

Birrell, Augustine

by Eunan O'Halpin

Birrell, Augustine (1850–1933), chief secretary for Ireland, was born 19 January 1850 near Liverpool, England, son of Charles Birrell, baptist minister, and Harriet Jane Birrell (née Grey), of Edinburgh. A legacy enabled him to study law at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, graduating BA (1872). He was called to the bar at the Inner Temple (1875) and took silk in 1895. He was Quain professor of law at University College, London (1896–9). His talents were, however, as much literary as legal, and while developing a strong practice at the bar he also became a noted essayist and bibliophile.

Birrell was elected as MP for West Fife (1889), but when he switched constituencies in the 1900 general election he failed to take a seat in Manchester. He had more luck in the Liberal landslide of 1906, taking North Bristol. He was immediately appointed to the cabinet of Henry Campbell-Bannerman (qv) as the Liberals set out on a path of radical social reform. Birrell's first post was president of the board of education. There he won plaudits from all sides for his management of an education bill intended to provide fairer treatment for nonconformist schools. Supporters and opponents alike appreciated the eloquence, sensitivity, courtesy, and finesse with which he sought to produce a successful compromise; what in retrospect was perhaps as significant, however, was that the measure failed when it was rejected by the house of lords.

Birrell became chief secretary for Ireland in January 1907, succeeding James Bryce (qv). His legislative initiatives must be seen in the wider context of the unprecedented radicalism and dynamism of the liberal government between 1906 and 1911. This had a spill-over effect in Ireland, in terms both of UK-wide reforms such as the children's act and the introduction of the old age pension. It also created a climate in which specifically Irish reforms became possible.

Birrell inherited two major schemes of reform which Bryce had been persuaded to embrace by his powerful under-secretary Sir Antony MacDonnell (qv). MacDonnell believed that the heat could be taken out of the home rule issue through practical, disinterested administrative reform, embodied in an 'Irish councils' bill; Birrell's political instincts suggested that this was a non-starter, and he made little effort to push it through the commons. He also discounted MacDonnell's advice to court the Irish centre ground, instead setting out to maintain the closest possible relations with the nationalist leaders John Redmond (qv) and John Dillon (qv).

Birrell inherited a recommendation, backed by MacDonnell, that the five Irish colleges – TCD, UCD, and the three Queen's Colleges at Belfast, Cork, and Galway – should come within a federal university. This would have met catholic and

nonconformist grievances about university education within a non-denominational framework. Birrell initially attempted to achieve such a federal system; but, faced with strong religious reservations all round, he compromised, overseeing the creation of the NUI and QUB, accommodating respectively largely catholic and nonconformist interests, to stand beside TCD. This largely segregated university system endured unchanged till 1968 (when the New University of Ulster was established in Northern Ireland) and 1989 (when Dublin City University and the University of Limerick were created), a very Irish solution to an Irish problem.

From 1907 Birrell was confronted with renewed agrarian agitation because of the slowing pace of land reform in the west of Ireland, arising largely from a shortage of funds. He was harshly criticised by conservatives for his unwillingness to use coercion to quell unrest, but his constructive approach was vindicated. He showed resolution and guile in securing cross-party support for the funds and powers of compulsory purchase necessary to clear the log jam in the 1909 land act, despite the reservations of many landlords and the reflexive hostility of the Treasury to any further expenditure on the Irish land question.

Birrell was unequivocally in favour of home rule. Until the constitutional crisis over the 1909 'people's budget' culminated in the removal of the house of lords' power of veto over legislation through the parliament act, there appeared no prospect of introducing self-government for Ireland. In tandem with this, the two general elections of 1910 saw the Irish nationalists emerge as a key factor in the commons, holding the balance between the liberals and the conservatives. The nationalists demanded and got a home rule bill, which Birrell brought to the commons in 1912. It met nationalist but not Ulster unionist demands, and it set in train a sequence of events that might well have culminated in civil war in Ireland in the summer of 1914, had the Kaiser not also been on the move. In the face of furious Ulster unionist resistance to home rule, including the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force, Birrell and his officials in Dublin Castle adopted an understandably cautious approach. The home rule crisis was of such a magnitude that only a united cabinet could address it. In those circumstances Birrell took the view that the Irish authorities should not take any steps that might inflame Ulster. There were also technical legal reasons why action against the importation and carrying of arms might fail, although these could have been remedied by legislation. The result was what amounted to a policy of drift, where Ulster unionism was allowed to build up a private army, encouraging the creation of a matching nationalist volunteer movement in November 1913, without let or hindrance.

