

“...in comradeship with our brethren in the North, we will ourselves defend”

Redmond's offer to Asquith on the eve of War and the road to Woodenbridge

By Ed Mulhall

On the afternoon of Monday, August 3rd 1914, Sir Edward Grey, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs rose in a packed House of Commons to give an update on the developing crisis in Europe. Chairs were placed along the floor of the crowded chamber - something that hadn't happened since Gladstone spoke on the Home Rule Bills over twenty years earlier. Sitting alongside Grey, the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, knew the importance of the speech that was being made. He had moved in the previous few days from dealing with the complexity of the Irish Home Rule crisis to a growing realisation that a major European War was inevitable and that it was also becoming inevitable that he would have to lead Britain into that conflict. On that Monday afternoon he knew that the decision was splitting the Cabinet; he had contemplated the prospect of that he and Grey resign, leading to the fall of the Government. There was also increasing pressure from the opposition to act. The case for war had to be made. Asquith was not to be disappointed, he wrote later that evening: " Grey made a most remarkable speech almost an hour long, for the most part almost conversational in tone and with some of his usual ragged ends, but extraordinarily well reasoned and tactful and really cogent.." ¹

Stephen Gwynn, the Irish Party MP for Galway, had failed to get a seat on the Irish benches and was sitting on one of the chairs close by the Sergeant of Arms, just inside the bar of the House - so he "saw both sides of the assembly, there were no parties that day." He said the House was unprepared for what it had to face, that there was surprise in the air as the speech unfolded and men "shaken away from all traditional attitudes, responded from the depth of themselves to an appeal none of us had ever heard before." He went on to describe how Grey slowly and methodically won over the chamber:

"The Foreign Secretary's speech, intensely English, with all the quality that is finest in English tradition clearly did not in its opening stages carry the House as a whole. Passages struck home, here and there, to men not to parties, kindling individual sentiments. Appeal to a common feeling for France did not elicit a general response; but here and there in every quarter there were those who leapt to their feet and cheered, waving the papers that were in their hands: and the two figures that stand out for me were Willie Redmond , our leader's brother and Arthur Lynch. We were a very different atmosphere already from the days of the Boer War. It was not until the speaker reached in his statement the outrage committed on Belgian neutrality that feeling manifested itself universally. Appeal was made to the sense of honour, of fair play, of respect for pledges by a man well fitted to make such an appeal as addressed any audience and it was the case of Belgium that made the House of Commons unanimous." ²

The key passage in Grey's speech showed how a violation of Belgium's neutrality would inevitably lead to wider chaos. He began by quoting Prime Minister Gladstone on the importance of Belgium: "We have an interest in the independence of Belgium which is wider than that which we may have in the literal operation of the guarantee. It is found in the answer to the question whether under the circumstances of the case, this country, endowed as it is with influence and power, would quietly stand by and witness the perpetration of the

direst crime that ever stained the pages of history, and thus become participators in the sin." and continued:

"No, Sir, if it be the case that there has been anything in the nature of an ultimatum to Belgium, asking her to compromise or violate her neutrality, whatever may have been offered to her in return, her independence is gone if that holds. If her independence goes, the independence of Holland will follow. I ask the House from the point of view of British interests, to consider what may be at stake. If France is beaten in a struggle of life and death, beaten to her knees, loses her position as a great Power, becomes subordinate to the will and power of one greater than herself—consequences which I do not anticipate, because I am sure that France has the power to defend herself with all the energy and ability and patriotism which she has shown so often—still, if that were to happen, and if Belgium fell under the same dominating influence, and then Holland, and then Denmark, then would not Mr. Gladstone's words come true, that just opposite to us there would be a common interest against the unmeasured aggrandisement of any Power?.." ³

Before concluding Grey added what many observers considered a surprising aside; "The one bright spot in the whole of this terrible situation is Ireland. The general feeling throughout Ireland—and I would like this to be clearly understood abroad—does not make the Irish question a consideration which we feel we have now to take into account". He finished by indicating that the fatal decisions could soon be taken in what was a rapidly developing situation: "I have put the vital facts before the House, and if, as seems not improbable, we are forced, and rapidly forced, to take our stand upon those issues, then I believe, when the country realizes what is at stake, what the real issues are, the magnitude of the impending dangers in the West of Europe, which I have endeavored to describe to the House, we shall be supported throughout, not only by the House of Commons, but by the determination, the resolution, the courage, and the endurance of the whole country."

Edward Grey was followed by the Conservative leader Andrew Bonar Law who confirmed to the House what he had already written to the Prime Minister: that the opposition would support the Government in taking the necessary action.

Next, to the surprise of many present, Irish Party leader John Redmond rose to speak. Stephen Gwynn described the scene: "Then Redmond rose, and a hush of expectation went over the house. I can see it now, the crowded benches and the erect, solid figure with the massive hawk-visage head thrown back, standing squarely at the top of the gangway. While he spoke, as during Grey's speech, the cheering broke out first intermittently and scattered over the House, then grew gradually universal. Sitting about me were Tory members whom I did not know: I heard their ejaculations of bewilderment, approval and delight. But in the main body of Unionists behind the front Opposition bench papers were being waved, and when Redmond sat down many of these men stood up to cheer him. In five minutes he had changed the whole atmosphere of domestic politics in regard to the main issue of controversy." ⁴

