

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 209

### “1919 – Ireland III”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“We are bound to lose Ireland in consequence of years of cruelty, stupidity, and misgovernment, and I would rather lose her as a friend than as a foe.”

William Gladstone.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 209. 1919: Ireland, part three.

We left off the story of Ireland last time in early 1921. The fighting between Crown forces and Irish nationalists was growing increasingly bitter.

The difficulty facing the British government, led by David Lloyd George, was that even the British side had already conceded that Ireland would be granted Home Rule. There must have been members of the government who hoped that implementing the long-delayed Home Rule would ease the pressure in Ireland for full independence and thus lessen the violence. On the other hand, the escalating violence was making it that much more difficult to implement Home Rule.

But although Parliament had approved Home Rule in principle in 1914, the thorny question of what to do about Ulster had never been adequately addressed. The Great War had postponed the question, but it still lay on the table, unresolved. In the previous two episodes, I focused on IRA violence in southern Ireland, particularly in Dublin and the counties of Tipperary and Cork. But there was violence in Ulster, too. Here there was less IRA activity than in some places on the island, but the violence in Ulster came with the added dimension of the Ulster Volunteer Force, a group of Unionist irregulars that were the mirror image of the IRA. The UVF often responded to nationalist violence with violence of its own, frequently aimed at Catholic neighborhoods and communities in Ulster with no known connection to the IRA apart from Unionist suspicions.

As was the case with the reprisals in the south, UVF reprisals were widely believed to be made possible by the indifference—or outright blessing—of the British Army and Crown forces in Ulster. This was likely true, but in any case, this Irish Protestant on Irish Catholic violence added to the unsavory flavor of this conflict the bitter taste of outright civil war.

You should note too that outside of Ulster there was some Irish Catholic on Irish Protestant violence as well, and that got nastier as the conflict progressed. Irish Protestants were sometimes seen as collaborators with the Crown. In retrospect, there's little evidence to support such a suspicion, but there was plenty of suspicion, and enough violence, that by the end of this conflict many Protestant Irish had fled to Ulster or to Britain.

The British Cabinet spent 1920 working through a solution to the knotty problems of Home Rule. The result was the Government of Ireland Act, which became law just before Christmas. It is often referred to as the Fourth Home Rule Bill; if you've been following the podcast since the beginning, you're already familiar with the first three.

This Home Rule plan attempted to split the difference between the unionist demand that Northern Ireland remain under British rule and not be ruled from Dublin with the nationalist demand that Home Rule apply to the entire island. Under this bill, there would be two Home Rule governments on the island: Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland. Each would have its own elected parliament and would control local affairs. The Parliament in Westminster would remain in control of defense and foreign affairs, Ireland would still elect members to that Parliament as before, and the King would still be the King, represented by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. As for questions that might affect both parts of Ireland but not Great Britain, the Act created a Council of Ireland, consisting of twenty members chosen from each parliament and a presiding officer appointed by the Lord Lieutenant. This Council would have the powers delegated to it by the two Irish parliaments. The hope was that, over time, as the two parliaments got comfortable coordinating their governance of the island through the Council, the Council would increase in power until it became the *de facto* government over all Ireland.

The Act also decreed the border between the two Irish Home Rule areas. The province of Ulster, in the northeast of the island, was the center of Protestant unionism. Historically, Ulster encompassed nine out of the 32 counties in Ireland, but Irish Catholic Nationalists constituted a majority in five of those nine counties, and also made up substantial portions of the populations of Belfast and Derry—or Londonderry, if you like; apparently in some dialects the first six letters of the town's name are silent. Anyway, these are the two largest cities in Ulster, whatever you'd like to call them.

On the other hand, if you whittled Northern Ireland down to the four Unionist counties, you would have a region that wouldn't be very integrated and its viability would be questionable. The Act's solution was to include three of Ulster's nationalist counties in Southern Ireland, leaving Northern Ireland with just six counties, which, spoiler alert, is the partition as we know it today.

This still left a substantial Irish Catholic Nationalist community in Northern Ireland; a cynic might say the arrangement was devised to insure the largest possible Northern Ireland that could maintain a reliable Unionist majority in its parliament.

