

Redmond, John Edward

by Michael Laffan

Redmond, John Edward (1856–1918), Parnellite and leader of the Irish parliamentary party 1900–18, was born 1 September 1856 in Dublin, third child among two daughters and two sons of William Archer Redmond (qv), a member of a catholic gentry family in Co. Wexford, and Mary Redmond (née Hoey), who belonged to a protestant and unionist family from Co. Wicklow. He lived for part of his youth in Ballytrent House, near Rosslare, Co. Wexford. His great-uncle John Edward Redmond had been MP for Wexford borough 1859–65, and his father held the same seat 1872–80. Politics was in his blood. As a schoolboy in Clongowes Redmond acquired a love of literature and he excelled as a debater. He then proceeded to TCD, an unusual move for a catholic at that time, but he was a mediocre student and he left after only two years. In 1876 he went to London to help his father in the house of commons, and he worked for a short time as a clerk in the vote office.

**Parnellite MP, 1881–91** When his father died in 1880 Redmond hoped to inherit the family seat, but instead C. S. Parnell (qv) offered it to his protégé T. M. Healy (qv). Redmond was not kept waiting for long; after a delay of some weeks he was returned unopposed for New Ross in February 1881. He was then aged 24. With slight exaggeration he would later boast that he took his seat, made his maiden speech, and was expelled from the house of commons, all on the same evening. He was appointed a party whip, and his oratorical skills were exploited not merely in parliament, but also in making speeches throughout Ireland and Britain. In 1883–4 he and his younger brother, Willie (qv), who was always a close ally and confidant, made a fifteen-month tour of Australia, New Zealand, and the US. They raised large sums of money for the party, and this experience gave Redmond a lifelong belief that Ireland should play a full role in developing the empire. In Sydney he met and married Johanna Dalton, who belonged to a prominent Irish-Australian family. Over the decades he made frequent visits to America.

Redmond was a junior member of the committee that chose home rule candidates for the 1885 general election. In the debates on the first home rule bill a year later he rejected the idea that Ulster differed significantly from the rest of Ireland. For years he had studied law, intermittently, and finally he was called to the bar in 1887. He then practised on the Munster circuit. He supported the Plan of Campaign led by John Dillon (qv) and William O'Brien (qv), hoping not merely to achieve rent reductions for Irish tenants but also to lure the conservative government into using coercive measures. In 1888 he was accused of using intimidating language and was sentenced to five weeks in jail – where one of his fellow-inmates was his brother, by now the home rule MP for Fermanagh North. A prison sentence was a badge of honour, almost a requirement for a home rule politician. The following year his happy

home life was devastated when his wife died suddenly, leaving him with three young children.

**Parnellite leader, 1891–1900** Redmond did not belong to Parnell's inner circle, but by the end of the 1880s his oratorical skills and his ability in managing party business ensured that he was prominent among the second rank of home rule MPs. He became the leading figure among the minority who remained loyal to Parnell in the split of 1890–91 – a decision that was at odds with his instinctive conservatism, but was partly explicable by personal and class loyalties. He refused to 'sell' the leader of the party, arguing that to do so would destroy its independence. Healy, scourge of the Parnellites, conceded that Redmond avoided rancour but described him nonetheless as callous, calculating, cool-headed, able, and astute (Callanan, *Parnell split*, 151). He was clearly a formidable opponent. After the split he sought compromise and reunification, and in January 1891 he participated in the Boulogne negotiations with William O'Brien.

When Parnell died the following October, Redmond played the main role in organising an elaborate funeral in Dublin, and immediately afterwards he was elected as leader of the minority faction. Despite a series of defeats in the course of the previous year, he and his colleagues decided to continue the fight, and he resigned his Wexford seat to contest the vacancy in Cork city created by Parnell's death. The result was humiliating and he obtained less than a third of the vote. However, only weeks later, in December 1891, he defeated Michael Davitt (qv) and was elected for Waterford city – a seat which he held for the rest of his life.

