

A Poet among Politicians – George Russell & the Irish Convention

By Ed Mulhall

It was New Year's Eve and the chairman had been working hard to see if he could save his Convention. He still felt optimistic. The prize was a great one, a beginning of a solution to the Irish problem, but the challenges were dwarfed by what was happening in Europe, the 'appalling killing of nations'.¹

He believed that the stalemate which had threatened to destroy the work of six months had been broken and that there was now a proposal which had the possibility of unionist and nationalist support, which bridged the sectarian divide and could prevent partition. The main leader of nationalism might put his still considerable influence behind the proposal; the Prime Minister was being encouraged to intervene to say the deal would be supported. There was still the problem with 'Ulster' but the issues were narrowing.

So it seemed to Horace Plunkett, the chairman of the Irish Convention, on 31 December 1917 as he worked in the Convention offices in Trinity College Dublin.²

It was, he wrote in his diary, the most important time in his life.³ The proposal in question had been put forward by the leader of the southern unionists at the Convention. Plunkett had been in consultation with John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, and in contact with Downing Street about a possible intervention by Prime Minister Lloyd George that would give some confidence a deal would be supported, even if Ulster unionism was not in agreement. If there was such an agreement with clear majority support in the Convention, then the Convention would be a success despite the controversy over its composition and the notable absentees from its deliberations.

¹ Horace Plunkett Diary entry 31 December 1917, Horace Plunkett's diary is available to view online at the National Library of Ireland, the diary for 1917 is MS 42,222/37 here: <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000628593#page/1/mode/1up>

² For background to Plunkett see Trevor West, *Horace Plunkett Co-Operation and Politics, An Irish Biography* (Washington, 1986) and for Irish Convention see R.B. McDowell, *The Irish Convention, 1917-18* (London, 1970)

³ H.P. Diary 31 December 1917

An agreement would provide a basis to implement devolved institutions and an Irish parliament. Such a development could act as a bulwark against the growing separatist movement in Ireland that was distracting from the war effort, as well as undermining necessary support from the United States, now an important ally in the war.

That afternoon Plunkett was visited in his offices by two of the delegates from the Convention, the writer George Russell, AE, and the nationalist publisher and farmer Edward MacLysaght.⁴ They were significant figures in the context of the Convention; they had both been nominated by the Government, joining representatives of the parliamentary parties, county councils, churches, labour and business; they were seen as independent but with the capacity and the contacts to reflect the perspective of the more radical nationalist movement then coalescing under the Sinn Féin banner. Both had been influential in the establishment of the Convention itself and Russell had authored an important document which set out the case for it. They had been active throughout its deliberations contributing to debates and drafting documents. But they had a wider significance. MacLysaght had throughout the deliberations kept in close contact with senior Sinn Féin figures and was able to act as an informal unofficial liaison with them, with an understanding of the development of their political strategy. Russell, as an established writer and journalist, was a respected figure in Dublin and in London as a major figure in the literary revival. His reputation now is of a poet, painter and mystic aligned with the strange visions' side of W.B. Yeats but in his time he was a pioneering editor and critic encouraging writers from James Stephens and James Joyce to Frank O'Connor and Patrick Kavanagh as well as being an influential commentator on politics, economics and agriculture. He had been associated with radical causes and had a detailed understanding of Ulster through his own Protestant background in Armagh and his work with the co-operative movement with its significant Ulster section. Plunkett was also Russell's boss, his employer at the *Irish Homestead* and they had worked closely together for 20 years. Russell had proposed Plunkett as chairman of the Convention.

⁴ For background to Russell see Nicholas Allen, *George Russell and the New Ireland, 1905-30* (Dublin, 2017) for MacLysaght see Edward MacLysaght by Charles Lysaght in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Royal Irish Academy (Cambridge, 2009)

‘AE and Lysaght came in a very bad temper’, Plunkett wrote in his diary that evening, ‘& talked as if they were determined to wreck the Convention.’⁵ Their message was clear, the compromise being worked on was not going to get widespread nationalist support even if agreed. Ulster intransigence was insurmountable unless the Government intervened. No solution was possible without dealing with the two extremes. Russell had called for a more radical approach in the *Irish Times* a week previously. He argued that there was need for a ‘new nation’, a movement away from the old allegiances which was built on the positive elements of both traditions. The war and the Rising made this essential: ‘No one has more to give than life, and, when that is given, neither Nationalist nor Imperialist in Ireland can claim moral superiority for the dead champions of their cause.’⁶

He now told his friend Plunkett that time was up for the Convention and for those parties engaged in finding a solution. In his challenge he was putting himself in direct contrast to the then leader of parliamentary nationalism John Redmond who in one of his final political acts was attempting a compromise. Russell believed he had a better understanding of the prevalent views in Ireland than Redmond and he was convinced the proposal under consideration would not gain broad support. He would be proved right.

A compromise arrangement was proposed. The Prime Minister delivered a letter to the parties as had been requested and Redmond moved to support the resolution but then all crumbled away. Under influence from Russell key nationalist support within the convention was lost to Redmond. MacLysaght in consultation with Sinn Féin resigned, followed by Russell and with them any prospect of an agreement gaining even tacit acceptance from the separatist nationalists. When the Convention reported, on 9 April 1918, it did so with no general agreement on a plan and with many minority dissenting reports. It would be ignored and immediately overshadowed by a new and more dangerous crisis on conscription which would see positions move to the extremes and inevitable conflict in Ireland. Russell would return to focus on his writing and editing, no longer a poet among the politicians, bishops and county councillors. Only

⁵ HP Diary 31 December 1917

⁶ George Russell, *The New Nation*, *Irish Times* 19 December 1917

occasionally using those strong rhetorical skills so directly again (against conscription, civil war and censorship)⁷. Within months the Irish Parliamentary Party was finished as a political force. Plunkett and his Convention would become not a formula for settlement but at best a footnote, at worst a folly.

George Russell had been staying at Edward MacLysaght's farm in Co. Clare when they heard of the Easter Rising in 1916.⁸ Russell had visited there regularly to paint since the two had met at the Arts Club in Dublin with a shared interest in Irish writing and culture (MacLysaght was on the board of Maunsell and Co. book publishers) and in the co-operative movement. The events of that Easter had a profound effect on both men. MacLysaght was stirred into action saying 'from that time on I felt I would have to be much more than a sympathetic spectator'. For Russell the events were even more personal. Russell had known many of the leaders from their cultural activities and had also worked closely with Connolly, Joseph Mary Plunkett and Thomas MacDonagh during the 1913 lockout when he was actively involved in trying to find a resolution. He was closest to Connolly who had just before his execution asked his wife to contact Russell for assistance in getting his family out of the country.⁹

Russell, though, wasn't engaged directly in political activity.