When the Act was presented to the House of Commons for the final vote on November 11, the second anniversary of the Armistice, most Irish members present voted against it. Unionists disliked the plan because they didn't want Home Rule at all. They wanted Ireland treated the same as Great Britain. Irish nationalists opposed the partition. The Sinn Féin MPs didn't participate at all, since they were refusing to take up their seats in the House of Commons. Nevertheless, the bill passed easily.

Election campaigns were conducted for the parliaments of the two Irish Home Rule regions. In Southern Ireland, where 128 seats were at stake, Sinn Féin ran unopposed in 124 of them. The remaining four seats represented the constituency of the University of Dublin, and they were carried by unionists who also ran unopposed. Not much of an election, really. Political parties and lists that might have opposed Sinn Féin opted to stay out of the campaign. Or feared Sinn Féin violence, as the unionists claimed.

In Northern Ireland, where 52 seats were at stake, the Ulster Unionist Party carried 40. Sinn Féin took six, with the other six taken by the Nationalist Party, a successor to the now largely defunct Irish Parliamentary Party.

On May 25, the day after the elections, the IRA attempted one of its most daring attacks, right in the heart of Dublin at the Custom House, the seat of the Local Government Board in Ireland. Over 100 plain-clothed IRA fighters attacked the building, which was undefended, at 1:00 that afternoon. They seized control and set fire to irreplaceable government records that went back as far as the seventeenth century, the loss of which is still felt today by Irish genealogists.

But Crown forces were able to take back control of the building in about an hour and killed or captured about 80 members of the Dublin IRA, a serious blow to the group. But it was also a serious blow to British prestige.

On June 22, not quite a month later, the Parliament of Northern Ireland met for the first time, at Belfast City Hall. In the House of Commons sat its forty Ulster Unionist members. They elected the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Lord Craigavon, Prime Minister. The six Nationalists elected to the House boycotted the session to protest the partition of the island. As for the six Sinn Féin members, well, we'll come back to them.

The King, George V, made a dramatic gesture by coming to Ulster himself to deliver the King's Speech personally, rather than through a representative of the Crown, as would be the usual custom. The King gave a short but heartfelt speech, in which he asserted his affection for Ireland and its people and the hope that a new and more peaceful chapter in Irish history was about to unfold.

Six days later, the Parliament of Southern Ireland met, but in the House of Commons, the only members who showed up to claim their seats were the four unionists from the University of Dublin. They met and adjourned and that was the beginning and the end of the Parliament of Southern Ireland.

The other 124 elected members of the Parliament of Southern Ireland along with the six Sinn Féiners elected in Northern Ireland, constituted themselves as the new, Second Dáil of the Irish Republic. The six Nationalist Party members elected in Northern Ireland declined to participate here as well. The First Dáil had been banned by British authorities last September and driven underground. The new Second Dáil would also be banned, for the time being.

And that was it. That was the last gasp in the 35-year effort to find a constitutional solution to the Irish Question. There were too few in Ireland willing to support it.

[music: "Limerick Jig"]

By the time those two Home Rule Parliaments held their first sessions, such as they were, it was already clear to Westminster that the Government of Ireland Act was not going to resolve the dispute nor end the violence. British Prime Minister David Lloyd George put out feelers to Éamon de Valera, inviting him to meet to discuss a negotiated end to the fighting in Ireland.

These contacts led to a truce in the fighting, which took effect on Monday, July 11, 1921. Word of the impending truce, which was announced on Saturday the ninth, led to a last-minute outburst of violence in Belfast, on Saturday night and Sunday, triggered by an IRA ambush that killed an RIC constable, which in turn led to an outburst of violence between Protestant and Catholic communities. When it was over, sixteen civilians were dead and over a hundred homes destroyed, mostly on the Catholic side of town. Contributing to the Protestant violence were fears that the coming truce betokened a British government "sell-out" to the Republicans.

Sunday, July 10, 1921, the day before the already-announced truce took effect, is known as "Bloody Sunday," the second Bloody Sunday in Irish history, which I alluded to last time.