The Parnellites were routed in the 1892 general election and they won only nine seats to their opponents' seventy-two. Redmond welcomed the second home rule bill in 1893, although he described it as a compromise. He dismissed once again the danger of agitation in Ulster, and he forecast, wrongly, that the conservatives would reform the house of lords. In the following years he made his mark as a skilled parliamentarian, revealing qualities unsuspected during the 1880s, and he became one of the finest orators in the house of commons. He was a heavy man of imposing appearance, 'with the face and figure of a Roman emperor' (Gwynn, *John Redmond*, 25), and in later years Prime Minister Asquith's nickname for him was 'Leviathan'. His physical presence reinforced his eloquence. Occasionally he indulged in personal abuse, but he was normally dignified in his battles with the anti-Parnellites, and he was often ready to collaborate with them, with unionists and landlords, and even with Fenians. He sought an amnesty for imprisoned dynamiters, and for a while he became one of the republicans' favourite Irish politicians.

In 1896 he sat on the recess committee, whose recommendations led to the creation of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction. He supported the land act of that year, and he also facilitated the financial relations commission, which concluded that Ireland had been overtaxed. He welcomed the local government act of 1898 as an important step towards self-government. Unlike Dillon, who was by

now leader of the anti-Parnellites, he believed that as the Irish people became more prosperous and acquired more responsibilities their determination to achieve home rule would increase rather than diminish.

By this stage he had settled into a routine that would vary little in future years. He divided his time between London and Aughavanagh, a former military barracks in the Wicklow hills which had once been Parnell's hunting lodge. It now became Redmond's Irish refuge. The building had no telephone and in winter it was sometimes cut off by snowdrifts; this was to his taste because, like Parnell, he often chose to be out of his colleagues' reach. He enjoyed the life of a country squire, taking long walks and shooting grouse. His second marriage (1899), to Ada Beesley from Warwickshire, brought him private contentment. Although he enjoyed the company of friends and family he was basically a solitary man who disliked social occasions. He was serious, formal, kindly and courteous, but he had little personal contact with most of his fellow MPs.

Over the years Redmond remained hostile to the liberals, as befitted a Parnellite who had been conditioned by the experiences of 1890–91, and he was wary of an alignment with British radicals. He was convinced that since the liberals would never regain power without Irish support there was little or no need to conciliate them, and that since the house of lords' power of veto could not be surmounted, home rulers would have to strike deals with the conservatives. He hoped to ease class conflict and, if possible, to win over the Irish gentry; in local elections he urged nationalists to vote for worthy protestants, unionists, and landlords – generous and far-sighted advice which was usually ignored.

**United party chairman, 1900–10** In January 1900 the home rule movement was reunited – appropriately at a meeting in Committee Room 15, where the split had been finalised nine years earlier. The sparring politicians were influenced by public disgust at their incessant bickering and by widespread Irish hostility to the British war in South Africa. Another incentive was the spread of William O'Brien's new United Irish League (UIL) whose aims included the imposition of unity and discipline on the home rule movement from outside and from below the ranks of its feuding MPs. This encouraged them to end their disputes. The anti-Parnellites were themselves bitterly divided, and this helped explain their magnanimity in consenting to a leader from among their opponents.

For different reasons the three leading anti-Parnellites were prepared to accept him as the chairman of the reunified party. Despite their long-standing mutual dislike and distrust, Redmond and Healy had drawn (briefly) closer together. The UIL had undermined Parnellite support, particularly in Connacht, and this led O'Brien to believe that he could control Redmond. And although Dillon was unenthusiastic and would have preferred another Parnellite leader, he feared isolation and gave way grudgingly.

Redmond was astonished by his unanimous election as chairman, but any appearance of unity was deceptive; soon the party was embroiled in new quarrels between rival factions. Redmond and O'Brien struggled for control of the UIL, and in a compromise settlement in June 1900 the league became the national organisation of the Irish parliamentary party. Redmond was elected its chairman (later president). But as leader of the home rule movement his powers were limited and – unlike Parnell – he was obliged to consult with party colleagues; he would be a chairman, not a chief. He adjusted rapidly to the views of the Dillonite majority and drifted away from cooperation with unionists. In December 1900 he yielded to pressure from Dillon and O'Brien by acquiescing reluctantly in Healy's expulsion from the party. He remained concerned to prevent any further divisions within the movement till home rule had been achieved – after which he believed it would break up and be replaced by new parties.