John Redmond began by referring to that passage on Ireland in Grey's speech: "I was moved a great deal by that sentence in the speech of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in which he said that the one bright spot in the situation was the changed feeling in Ireland. In past times when this Empire has been engaged in these terrible enterprises, it is true - it would be the utmost affectation and folly on my part to deny it—the sympathy of the Nationalists of Ireland, for reasons to be found deep down in the centuries of history, have

been estranged from this country. Allow me to say that what has occurred in recent years has altered the situation completely. I must not touch, and I may be trusted not to touch, on any controversial topic. By this I may be allowed to say, that a wider knowledge of the real facts of Irish history have, I think, altered the views of the democracy of this country towards the Irish question, and to-day I honestly believe that the democracy of Ireland will turn with the utmost anxiety and sympathy to this country in every trial and every danger that may overtake it." Redmond went on to recall that in the aftermath of the American Wars in 1778 and with the British army at its lowest ebb, a local Volunteer force had sprung up to defend the shores of Ireland, one that eventually included both Protestants and Catholics. "Today there are in Ireland two large bodies of Volunteers. One of them sprang into existence in the North. Another has sprung into existence in the South. I say to the Government that they may to-morrow withdraw every one of their troops from Ireland. I say that the coast of Ireland will be defended from foreign invasion by her armed sons, and for this purpose armed Nationalist Catholics in the South will be only too glad to join arms with the armed Protestant Ulstermen in the North. Is it too much to hope that out of this situation there may spring a result which will be good not merely for the Empire, but good for the future welfare and integrity of the Irish nation? I ought to apologise for having intervened, but while Irishmen generally are in favour of peace, and would desire to save the democracy of this country from all the horrors of war, while we would make every possible sacrifice for that purpose, still if the dire necessity is forced upon this country we offer to the Government of the day that they may take their troops away, and that if it is allowed to us, in comradeship with our brethren in the North, we will ourselves defend the coasts of our country." ⁵

As the MPs left the chamber Gwynn heard that just before he spoke Redmond had consulted with MPs on either side. One, Mr Hayden, on hearing what he was going to propose said he should speak, the other T.P. O'Connor was against it, particularly following the events in Dublin. ⁶ Had it been a spontaneous act prompted by Grey's statement? Journalist Michael MacDonagh, who was in the Press Gallery, thought not. He (MacDonagh) noted that his speech was prepared, written out on his customary half sheets of notepaper. ⁷

Given the context in which it was made, only weeks after the King had warned against the prospect of civil war, Redmond's intervention was a dramatic one and seen immediately as of the utmost significance. The headlines in The Times, the following morning, show its impact: "Naval Aid for France, British Policy Defended, Sir E. Grey's Statement, The Belgian Appeal, Mobilisation of the Army, Loyal Ireland."⁸

But what had led to this dramatic statement? Was Redmond acting unilaterally without the knowledge of his party colleagues? Had there been a secret deal with Grey and Asquith on Home Rule? And what had sparked Grey's remarks about Ireland? What was the role of the Prime Minister's wife who it was revealed later had written to Redmond with a plea? And what were to be the consequences of this decision? Had Redmond set his party firmly on the road to Woodenbridge and full support for Irish participation in the War?

Prime Minister Asquith, writing on the evening of August 3rd, considered Redmond's intervention to be very effective and was later to link this initiative with those of his own that led to the concept of the League of Nations. Edward Grey went back to the Foreign office to await the exchange of dispatches that led to the final ultimatum. As light faded along the Mall, he turned to his companion the newspaper editor John Alfred Spender and said: "The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them again in our life-time."

The answers to the questions regarding Redmond's initiative can be gleaned from an examination of the interaction between the Irish leader and the Prime Minister in the aftermath of the failure of the Buckingham Palace talks in July and from an understanding of how both men reacted to the rapidly developing international crisis.

A very detailed account of those days from Asquith's perspective exists. Writing in his biography, which was published in the year of his death, 1928, Herbert Asquith outlined the situation at the end of June 1914: "The question of the Amending Bill in connection with the Home Rule Bill, which had passed the House of Commons in three successive sessions went through a number of phases. The Amending Bill introduced by the Government on June 23, 1914, embodied the proposal that any Ulster county should be entitled to vote itself out of Home Rule for Six years. The Lords transformed it into a shape which the Nationalists and the majority of the House of Commons could not accept, by definitely excluding the whole of Ulster. Before and after that proceeding, efforts were made to attain an agreement. There were comings and goings (?) of negotiators, and long discussions of Ministers.

Without prejudice to the decision on other matters, such as the time limit, which, from Sir Edward Carson's point of view, was at the moment the real difficulty, conversations turned on the geographical delimitation of the area that might be excluded temporarily or permanently. There was debatable territory, particularly in the two counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone, where the racial and religious inter-mixture presented exceptionally intricate difficulties. I had talks with the protagonists from both sides. Each of them had their difficulties. I had hoped to the last that an agreement might be reached, but the question of Tyrone, on which neither side would give way, was an intractable problem."⁹

He then presents in diary form the events of the next few weeks. Asquith explained that his diary which gave details of the political events was compiled from contemporaneous notes and jottings and letters he had written in those days to close friends. We know now that it is almost entirely based on letters he wrote to Venetia Stanley, a young woman with whom he was besotted and to whom he wrote most days with great sentimentality and with great detail of his political activities. It presents a real insider's view of the pre-occupations of a Prime Minister at this crucial moment of history. Here is the extract from his letter to Stanley on July 24th concerning the collapse of the Buckingham Palace conference, called by the King with Redmond and Dillon representing the Irish Party, Edward Carson and James Craig the Unionist, Bonar Law and Lord Lansdowne the Conservatives and with Asquith and Lloyd representing the Government:

"July 24th

The other cause of blackness as I told you was pretty certain the Conference broke down and as you will see by the papers I announced to the House the terms of the Speaker's rather bald and jejune report. The last meeting this morning was in some ways dramatic...At the end the king came in, rather emotionne & said in two sentences(thank God there was not another speech¹⁰) farewell, I am sorry, I thank you. He then very wisely had the different members brought to him privately, and saw each in turn. Redmond was a good deal impressed by his interview, especially as the King told him that he was convinced of the necessity of Home Rule.

