

MINI PROFILE

Edward Carson

BY DR RICHARD McELLIGOTT

EDWARD CARSON was born in Dublin in 1854. Having studied law at Trinity College he qualified as a barrister in 1877, rising quickly in the profession. Following his election as an MP for Dublin in 1892, his impressive performances in the House of Commons during the debates on the Second Home Rule Bill earned him celebrity status in Britain. In 1895 he achieved international fame as the prosecutor who secured the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde.

In 1910 Carson became chairman of the Irish Unionist Parliamentary Party. His new role placed him at the head of the Unionist campaign against the Third Home Rule Bill. Carson was determined to keep Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom. He believed that without the industrial and economic power of Ulster, a Home Rule State in Ireland could not function.

Therefore his strategy was to make Home Rule unworkable by co-ordinating a massive campaign of Unionist opposition in the province. He presided over a demonstration in September 1912 when 471,414 people signed the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant or, in the case of women, the Declaration.

Carson is often seen as the man who militarised modern Irish politics, by sanctioning the formation of the paramilitary UVF in January 1913 to resist Home Rule, by armed force if necessary. With the outbreak of the First World War, Carson pledged Unionist support for the British war effort. Unlike John Redmond, he accepted an invitation to enter Asquith's wartime coalition Cabinet formed in May 1915.

He was appointed Attorney-General of England and, when Lloyd George took over the premiership, First Lord of the Admiralty. Carson grew increasingly disillusioned over the Government's attempts to find a political settlement to satisfy Nationalist and Unionist aspirations during the Anglo-Irish War.

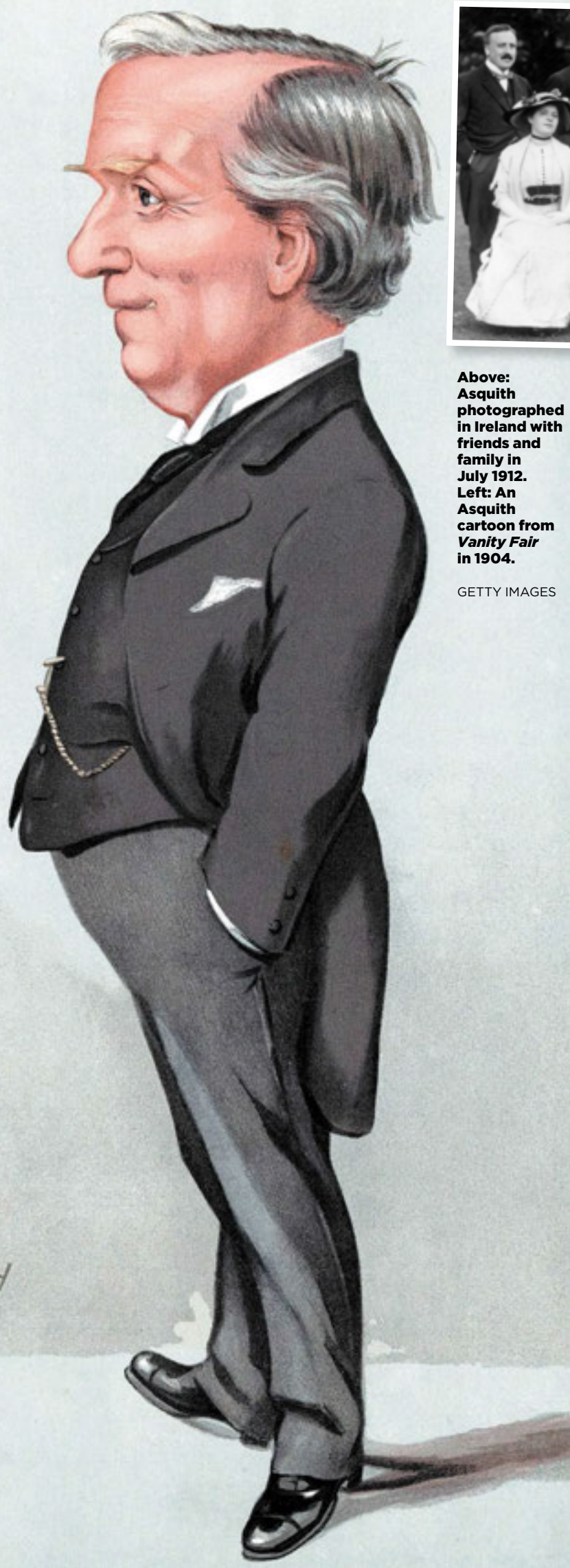
He was a vehement critic of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and passed over the offer to lead the newly created state of Northern Ireland to his lieutenant, James Craig. He retired to the House of Lords and died in 1935.

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Above: Asquith photographed in Ireland with friends and family in July 1912. Left: An Asquith cartoon from Vanity Fair in 1904.

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the shock, or its consequences. They would extend into every department of political, social, agrarian and domestic life. It is not too much to say that Ireland would become ungovernable - unless by the application of forces and methods which would offend the conscience of Great Britain, and arouse the deepest resentment in all the self-governing Dominions of the Crown.'

Asquith's analysis was chillingly prophetic. Within six years nationalist Ireland had taken precisely this path and become ungovernable except by the forces and methods applied in 1920-21 by the Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries.

The Ulster unionists' threat of violence bore fruit on 9 March 1914 when Asquith told the House of Commons that his government would exclude Unionist Ulster from the terms of the Home Rule Bill for six years. Edward Carson's contemptuous dismissal of the change of policy Asquith had imposed upon the hapless John Redmond - 'we do not want a sentence of death with a stay of execution for six years' - disguised his acknowledgement of its larger significance. The partition of Ireland had probably been unavoidable since the cabinet meeting of 6 February 1912; on 9 March 1914 it became inevitable.

THE compromise that put the Irish problem on ice for the duration of the Great War merely disguised this inevitability. The core of the compromise was Redmond's proposal that if the government would postpone the introduction of the amending bill providing for Ulster's exclusion, he would agree to the suspension of the coming into effect of the Home Rule Bill (despite its being immediately put upon the Statute Book) until the amending bill became law.

Put simply, Redmond agreed to the suspension of Home Rule, and Asquith agreed to the suspension of partition. But the announcement of the deal was accompanied by an explicitly partitionist and public assurance from Asquith that 'the employment of force, any kind of force, for... the coercion of Ulster, is an absolutely unthinkable thing... a thing which we would never countenance.'

The apocalyptic violence of the Great War changed everything in nationalist Ireland. But although the revolutionary nationalists of Sinn Féin swept aside the constitutional nationalists of the Irish Parliamentary party at the 1918 election, one thing had not changed: Éamon de Valera was as impotent as John Redmond to resist the partitionist solution to the Irish problem to which Asquith irrevocably committed the British government.

Ronan Fanning is Professor Emeritus of Modern History at UCD and this article is based on his book 'Fatal Path: British Government and Irish Revolution 1910-1922' (London, 2013). His new book 'Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power' was published in October.