A convinced pacifist, while Pearse and Connolly were planning revolution, he was examining concepts of nation and identity with his influential book, *The National Being*, almost ready for publication.¹⁰ It was his role in the co-operative movement, as editor of the *Irish Homestead*, which precluded him from direct political activity. He had even had a major conflict with his employer, Horace Plunkett, over Plunkett's wish to have his pro-Home Rule views published in the paper. Russell had threatened resignation saying the unity of the movement would be destroyed if the Ulster members saw the paper take such a stance officially.¹¹

⁷ See Allen, 2017, for Russell's further writings.

⁸ Henry Summerfield, *That Myriad-Minded Man, a Biography of George William Russell*, (Buckinghamshire, 1975) p. 177

⁹ Summerfield, 1975, p. 178

¹⁰ AE, *The National Being* (Dublin, 1917)

¹¹ Russell to Plunkett, 27 May 1914 in *Letters from AE*, edited by Alan Denson (London, 1961) p. 97

From Easter Rising to the Irish Convention

In 1916 Russell recognised immediately the implication of the executions: 'You see it is not the shooting of 50 or 1000 people moves public opinion but the treatment of one person, isolated and made public.'¹² He explained to his friend Charles Weekes that despite his feelings he must be constrained in his public utterances, 'I asked my own soul about all this trouble and got, not opinions, but a direction of feeling, and what I wrote under that inspiration I do not intend to make public simply because I am in a movement which is non-political and I am an important figure in it and any statement made by me might create a split and cause intense anger.'¹³

He was referring to a poem, which was, like his mentor W.B. Yeats's 1916 poem, privately circulated. It was called 'Salutation'. In it he recognised his own ambiguity about their cause: 'their dream had left me numb and cold/ But yet my spirit rose in pride/ Refashioning in burnished gold /The images of those who died.' He addressed the three leaders: 'Pearse: "your dream, not mine", MacDonagh: "high words you were equalled by high fate" and Connolly: "for Labour as a heritage, for this has Ireland lost a son."' Connolly's was the 'last torch on the pile'.¹⁴ His allegiance to Connolly was also reflected in his analysis of the Rising: 'It was labour that supplied the personal element in the revolt. It had a real grievance. The cultural element, poets, Gaels etc never stir more than one per cent of the country. It is only when an economic injustice stirs the workers that they unite with all other grievances.'¹⁵

While not engaging in public, Russell was trying behind the scenes to exert some influence, supporting the attempts to get an inquiry into the death of Francis Sheehy Skeffington and a reprieve for Sir Roger Casement and to get some support for a move on the constitutional issues. He wrote to the Conservative leader Arthur J. Balfour saying that any agreement which excluded Ulster would not work even if John Redmond agreed to it: 'Mr. Redmond cannot speak for the Irish people on this matter. He has lived so long out of Ireland that he cannot gauge the feelings of the present generation and his

¹² Russell to Mrs Philimore 28 July 1916 quoted in Charles Townsend, *Easter 1916. The Irish Rebellion* (London, 2016) p. 307

¹³ Russell to Charles Weekes 25 May 1916, Denson, 1961, p. 111

¹⁴ George Russell, *Salutation*, in *Nineteen-Sixteen, an Anthology*, compiled by Edna C. Fitzhenry (Dublin 1935)

¹⁵ Russell to Weekes, 18 August 1916, Denson, 1961, p. 117

ignorance of the power of the Sinn Féin movement is proof of this.’¹⁶ He said a settlement must give Ireland complete control over Irish affairs, provide guarantees which protected Ulster from oppression in respect of religion or legislation and contain a friendly association with Great Britain. He recommended a system with an Irish parliament, together with a House of Lords with a veto, and, noting comments made by Arthur Griffith to him after the Home Rule Bill, said such a formula, if proposed from the unionist side, could succeed. Edward MacLysaght was at the same time sending out a circular letter to his friends and other non-party men getting their view on the present situation and seeking proposals for a solution.¹⁷ In correspondence with MacLysaght about this, Russell said their efforts should be linked with those of Horace Plunkett who was also trying to gather interests in a conference.¹⁸ MacLysaght’s group included Dermot O’Brien the President of the Royal Hibernian Academy, Lord Monteagle (Thomas Spring Rice an ex-unionist peer and associate of Horace Plunkett), James Douglas, the Quaker businessman, and later Col. Maurice Moore, Irish Volunteer leader and brother of novelist George Moore. Their efforts in liaising with Plunkett were hampered by his ill health but Russell also suggested some unionist figures such as A.W. Samuels and more radical nationalists such as James MacNeill, the later Governor General of the Irish Free State, whose brother Eoin, the Volunteer leader, was in prison in Britain.¹⁹ Russell was in correspondence with some of those prisoners, sending books, including a copy of his newly published *The National Being*, to Darrell Figgis in his internment camp in Reading.

The contacts between MacLysaght’s group, loosely organised as the Irish Conference Committee, culminated in a circular letter in March of 1917 signed by Russell, Maurice Moore and James Douglas setting up a general meeting to further their plans.²⁰ The aim was to bypass the ‘hostile’ Irish parliamentary groupings who had failed to agree in the past most notably in the aborted discussions involved Carson, Redmond and Lloyd George that had collapsed with a deal of acrimony and distrust between all. The letter and its accompanying document set forth the considered views of a number of