We then had a meeting at Downing St.- Redmond & Dillon,(Lloyd) George, (Augustine) Birrell & I. I told them that I must now go on with the Amending Bill- without the time limit: to which after a good deal of demur they reluctantly agreed to try and persuade their party to assent.¹¹

Redmond also assured us that when he said goodbye to Carson the latter was in tears and that Captain Craig who had never spoken to Dillon in his life came over to him and said: 'Mr Dillon will you shake my hand? I should be glad to think that I have been able to give as many years service to Ulster as you have to the service of Ireland.' Aren't they a remarkable people? And the folly of thinking we can ever understand, let alone govern them....

At 3.15 we had a Cabinet where there was a lot of vague & not very fruitful talk about Ulster, the provisional government &c; but the real interest was Grey's statement of the European situation, which is about as bad as it can possibly be. Austria has sent a bullying and humiliating Ultimatum to Serbia¹², who cannot possibly comply with it, and demanded an answer within 48 hours- failing which she will march. This means, almost inevitably, that Russia will come on the scene in defence of Serbia & in defiance of Austria: and if so it is difficult both for Germany & France to refrain from lending a hand to one side or the other. So that we are within measurable or imaginable, distance of real Armageddon, which would dwarf the Ulster and Nationalist Volunteers to their true proportions. Happily there seems to be no reason why we should be anything more than spectators. But it is blood-curdling prospect - is it not?"¹³

That meeting in Downing Street between the Irish leaders, the Prime Minister and Lloyd George is crucial in understanding the events that were to follow. By acceding to the Prime Minister's ultimatum to push through the Amending Bill, they were in effect agreeing to exclusion of some counties from the Home Rule Bill. A realisation that this was inevitable is contained in John Redmond's minute of the first day of the Buckingham conference as Ronan Fanning has pointed out.¹⁴ Redmond writes: "It was generally understood that there was no possibility, with any advantage, of discussing any settlement except on the lines of exclusion of some sort." When it was clear that the conference was coming to no conclusion Redmond made a further interjection according to his own hand written addition to his minutes. He asked "formally whether any settlement not based on exclusion would be considered & said if exclusion was given up he could personally consider very large concessions. Sir E. Carson said he would consider no settlement of any kind unless based on exclusion."¹⁵

In addition there seems to have been another proposal from Redmond as can be seen from a diary entry of that day by the Prime Minister's wife. Margot Asquith's diary for 24th July states "Redmond told H. this afternoon that if the Government liked to remove every soldier from Ireland, he would bet there would never be one hitch and that both his volunteers and Carson's would police Ireland with ease."¹⁶ The fact that this particular point was noted by Margot Asquith does perhaps give a clue to what she had in mind in her later intervention on the eve of the Commons debate.

In the days that followed, other dramatic events intervened to postpone the introduction of the Amending Bill and all the while the European Crisis was worsening.

On July 27th there was the killing in Dublin of four civilians by soldiers from the Kings Own Scottish Borderers in the aftermath of the Howth gunrunning. Asquith's letter of July 28th deals with it: "We were playing bridge at the Wharf last night when a telephone message came in reporting the shocking news from Dublin. The malignity of fortune could not hardly have devised a more inopportune coup and how the devil the soldiers got mixed up in it at all, still more to fire their volleys at this moment, passes my comprehension. The Nationalists of course are furious and not without reason and the whole thing in any case must react most unfavourably on the chances of peace and settlement. The Eastern crisis is hanging in the balance - we are to have a Cabinet about it this afternoon."¹⁷

Later he wrote that they have had a briefing that the summoning of the military was the act of "an Ass of a Police Commissar called Harrell" and that they were postponing the debate on the Amending Bill due the following day to have a debate on the shootings.

The introduction of the Amending Bill was postponed for the statements on the Dublin shootings.

On July 30 with the European Crisis now acute and growing fears amongst the Conservative opposition and their contacts in the Army that the Government might be prevaricating from entering in support of France and Belgium, there was a surprising initiative from Edward Carson. Again as seen by Asquith: "I was sitting in the Cabinet room with a map of Ulster and lot of statistics about populations and religions, endeavouring to get into something like shape my speech on the Amending Bill, when a telephone message came from Bonar Law to ask me to go and see him and Carson at his Kensington abode. He had sent his motor, which I boarded, and in due time arrived at my destination. I found the two gentlemen there, and Bonar Law proceeded to propose in the interests of the international situation that we should postpone, for the time being, the second reading of the Amending Bill. He thought that to advertise our domestic dissensions at this moment would weaken our influence in the world for peace. Carson said that at first he had thought it impossible to agree, as it would strain still further the well-known and much tried patience of his Ulstermen, but he had come to see that it was now a patriotic duty. I, of course, welcomed their attitude, but said I would consult my colleagues before giving a definite answer. When I got back I saw Lloyd George and Grey and we agreed that it was right to close with the offer. Redmond who I saw afterwards, thought it an excellent chance of putting off the Amending Bill and for the first time in my experience of him made a really useful suggestion that if we put the Amending Bill off to the next session he would agree that the operation of the Home Rule Bill (to be put on the Statute book now) should be suspended until the Amending Bill became law. He said that under those conditions he could make much larger concessions than he can now. The City, which is in a terrible state of depression and paralysis, is for the time being all against English intervention. The prospect is very black".¹⁸