Redmond was sceptical towards the proposal for a conference between representatives of landlords and tenants, but he and O'Brien supported the plan once it received the endorsement of George Wyndham (qv), the chief secretary. They were among the tenants' representatives at the ensuing negotiations, and the two sides soon recommended unanimously an ambitious scheme of land purchase which would be aided by the state. A bill along these lines was introduced in parliament in March 1903 and Redmond secured amendments in favour of the tenants. Dillon remained aloof and hostile, seeing the bill as a trap and fearing that home rule might lose its appeal if the land question were to be solved. But Redmond's enthusiasm was fully vindicated, and over the next few years the Wyndham act allowed over 200,000 tenant farmers to buy their holdings on most attractive terms.

In his first years as party chairman Redmond was placed awkwardly between Dillon and O'Brien. Conscious of the balance of power in the party, he chose not to defend O'Brien against Dillon's attacks on the policy of conciliation – till O'Brien resigned suddenly from the UIL directory and from parliament in November 1903. Despite his difficult temperament he had become a useful ally, and his departure left Redmond exposed and more dependent on Dillon's wing of the party – a faction that welcomed conflict and confrontation.

Another setback soon followed. Initially Redmond supported the abortive devolution scheme of 1904–5 proposed by Antony MacDonnell (qv), the under-secretary. He believed it would strengthen the demand for a national parliament in Dublin and that, because it was a 'conservative' initiative, it might escape the house of lords' veto. Dillon and the unionists opposed it, for conflicting reasons, and the result was a humiliating defeat for the policy of conciliation. The conservative and unionist onslaught on Wyndham inaugurated a new polarisation of Irish political life, and it provided a powerful argument against further compromise.

All Redmond's confident expectations were disproved by the massive liberal victory in the 1906 elections, giving the new government a large overall majority and enabling it to dispense with Irish support. He was attracted by the liberals' proposals for a limited form of devolution in the Irish council bill, which envisaged a partly elected body with limited administrative functions but no legislative powers, and he endorsed them warily. He believed that, however inadequate it might be, this measure could be a stepping-stone towards the ultimate objective of an Irish parliament. But he yielded to internal opposition and was forced to insist that nothing less than home rule would be acceptable to the party; there would be no gradual or incremental approach. Once again he gave way to his more intransigent colleagues and followers.

O'Brien and Healy rejoined the party, left it once more, and then carried on a vendetta against its leaders (who now included Joe Devlin (qv)). Personal feuds and fluctuating alliances were among the home rulers' most striking characteristics.

Although the liberals were unwilling to concede the nationalists' principal demand, Redmond had grounds for satisfaction in these years. He was able to facilitate legislation such as the Irish labourers act, which provided money to build rural labourers' cottages. He cooperated eagerly with the liberals in drafting the Irish universities bill. He welcomed the 1909 land act which introduced the principle of compulsory purchase. But he remained instinctively conservative and he was suspicious of some aspects of the liberals' welfare policies. He regarded old age pensions as an extravagance because of the future burdens they would impose on Irish finance, and (like the government) he opposed women's suffrage. He also remained aloof from a new round of agrarian conflict which characterised the ranch war of 1906–8.

The constitutional crisis of 1909–11 enabled Redmond to distance himself from agitation at home and to concentrate on events in Westminster. With considerable unease he acquiesced in the 'people's budget' of 1909, although its increase in liquor licences and taxes on spirits made it deeply unpopular in Ireland. This was a dangerous strategy, but it succeeded. The result was the rejection of the budget by the house of lords, a commitment by the liberals to introduce a home rule bill, an early general election in January 1910, and political deadlock in which the liberals and conservatives gained almost exactly the same number of seats. This development surpassed all Redmond's expectations and placed him in the position that home rulers had always sought: with his seventy-one seats he held the parliamentary balance of power. In theory he could make and unmake governments, although in practice he would have no reason to restore the anti-home-rule conservatives to office.

He seized the opportunity provided by the lords' folly and demanded an end to their power of veto. In these unexpected circumstances he was happy to abandon the policy of conciliation which, with some wavering, he had followed (or tried to follow)

since the 1890s. He urged the government to break the power of the lords and then to introduce a home rule bill which could no longer be blocked by the upper house. Since the unionists had chosen an uncompromising path they would no longer be reassured and conciliated; instead, as Dillon and his followers had always wished, they would be confronted and defeated.