¹⁶ Russell to A J Balfour, 1 June 1916 Denson, 1961, p. 112

¹⁷ Edward MacLysaght, *Master of None*, unpublished memoir VIII . 1 NLI MS4750

¹⁸ Russell to MacLysaght 18 July 1916, Denson, 1961, p. 115

¹⁹ Russell to MacLysaght, 25 July, 1916, Denson, 1961, p. 116

²⁰ Letter 17 March 1917, Denson, 1961 p. 121

‘independent Irishmen’ that could clarify the real claims of an ‘Irish Nation’ which could inform discussion at a proposed gathering of the ‘Colonial Premiers’. The accompanying document largely written by Col. Maurice Moore was a ‘Memorandum, Concerning the Present and Future Relations of Great Britain and Ireland in the Empire’.²¹ The emphasis on the colonial dimension reflected a movement in their thinking to the concept of ‘Dominion Status’ as an option in the solution, keeping one Irish unit but firmly within the wider colonial structure. Their ideas were forwarded by Russell to Lloyd George’s private secretary, Philip Kerr, who suggested an informal meeting with William G. Adams, an official in Lloyd George’s secretariat, and an expert on Irish affairs, who had previously worked for Plunkett in Ireland as a statistician.²² Russell also contacted the editor of the *Times*, Geoffrey Dawson, and urged Moore to contact Lord Northcliffe, the newspaper proprietor.²³ Copies were sent to influential figures at Westminster.²⁴ The group supporting the proposal now included Alice Stopford Green, Erskine Childers, Robert Barton, J.J. Horgan, Diarmuid Coffey, Joseph Johnston and Alec Wilson.²⁵ MacLysaght stressed the wider support for the document: ‘men as far asunder in views as Coote and Everard on the one hand and James MacNeill, Coffey, Moore and myself on the other.’²⁶ Moore, Douglas and AE brought the document to London where they showed it to a number of prominent individuals including General Smuts, the South African general, who was a member of the War Cabinet.

By May 1917, there were extra pressures on the Lloyd George government to deal with the Irish question: America had entered the war and Irish interests were pressing for movement there, the rise of Sinn Féin with its first by-election successes, the demands for the extension of conscription to assist the war effort. The attempt to involve the dominion prime ministers had failed and the government was examining legislation to implement a limited form of Home Rule to 26 counties but getting no support from

²¹ Document in the Maurice Moore Papers NLI MS 10,573

²² Russell to Col. Moore 10th April 1917, Denson, 1961, p 123

²³ Russell to Moore 13 April 1917, Denson, 1961, p 123

²⁴ See letter from Moore 5 April 1917, MS10,573

²⁵ List in Moore papers MS 10,573.

²⁶ MacLysaght diary entry 18 May 1917 in MS4750, Col. Nugent Everard and Sir Algernon Coote were unionists, Alec Wilson a protestant nationalist associated with Casement and Pearse, Johnston an economist protestant nationalist, Diarmuid Coffey barrister, National Volunteer, associate of Douglas Hyde, Childers the author and then serving naval intelligence officer and his cousin Barton would be Irish negotiators in the 1921 Treaty.

either the unionist or nationalist leaders for the measure. It was in this context that the convention proposal took hold. There were a number of significant interventions by individuals with whom the group had been in contact. T.P. Gill, long associated with Horace Plunkett through the co-operative movement, sent a detailed proposal to the Prime Minister's secretary Adams on the possible composition of an assembly; the Conservative peer, Lord Amery, had called for a conference and had written to Lloyd George, Carson, Smuts and F.S. Oliver (a confidant of Carson who was proposing a federal solution).²⁷ The crucial intervention though came at a dinner for General Smuts when Redmond (in the days after his party's traumatic defeat in South Longford) indicated to Lord Crewe, the Liberal peer, that the Irish Party could support a convention.²⁸ Lloyd George who had been preparing a document outlining a partition proposal for Home Rule, which had been strongly opposed by Redmond, amended his letter to the parties including the Convention as an alternative.²⁹

As this was being considered, the MacLysaght group worked to put their proposals in a pamphlet and MacLysaght, Johnston and Coffey prepared a draft which was then given to Russell to rewrite. As well as completing the text, Russell, without first consulting the others, offered the work to the *Irish Times* for publication to be printed under his own name. This led to an explosive meeting of the group, as recounted by MacLysaght:

'Tonight we met (AE, Moore, Douglas, Johnston, Coffey, Monteagle and I) to discuss his draft. He had taken quite a different line from the original memorandum which was first drawn up as a kind of brief to which we could all speak if we had gone to London to meet the Dominion premiers as was originally intended. He wrote in a perfectly detached way, outlining the ideas of each of the three parties in Ireland, remonstrating with each for its shortcomings and making an appeal to each. So far his work was entirely original. His proposals for settlement (the remainder of the document) were substantially those of our first

²⁷ See John Turner, *Lloyd George's Secretariat* (Cambridge, 1980) pp. 9-94. Also *The Leo Amery Diaries Volume 1*, edited by John Barnes and David Nicholson (London, 1980). T.P.Gill's documents are in his correspondence to W.G. Adams in NLI MS 13516/4. Both Gill and Plunkett saw their work on the Recess Committee as a model for the Convention. On Gill's list of potential nominees were Plunkett, William Martin Murphy and Douglas Hyde though not Russell or MacLysaght. Amery dined regularly at F.S. Oliver's with an influential group that included George, Carson, Lord Milner and Philip Kerr.

²⁸ Stephen Gwynn, *Redmond's Last Years* (London, 1919) p. 257. The Irish Party lost by 37 votes to Sinn Féin following an eve of poll intervention by Archbishop William Walsh warning of a 'sell-out' on partition.

²⁹ See William O'Brien, *The Irish Revolution and How it came about* (Dublin, 1923) p. 319.

memorandum the portion about navy and army being taken word for word from Col. Moore's draft. Now AE has produced a fine piece of writing which was his own. The first part of it - as well as the structure of the whole - were the result solely of his own thinking. The conclusions and arguments were however almost entirely the conclusions and arguments of a previous documents which was as much Moore's as his. AE has shown his draft, among others, to Healy the editor of the *Irish Times*. AE in somewhat an exuberant and ingenious way signed it (without his signature Healy would not publish) and added a note to the effect that the ideas in it were the result of discussions with us, mentioning our names (not Monteagle's as he was not one of us all along). He did not wait for the meeting to decide this. We all agreed that the document was excellent. Moore, however practically said without a tactful veil that AE was doing an illegal and dishonourable act in publishing it under his own name. The peace and goodwill which the pamphlet urged upon intolerant Irishmen was lacking between them and AE became thoroughly angry. He went to the telephone, heedless of our requests for a few minutes consideration, and told Healy the whole thing was off. We all agreed that publication in the *Irish Times* was desirable. Col. Moore gradually gave in as to the form of acknowledgement which would satisfy his claim to co-authorship. But AE was so upset that he would not listen to reason... He spoke vaguely of seeing (Healy) on Monday.'³⁰

The articles were published in three successive issues of the *Irish Times* from 26 May. This was important. As MacLysaght recognised: 'It is highly desirable to publish this at once since the government's alternative schemes of settlement has been known to the world. It would come well from a unionist paper.'³¹ He also saw that it was published as a pamphlet by Maunsels as 'Thoughts for an Irish Convention.'³² In a detailed exposition of the three main factions, it urged co-operation and compromise, recommending self-government in a Dominion structure with complete control of taxation and trade, while reserving defence to Great Britain and providing for an imperial contribution and safeguards for Ulster and protection against oppression.