Carson's offer on the Amending Bill was prompted by a letter from James Craig the Ulster Volunteer leader: who wrote: "I am of the opinion you should today, openly, on the highest patriotic grounds, take the initiative in suggesting that the Home Rule question be postponed. You doing so in the House at the first instance will be fully understood here and appeal to the loyalty of the people. Offer Government our officers, men and arms generously to see the matter through". In an additional note, he added that as well as being a patriotic suggestion: "it may very well disconcert the Coalition, especially the Nationalists. They would find it extremely awkward to follow on with a similar offer from their side, and surely the country would be able to read between the lines and store up that much to our credit when the issue is finally fought out."¹⁹

This set the strategic context for Carson's approach during the following month. It was also pragmatic as Carson pointed out to Asquith on July 30th: He told the Prime Minister that without this suspension there was the prospect of reservists among the Volunteers refusing the mobilisation order and staying in Ulster. He didn't elaborate on the other side of that equation which was that if many officers and instructors did mobilise then the Volunteer organisation could lose much of their professional leadership.

Asquith replied that he thought the same might apply in the South, a timely observation as it was to turn out.

The position now taken by Redmond was to remain consistent right through the next month. His principle aim was to get the Home Rule Bill on the Statute book. But the operation of the Bill would be postponed for a time until the Amending legislation was agreed. In turn he would be in a position to make larger concessions, both perhaps on the terms of the Amending Bill but also with regard to the War and the role of the Volunteers. This was increasingly becoming both a matter of pragmatism and principle.

Dermot Maleady has pointed to a fascinating insight into Redmond's logic for this position. In draft notes for a speech he never gave on the Amending Bill, ²⁰ Redmond writes .that no settlement is possible until the Bill is actually on the Statute Book, "only then will they realise the true situation and both sides will find it easier to agree.", But he also addresses the inevitability of some form of exclusion: It is "a hateful expedient" but "the only expedient which Ulster Unionists will consider". The Irish Party had been prepared to make enormous sacrifices to enable Home Rule to come into being "in peace, to avoid strife with our fellow countrymen and would make every possible concession to the pride, prejudice and fears of our fellow Irishmen today separated from us." There was also a guarantee, the new Government proposal would leave "to Ulstermen themselves the decision when they would come in, instead of leaving it to chance and change and General Elections in Great Britain and the play and fortunes of political parties... under the proposal "there can be not coercion of any Ulster County" (the last underlined for emphasis by Redmond). ²¹

The formula for an agreement was therefore in place before the Commons debate.

On the eve of the speech, Redmond was in correspondence with another member of the Asquith family, Margot, wife of the Prime Minister. On Saturday evening, August 1st. concerned about the turn of events in Europe and worried about how the Irish stalemate might impact, she wrote a personal note to Redmond. As she recounts in her auto-biography: " we were still worried over the Irish question, and after dinner I wrote a letter to Mr. Redmond telling him he had the opportunity of his life of setting an unforgettable example to the Carsonites if he would go the House of Commons on the Monday and in a great speech offer all his soldiers to the Government: or if he preferred it, write and offer them to the King. It appeared to me that it would be a dramatic thing to do at such a moment and might strengthen the claim of Ireland upon the gratitude of the British people."Redmond replied on August 2nd "I received your letter late last night. I am very grateful to you for it. I hope to see the Prime Minister to-morrow before the House meets, if only for a few moments, and I hope I may be able to follow your advice." ²²

From a note in Redmond's paper in the National Library of Ireland, it seems he had such a meeting. It is from the Chief Whip Percy Illingworth on August 3rd and says "The Prime Minister will be very glad to see you in his room in the House at 3 pm." - just before the debate was to begin.²³ (Edward Grey told Denis Gwynn that he hadn't met Redmond before the speech and couldn't remember Asquith telling him of his meeting. His comments came from his general perception that at the moment he spoke the prospects of a peaceful solution were better than they had been.²⁴

Margot Asquith was however happy with Redmond's speech: "Coming after Edward Grey's wonderful pronouncement (in its way the most remarkable utterance in a unique crisis that has been made in my lifetime) made its reception more noticeable. I daresay he would have made the speech even if I had not written, but (in his letter to me) he does not give the impression of being mad keen."²⁵ On August 4th she was back in the Commons to hear her husband deliver the final ultimatum. When she went to him in his room as she recounts in her

diary: "He was sitting writing in his room. We looked at each other. M. so it is all up? H. 'Yes it is all up'. He had tears in his eyes." ²⁶

He wrote to Venetia Stanley that evening: "The whole thing fills me with sadness". Margot concludes her entry: "All happened in such a short time. On 30th July everyone was talking of Ireland. The cry of 'Civil War! Civil War!' to which the Times and the Tories treated us every day has been stilled in five days, and now we read in tears a silenced Press, with the sound of real war waving like wireless telegraphy around our heads."

The position Redmond had adopted was also informed by practical issues and these mirrored the concerns that Carson had shown in relation to the Ulster Volunteers.