Violence would continue in Northern Ireland, in spite of the truce, but elsewhere, IRA attacks dwindled. Overall, through the period beginning with the Easter Rising and continuing to the July 1921 truce, about two thousand people in Ireland had died in the violence. About 650 of these were IRA volunteers, about 550 were members of the Crown forces, and the remainder were civilians, albeit in many cases civilians who were accused of aiding one side or the other.

After years of violence and terror, both sides had become exhausted with the conflict. The question sometimes comes up in hindsight whether one side or the other made a strategic misjudgment. It may have been that the opposing side was just weeks away from giving up in frustration and exhaustion. You can actually make this argument either way, though ultimately you're just speculating. How much more pressure it would have taken to get one set of leaders or

the other to give up and cry, “Uncle!” when both of them were feeling that same pressure seems to me inherently unknowable. And with killings happening almost daily, how tough do you really want your leaders to be?

The IRA had demonstrated an ability to keep up the fight against the world’s most powerful nation despite the long odds against them. The recent, dramatic attack on the Dublin Custom House proved the IRA could launch a surprise strike whenever and wherever it chose and affirmed the dedication of its volunteers. But the IRA was also proving it was highly dependent on stealth and surprise, and seldom able to win any greater victory than the capture of a remote and ill-defended police station. One on one, they were no match for the British Army.

With regard to the British government side, the bloodshed in Ireland was just a sideshow at first, back in 1919 when the government also had to deal with occupation forces in the Rhineland, the Near East, Constantinople, and East Africa, as well as the problems of demobilizing the British Army and restoring the peacetime UK economy, which would include addressing inflation in food prices and the postwar economic slump and unemployment. Now add in the unrest in Egypt and India and Palestine and the opposition to the British Army presence in Iraq. Remember Iraq, episode 192? In 1919 and 1920, more members of the British Army were dying there than in Ireland.

Or to put it another way, Great Britain is the center of a huge, sprawling Empire, with huge, sprawling problems, of which the unrest in Ireland was just one. You might be tempted to conclude, based on these past couple of episodes, that Ireland was a gaping wound, bleeding the United Kingdom, and wonder why the British persisted as long as they did. In truth, Ireland was one small cut, albeit one among many. The Irish nationalist campaign had not defeated the Crown forces in open battle, but it had made the conduct of peaceful, civilian administration of Ireland impossible. The British government was at a crossroad. It could negotiate, or it could pour much larger numbers of soldiers and resources into Ireland and crush the nationalists. There were two problems with the second approach, though. One was that it was ruthless, authoritarian, and anti-democratic; in short, everything British propaganda had been telling everyone since 1914 that Britain abhorred. The other was that the British public was sick to death of war and conflict. They were tired of being the world’s policeman.

And so negotiations began. Despite holding one face-to-face meeting, Éamon de Valera did not personally represent the Irish side at these negotiations. That task went to a negotiating team headed by Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins, on the theory that since these talks were being held at the Cabinet level, Griffith and Collins were cabinet-level members of the government of the Irish Republic. Of course, Michael Collins was in truth much more than that. Also true is that sending Collins to London publicly for the talks forced him to abandon his most valuable weapon as an IRA fighter: his anonymity. Now newspapers across Britain splashed his picture on their front pages.

De Valera is sometimes accused of ducking personal involvement in the negotiations for self-serving reasons. The most ardent Republicans demanded full independence from the UK for the entire island, but the idea that the Lloyd George government could ever be persuaded to accept all this at the negotiating table was pure fantasy, and there is the suspicion that de Valera understood this from the beginning and therefore didn't want to be associated personally with what came out of these talks.

The Crown had already been willing to grant Home Rule. An independent Republic would surely have been too much for the British government to swallow. But there was an in-between option. Ireland could become a Dominion within the British Empire. The exact status of the British Dominions in international law was an interestingly convoluted question in 1921. Before the Great War, most people regarded the Dominions as simply colonies of the Empire. They were particularly advanced and well-organized colonies that had something like the home rule that Ireland had so long sought, but they still answered to the mother country. When the UK entered the Great War, it was taken as a given by everyone that meant Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Australia, and Newfoundland were also in the war.