³⁰ MacLysaght Diary 18 May 1917, NLI MS 4750

³¹ MacLysaght Diary 18 May 1917, NLI MS 4750, *Irish Times*, 26 May 1917

³² AE, *Thoughts on a Convention* (Dublin, 1917)

The group sought endorsement for their proposals from more prominent personalities including Archbishop William Walsh, who supported them, and the owner of the *Irish Independent*, William Martin Murphy (who said he agreed with most of the ideas but would only sign something for publication in his own paper).³³ The list of supporters was sent to the *Times* and the *Irish Times* by James Douglas. Russell's preparatory work with the *Times* worked, the document receiving a strong editorial endorsement.³⁴ Russell sent the *Irish Times* a letter from George Bernard Shaw supporting his analysis and, while W.B. Yeats did not get the pamphlet in time to be one of the signatories, he told Lady Gregory he approved of its contents.³⁵ Horace Plunkett wrote a letter to the *Irish Times* in support and wrote to Adams with an enthusiastic endorsement for the Convention, urging that there be a prisoner release to create a positive atmosphere amongst nationalists for the discussions.³⁶ He outlined his own views in a speech in Dundalk a few weeks later and this was also published as a pamphlet 'A Defence of the Convention.'³⁷

The Irish Convention and its workings

The composition of the Convention marked out its ultimate futility. Building on the proposal in T.P. Gill's memo for a 120 member assembly, it institutionalised current divisions and old regimes by basing its representation on the county councils, with some sectoral representation from the churches, business interests, labour and the political parties. Sinn Féin were offered five members but rejected the offer. (The nationalist MP William O'Brien had suggested instead a much smaller conference of experts and had received some support from Arthur Griffith for the idea).³⁸ The Ulster unionists eventually agreed to send a delegation led by Hugh Barrie but they were to refer back to a committee in Belfast on developments. John Redmond and Joe Devlin, but not John Dillon, represented the Irish Party. Lord Midleton led the southern

³³ Letters in James Douglas papers NLI MS 49581/3. Russell and Murphy had been in major dispute during the 1913 Lockout.

³⁴ The Times 31 May 1917

³⁵ Irish Times 1 June 1917, Shaw endorsed the 'admirable document' with one caveat on the proposals on 'federation'. W.B. Yeats to Lady Gregory 31 May 1917, 'I do not want to take a position however slight in haste.' *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats*, Electronic Edition, Intellex.

³⁶ *Irish Times* 31 May 1917. West, 1986, p. 158

³⁷ Horace Plunkett, *A Defence of the Convention* (Dublin, 1917)

³⁸ O'Brien, 1923, p. 330

Unionists. There were 15 delegates selected by Henry Duke, the Chief Secretary, including George Russell and Edward MacLysaght to reflect the advanced nationalist position. Russell's friend George Bernard Shaw tried and failed to be nominated.³⁹

Russell and MacLysaght consulted each other before accepting.⁴⁰ Russell told the lawyer John Quinn in America: 'I could not have it on my conscience if I refused to help to bring about an Irish settlement.'⁴¹ MacLysaght, who had witnessed de Valera's victory in East Clare, consulted his Sinn Féin contacts before agreeing to participate and agreed to daily meetings to keep them informed. 'It was agreed it would be advisable to have someone in the convention who was in sympathy and in close touch with Sinn Féin and so could act as a sort of liaison member but still could not be regarded in any sense an official representative of the party.'⁴² At 29, he was the youngest member of the all-male convention. William Martin Murphy and Horace Plunkett were also government nominees as was the Trinity College Provost, John Pentland Mahaffy, who hosted the Convention.⁴³

The Irish Convention met in Regent House in Trinity College on 25 July 1917 and a committee of 10 was established to select a chairman. Sir Francis Hopwood, a government nominee who had help create the union of South Africa, was nominated by the southern unionist leader Lord Midleton but Russell pushed for Horace Plunkett and with the help of Redmond and the acquiescence of the Ulster unionists succeeded in getting unanimous agreement. It was not to prove to be a correct choice as Trevor West, Plunkett's biographer has observed, 'Plunkett was lured to politics like a moth to a flame with consequences that were regularly fraught with disaster.'⁴⁴ Hopwood was selected as secretary of the Convention and perhaps as a harbinger for its prospects,

³⁹ See Stanley Weinrub, *Journey to Heartbreak, Bernard Shaw 1914-1918* (London, 1971) p. 264-5. Shaw who visited with Plunkett during this period also wrote a series of articles for the *Daily Express* in November modelled on Russell's approach recommending a Irish parliament in a federal/dominion structure to the Convention see Bernard Shaw, *The Matter with Ireland*, edited by David H. Green and Dan H. Laurence, (London, 1962) pp. 140-63

⁴⁰ Russell to MacLysaght 12 July 1917, Denson, 1961, p. 129

⁴¹ Russell to Quinn 28th July 1917, Collected Letters Denson NLI MS 8389.

⁴² MacLysaght Viii. 4 MS4750

⁴³ For full account of Convention see McDowell, 1970

⁴⁴ West, 1986, p. 180

when he and John Redmond were leaving Trinity College they were heckled with cries of ‘Sinn Féin, East Clare and up de Valera.’⁴⁵

MacLysaght made one more effort to get a wider group co-opted, Sinn Féin agreed to Douglas, Alice Stopford Green, the nationalist historian, James MacNeill and Robert Barton, the former army soldier, national volunteer and later Sinn Féin MP (Hopwood commented to Adams: ‘Alice Green would be prepared to accept it touches one’s imagination to have a women’s representative.’⁴⁶) But the proposal was rejected by the northern unionist representative Hugh Barrie and the southern unionist leader Lord Midleton.

Alvin Jackson has observed that ‘Plunkett’s tactics and strategies were disastrous from the start. He believed by giving delegates a free hand to debate, they would exhaust themselves and succumb to compromise.’⁴⁷ There followed two months of debate with little progress leading to a rebellion by the parties against the chairman’s approach and the establishment of a nine member senior committee without Plunkett to formulate proposals. The ‘Russell’ pamphlet was referred to throughout the statements.