By July of 1914 Redmond had just concluded a very complicated negotiation to integrate Irish Party leadership into the Irish Volunteers thus greatly expanding the movement. The organisation was also being put on a more professional footing, largely through the use of reservists and retired officers (Col. Maurice Moore and Capt. Jack White for example). There were already stresses inherent in this structure with the more militant (IRB influenced) group very reluctant about the development. Redmond had also already moved to buy arms for the Volunteers in Belgium when, unknown to him, another arms shipment arrived in Howth and Kilcoole.²⁷

The shooting of civilians in the aftermath of those landings in July by a British regiment had added to the pressure. Then on the fateful weekend of July 31st Redmond received an alarming letter from Maurice Moore as the leader of the Volunteers in Derry. It said: "If there is any hesitation on the part of the Government in getting the King to sign the Home Rule Bill immediately the Irish Reservists ought to be told not to join and the men of the Special Reserve (old militia) ought not to join. This is the only pressure we can exert against a combination of the two English parties and a decision is urgent before the men are called up. PS there is a peaceful landing I think on both sides."²⁸ A telegram was also sent under the name 'Duddy', to say that the naval and military reserve men in Derry had decided not to obey the summons to the colours until they received this assurance.²⁹ Redmond's response was his speech to the Commons. He followed this up immediately with telegrams to Derry and a letter to the Volunteer leader Eoin Mac Neill: "You will have seen what I said in the House of Commons today, to the effect that if England were to withdraw her troops from Ireland, the Irish people would defend their own. Anything in the nature of disagreement with this declaration would split the country and be fatal to the Home Rule cause. I received the most disquieting telegram from Derry signed "Duddy", saying that the naval and military reserve men had decided not to obey the summons to the colours until assured that Royal assent would be given to the Home Rule Bill.. This action is the best way to prevent the possibility of passage of the Bill and to adopt it generally would be absolute suicide. I have telegraphed to Derry asking them to withhold any such resolution and I rely on your good sense and patriotism to prevent a course of action which would undoubtedly be ruinous to the Home Rule cause. As things stand now, our position has improved enormously by the foreign complications. Do not let us by our folly and temper destroy the situation."³⁰ (NLI 15204). McNeill understood the message and on August 6th contacted Edward Carson Ulster to meet in "order to follow up our offer of cordial co-operation during the present grave emergency" and he also suggested a meeting between Col. Moore and Sir George Richardson of the Ulster Volunteers on practical arrangements.³¹

The signal given by Redmond's speech was also understood immediately by Maurice Moore. He wrote from Dublin on August 4th: "Your speech of last night has transformed matters and left Carsonists in gloom though I dare say they are glad enough to get out of their awkward

fix." Moore then immediately moves to practicalities ... "the mobilisation has however left us in a fix, it takes away some 25,000 of our soldiers and most of our instructors just when they are most wanted. I pointed out to our people the great difficulty, perhaps impossibility of the Government leaving them in Ireland because it means that the Irish regiments going abroad. (if they do go) will be left without the men to bring them up to War strength. Still the loss to us, if we are to defend Ireland is so great that I think you ought to approach the authorities to see if anything can be done."³² Thus the professional soldier Col. Moore saw the practical aspects of mobilisation and defence as directly linked issues. Redmond saw it too - he was keen to ensure there was no disruption of mobilisation. It is also evident that he was prepared to move even further and that the Commons speech was just the first public step.

Redmond's speech had reawakened tensions within the Volunteers. A resolution passed by some of the Dublin battalions (prompted by IRB members such as Pearse), "we won't fight for the British Empire", was rejected by the Provisional Committee of the Volunteers. McNeill wrote to Redmond on August 9th with his account of a fiery meeting. He said that, the resolutions were interpreted by several members of the Committees "as a move in direct hostility to your recent statements and to subsequent resolution of the Committee...It would probably be more correct to say that the action, which appears to have had the sanction of the Dublin City and Country Board, was due to a fear lest the Volunteers should be changed from a National to an Imperial Defence force. No such change I take it is implied either in your statement or in the Committee's subsequent resolution.....I pledged myself to the Committee on Friday against placing the Volunteers under any authority without the security of National Government and my statement was received by all present with approval."³³,

(Rebuffed at this time, the IRB members were to meet later that month unknown to MacNeill to confirm their determination to plan a rising during the war and a motion to that effect was passed at a meeting in Sean T. O'Ceallaigh's Gaelic League office on September 7th.)³⁴ Mac Neill had defended Redmond's strategy to Roger Casement by saying that 'Grattan at his best would not have gone beyond what Redmond had said.' Under the clear understanding that it was limited to defence.³⁵ Not for the last time was Eoin MacNeill to misread the intentions of a fellow Irish leader and with Woodenbridge came the breach.

The real test of whether there was any agreement between Asquith and Redmond was of course whether the strategy it proposed was carried through in practice. The events of August show that it was, though not without a great deal of difficulty. These were both political and practical. War was declared and understandably that became the main focus of all government action and with it the need to build a consensus around the war plans. The political problems though were immediate. Recognising the import of Redmond's intervention, Bonar Law contacted Asquith to say that "he was afraid that we shall make use of the truce to spring a trick on his party by suddenly proroguing and putting the Home Rule and Welsh Church Bills on the Statute book before they can say 'knife'. I assured him that there would be no thimble rigging but it is not easy at the moment to decide exactly how to deal with these bills. The best thing of course would be a deal between Carson and Redmond which is far from impossible."³⁶ Redmond wrote to him on the same day seeking that the bills be put on the Statute book. He also wrote to Edward Grey and Winston Churchill. Churchill replied on August 5th: "You may count on me to use every influence I possess to work for a *modus vivendi* on the lines you indicate. Please see I have called the new battleship *Erin* on account of your memorable speech."³⁷ Redmond also wrote to Dillon, bringing him up to speed on his attempt to get Home Rule on the Statute book and asking him to come to London as complications might arise at any moment. (The close contact here would seem to cast doubt on Eoin MacNeill's claims a year later that Dillon was unhappy with Redmond's speech. As F S Lyons points out there is also no evidence for this in

