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# The Home Rule Question (1870-1914)

Pauline Collombier-Lakeman





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# Abbreviations

AOH	Ancient Order of Hibernians
<i>Fj</i>	<i>Freeman's Journal</i>
HGA	Home Government Association
HRCGB	Home Rule Confederation of Great Britain
HRL	Home Rule League
INL	Irish National League
IPP	Irish Parliamentary Party
ISHRL	International Scots Home Rule League
JP	Justice of the Peace
MP	Member of Parliament
NLI	National Library of Ireland
PM	Prime Minister
PRONI	Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
SHRA	Scottish Home Rule Association
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
UCC	University College Cork
UCD	University College Dublin
UIL	United Irish League
WUTRA	Women's Unionist and Tariff Reform Association
YSS	Young Scots Society



# Introduction

In his seminal work on Irish Home Rule from 2003, Alvin Jackson posits that “there is a fundamental symmetry between late Victorian and late-twentieth century Irish politics<sup>1</sup>.” Twenty years later this statement still rings true. The results of the Brexit referendum have revived the possibility of a second Scottish poll on independence and the negotiations between Europe and the UK are currently stalling over the issue of the Irish border. The struggle for Scottish independence and the problem of the Irish border are both rooted in the nineteenth century, when Britain witnessed a debate that was to span over almost 50 years—the debate over Home Rule (1870-1914).

Home Rule was a demand for limited self-government that was initiated in Ireland by constitutional nationalists who, from 1870 onwards, developed strategies in order to become key players in British politics. As a result, the Irish Home Rule movement deeply impacted British politics and the aspiration for legislative autonomy also spread to Wales and Scotland. Irish Home Rulers even inspired Indian nationalists! The fact that other constituent parts of the United Kingdom showed an interest in self-government raised the question of federalism or federation: 1870 was also an important turning point in the growing appeal and relevance of federalism in British politics. Home Rule, or its federal version known as Home Rule All Round, may have been dismissed by those who wanted to preserve the Union at all costs. However the British did experiment with federation in their colonies—in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. This caused the debates on Home Rule, Home Rule All Round and imperial federation to overlap. Therefore the Home Rule question is not limited to a purely Irish problem but needs to be examined as a British as well as an Imperial issue. As is underscored by Michael Burgess, “the

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1. A. Jackson, *Home Rule, An Irish History 1800-2000*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003, 327-8.

problem of Ireland was always viewed in terms of the integrity of the United Kingdom, but during the period surveyed [=1870-1920] it was also intimately linked to the wider question of imperial unity<sup>1</sup>.”

That such a wide framework is required to understand the Home Rule question is reflected by some of the recent developments in the historiography related to the topic. The pioneering efforts of the early Irish revisionist historians to take better account of the moderate strand of Irish nationalism (T. W. Moody, F. S. L. Lyons, C. C. O'Brien) have been completed by more recent studies and biographies from a new generation of historians (A. Jackson, F. Callanan, A. O'Day, C. W. Reid, D. G. Boyce). The centenary of 1912-1921 in Ireland has also encouraged young historians to revisit old issues and write about topics that had received little attention until now (C. Mulvagh, J. McConnell, I. Cawood). Historians of Scotland have also produced scholarly work focusing on the specificities of Scottish nationalism and unionism (G. Morton, C. Kidd). Home Rule is no longer regarded as an exclusively Irish problem but as an issue that had profound repercussions in the rest of the United Kingdom and the Empire at large. This is confirmed by the publications of J. Kendle and M. Burgess on the notion of federalism in Britain, by increasing interest in the interactions between Irish moderate nationalists and the British Empire (P. Townend), by new comparative studies of unionism in Ireland and Scotland (A. Jackson, C. Burness), and by the publication of collected works which attempt to tackle the issue of self-government according to a four nation approach (*The Challenge to Westminster* edited by H. T. Dickinson & M. Lynch and *Debating nationhood and governance in Britain* by D. Tanner et al.). In Britain, the centenary of the death of W. E. Gladstone in 1998 also encouraged historians to review the legacy of the former Prime Minister and his handling of the Irish issue (with the books edited by A. O'Day & D. G. Boyce; M. Daly and K. T. Hoppen; R. Swift and D. W. Bebbington). But scholars have also emphasised the need to concentrate on grassroots and low politics as well as high politics (G. K. Peatling, D. Jackson, E. Biagini). Groundbreaking work has been done on the topic of Welsh politics by K. O. Morgan, but N. Lloyd Jones still bemoans the “scant treatment afforded to Wales” and pleads for a new British history that would deal with “both the multifaceted interplays and distinctive experiences” of

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1. M. Burgess, *The British Tradition of Federalism*, London: Leicester University Press, 1995, 23 & 83.

all four British nations<sup>1</sup>. This would obviously benefit research on the Home Rule question.