MacLysaght in his contribution in August used it as his starting point before clarifying what he believed the Sinn Féin position to be: ‘the great bulk of Sinn Féin in the country wants only complete freedom for Ireland to work out her own destiny in her own way without constant interference - benevolent or malign - by another nation...they have stated their full claim, but I say with the greatest confidence that they would accept a settlement arrived at by this convention if the solution were a bold and far reaching settlement within the Empire.’⁴⁸ He believed full Dominion Home Rule to be a compromise between the two extremes (of northern unionism and Sinn Féin) and he believed the extreme ‘which I partially represent will make a compromise - on detail not first principles - but rest assured they will not go beyond a certain point.’

⁴⁵ West, 1986, p. 165

⁴⁶ McDowell, 1970, p. 84

⁴⁷ Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule, An Irish History 1800-2000*, p. 184

⁴⁸ Full text in MacLysaght, NLI MS 4750 p. 299

MacLysaght kept in daily touch with Sinn Féin leaders going with James Douglas to meet at James MacNeill's house with the released Eoin MacNeill and Bulmer Hobson (with the promise of consultation with Éamon de Valera)⁴⁹. He stayed at Diarmuid Coffey's house with Erskine Childers who had been appointed to the Convention's secretariat (as had Francis Cruise O'Brien though not T.P. Gill who had lobbied to be chosen).⁵⁰

Russell, with his command of 'facts and figures', proved to be an influential member of the assembly, moving between groups, making interventions and drafting documents.⁵¹ In his speech to the Convention, as noted by chairman Plunkett in his confidential daily report to the King, Russell dealt in detail with the unionist case saying the 'South was not jealous of the prosperity of the North but proud of it' but that prosperity had limitations and workers were not getting good wages and were leaving for Britain. There would be a 'social revolution' after the war and Ireland need to prepare for it by accepting 'the responsibility of framing a fiscal policy and an educational policy for itself'.⁵² He appealed to the unionists, Sinn Féin and the parliamentary nationalists to cordially co-operate: 'He knew many of the extremists who were not represented in the Convention. These men were quite prepared to accept any reasonable settlement but they were very determined and if failure followed our deliberations he almost felt that he could "hear the whistle of flying bullets in the street; see the gutter filled with blood while the souls of young men sent prematurely into the presence of their God protested against the Convention and the want of wisdom"'.⁵³

As the Convention proceeded both continued to make detailed contributions to its deliberations. MacLysaght, with Russell's support, submitted a detailed paper pointing out the potential costs for Ulster if fiscal unity were maintained after the war. It was, Russell said, the 'best statement of the Irish case on the business side made by anyone in the convention'.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ MacLysaght NLI Ms 4750 p. 303

⁵⁰ Coffey was also appointed to the secretariat but had to resign when he refused to toast the King at a convention dinner and the unionist objected to his continuing. Francis Cruise O'Brien was fater of the Minster and writer Conor.

⁵¹ John Eglinton, *A Memoir of AE* (London, 1937) p. 134

⁵² Horace Plunkett, *The Irish Convention, Confidential Report to His Majesty the King* (Dublin, 1918) p. 15

⁵³ Plunkett, 1918, p. 15

⁵⁴ McDowell, 1970, p. 117

Frustration with the lack of progress led to the establishment of the nine man sub-committee which excluded the chairman but included Russell, Redmond, Barrie, Midleton and the Bishop of Raphoe. Meeting in London and then back in Dublin, the sub-committee made substantial progress on the institutions (an all-Ireland parliament with extra unionist representation, a non-elected Senate and continued presence at Westminster) but agreement stalled when it came to fiscal issues. Plunkett then intervened setting an 'exam paper' of 10 questions to both sides to get at the core of the issue.⁵⁵ Russell who had grown increasingly impatient with Ulster unionist intransigence drafted the responses for himself, Redmond, Joseph Devlin and the Bishop of Raphoe. Stephen Gwynn, the Irish Party MP and Redmond biographer, observed later that he went harder than Redmond might have wanted and Redmond's acquiescence was an example of him 'losing his grip - a tired man'.⁵⁶ Plunkett gave his account to the King: 'Unhappily the nationalist representatives, perhaps owing to the inclusion amongst them of a poet, seemed to think that such a lump of business needed a little leaven of sentiment'. 'We wish to add,' wrote the five signatories, that 'We regard Ireland as a nation, an economic entity...Self-government does not exist where those nominally entrusted with the affairs of government have not control of fiscal and economic policy. No nation with self-respect could accept the idea that while its citizens were regarded as capable of creating wealth, they were regarded as incompetent to regulate the manner in which taxation of that wealth should be arranged, and that another country should have the power of levying and collecting taxes, the taxed country being placed in the position of a person infirm of mind whose affairs are regulated by trustees. No finality could be looked for in such an arrangement, not even a temporary satisfaction.'⁵⁷

This was a harder line than that taken in the Home Rule Act which reserved some fiscal powers to Westminster and was, accordingly, in Gwynn's analysis, a 'red rag' to Ulster.⁵⁸ The unionists, on their side, answered the questions put by Plunkett in a categorical way; their position was not one of detail but of principle, one they wouldn't concede.

⁵⁵ Details from McDowell, 1970, and Plunkett, 1918. Questions were prepared by Cambridge economists Arthur Pigou.

⁵⁶ Stephen Gwynn, *Redmond's Last Years* (London, 1919) p. 310

⁵⁷ Plunkett, 1918 p. 47

⁵⁸ Gwynn, 1919, p 309

The intervention had moved the Convention into deadlock. When it looked like it might collapse entirely Lord Midleton, the Southern Unionist leader, indicated that he would propose a compromise on the fiscal issue; the Irish parliament would control taxation and excise duties but customs should be retained by Westminster.⁵⁹ Plunkett, who was concerned at the growing militancy in the aftermath of the death, following force feeding, of hunger striking republican Thomas Ashe, saw in this proposal some hope of an outcome (he felt the equation had been moved from 3/4 to 1/4, to a new one of 4/5 to 1/5 with just the Ulster unionists out).⁶⁰ Redmond, whose attendance was interrupted by continuous bouts of illness, was examining the proposal. He was reluctant to do anything that might split Nationalist opinion and had been urging Lloyd George to intervene to soften Unionist intransigence on the fiscal issue and to get Carson involved, warning that failure would lead to further moves away from the constitutionalists to Sinn Féin.⁶¹ There was uncertainty over what would happen if there was an agreement with which just one group disagreed. The government had said they would support a proposal that had 'substantial' agreement but there was the issue of a pledge given by Lloyd George to Carson that Ulster would have a veto over any solution.