But as you know, the Dominions demanded and got separate representation at the Paris Peace Conference. They signed the peace treaties as separate powers, and joined the League of Nations in their own rights, as did British India, though India was not even formally a Dominion. Yet the Dominions still accepted the British King as their Sovereign, and the UK Parliament in Westminster retained its authority to legislate Dominion affairs, even if that authority was rarely exercised. So the Dominions were an anomaly in the world of 1921. Perhaps three-quarters independent sovereign states, but not entirely.

But the existence of these anomalous semi-states offered a model for a split-the-difference compromise between Ireland as part of the UK and Ireland as a fully sovereign state. How about: Ireland as a self-governing British Dominion. The nationalists might go for that, although it would mean Ireland would remain a constitutional monarchy, not a full republic, which the nationalists would not welcome. For the UK government, it would be face saving. You could call it simply a more robust form of home rule.

The other outstanding issue would be more difficult. The British side would certainly never accept a fully unified Ireland. The government had already created Northern Irish home rule with a parliament and everything. It was an ironclad certainty that the British would refuse to include Northern Ireland in the new Irish state unless the new parliament in Belfast consented. And that parliament, with its all-Unionist membership, would certainly not consent.

The final treaty agreement, as written, technically included Northern Ireland, but it gave the Northern Ireland parliament the power to opt out, which it promptly did. In that event, the agreement called for the creation of a joint Boundary Commission, which would study the question and recommend a boundary between the new Irish state and Northern Ireland.

The proposed treaty also guaranteed the Royal Navy could retain use of its four naval bases in Ireland.

From the Irish nationalist point of view, the treaty was defensible on the grounds of pragmatism. This is the most we can expect, it's pretty good, and it sure beats endless violence and terror. David Lloyd George did his bit to emphasize this last point, by vowing that if the peace negotiations collapsed, he would flood Ireland with British soldiers, one for every man, woman, and child on the island, if that's what it took to restore British rule.

Even a more radical nationalist, one not entirely persuaded by the pragmatist argument, could take solace in the thought that, even if this agreement did not give Ireland all it was owed, it represented a big step forward toward the day when the remaining Irish demands could and would be fulfilled. Dominion status might one day become full independence. And as for the Northern Ireland question, one might reasonably hope that once that Boundary Commission did its proper job, the remaining bits of Northern Ireland would become unviable, and economic reality would force the people living there to concede that their future lay with the south and not with Great Britain.

The Irish negotiators in London agreed to the treaty and signed on December 6, 1921. The story is told that Lord Birkenhead, the British Lord Chancellor, one of the British signatories to the agreement, told Michael Collins that in signing the treaty, he was signing his political death warrant. Michael Collins is said to have replied, "I'm signing my actual death warrant." This would prove to be true.

The UK Parliament approved the treaty overwhelmingly ten days later. After a long and heated debate, the Irish Dáil approved the treaty on January 7, 1922 by a much narrower margin, 64 to 57. De Valera resigned as President two days later. The Dáil voted narrowly to elect Arthur Griffith to succeed him. Michael Collins would chair the Provisional Government of Ireland, pending the enactment of an Irish constitution.

A general election was held on June 16, 1922 for seats in a new Dáil. This new Dáil would also serve as a constituent assembly to enact the proposed constitution. Sinn Féin was divided over the treaty question, with Michael Collins leading the pro-treaty faction and Éamon de Valera the anti-treaty faction, yet they agreed to an electoral pact, under which they would not compete against each other for seats in the new Dáil. Incumbent Sinn Féin members would not be contested by other Sinn Féiners, irrespective of whether the incumbent had supported or opposed the treaty. The arrangement was criticized as undemocratic, as in many places the Sinn Féin candidate was the only name on the ballot, thus depriving the voters of the opportunity to weigh in on the treaty.