For a short while some cabinet ministers contemplated resignation in preference to renewed dependence on Irish support. Redmond was unyielding, insisting 'no veto, no budget', and the government committed itself to abolishing the lords' veto power before he in turn agreed to vote for the budget. The hatred that he aroused among conservatives and unionists in the following years confirmed the extent of his achievement. He was excluded from negotiations between the main British parties from June to November 1910, but when these failed to result in a compromise – to his great relief – a second election was called in December. It confirmed the verdict of January, after which the government proceeded to abolish the lords' veto and replace it with the ability to delay 'ordinary' (non-budget) bills for two parliamentary sessions.

**The home rule crisis, 1912–14** This measure was followed in April 1912 by the introduction of a third home rule bill, which was expected to come into effect in summer 1914. In many respects its terms were disappointing for Irish nationalists. A wide range of powers would be retained by London, and the number of Irish MPs in Westminster would be reduced from 103 to forty-two. Ireland would be treated as an entity, although to Redmond's dismay Asquith warned privately that at a later stage concessions might have to be made to the Ulster unionists. However, it seemed certain that this bill would be enacted, unlike its two Gladstonian predecessors, and Redmond gave it his full support. He claimed that it would be a final settlement of the quarrel between the two islands.

Like Asquith, Redmond rejected proposals whereby Ulster counties could vote on whether they wished for inclusion or exclusion. But for him this was a new problem; in the past his concern had been to win over southern landlords rather than the unionist majority in Ulster. While prepared to offer inducements (such as the over-representation of Ulster in a home rule parliament), he was adamant in his rejection of partition. He and Asquith realised that at this stage any compromise would be unacceptable to the conservatives and unionists. They hoped that as the final enactment of home rule grew nearer the unionists would become desperate and that therefore they would be satisfied with fewer concessions. This strategy has been much criticised, and with the benefit of hindsight it seems clear that the government's position in 1914 would have been strengthened if it had shown greater generosity towards unionist Ulster in drafting the home rule bill. But in 1912 it was difficult or impossible to foresee the ferocity of later conservative and unionist resistance.

Redmond was genuinely shocked when his opponents, led by Edward Carson (qv), threatened and planned an Ulster rebellion, and he dismissed their threats as bluff.

He had always believed in constitutional methods and parliamentary procedures, and he felt that now the unionists were changing or breaking the rules. In 1910 his first biographer had written: 'Redmond is more for times of peace: Parnell for times of war' (Redmond-Howard, *Redmond*, 138). Unexpectedly 'times of war' now lay ahead, and he was ill-equipped for the challenge. He was determined not to follow the unionists' example and to form a nationalist paramilitary force; to do so would be to abandon his hard-earned image of a responsible statesman to whom power could safely be entrusted, throwing away his partial triumph over British prejudices against the Irish. He was aware that Carson and the unionists had a freedom of manoeuvre (and also a sense of desperation) which nationalists did not share.

But the formation of the Ulster Volunteers was emulated by other, more radical nationalists, and Redmond was embarrassed when they created a rival volunteer force in November 1913. He was being undermined from within at a time when he believed that it was imperative to display unity under his leadership. His problems were compounded by the Dublin lock-out of 1913–14, which he saw as a distraction from the struggle for home rule – exactly the sort of internal division that he had always deprecated. His (and his party's) sympathy with tenant farmers did not extend to urban workers.

He urged the government to remain firm, but from November 1913 onwards he encountered pressure to compromise and to accept the exclusion of certain Ulster counties from the home rule area. He remained convinced that 'mutilation' would be unacceptable to his followers. Asquith warned that there was a danger of civil war and a possibility that the king might dismiss the government in an effort to avert such a disaster. The dissolution of parliament would ensure that, at best, the whole home rule debate would start all over again – an unwelcome and unlikely prospect.

The following March Redmond made a series of concessions, finally agreeing that individual Ulster counties would be allowed to opt out of home rule for a period of six years. This would give the conservatives two opportunities to gain power in general elections, in which case they could be expected to make exclusion permanent. On the one hand, Carson rejected this suggestion as a sentence of death with a stay of execution, while on the other, many nationalists were appalled by Redmond's acquiescence in partition.