On 18 December Russell formally submitted the sub-committee findings to the Convention.⁶² The next day his letter, 'The New Nation', was published in the *Irish Times*. It was a direct challenge to Unionism and indeed Gaelic nationalism:

'we have been told there are two nations in Ireland. That may have been so in the past but it is not true today...there is now but one powerful Irish character not Celtic nor Anglo-Saxon but a new race. We should recognise our own moral identity...we are a new people and not the past but the future is to justify this new nationality. I believe it was this powerful Irish character which stirred in Ulster before the war, leading it [to] adopt methods unlike the Anglo-Saxon tradition in politics. I believe that the new characteristics far more than the spirit of an ancient race, was the ferment in the blood who brought about the astonishing enterprise

⁵⁹ See Lord Midleton, *Records and reactions* (London, 1939)

⁶⁰ Plunkett, 1918, p. 59

⁶¹ See Redmond to George, 13 and 19 November 1917, NLI MS 15,189 also in *John Redmond Selected letters and Memoranda 1880-1918*, edited by Dermot Meleady (Dublin, 2018) pp. 287-289

⁶² Allen, 2017, p 84

of Easter Week. Both had proven the capacity for sacrifice, at Easter or on the battlefields of Europe.'

His purpose was to

'deprecate the scornful repudiation by Irishmen of other Irishmen so common at present and which helps to perpetuate our feuds...I have been in council with others of my countrymen for several months and I notice what an obstacle it is to agreement, how few, how very few, those who have been on terms of friendly intimacy with men of all parties. There was hardly one who could have given an impartial account of the ideas and principles of his opponents. Our political differences have brought about social isolations and there can be no understanding where there is no eagerness to meet those who differ from us and hear the best they say for themselves. This letter is an appeal to Irishmen to seek out and understand their political opponents. If they come to know each other, they will come to trust each other, and will realise their kinship, and will set their faces to the future together to build a civilisation that will justify their nationality.'⁶³

He ended his letter by reflecting on the impact the Rising had had on him, stirring all that was Irish in his 'Anglo-Irish body' but as he reflected he remembered others who were also dying to 'serve Ireland'. Then in a remarkable reworking of his Easter Rising poem 'Salutation', now called 'To the memory of some I knew who are dead and who loved Ireland', he alternated his reflections on the executed Pearse, MacDonagh and Connolly with friends who had died in the Great War: Alan Anderson, one of the two sons of his and Plunkett's Irish co-operative friend, Robert Anderson, who had died in France: 'you too in all the dreams you had, thought of something for Ireland done'; the writer and MP Tom Kettle who was killed on the Somme: 'you proved by death as true as they'; Willie Redmond, brother of John Redmond who had died earlier that year: 'oh gallant dead - this wreath Will Redmond on your head.' The end verse of the poem now

⁶³ George Russell, *The New Nation*, *Irish Times*, 19 December 1917

worked for both traditions 'One river, born from many streams/ Roll in one blaze of blinding light.'⁶⁴

When Russell and MacLysaght stormed into Plunkett's convention office on New Year's Eve they came in the belief that any deal that did not encompass the two extreme elements would not be viable, a compromise between unrepresentative groups would not be a sustainable outcome. More than the others, they were aware, on the one hand, of the growing confidence of the Sinn Féin leadership who, following their own convention in October, were becoming more organised and coherent and, on the other, of the moves being made by Edward Carson in distancing himself from the government and moving toward a more federalist viewpoint.⁶⁵ It seems likely too that they were aware that even if Redmond manoeuvred some political accommodation in order to split the southern and northern unionists, the nationalists they were close to would still not support it.

As the meeting in Dublin was occurring, moves were on to build some momentum around the Midleton compromise. Midleton was optimistic that Ulster unionists would not oppose it even if some were getting worried about its implications.⁶⁶ Redmond had sought assurances that an agreement would be supported by the government even if Ulster disagreed. Plunkett also sought some intervention from the Prime Minister.

In a typical Lloyd George move he sent two messages, one a public one to Plunkett encouraging agreement at the Convention and one relayed indirectly to Redmond. The latter was brought back from London by Midleton and a copy given to Redmond. It was in, the leader of the Lords, Lord Curzon's hand but initialled by George and said 'if the southern unionist scheme is carried by the Convention with substantial agreement i.e., with the opposition of Ulster alone - the P.M., will use his personal influence with his colleagues... to accept the proposal and to give legislative effect.'⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Irish Times 19 December 1917, Full poem: AE, Salutation in *Earth Voices Whispering, An Anthology of Irish War Poetry, 1914-1945*, edited by Gerald Dawe (Belfast, 2008) pp. 19-21

⁶⁵ See Michael Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland, The Sinn Féin Party 1916-1923* (Cambridge, 1999)

⁶⁶ Barrie indicated 'you may count on us, we shall certainly not be against you.' Lord Midleton, *Records and Reactions* (London, 1939) p. 242

⁶⁷ Gwynn, 1932, p. 579, note in Redmond papers, NLI MS 15,189, Plunkett letter in Plunkett, 1918

Lord Midleton formally moved his motion on 4 January and it was followed by the last major speech John Redmond was to give. In his papers in the National Library of Ireland, the notes of the speech are preserved in Redmond's careful hand, points of importance underlined for emphasis. But in an emotional section not in his prepared notes he reflected on his diminished influence and the sacrifices made by his decision to support the war and his own family tragedy, 'personal loss I set aside. My position - our position - before the War was that we possessed the confidence of nearly the entire country. I took a risk - we took a risk - with eyes open. I have - we have - not merely taken the risk but made the sacrifice. If the choice were to be made tomorrow I would do it all over again. I have had a surfeit of public life. My modest ambition would be to serve in some quiet humble capacity under the first Unionist Prime Minister of Ireland.'⁶⁸ He indicated that he would be proposing that Midleton's proposals be accepted on condition the government would accept them and give them immediate legislative effect.