Dillon's letters that week and MacNeill might not have been - by that time - the most reliable witness.³⁸⁾

Redmond met with Carson in the Speaker's library on the afternoon of August 5th and it did not go well as he reported to Asquith: "I found Sir Edward Carson in an absolutely irreconcilable mood. So much so that it was impossible to discuss matters calmly with him. The gist of our conversation was this...that if the Government dared to put the Home Rule Bill on the Statute Book he and the Tory Party would obstruct the Appropriation Bill and revive all the bitterness and controversy. He would not listen to any suggested way out of the difficulty at all, and is evidently in the worst possible temper. I can add very little to my letter of yesterday; but if the Government allow themselves to be bullied in this way by Sir Edward Carson a position of the most serious difficulty will arise with us. It will be quite impossible for us to abstain from raising a discussion on the second reading of the Appropriation Bill, which would have most unfortunate and disastrous results in Ireland, and really, would have put us and our country in an absolutely cruel position. It would make it quite impossible for me to go to Ireland, as I desire to do, and to translate into action the spirit of my speech the other day... This undoubtedly is the greatest opportunity that has ever occurred in the history of Ireland to win the Irish people to loyalty to the Empire, and I do beg of you not to allow threats of any kind used to prevent you from taking the course which will enable me to preach the doctrines of peace, goodwill, and loyalty in Ireland."³⁹⁾

This was to remain his position for the rest of the month. There continued to be a series of fruitless contacts between the parties conducted under the shadow of a difficult first month of the War. The Chief Secretary for Ireland Augustine Birrell in a series of letters throughout the month kept reassuring Redmond that a decision was coming and trying to sort out new difficulties as they arose. Principal amongst these was the reluctance of the new War Secretary Kerry born Lord Kitchener to co-operate with the plan for the Volunteers. Redmond had met with Kerry with Lord Kitchener on his second day in office as Secretary of State for War August 7th but found him not all positive about the prospects of recruiting in Ireland and regularising the Volunteers. Kitchener told Redmond, "Get me five thousand men and I will say thank you, get me ten thousand and I will take my hat off to you." Redmond wrote to Asquith to protest with some effect as Birrell, who was now in almost daily correspondence told him a few days later that Lieutenant General Bryan Mahon was being sent over by the War Cabinet to liaise with the Volunteers.⁴⁰⁾

Back in Ireland during a two week parliamentary recess Redmond addressed a parade of Volunteers in Maryborough on August 16. Here he pushed the case for co-operation between the two Volunteer forces as promised in his Commons speech, told the men that he was organising several thousand rifles to arm them and referred to a recent occurrence in Enniskillen "I read a few days ago an account in the public press of the departure of one of the most gallant Irish regiments, the Inniskilling Fusiliers, and how they were escorted through Enniskillen by united bodies of the Ulster and the National Volunteers. Pray God that may be an omen for the future."⁴¹⁾

On the Unionist side the war and the first engagement of Irish troops had led increased urgency to their efforts to join forces with the Army. On the 28th of August, Birrell wrote to Redmond to inform him that Lord Roberts who had been meeting the Irish leaders had told the Prime Minister that Carson was offering to put all his Ulster Volunteers at his disposal for drilling and that 35,000 of them were willing to enlist and go abroad. Birrell also said that while the PM was still keen to have an Amending Bill as well as the HR bill he was open to other options; Birrell also assured him that the HR bill would definitely go on the Statute book. That day Redmond addressed a motion to the King of Belgians in the House of Commons: "I am glad and proud to be able to think that at the moment there are many gallant

Irishmen willing to take their share of the risks, and to shed their blood, and to face death in the defence of their liberty and independence. The spectacle of the small nation making these heroic sacrifices in defence of their independence against overwhelming odds appeals in a very special way to the sentiments and feelings of Ireland." ⁴²

On Monday 31 August Asquith inspected series of troops just back from the front including a private in the Dublin Fusiliers who assured him " that he had seen with his own eyes after Mons the Germans advancing with a screen of women & children in front of them & when any of these were wounded throwing them aside and putting others in their places. Pretty bad." Back with the politics he expressed his frustration:

"The Irish (both sets) are giving me a lot of trouble, just at a difficult moment. I sometimes wish we could submerge the whole lot of them, for say ten years, under the waves of the Atlantic... I had interviews today - in the intervals of what are equally serious and more urgent things- with Redmond and with Bonar Law (inspired by Carson) and they almost fill me with despair." ⁴³

On September 3rd Carson announced that the War Office had agreed the Ulster Volunteers could enlist as a separate unit , the Ulster Division with its own officers, a major development. ⁴⁴

Asquith finally took the advice of the King and made his own decision. He opted for a Suspensory Bill. Birrell informed Redmond on September 8th " I really think the knot is untied at last and will not need cutting. ⁴⁵...Asquith accompanied by Lloyd George and McKenna met with Redmond and Dillon the following day. "The result is that we must clearly stick to our first proposal - to put the Bill on the statute book but suspend its operation until 12 months or the close of the War, whichever is later, undertaking in the meantime to introduce and prosecute an Amending Bill... the leaders (of Unionism) are likely to protest sharply as they can but I fancy they will content themselves with a verbal demonstration & not divide. The 6 counties could not at this stage be managed." ⁴⁶

The formula was essentially that of a month before. Redmond was now in a position to fulfill the other side of the bargain.