Subsequent events – the Curragh 'incident' and the Larne gun-running – made violence more probable, but Redmond advised against any provocative response such as prosecuting the gun-runners. Instead he decided to neutralise potential opposition within Irish nationalism. In June 1914 he confronted the standing committee of the Irish Volunteers, pointing out that its members held their positions through self-appointment and that they were all Dublin-based. He demanded that his party should nominate half of the standing committee, and he threatened to disrupt the Volunteers if his terms were not accepted. A majority of the members gave way,

with an understandable ill-grace. Belatedly and unwillingly he had followed Carson's example.

In late July 1914 Redmond and Dillon joined leaders of the liberals, conservatives, and unionists in the Buckingham Palace conference, a last attempt to reach a compromise over Ulster. They failed predictably to agree on the 'excluded' areas. The unionists were implacably opposed to county option, but they were now prepared to accept six- rather than nine-county exclusion. They demanded Fermanagh and Tyrone, which had small nationalist majorities. Tension grew with the approach of the parliamentary deadline, the date by which the home rule bill would have to be passed, amended by agreement, or abandoned. It was heightened further by the Howth gun-running and the subsequent killings at Bachelor's Walk. Then, just as the crisis was due to be resolved in one form or another, the first world war broke out.

**The impact of war, 1914–16** From the very beginning Redmond supported the British war effort. In his speech in the house of commons on 3 August 1914 he urged that all British troops should be withdrawn from Ireland and that the hitherto rival Volunteer forces would defend the island. This would have the attraction of bringing the two communities together and would therefore help to maintain a united Ireland. He consulted only a few colleagues before making this statement, and Dillon and other nationalists were later to be deeply critical of his action, but any other response would have been uncharacteristic and probably ill-judged. Home rule had not yet been enacted, and he still needed the liberal government's goodwill. A European war provided the opportunity for Irish nationalists to prove their claim that home rule would not threaten British strategic interests. And Redmond believed that Germany was responsible for the war.

His public support was unconditional, but in private he continued his pressure on Asquith. This soon produced results. Home rule became law on 18 September 1914, although it would not be implemented till a date not later than the end of the war, and not till special amending legislation had been passed for Ulster. After decades of effort, patience, and disappointment, home rule was on the statute book at last, and nationalist Ireland celebrated its triumph. But the enactment (and simultaneous postponement) of home rule turned out to be a pyrrhic victory, and the events of the next few years would show that the unionists had greater cause for rejoicing.

Two days later Redmond addressed a group of Irish Volunteers who were drilling at Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow, encouraging them to join the British army and to fight as far as the firing-line extended. The Volunteers' standing committee, which he had recently packed with his own supporters, was ignored. As in his support for Parnell, Redmond 'committed himself sparingly but completely . . . The code of honour behind this commitment can be seen as self-indulgent or heroic' (Maume, *Long gestation*, 119). Eoin MacNeill (qv) and the other original Volunteer leaders did not wish their followers to join the British army, and these remarks precipitated a split

in the force. The vast majority supported Redmond rather than MacNeill; the ratio was 15:1 in his favour. However Dillon and other colleagues were dismayed by what they saw as his excessive enthusiasm for the war effort.

Like most other observers Redmond expected the war to end quickly, and in that event his gamble would probably have succeeded. But early enthusiasm vanished as the conflict dragged on interminably and as the death toll rose steadily. The war's unpopularity rubbed off on those, like Redmond, who encouraged Irishmen to enlist and were seen as recruiting sergeants. He became increasingly out of touch with nationalist opinion, rarely visiting Ireland except to relax in Aughavanagh, and he lost valuable financial support from Irish-American groups who opposed any involvement in 'England's war'. He also encountered suspicion and obstruction from those whom he wished to help. The War Office was hostile to his romantic idea of an 'Irish brigade' or division, it ignored the Irish Volunteers in its recruiting campaign, and it indulged in gratuitous snubs towards nationalists. By contrast, Carson and his followers received preferential treatment, and in political terms the 36th Division was more thoroughly 'Ulster' than the 16th was 'Irish'.

When a coalition government was formed in May 1915 Redmond was offered a cabinet post, but he followed the party's traditional policy and declined. He did not propose what he felt *should* have been offered: a cabinet seat without portfolio and without a salary. His refusal was in accordance with traditional party policy, but in the circumstances it was probably a mistake – and the fact that his rival Carson entered the cabinet as attorney general put Irish nationalists at a disadvantage.

