

THE IRISH SITUATION

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The Irish situation by Stephen Gwynn

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STEPHEN GWYNN

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The Irish Situation

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FIVE years have elapsed since the Easter Rising of 1916; six and a half since the outbreak of European War; eight since the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force. These are the main marking points in the evolution which has transformed Ireland from a peaceful country into a theatre of operations for three armed forces, all differing in purpose and control; these milestones mark stages for Ireland on a new track of political development. But survey of the situation must begin a good deal farther back if it is to be intelligent, or intelligible to the general reader who has not closely followed Irish affairs.

At the joining point between this century and the last the South African War furnished illustration of the permanent contradictions which characterise the relations between Ireland and Great Britain. In Ireland there

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was a fierce outburst of anti-British feeling, strengthened and dignified by the sense that the great Power which held Ireland by force was using that same force without justice against a small, free nation. In England there was angry resentment of this new manifestation of what England held to be disloyalty. Explosive scenes in Parliament emphasised this disunion within the United Kingdom; yet at the same time London was swept by a brief wave of sentimental gratitude for the valour shown by Irish troops; and, of the three outstanding leaders in the war, Lord Roberts and Sir John French were thoroughly normal representative types of the Irish Protestant gentry, while Lord Kitchener also was claimed as Irish by many in virtue of his Irish upbringing.

These reminders, on the one hand, that Ireland was a weakness and a discredit to the British Empire, and, on the other, that it might be a source of honourable strength, were probably not without their effect on the minds of two British statesmen, both closely connected with Ireland. Lord Lansdowne, then Foreign Secretary, remembered that, as Viceroy in India, he had known one Irishman of old Catholic stock whose force of character and whose insight proved invaluable in the settlement of vexed questions concerning land

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tenure; and upon his advice Sir Antony MacDonnell was brought home to be Under Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant, that is, permanent chief of Irish administration. At the same time Mr. George Wyndham, descended from the great Geraldine House of Kildare, became Chief Secretary. These two men were jointly responsible for the Land Purchase Act of 1903, which decided in principle that all Irish landlords should be bought out on terms so favourable that they could maintain their old way of life in their old homes, but that the land of Ireland should be owned by the men who farmed it, payment being made by a long series of annuities, less in every case than the rent which had been paid in the past.

This Act, though its principle has still not been carried out over the whole of Ireland, yet marked the triumph of a revolution. Forty years ago agricultural Ireland was governed entirely by the landlord class, who were with few exceptions Protestant. Their power was broken by the Land Act of 1881, which ordained that rents should be fixed by law and that no man should be forced to give up his holding while he paid the rent so fixed. In substance, the Wyndham Act only introduced the sound system of land purchase which Parnell had advocated, instead of the unsound one of repeated rent fixings. But in essence the Act

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represented the acceptance of the new order by the landlord class. It was based on a compact reached between great Unionist landlords and leading Nationalist representatives of the tenant interest.

In 1898 the establishment of a system of Local Government based on popular representation had transferred the control of parish and county business from the privileged class to the community at large. Thus it may be said that from the beginning of the present century Irishmen have possessed full freedom in their strictly local affairs, and have been liberated from that control over their personal and political action which was exercised by the landowning class. It has been admitted, moreover, by representatives of the dispossessed interest, for instance by the Duke of Abercorn in the Irish Convention, that these changes were necessary and have been beneficent. But the reforms came in the wrong way. They were the result of concessions made to violence after appeal to argument and justice had failed. They earned and they deserved no responsive gratitude. Gratitude was felt to individuals—to Mr. Gladstone chiefly, and this sentiment is not dead yet among men of the older generation; it was felt also to Mr. Wyndham, but the sequel prevented any extension of it to Mr. Wyndham's colleagues.