

**THE IRISH QUESTION: I.  
HISTORY OF  
AN IDEA; II. LESSONS OF  
THE ELECTION**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649332861

The Irish Question: I. History of an Idea; II. Lessons of the Election by W. E. Gladstone

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Cover @ 2017

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**W. E. GLADSTONE**

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THE

# IRISH QUESTION

I.—HISTORY OF AN IDEA

II.—LESSONS OF THE ELECTION

BY THE

RIGHT HON. W. E. GLADSTONE

M.P. FOR MIDLOTHIAN

"When the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come."—St. MARK IV. 23

NEW YORK

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1886

## THE IRISH QUESTION.

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### I.—HISTORY OF AN IDEA.

IN the year 1868, I was closely associated with the policy of disestablishing the Irish Church. It was then, not unfairly, attempted to assail the cause in the person of its advocate. To defeat this attempt, an act became necessary which would otherwise have been presumptuous and obtrusive. In order to save the policy from suffering, I laid a personal explanation before the world.\* The same motive now obliges me to repeat the act, and will I hope form a sufficient excuse for my repeating it.

The substance of my defence or apology will, however, on the present occasion be altogether different. I had then to explain the reasons for which, and the mode in which, I changed the opinions and conduct, with respect to the Church of Ireland then established, which I had held half a century ago. I had shown my practical acceptance of the rule that change of opinion should if possible be accompanied with

\* 'A Chapter of Autobiography,' Murray, 1868.

proof of independence and disinterested motive; for I had resigned my place in the Cabinet of Sir Robert Peel in order to make good my title to a new point of departure. On the present occasion, I have no such change to vindicate; but only to point out the mode in which my language and conduct, governed by uniformity of principle, have simply followed the several stages, by which the great question of autonomy for Ireland has been brought to a state of ripeness for practical legislation.

It is a satisfaction to me that, in confuting imputations upon myself, I shall not be obliged to cast imputations on any individual opponent.

The subject of a domestic Government for Ireland, without any distinct specification of its form, has been presented to us from time to time within the last fifteen or sixteen years. I have at no time regarded it as necessarily replete with danger, or as a question which ought to be blocked out by the assertion of some high constitutional doctrine with which it could not be reconciled. But I have considered it to be a question involving such an amount and such a kind of change, and likely to be encountered with so much of prejudice apart from reason, as to make it a duty to look rigidly to the conditions, upon the fulfilment of which alone it could warrantably be entertained. They were in my view as follows:—

1. It could not be entertained, except upon a final surrender of the hope that Parliament could so far serve as a legislative instrument for Ireland, as to be able to establish honourable and friendly re-

lations between Great Britain and the people of that country.\*

2. Nor unless the demand for it were made in obedience to the unequivocal and rooted desire of Ireland, expressed through the constitutional medium of the Irish representatives.

3. Nor unless, being thus made, it were likewise so defined, as to bring it within the limits of safety and prudence, and to obviate all danger to the unity and security of the Empire.

4. Nor was it, in my view, allowable to deal with Ireland upon any principle, the benefit of which could not be allowed to Scotland in circumstances of equal and equally clear desire.

5. Upon the fulfilment of these conditions, it appeared to me an evident duty to avoid, as long as possible, all steps which would bring this great settlement into the category of party measures.

6. And, subject to the foregoing considerations, I deemed it to be of great moment to the public weal that the question should be promptly and expeditiously dealt with; inasmuch as it must otherwise gravely disturb the action of our political system by changes of Ministry by Dissolutions of Parliament, and by impeding the business, and derogating further from the character of the House of Commons.

These were the principles, which I deemed ap-

\* I have not in the following pages given explanations on this head, as I think they were sufficiently supplied by my speech on the introduction of the Irish Government Bill in April last.



plicable to the subject ; and every step I have taken from first to last, without exception, has been prompted by, and is referable to, one or other of them.

From the torrent of reproachful criticisms, brought down upon me probably by the necessity of the case, it is not easy to extricate, in an adequate form, the charge or charges intended to be made. One or two of the statements I must own surprise me ; as for example when Lord Northbrook, complaining of me for reticence before, and for my action after, the election of 1885, states confidently that nothing had happened "that could not have been foreseen by any man of ordinary political foresight." I do not dwell upon the undeniable truth that many things may be foreseen, which, notwithstanding, cannot properly become the subject of action until they have been seen as well as foreseen. But I broadly contest the statement. I assert that an incident of the most vital importance had happened, which I did not foresee ; which was not foreseen, to my knowledge, by any one else, even if some might have hoped for it ; and which I doubt whether Lord Northbrook himself foresaw ; namely, that the Irish demand, put forth on the first night of the Session by Mr. Parnell, with eighty-four Irish Home Rulers at his back, would be confined within the fair and moderate bounds of autonomy ; of an Irish legislature, only for affairs specifically Irish ; of a statutory and subordinate Parliament. But in this incident lay the fulfilment of one of those conditions

which were in my view essential, and which had been theretofore unfulfilled.

The more general and more plausible form of the attack I think may be stated as a dilemma. Either I had conceived the intention of Home Rule precipitately, or I had concealed it unduly. Either would, undoubtedly, have been a grave offence; the second, as a plot against my friends, the first as an attempt to escape from the sober judgment of the country, and to carry it by surprise. The first aspect of the case was presented by Lord Hartington in the House of Commons,\* and by Mr. Chamberlain, on the 20th of June, at Birmingham.† The second was put forward by Mr. Bright, in addressing his constituents,‡ and, with much point and force, by Lord Hartington§ at Sheffield. In substance he argued thus: "Mr. Gladstone has never, during fifteen years, condemned the principal of Home Rule. Either then, he had not considered it, or he had assented to it. But, in his position as Minister, he must have considered it. Therefore the proper conclusion is, that he had assented to it. And yet, though I was Secretary for Ireland, with Lord Spencer as Viceroy, when he was Prime Minister, to neither of us did he convey the smallest idea of such assent."

Telling as this statement evidently was, it abounds in leakages. In the first place, I deny that it is the duty of every Minister to make known, even to his colleagues, every idea which has formed itself in his

\* 'Times,' May 11.

† 'Times,' July 2.

‡ 'Times,' June 21.

§ 'Times,' June 29.

mind. I should even say that the contradictory proposition would be absurd. So far as my experience of Government has gone, subjects ripe for action supply a Minister with abundant material for communication with his colleagues, and to make a rule of mixing with them matters still contingent and remote, would confuse and retard business, instead of aiding it. But letting pass, for argument's sake, a very irrational proposition, I grapple with the dilemma, and say *non sequitur*: the consequence asserted is no consequence at all. It was no consequence from my not having condemned Home Rule, that I had either not considered it, or had adopted it. What is true is, that I had not publicly and in principle condemned it, and also that I had mentally considered it. But I had neither adopted nor rejected it; and for the very simple reason, that it was not ripe either for adoption or rejection. It had not become the unequivocal demand of Ireland; and it had not been so defined by its promoters, as to prove that it was a safe demand. It may and should be known to many who are or have been my colleagues, that I made some abortive efforts towards increasing Irish influence over Irish affairs, beyond the mere extension of County Government, but not in a shape to which the term Home Rule could be properly applied. Nor have I been able to trace a single imputation upon me, whether of omission or commission, in respect of which I should not, by acting according to the orders of my censors, have offended against all or some of the rules, which I have pointed out as the