In Ireland itself other forces were also at work. The charismatic trade union leader James Larkin (qv) led a bitter transport strike in Dublin in 1913. This was met with a sharpness of repression at odds with Birrell's general style of governance. Birrell had never taken much interest in questions of law and order or in the activities of the police forces, leaving these matters to officials in Dublin Castle, but he had overall responsibility. To an extent, official excesses during the 1913 disturbances

– including what appeared a vindictive and disproportionate prosecution of Larkin
– may reflect Birrell's progressive disengagement with Ireland: his second wife was desperately ill with a brain tumour, and he had already attempted to resign on more than one occasion. The legislative battle for home rule had been won, and solution of the outstanding intractable question of Ulster would be the responsibility of the cabinet as a whole.

In April 1914 the Ulster Volunteers successfully smuggled and distributed 20,000 rifles at Larne. This gun-running operation took place under the eyes of the Irish authorities, who did nothing. In July, when the Irish Volunteers attempted a similar coup on a smaller scale at Howth near Dublin, there was a disastrous attempt to interfere. Some weapons were seized by the police, only to be returned because of doubts about their legal powers, but the bulk of the arms were spirited away. Events culminated in the deaths of three onlookers, shot by troops during a minor riot at Bachelor's Walk in central Dublin. The episode underlined the danger of over-zealous law enforcement; it also threw up familiar problems arising from outdated legislation on firearms and public order. The Bachelor's Walk fiasco can only have reinforced a tendency not to act precipitately against armed groups.

Birrell had one stroke of good fortune in 1914. He acquired a very able under-secretary for Ireland in Sir Matthew Nathan (qv), a former Royal Engineer. The great question, once war broke out and the bulk of the unionist and nationalist volunteers enlisted in the army, was what to do about the rump of advanced nationalists who remained as the Irish Volunteers and the Citizen Army. These continued to prepare for armed conflict, parading and practising under the eyes of the authorities. The balance that had to be struck was between ensuring that no outbreak took place, and not inflaming public opinion by repression of a movement which most Irish nationalists appeared to regard as an irrelevance. Redmond and Dillon were anxious that Ireland be governed with caution and toleration: it was important not to damage recruitment to the armed services, and to prevent any disruption in the war economy. Neither Birrell nor Nathan were aware that a circle of conspirators within the Irish Volunteers had already made arrangements for German help for a rebellion, a matter that became known to naval intelligence through decodes of German diplomatic cables between Washington and Berlin in 1915–16; had the extent and limits of London's foreknowledge been passed on to Dublin Castle and assessed in parallel with what the police knew, it is likely that action to thwart the conspiracy would have followed. Nevertheless, the increasing boldness of the Irish Volunteers, culminating in their mock attack on Dublin Castle in March 1916, should surely have prompted firm action by the Irish administration. As it was, the outbreak of the Easter rising took Dublin Castle by surprise.

Had Birrell retired as he wished in 1913 or 1914, his political obituaries would undoubtedly have been kinder. His first six years in Ireland saw a succession of notable innovations, some the product of the rising tide of social legislation enacted by the liberals, others specifically Irish and his responsibility. His misjudgement

in tolerating the seditious activities of the Irish Volunteers after 1914 cannot be separated from the earlier home rule crisis and the government's unwillingness to prevent the arming of Ulster, but there is no doubt that he failed to appreciate the enhanced threat posed by even a relatively small group of committed militants in the changed circumstances of war.

Birrell willingly accepted political responsibility for the rising, and bore without complaint the attacks made on him by many who had flouted the spirit of the law and the constitution themselves only a few years earlier. Sir Henry Wilson (qv) maintained that Birrell should be tried for dereliction of duty and shot if convicted; yet the same officer had supported the militarisation of Ulster resistance to home rule from 1911. Birrell wrote ruefully of his time in Ireland in a posthumously published memoir, *Things past redress* (London, 1937). He was conferred with an honorary degree by the NUI in 1929 (though bad weather prevented his attending the ceremony). He lived in comfortable retirement in London, surrounded by books, till his death on 20 November 1933 at the age of 83.

He married first (1878) Margaret Mirrielees, who died the following year. He married secondly (1888) Eleanor (née Locker; d. 1915), widow of the Hon. Lionel Tennyson; they had two sons.

WWW; Leon Ó Broin, *Dublin Castle and the 1916 rising* (1966); id., *The chief secretary: Augustine Birrell and Ireland, 1907–16* (1969); Patricia Jalland, *The Liberals and Ireland, 1911–1914* (1980); Eunan O'Halpin, *The decline of the union: British government in Ireland, 1892–1920* (1987)