Throughout the early years of the war Redmond had virtually no input into Irish policy. One important exception was his achievement in ensuring that Ireland would be exempt when conscription was imposed on the rest of the UK in January 1916; Irishmen would be spared when the English, Scots, and Welsh were dispatched to the battlefields. Another was his – ultimately self-destructive – advice to Dublin Castle to show patience and restraint towards the provocations of republican extremists. (Later he blamed himself for having reassured the chief secretary that there was no danger of a rebellion in Ireland.) Preparations began for a transfer of limited powers after the war, and he was briefed on his future responsibilities, but it was revealing that while he had struggled constantly to achieve home rule he seems to have made no detailed plans for using it.

**Rebellion** With the enactment of home rule the party no longer had a goal, and its machinery, already rusty through disuse, fell into further neglect. Yet although voters were apathetic it still maintained a wide if shallow support base, and home rulers won all the six by-elections they contested between the outbreak of war and late 1916. Redmond remained optimistic about his prospects once the conflict would come to an end.

The Easter rising was, if only incidentally, an assault on him and all that he stood for. He expressed his detestation and horror at the insurrection and claimed that the Germans had plotted, organised, and paid for it. Nonetheless he appealed to Asquith, both in private and public, for leniency towards those who had not been involved in planning the rebellion – even threatening to resign as party leader. As the executions continued he became more depressed and more desperate, aware of the damage they would cause to moderate nationalism. He shared Dillon's views that the British were 'washing out our whole life work in a sea of blood' (Lyons, *Dillon*, 381). In private he talked about retirement.

But the rising also provided him with an unexpected opportunity. Asquith decided on a new initiative to resolve Irish problems during wartime, and he delegated Lloyd George to negotiate with nationalists and unionists – separately, rather than face-to-face as had been the pattern in July 1914. These discussions, characterised by 'creative ambiguity and well-intentioned elision' (Jackson, *Home rule*, 170), lasted two months, from May to July, and Redmond was led to believe that home rule would be granted during the war. However, his position had been seriously weakened, and from the beginning it was taken for granted that six counties rather than four were to be excluded from the home rule area. There would be no county plebiscites, and the nationalists would have to abandon Tyrone and Fermanagh. Lloyd George was deliberately vague about the duration of 'exclusion', but in private both sets of leaders realised that a temporary arrangement was unlikely to be reversed. The number of Irish MPs in Westminster would remain unchanged. Against expectations Redmond won the support of a nationalist convention in Belfast, although he was obliged to threaten his own resignation if the plan were rejected.

Southern unionists were horrified by the prospect of imminent home rule for most of Ireland and they feared that nationalism would fall into the hands of republican supporters of the Easter rebels. Assisted by allies in the conservative party they undermined Redmond and the moderate nationalists who, even at this late stage, might have offered them a more attractive future. They schemed successfully against the plan, imposing terms impossible for home rulers to accept: a reduction in the number of Irish MPs at Westminster and public recognition that partition would be permanent. He broke off the negotiations, protesting that he and his colleagues had been deceived.

The result was disastrous. Redmond's morale was shattered and he was widely blamed for the failure to build on an opportunity presented to him by the Easter rebels. The immediate implementation of home rule, even in the aftermath of a failed rebellion, might possibly have revitalised moderate nationalism, but the failure of the negotiations made the party seem naive, incompetent, and futile. It stagnated, and public opinion drifted away from the cause of home rule. Redmond made no public appearance for months.

**Decline, 1917–18** The following January, after a decisive defeat in the Roscommon North by-election, Redmond alarmed his colleagues by planning to announce that the party was ready to make way for other, younger men if the people so wished. Throughout 1917 the home rule movement was overshadowed by the new mass Sinn Féin party.

However, in June he was presented with what he saw as yet another chance to reach a settlement. Lloyd George, by now prime minister, offered him immediate home rule for the twenty-six counties or, alternatively, an Irish convention representative of all sections of Irish opinion. He guaranteed the enactment of any 'substantial agreement'. Unwisely Redmond chose the latter option, unable to resist the temptation to negotiate, and the result was a long, incompetently managed series of meetings in TCD. The omens for the convention were poor, Sinn Féin boycotted it, and both Dillon and O'Brien refused to have any involvement. Redmond soon suffered a personal blow when his brother Willie was killed in the battle of Messines.