After the election, the new Third Dáil looked like this: 58 pro-treaty Sinn Féiners, 36 anti-treaty Sinn Féiners, 17 members from the Labour Party, with the remaining 17 seats held by smaller parties and independents. As the anti-treaty Sinn Féiners refused to take their seats, at least in

part because the treaty agreement required them to swear allegiance to the British King, the pro-treaty faction had no difficulty getting their way. The Dáil enacted an Irish constitution in October; once this action was confirmed by Parliament in Westminster, on December 5, 1922, the Irish Free State became a reality. But by that time, the Irish Civil War had already begun.

On April 14, 1922, with the election campaign for the Third Dáil underway, IRA fighters opposed to the treaty occupied the Four Courts, which was a courthouse in Dublin, known by that name because it housed four courts. Their goal was apparently to force a response from the British Army and thus undermine the peace agreement.

But no violence was undertaken. Not by the British. Not until after the election. But just days after the Third Dáil was elected and seated, on June 28, the building was attacked by the new National Army of the provisional Irish state. This new army had been assembled largely from pro-treaty IRA fighters, which meant the battle to recapture the Four Courts was essentially a battle between pro- and anti-treaty factions of the IRA, fighters who until recently were comrades in the war against the Crown forces. The fighting in Dublin lasted a week, and ended only after a huge explosion as the rebel IRA's stockpile of gelignite inside the building was detonated. Whether the detonation was deliberate or was caused by shelling of the building by the National Army is disputed. Either way, the explosion destroyed court records that went back a thousand years, to the lament of historians everywhere.

The recapture of the Four Courts did not end the violence, which went on for five more days and is sometimes referred to as the Battle of Dublin. By the time it was over, the death toll was at least 80, including many civilians, and hundreds were wounded.

The nascent Irish state had been pressed by the British to do something about the standoff at the Four Courts and thus prove it could actually impose order on Ireland. The reason the British were suddenly so keen on this was the murder just a few days earlier of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson. Henry Wilson's name has come up several times in the podcast. He was a staff officer in the British Army. He's the fellow who, before the Great War, rode his bicycle around Belgium, studying possible German invasion routes and he played an important role in laying the groundwork for a possible deployment of the British Army to France in the event of war with Germany. He began the war as a staff officer in the BEF, and by the end of the war he was Chief of the Imperial General Staff. He'd also served as the British military representative to the Supreme War Council.

Wilson was also an Irish Protestant Unionist, and a pretty committed one. After Bloody Sunday, the first one, Wilson pressed the government to declare martial law over all of Ireland, excluding Ulster. When Éamon de Valera came to London to meet with David Lloyd George, Wilson recommended de Valera be handed over to the police. He condemned the subsequent truce as "cowardice," and the peace treaty with comparable language.



He resigned from the Army following the treaty agreement, but was embraced by Unionists in Northern Ireland, where fighting was still going on. Wilson took a seat in the UK Parliament from Northern Ireland, which he used as a platform to condemn the government's Irish policy. He also took a post as a "security advisor" to the prime minister of Northern Ireland, and within the IRA, he was widely believed to be behind unionist paramilitary attacks on Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland. On June 22, 1922, two IRA members in London shot and killed Wilson in front of his home. Whether they acted alone in this attack or whether it was ordered by Michael Collins is something still debated today, although it has to be said that the IRA under Collins seldom went after high-profile targets, although they did try three times to kill Lord French during his tenure as Viceroy. All three of those attempts failed.

The murder of Henry Wilson shocked the British public, not least because it was the first killing of a sitting British MP since 1812. There would not be another until 1979. From this came the political pressure on the British government and from there to the provisional Irish government, to prove Ireland could keep its extremists under control.

In the aftermath of the Battle of Dublin, the new Irish government did indeed establish its control over the city, but anti-treaty IRA forces remained active and defiant in the west of the country, particularly around Cork and Limerick, and thus begins the next phase of the Irish Civil War. The National Army moved west and quickly took control of the major cities in the region, such as Limerick, Cork, and Waterford that summer. Anti-treaty IRA fighters dispersed and continued to resist in a guerilla campaign. One of the casualties of that guerilla campaign was Michael Collins, who was ambushed and killed in August, thus fulfilling his prediction that the treaty would be his death warrant. He was 31 years old. The other major figure in negotiating the treaty, Arthur Griffith, had died just days earlier of a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 51. Griffith's death is often attributed to the stress of leading Ireland through this troubled period, although no one can say for sure.