But there was now another gap in proceedings, and with Redmond ill at home in Aughavannagh, Russell and MacLysaght were urging Bishop O'Donnell of Raphoe to take a firm stand against the motion. Russell stressed that if it succeeded the Ulstermen would use it as a starting point for further negotiation, 'the bold attitude, the demand for full fiscal autonomy is the best and only one that would result in us winning anything' as it would force the Government to intervene with Ulster to save the Empire. MacLysaght argued that they should push for full dominion powers and that the southern unionists' proposals were not viable without Ulster support.⁶⁹

William Adams believed Russell's influence on the bishop to be decisive.⁷⁰

Redmond kept three drafts of his amendment to the Midleton motion which shows the thought being put into his position but, as he prepared to return to Dublin, he became

⁶⁸ Gwynn, 1932, p. 582. Redmond notes in NLI MS 15,265/

⁶⁹ McDowell, 1970, p. 138

⁷⁰ Turner, 1980, p 106

aware of the hardening attitude of other nationalists.⁷¹ He wrote to O'Donnell: 'I daresay my amendment will receive a certain amount of opposition - certainly from Murphy, Lysaght and Russell. But I am moving it entirely on my own responsibility and everybody will be free to vote as he likes and I will say so.'⁷² O'Donnell replied that he was firm in his opposition and on arriving in Dublin, Redmond discovered that Joe Devlin was supporting the Bishop. As he entered the Convention he told his colleague Stephen Gwynn he would not need a seconder, he would not be moving his motion. Redmond rose to address the meeting and said he had not the support of other nationalists and would not move his amendment: 'I feel that I can be of no further service to the Convention and will therefore not move.'⁷³ Redmond did however make one last effort writing to Lloyd George that in order to avoid a breakdown he invite the leaders of the Convention to London for consultations.⁷⁴ Lloyd George, who met Plunkett in London, sent back a message agreeing to the suggestion and a delegation was proposed.⁷⁵

'Ireland is going to descend into Hell and I won't help it in that direction'

In the meantime following their meeting with Plunkett, and in knowledge of these political manoeuvrings, MacLysaght and Russell had come to a critical juncture in their membership of the Convention. Russell had already contemplated resignation with a public letter to Lloyd George; he and MacLysaght had considered issuing a minority report but now MacLysaght felt that resignation was the only option.⁷⁶ He discussed it with 'MacNeill' and Gavan Duffy (and James Douglas) who supported his decision. William Martin Murphy advised against, saying 'never resign', and when the crux came Russell would not act with him in a joint resignation.⁷⁷ MacLysaght wrote to Lloyd George on 12 January 1918 saying that he 'would be acting in an unpatriotic manner if I were to remain a member of the Convention without obtaining an assurance that the will of the majority will be given effect to and a definitive statement of what you will

⁷¹ The drafts are in 15,265/3

⁷² Redmond to O'Donnell 14th January 1918, NLI MS 15,217/4.

⁷³ Gwynn, 1919, p. 323

⁷⁴ Redmond to George, 18 January 1918, NLI MS 15,189

⁷⁵ Gwynn, 1932, p. 588 letters in NLI MS 15,189

⁷⁶ MacLysaght, VIII -7, NLI MS 4750

⁷⁷ MacLysaght, NLI MS 4750 VIII-7, Gavan Duffy was a republican solicitor who had represented Casement.

regard as “substantial agreement”⁷⁸ Lloyd George’s reply on 17 January said no assurance could be given until the Convention reported.⁷⁹ MacLysaght resigned in a letter to Plunkett on 22 January, the same day as Sir Edward Carson left his cabinet post. He was frustrated at Russell’s refusal to resign with him, ‘my admiration for his intellect and his eloquence was unbounded, but he wasn’t an easy man to deal with in political matters’.⁸⁰

Russell’s refusal to resign immediately was probably due to his wish to make one more speech to the Convention and he did so on the day of MacLysaght’s resignation. In it, according to Plunkett’s report to the King, he ‘gratefully acknowledged the sacrifice of feeling made by the southern unionists and would have accepted their proposals had Ulster come in. Failing that essential of a settlement, which would ensure the setting up of an all-Ireland parliament, he could not accept a compromise which meant a ‘bow to God and a wink to the devil’. Above all he wanted to throw upon Ireland the responsibility of self-government before the socialistic and revolutionary ideas now rampant in Russia had, as they inevitably would, developed to be vast. ‘There is going to be wild weather through the world, and we want an Irish captain and an Irish crew in command of the Irish ship.’⁸¹

On the following day Plunkett presented to the Convention Lloyd George’s offer of talks in London and this was agreed to following a debate which confirmed the stalemate. Russell was chosen as one of the 16 man delegation as, according to Plunkett, ‘a knowledge of whose thoughts upon the Irish situation is essential to a full understanding of the Irish mind’.⁸²

Russell however had been ‘brooding much on the state of Ireland’ and wrote to Plunkett on 1 February: ‘the Convention constituted as it is and hampered by the pledge of Ministers to the people of Belfast cannot be the instrument by means of which an Irish

⁷⁸ MacLysaght to Lloyd George 12 January 1918 in MacLysaght NLI MS4750, p. 307

⁷⁹ Lloyd George to MacLysaght 17 January 1918 in NLI MS4750 p. 310

⁸⁰ MacLysaght, NLI MS4750 VII 4

⁸¹ Plunkett, 1918 p 75

⁸² Plunkett, 1918 p 77

settlement can be maintained.’⁸³ The Midleton scheme would not work nor had he any confidence that the government would intervene successfully. ‘I view with the greatest foreboding the future of Ireland and I do not think I have any part to play politically in a country ravaged by such passions, and I intend to devote such energy and thought to other movements with which I have more efficiencies.’⁸⁴ In deference to their close relationship, he promised to ‘quietly drop out’ without a public statement. Russell alerted MacLysaght as well: ‘Ireland is going to descend into Hell and I won’t help it in that direction. It may rise again and I believe it will but by other minds than those engaged in its troubles today.’⁸⁵ Plunkett asked him to postpone his decision until he had come with the delegation to meet the government and expressed his views to them in person. Russell replied that he was confirmed in his decision to resign by the expressed determination of Edward Carson in a speech in Belfast to resist any inclusion of Ulster in a settlement.⁸⁶ The only thing to do now was ‘let the new forces of nationalism manifest themselves in their full strength. I think, in spite of South Armagh [a by-election held in February 1918 in which the Irish Party defeated Sinn Féin], that they will grow stronger and I think nothing but the most determined opposition to British Government in Ireland will have any effect on that Government. I have no affinity with extreme methods and while I see their inevitability I am not one who can take part in them...The Sinn Féiners were right in their intuition from the first. If I had followed my intuition from the first I would have remained away also. A man must be either an Irishman or an Englishman in this manner. I am Irish.’⁸⁷

Russell kept to his pledge of silence, despite much coverage in the press of his withdrawal, but he did write privately to Lloyd George. In that letter he included a copy of his Convention pamphlet, which he said still remained his analysis after the Convention deliberations and he explained his reasons for resigning. The unconditional pledge to Ulster hampered any possibility of an agreed settlement from the Convention and ‘half-measures’ – such as the Midleton proposal – would not be accepted in Ireland nor would they relieve Britain of its ‘anxieties’. He believed an Irish parliament in a

⁸³ Russell to Plunkett 1st February 1918, Denson, 1961 p. 136

⁸⁴ Russell to Plunkett 1st February 1918, Denson, 1961 p. 136

⁸⁵ Russell to MacLysaght 1 February 1918, in Denson Collected letters manuscript NLI 8389

⁸⁶ See Ian Colvin, *The Life of Lord Carson*, Volume 3 (London, 1936) pp. 806-808 on Carson’s resignation.