This book will explore the question further as a problem affecting not only Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but also Britain and the Empire. It will present the movements which were formed to campaign for self-government and stress their specificities. It will explain what Home Rule entailed constitutionally and how the debates surrounding it affected and divided British politics. And it will examine how British colonies were used to legitimise the demand for more political autonomy.

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1. N. Lloyd Jones N. & M. M. Scull, "A New Plea for an Old Subject? Four Nations History for the Modern Period", in N. Lloyd Jones & M. M. Scull (eds.), *Four Nations Approaches to Modern 'British' History, A (Dis)United Kingdom*. London: Palgrave, 2018, 5 & 10.



**PART ONE**

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**THE IRISH HOME  
RULE MOVEMENT  
(1870-1914):  
BIRTH AND HISTORY  
OF A THIRD  
POLITICAL FORCE  
IN BRITISH POLITICS**



When a Home Government Association was set up in Dublin in May 1870, the question of obtaining self-government for Ireland was not new. Since the establishment from 1801 of a political, economic and religious Union, effectively transforming Ireland into a province of the United Kingdom, various movements had coexisted or succeeded each other, with demands “ranging across the whole spectrum of constitutional relations, from the idea of a kingdom of Ireland, subordinate to the British crown but not to the British parliament, to outright separation<sup>1</sup>.” Daniel O’Connell (1775-1847) had campaigned for the Repeal of the Union with the support of his Loyal National Repeal Association founded in 1840. Young Ireland, established in 1842, had also been a standard-bearer for national autonomy until its failed insurrection of July 1848. Exiled Young Irelanders had participated in the formation of a new radical force—the Fenians—both in Ireland and in America at the end of the 1850s. Their aim was to use force to proclaim an Irish Republic and they organised another failed rising in Ireland in 1867 and several attacks in Britain and British North America in 1866-7. Dozens of Irish Fenians were arrested and jailed: a campaign to obtain their release was launched at the end of 1868 in Ireland and saw the rise to prominence of Isaac Butt, an Irish Protestant and former Tory. Ireland was experiencing renewed agrarian agitation, to which the Liberal government failed to respond adequately<sup>2</sup>. So the amnesty campaign in favour of Irish Fenians created conditions favourable to the birth of a moderate movement in favour of Irish self-government.

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1. D. G. Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland* [1982], London: Routledge, 1996, 19.

2. The Irish Church Act had been passed in 1868. In 1870 Gladstone introduced a Land Bill, which was passed in August, but a Peace Preservation Act was also voted.



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# THE LEADERSHIP OF ISAAC BUTT (1870-79)

## A | A HOME RULE MOVEMENT BUT NOT YET A PARTY

On 19 May 1870, 49 men headed by Isaac Butt met in Dublin and voted a motion in favour of the restoration of an Irish Parliament. A multiparty and multi-faith committee of over 60 people was put in place to help establish a Home Government Association (HGA), which met for the first time on 1 September 1870. Its members paid a £1 annual fee, and the association was structured around an executive committee meeting monthly and local branches in Ireland (in Cork city, Drogheda, Dundalk, Belfast and Derry, among others) and in Great Britain (notably in Manchester and Leeds). While the membership of the association is unknown, it is believed to have been fairly successful. In 1871-2, eight candidates put forward by the association at by-elections in Ireland, including Isaac Butt himself in Limerick City, were elected and joined three Irish MPs already involved in the movement. Butt suggested in vain that this small group of Irish MPs should form an Irish parliamentary party. But the HGA was still too weak politically. As its name conveys, it was dedicated to a single cause. Its members were free to vote as they wished on all other issues, which limited cohesion and discipline. Its influence in Ireland was also fairly poor despite the creation of local branches: these were “not formally affiliated to the original body and owed it no obedience,” so that the association was “never more than a Dublin pressure group<sup>1</sup>.” This early home rule group also disagreed on strategy: whereas ex-Young Irelander John Martin estimated that “the best parliamentary policy (...) [was] to elect members

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1. D. Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule*, London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1964, 95.

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Home Rule became a significant issue from the 1870s across the British Isles. Aspirations to limited legislative autonomy were notably strong in Ireland, where a Home Rule party progressively emerged and played a major role both on the island and at Westminster. While the question of Irish Home Rule came to dominate discussions, the quest for self-government was not limited to Ireland but soon spread to other parts of the United Kingdom. In Scotland and Wales, Home Rule movements were also formed with their own specific objectives. This led to exchanges on the idea of “home rule all round”. On a broader scale, Home Rule spurred cross-imperial solidarities and raised the question of the future of the British Empire and the possibility of an “imperial federation”. And although it aroused keen interest and support across Britain and the rest of the Empire, it also provoked intense opposition in the shape of loyalism or unionism. In doing so, Home Rule reshaped British politics along new lines.

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