The IRA found it difficult to maintain its guerilla war. It lacked the level of support it had enjoyed during the fight against the Crown forces. Ironically, by focusing on the National Army, the IRA was forced to reduce its activities in Northern Ireland, which allowed the Belfast government valuable time to consolidate its position.

The killing of Michael Collins escalated the bitterness in the war, and led to further violence, including reprisal killings on both sides. It was a hard winter for the IRA, and by the following spring, with the National Army tightening its grip on the island, the IRA leadership wavered. The final blow came on April 10, 1923, when the head of the IRA, Liam Lynch, was shot and killed by the National Army. You may recall Lynch as the IRA commander who led the first IRA attack on British soldiers, in Fermoy, two and a half years earlier.

The death of Lynch removed from the IRA leadership one of the loudest voices in support of maintaining the fight, and soon after, the rest of the leadership agreed to surrender. The Civil

War phase of the violence in Ireland was short but bloody, claiming an additional two thousand Irish lives.

The fighting in Ireland also caused extensive property damage and left the Irish economy struggling, which was all the more serious because the treaty had required the new Irish Free State to assume a share of the UK debt from the Great War, which was a heavy burden for the new state to shoulder.

Two years later, when the Boundary Commission did its work, it came back with a recommendation for a border between the Free State and Northern Ireland that differed only in trivial ways from the existing provisional border. Reaction against this recommendation was sharp in Ireland, since the existing border left many Irish Catholic nationalists on the Northern Ireland side of the line. But the British sweetened the deal by offering to forgive the Irish war debt in exchange for ratification of the border. And so it was done.

The Civil War would leave a legacy of bitterness in Irish politics that would persist for the rest of the century. The pro-treaty side would form the political party Fine Gael, which means something like “The Irish Family,” while anti-treaty leaders would form Fianna Fáil, which means something like “Warriors of Destiny.” (And I sure hope I’m pronouncing these correctly.) These two political parties would be the two principal parties in Irish politics for the rest of the century, and the hard feelings between them, a result of the Civil War, would take generations to fade. The IRA and Sinn Féin would go on, eventually banned in the Free State as they were in the North, but they will not give up the fight for their own vision for a united republican Ireland.

In Northern Ireland, Unionists would retain control of the government for the foreseeable future, much to the detriment of Irish Catholic nationalists, who would complain of being shut out of political power and of pervasive discrimination from Protestant Unionists.

And so the long and tortuous history of Irish Home Rule leads at last to independence, or something close to it, with the painful partition now a reality. It was a bitter experience; more like a divorce than a secession, really. And I can’t help but think that, as in the case of a divorce, despite the incompatibilities, despite the resentments and the hurts and the bitterness, some vestigial affection must have survived in the hearts of both peoples, to make the separation so painful and so difficult.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Trevor for his donation, and thank you to Will for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Trevor and Will help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, and keeps Mrs. History of the Twentieth Century happy, which I think we can all agree is the most important thing, so I thank them, and everyone else who has contributed on her behalf as well as my own. If you’d like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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We are now in the home stretch of our 1919 World Tour, which will conclude with a six-episode series on what's going on in Germany, from the Armistice through 1924. Most of the histories of the Great War take the story up to the Armistice and then shift focus to the Paris Peace Conference, but what went on in Germany during the Armistice and afterward is an important story that often gets shortchanged. My attempt to do something about that begins next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In 1931, the British Parliament would enact the Statute of Westminster, which declared that no future act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom would become law in the Dominions without their consent. In other words, Parliament had surrendered the power to legislate over the Dominions unilaterally. This included the Irish Free State, and it took Ireland one step closer to full independence. The Irish government in 1937 took advantage of this opportunity to revise the Irish constitution to create the office of President of Ireland to act as head of state and to remove all references to the British Sovereign. This made Ireland a republic in all but name, and it would at last officially describe itself as the Republic of Ireland in an act passed in 1948.

[music: Closing Theme]