⁸⁷ Russell to Plunkett, 3 February 1918, Denson, 1961, p. 137

dominion context, with a free trade agreement with Britain, could offer the necessary assurances for Ulster. He stressed that the views of the 'national extremism' were not represented or understood by any of those George would meet in the Convention delegation but it would be dangerous for the Government to ignore those views:

'we have for the first time in Ireland a disinterested nationalism not deriving its power from grievances connected with land or even oppressive Government but solely from the growing self-consciousness of nationality, and this has with the younger generation all the force of a religion, with the carelessness about death, suffering or material loss which we find among the devotees of a religion. Any Government established which does not allow this national impulse free play will be wrecked by it.'⁸⁸

'...perhaps such men should never enter the field of practical politics'

Plunkett, who was sent a copy of the letter, was impressed: 'your resignation will be a great blow to the Convention in Ireland, in England, and perhaps most of all in America. I am using what I can sincerely say of your character, intellect and knowledge to bring home to the Government that they must deal seriously, radically and immediately with the situation. Your letter to Lloyd George may be helpful and, indeed if it were not for the brilliant part you played in the Convention, I should say nothing became you in it like leaving it.'⁸⁹ To the King he reflected 'he is a true patriot, intellectually honest and devoid of personal ambition...he has a powerful influence over the younger generation whose mentality he describes ... perhaps such men should never enter the field of practical politics which must, as far ahead as we dare to look, belong to the seekers of the second best.'⁹⁰

The gap in understanding left by Russell and MacLysaght was never bridged in the Convention and even within its memberships the divisions evident in January were reinforced. The political environment changed dramatically in early 1918. Redmond died on 6 March to be replaced as party leader by John Dillon. Carson had resigned from the Cabinet and was now focussed on Ulster. But most significantly, a major German

⁸⁸ Russell to Lloyd George, 5 February 1918, Denson, 1961, p. 138

⁸⁹ Plunkett to Russell, 6 February, 1918, Denson, 1961, p. 140

⁹⁰ Plunkett, 1918, p. 8

offensive in March renewed the pressure on army resources and the calls for conscription, already introduced in Britain, to be extended to Ireland.

Following the meetings in London, Lloyd George did put forward to the Convention a compromise scheme which included an all-Irish parliament with safeguards for unionists (including an Ulster committee and the Department of Trade in Belfast) with foreign and military powers reserved for Westminster and with customs and excise reserved as well for the duration of the war and for two years afterwards.⁹¹ The northern unionists rejected the proposals, advocating instead a partitioned, direct rule model for all Ulster. Only moderate nationalists and the southern unionists supported the proposal, so Joseph Devlin, Bishop O'Donnell, William Martin Murphy and the Ulster unionists were united in rejecting the main Convention recommendations when it wound up on 8 April, offering instead a series of minority reports.⁹² Plunkett delivered the Convention report to Downing Street the following morning, 9 April. That afternoon he was in the Commons to hear Lloyd George speak on the promised legislation giving support to the Convention proposals. He was astonished to hear the Prime Minister introduce as well a bill to extend conscription to Ireland thereby confounding any prospect of success for any political initiative. 'I was witness', he told the King, 'to one of those perverse misunderstandings which ever darken the pages of Anglo-Irish history.'⁹³

Both Plunkett, to the *Irish Times*, and Russell, to the *Manchester Guardian*, issued strong letters condemning compulsory conscription.⁹⁴ Russell's letter was published as a pamphlet for the Mansion House conference which launched the anti-conscription campaign with John Dillon, Joe Devlin, Éamon de Valera, Arthur Griffith, Tim Healy, William O'Brien and Tom Johnston all in attendance; all nationalist opinion united in opposition (to be joined by leading Catholic church figures). Russell, back in the more familiar surroundings of his fellow writers, with W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Douglas

⁹¹ Details in Lloyd George to Horace Plunkett 25 February 1918 in Plunkett, 1918, p. 85

⁹² For details on ending of Convention see McDowell, 1970, pp. 181-14

⁹³ Plunkett 1918 p 130

⁹⁴ Plunkett's letter is *Irish Times*, 6 May 1918, Russell's in the *Manchester Guardian*, 8 May 1918, in Denson, 1961, p. 141

Hyde and James Stephens, wrote that conscription was a death blow to 'all hope of peace in Ireland and goodwill toward England in our lifetime'.⁹⁵

MacLysaght and Russell remained close friends and were to co-operate again on important national issues most notably in efforts to arrange a ceasefire during the War of Independence.⁹⁶ Russell, though he continued to meet occasionally with political leaders, including Lloyd George, made his greatest impact as a writer and editor.⁹⁷ MacLysaght was more politically active, becoming a Senator in the Irish Free State, an honour which Russell refused. The Convention had been politics enough.

In July 1918, George Russell wrote to his friend, the playwright, St. John Ervine, who had been wounded in battle in France and had lost a leg. Russell said he was relieved as Ervine was now out of danger of worse. He then added:

'I am taking no thought or rather part in Irish politics. I feel like a man watching an avalanche sliding down a hill who knows nothing can stay it, and action is useless until the avalanche rests. Unionists/Nationalist and Sinn Féiners are all in a state of exasperated nerves, all intolerant and one can belong to no party...The Convention gave me enough politics to last a lifetime and I will now try to break heresies which interest me more. Macmillan and Co are bringing out a book which will finally make it impossible for me to take part in politics in Ireland as it is full of religious heresies and will give me a bad name. But I have had that often and can stand it. I hope you will soon be able to move about again and get at your work. Anyhow you have a clean conscience and have done your part and good luck to you. AE.'⁹⁸

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⁹⁵ The Nation 25 May 1918

⁹⁶ MacLysaght, MS4750 XI.3, Summerfield, 1975, pp. 202/3

⁹⁷ Most notably as editor of *The Irish Statesman* from 1923 to 1930, collected in AE, *The Living Torch*, edited by Monk Gibbon (London, 1937)

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