Asquith moved the Suspensory Bill to put into effect this model on September 15th:

The Conservative leader Bonar Law in an angry speech of betrayal and duplicity referred back to Redmond 's address of August 3rd:

"The speech which he made the other day in this House undermined, I believe, the strength of the unionism of a great number of Unionist Members of this House. I was moved by it myself because I accepted it literally. I did not understand then that it was only a promise of conditional loyalty. I have no doubt the hon. Member this afternoon will make a speech promising great things, now that he has got his way. We shall see. I hope he will be successful, for however badly we have been treated by the Government, and however unfairly, for I think it is unfair, by the Nationalists, heaven knows I should be glad to see an end put, on any terms, to the secular quarrel between the Nationalists and the people of this country." ⁴⁷

At the conclusion of his speech he led the Conservative and Unionist members out of the House, Carson was not to speak on the Bill.

John Redmond in his speech responded to the criticism from Bonar Law: "An allusion has been made to recruiting in Ireland. A rather ungenerous and unjust allusion was made by the

Leader of the Opposition to a speech which I made about a month ago. He said that that speech was an offer of conditional loyalty. It was nothing of the kind! That speech was an appeal I venture to recall—not in any spirit of controversy at all, but really in the spirit of self-defence - the attention of the House to the fact that that speech of mine was a double appeal. It was an appeal to the Ulster Volunteers to allow us—I used the phrase "to allow us"—to have the honour, shoulder to shoulder with them, of engaging in the defence of our country, and it was an appeal, at the same time, to the Government and the War Office to enable the National Volunteers to fulfil that duty."

He outlined the core principles that lay behind the position he was taking:

There are two things that I care most about in this world of politics. The first is that the system of autonomy which is to be extended to Ireland shall be extended to the whole country, and that not a single sod of Irish soil and not a single citizen of the Irish nation shall be excluded from its operation. Let me say—and this may perhaps surprise some hon. Members, but it has honestly been my view all through—that the second thing that I most earnestly desire is that no coercion shall be applied to any single county in Ireland to force them against their will to come into the Irish Government. At this moment, as everybody knows, these two things are unfortunately incompatible. Will they be incompatible after an interval of some months, as those months will be occupied by the Irish people at home? No, Sir, I do not believe they will. During that interval, Catholic Nationalist Irishmen and Protestant Unionist Irishmen from the North of Ireland will be fighting side by side on the battlefields on the Continent, and shedding their blood side by side; and at home in Ireland, Catholic Nationalists and Protestant Ulstermen will, I hope and believe, be found drilling shoulder to shoulder for the defence of the shores of their own country.

He turned to support for the War:

"For the first time—certainly for over one hundred years—Ireland in this War feels her interests are precisely the same as yours. She feels, she will feel, that the British democracy has kept faith with her. She knows that this is a just War. She knows, she is moved in a very special way by the fact that this War is undertaken in the defence of small nations and oppressed peoples."

And then finally he made explicit his promise of support:

"I have publicly promised, not only for myself, but in the name of my country, that when the rights of Ireland were admitted by the democracy of England, that Ireland would become the strongest arm in the defence of the Empire. The test has come sooner than I, or anyone, expected. I tell the Prime Minister that that test will be honourably met. I say for myself, that I would feel myself personally dishonoured if I did not say to my fellow countrymen, as I say today to them here, and as I will say from the public platform when I go back to Ireland, that it is their duty, and should be their honour, to take their place in the firing line in this contest."⁴⁸

In John Redmond's papers in the National Library of Ireland are copies his notifications to attend at 12'clock in the House for the final act in getting Home Rule on the Statute Book. ⁴⁹.

At noon on September 18th, in dramatic scenes in the House of Lords, Royal Assent was given to the Home Rule Bill, the King's decree delivered by the Lord Chancellor. Almost none of the Lords attended but the chamber was packed with MPs who returned to the Commons chamber to hear the Deputy Speaker announce that Royal Assent had been given. As parliament was adjourned the official Hansard report describes what happened next:

Mr W. Crooks (the Labour Leader):

Would it be in order to sing "God Save the King"?

In response, all the Members present joined in singing the National Anthem, the occupants of the Press and other galleries standing.

Mr Crooks:

"God save Ireland."

1020

Mr John Redmond:

"And God save England, too."

End of the Fourth Session of the Thirtieth Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, in the Fifth Year of the Reign of His Majesty-King George V. ⁵⁰

John Redmond left the Commons to return to Ireland. On September 20 on his way home to Aughavannagh he learned that a parade of Volunteers lead by the local school master was been inspected by Col Maurice Moore. Redmond stopped at the parade in Woodenbridge Co. Wicklow to make his first speech on home soil after the Home Rule Bill had become law. ⁵¹

Postscript;

Following his speech at Woodenbridge Redmond also fulfilled his promise to Asquith to join him at a recruiting rally in Dublin on September 25th. In his memoir Herbert Asquith links his speech there back to John Redmond's on August 3rd and his offer for the two Volunteer forces to defend Ireland. He emphasised a passage in his address where he speaks of a definition of European policy - the idea of a public right. "...it means first the definite repudiation of militarism as the governing factor in the relation of States and of the future moulding of the European world. It means next that room must be found and kept for the independent existence and free development of the smaller nationalities, each with a corporate consciousness of its own...And it means finally, or it ought to mean, perhaps, by a slow and gradual process the substitution of force, for the clash of competing ambition, for groupings and alliances and a precarious equipoise, of a real European partnership based on the recognition of equal right and enforced by a common will." ⁵²

He added in 1927, the last year of his life, "Herein lay the germ of the League of Nations." A statesman then in 1914, at the start of a bloody conflict, trying to take some hope from local politics with the wish that in the future conflicts would be solved by politics and diplomacy in the public good rather than militarism and violence. For Britain, Europe and Ireland it was to be a forlorn hope.