But depression and declining health did not prevent him from throwing his weight behind this last effort to reach a compromise settlement. Nationalists sought to expand the degree of autonomy which they would exercise under home rule, while Ulster unionists, whose position had already been secured, objected to the prospect of tariff barriers being raised against Britain. Convention members observed confidentiality, and this repeated the problems posed during the 1916 negotiations: Redmond was once again effectively silenced and invisible to the Irish public, but now at a time when his republican opponents were active. He concentrated on reaching an agreement with the southern unionists who were, like his own party, weak and demoralised. Eventually a coalition of catholic bishops and nationalist politicians sabotaged his proposals on the grounds that he was giving too much away. One of his parliamentary colleagues recalled Redmond's reaction: 'everything, in his judgment, was wrecked; he saw nothing ahead for his country but ruin and chaos' (Gwynn, *Last years*, 325).

It was a miserable end to his career, although at least he was spared the final disaster. After an operation for gallstones in London he died of heart failure on 6 March 1918. Within weeks the Irish convention failed to reach 'substantive agreement' and the British decided to impose conscription on Ireland, thereby radicalising nationalists and propelling large numbers into the ranks of Sinn Féin. In the general election of December 1918 the home rule party was wiped out in southern Ireland, winning only six seats to seventy-three for Sinn Féin.

More clearly than is the case with most politicians, Redmond's career ended in failure. Had he died four years earlier, in sight of the promised land, his life would be seen very differently. He had been a great orator and parliamentarian. For years he had attempted to win over and conciliate his opponents, although he was unable to persuade enough of his followers to share his views; unionist fears that he was

not representative of his party were sometimes justified. He was an ideal advocate of Irish nationalism in Britain, and particularly in Westminster, but he became increasingly out of touch with Irish opinion. Like all politicians he sometimes stooped and trimmed. He was courageous and adaptable, and under changed circumstances the critic of the liberal alliance in the 1890s had become its principal advocate by the 1910s. Over many years he persevered in the fight for home rule, coping with hostility from the conservatives and indifference from the liberals.

He responded with varying success to the rapidly changing fortunes of his final years. He showed skill and determination in exploiting the opportunities provided by a first upheaval, the political crisis initiated by the House of Lords. But his background and temperament left him unable to respond effectively to a second 'revolution': the abandonment of normal constitutional procedures by conservatives and unionists, and the ensuing militarisation of Irish public life. He was widely seen as being too anxious to trust the promises and assurances of British ministers. He was spectacularly unlucky in the timing of the first world war and – like very many others – he miscalculated its duration. Ultimately he and his party fell victim to the rival extremes of Ulster unionism and Irish republicanism.

Nonetheless he was a worthy and noble representative of the Irish political tradition, he proved that patience, negotiation and compromise could bring about important reforms, he helped to embed parliamentary procedures in the habits and instincts of Irish nationalists, and he played a significant role in transforming Ireland in the decades before the first world war. The miscalculations and failures of his later years have obscured his many achievements.

---

NLI, Redmond papers; TCD, John Dillon papers; J. L. Redmond-Howard, *John Redmond: the man and the demand* (1910); S. Gwynn, *John Redmond's last years* (1919); D. Gwynn, *The life of John Redmond* (1932); F. S. L. Lyons, *John Dillon* (1969); J. O'Brien, *William O'Brien and the course of Irish politics, 1881–1918* (1976); P. Jalland, *The liberals and Ireland: the Ulster question in British politics to 1914* (1980); P. Bew, *Conflict and conciliation in Ireland, 1890–1910: Parnellites and radical agrarians* (1987); A. Gailey, *Ireland and the death of kindness: the experience of constructive unionism, 1890–1905* (1987); N. Mansergh, *The unresolved question: the Anglo-Irish settlement and its undoing* (1991); F. Callanan, *The Parnell split, 1890–91* (1992); P. Bew, *Ideology and the Irish question: Ulster unionism and Irish nationalism, 1912–1916* (1996); F. Callanan, *T. M. Healy* (1996); P. Maume, *The long gestation: Irish nationalist life, 1891–1918* (1999); A. Jackson, *Home rule: an Irish history, 1800–2000* (2003); J. Finnan, *John Redmond and Irish unity, 1912–1918* (2004); D. Meleady, *Redmond: the Parnellite* (2008)

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 192.168.60.239 on Wed Apr 01 09:12:00 BST 2015 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2015 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.