Further Reading:

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- ¹ H.H. Asquith to Venetia Stanley 3rd August, 1914 in Michael and Eleanor Brock, *H.H. Asquith, Letters to Venetia Stanley*, Oxford, 1982, p.148.
- ² Stephen Gwynn, *John Redmond's Last Years*, London, 1919. p128.
- ³ House of Commons Debate 03 August 1914 vol 65 cc1809-32
- ⁴ Gwynn, 1919, p 133
- ⁵ House of Commons Debate 03 August 1914 vol 65 cc1828-1830
- ⁶ Gwynn, 1919, p 131.
- ⁷ Michael MacDonagh, *The Life of William O'Brien, The Irish Nationalist*, London, 1928. p 198.
- ⁸ Times, London, August 4th, 1914
- ⁹ The Earl of Oxford and Asquith, *Memories and Reflections 1852-1927*, London, 1928. p 2
- ¹⁰ The Kings opening speech had caused controversy. He had said: "today the cry of Civil War is on the lips of the most responsible of my people." Speech text in is the Redmond Papers in the National Library of Ireland, NLI 15257/3.
- ¹¹ note : Asquith meant to restore the county option however.
- ¹² Servia in the letter.
- ¹³ Letter of 24th July in Brock, 1982 p122.. Showing the nature of the correspondence Asquith also writes: "I missed you terribly last night. Most beloved, I wish I could tell you what a stay you have been & are & will be to me."
- ¹⁴ Ronan Fanning, *Fatal Path, British Government and Irish Revolution, 1910-1922*, London 2013. p 127.
- ¹⁵ NLI 15257/3
- ¹⁶ Michael and Eleanor Brock, *Margot Asquith's Great War Diary 1914-1916: The View from Downing Street*, London, 2014. p 4.
- ¹⁷ Letter 27th July in Brock, 1982 p 127.
- ¹⁸ Letter 30th July in Brock, 1982. p 136.
- ¹⁹ Ian Colvin, *Carson The Statesman*, New York, 1935. p 422.
- ²⁰ Dermot Meleady, *John Redmond, The National Leader*, Merrion, 2014. p284.
- ²¹ Draft Speech is in NLI 15257/3
- ²² Margot Asquith, *Autobiography*. London, 1920, 1922. p 284
- ²³ Note in is NLI 15,257/4
- ²⁴ Denis Gwynn, *The Life of John Redmond*, London, 1932 p 385
- ²⁵ Marot Asquith Diary 1st August in Brock, 2014. p9.
- ²⁶ op cit p 12
- ²⁷ Redmond's papers has correspondence seeking to retrieve this arms in August after the outbreak of war and fearing they had been seized by the Belgian army. See letter to Brussels embassy August 11th in NLI 15,257/4
- ²⁸ Maurice Moore letter of July 31st in NLI 15,206
- ²⁹ Gwynn, 1932. p 353.
- ³⁰ Letter to MacNeill, 2nd August in NLI 15204
- ³¹ Colvin, 1935. p 26
- ³² Moore letter of August 4th in NLI 15,206/7. Redmond's correspondence also included a letter from Thomas J. Kenny gunsmiths in Scotland sending him his rifle and 250 rounds of ammunition and complimenting him on the speech: "It was worthy of yourself and of Ireland and will go down to posterity as a credit to you both. I may tell you it has raised our status in this country 100% on what it used to be." NLI 15,257/4
- ³³ Michael Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill, Scholar and Man of Action, 1867-1945* (Oxford, 1980) p 145
- ³⁴ Dorothy Macardle, *The Irish Republic*, Dublin, 1937 p 123.
- ³⁵ Tierney, 1980 p146.
- ³⁶ Asquith 1928 p 23
- ³⁷ Gwynn, 1932 p 362
- ³⁸ F.S.L. Lyons, *John Dillon, A Biography*, London, 1968. p359
- ³⁹ Gwynn, 1932 p363, NLI 1527/3
- ⁴⁰ see Gwynn, 1932 for details of the correspondence also in Redmond papers NLI 15257/3
- ⁴¹ Gwynn, 1932 p 369
- ⁴² Gwynn, 1932 p 377, and Colvin p33

⁴³ Letter of 31st August in Brock 1932 p 209

⁴⁴ Gwynn,1932 p 378

⁴⁵ Gwynn 379 and NLI 15257/3

⁴⁶ Asquith,1928 p 22

⁴⁷ *House of Commons Debate*15 September 1914 vol 66 cc881-920

⁴⁸ *House of Commons Debate*15 September 1914 vol 66 cc906-912

⁴⁹ NLI 15237/3, notification from the Prime Minister Private Secreary on September 17th that the Bill s have been returned , the following days notice of the meeting from Downing Street and Parliament.

⁵⁰ *HCDeb*18 September 1914 vol 66 cc1017-20

⁵¹ Meleady,014 p 307

⁵² Asquith 1928 p 37