



August 1914: England's Difficulty, Ireland's Opportunity?

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Retrospectively, the summer of 1914 was portrayed as the culmination of the long Edwardian idyll that stood in contrast to the rupture and disharmony brought by the outbreak of the First World War. In reality, the pre-war period was one of domestic unrest and mounting anxiety for the authorities. The Liberal Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, faced a kaleidoscope of problems ' suffragettes on hunger strike in prison; a threatened general strike; as well as the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914. But Ireland was the most intractable problem.

Since 1912, the biggest threat to the political stability of the United Kingdom had come from within, rather than beyond, its borders. By 1914, as the Home Rule Bill edged towards ratification, the Ulster and Irish National Volunteers, the paramilitary wings of, respectively, the Ulster unionists and Irish nationalists, prepared for an armed response, both sides feeling abandoned by politicians in Westminster. King George V's fears 'of civil war' appeared to be confirmed when, on 26 July, a detachment of the King's Own Scottish Borderers fired on a crowd of Dublin civilians on Bachelor's Walk ' suspected of being INV gun-runners ' killing four and wounding many others. The tragedy reverberated across Ireland. The funeral of three of the victims, on 29 July, became a day of national mourning. In the wake of the murders John Redmond, nationalist leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), bluntly told the House of Commons:

"Let the House clearly understand that four-fifths of the Irish people will not submit any longer to be bullied, or punished, or shot, for conduct which is permitted to go scot-free in the open light of day in every county in Ulster by other sections of their fellow countrymen."

This was the Irish political situation in July 1914, only days before the British government declared war on Germany.

With this ominous political context in mind, it is remarkable, therefore, to note that the vast majority of the Irish people responded to the outbreak of war in a similar way to their comrades across the Irish Sea. Just as in Britain, the Bank Holiday weekend (Friday 31 July ' Monday 3 August) was the moment when people began to focus on the prospect of war. Military precautions, such as mobilisation orders and the mass movement of troops, fuelled speculation over the conflict and increased anxiety and confusion about what the future held. Whilst Britain's involvement was still unconfirmed, the Irish population continued to hope that it would be avoided. War was viewed as a catastrophe and ordinary people willed individuals, like Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, to find a peaceful solution to the brewing storm.

Similar emotional reactions were expressed amongst British and Irish people: shock, despair, panic, a thirst for news, a sense of stoic necessity, amongst many others. There was, however, one distinctive feature of Irish responses: war abroad meant peace at home. It is one of the paradoxes of modern Irish history that the outbreak

of war in Europe may have prevented conflict in Ireland in 1914. In consequence, the war was greeted with a short-lived sense of relief. The state that declared war on 4 August 1914 was the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland; the evidence confirms that its population, on the whole, suspended political difference and reacted as one, as United Kingdomers.

Eyewitness accounts of the type of send-off British troops received as they left Ireland during the first weeks of war counter post-war myths about negative Irish reactions to the outbreak of war. Cheering crowds were common. In Dublin, the men of the King's Own Scottish Borderers, who only days previously had fired on a crowd of civilians, were given a 'rousing send-off' by local people as they marched to the docks to embark for the Front. On 6 August an estimated crowd of 50,000 people accompanied reservists to the North Wall at Dublin port and was 'most enthusiastic for England, singing and playing God Save the King, an unheard of thing hitherto among nationalists.' Charles Arnold left Dublin with his regiment on 13th August: 'What crowds there were to see us off! The Dublin people went mad, flags were flying, bands playing, in fact we got a right Royal send off (including a packet of fruit, cakes and cigarettes for each man)', a description that cannot be described as an occupied people willing British soldiers off Irish soil. Nor could these scenes be described as enthusiastic for war. When troops departed from Cork the Cork Free Press described how 'a vast crowd filled the spacious station yard, and the scenes full of pathos, tinged at times with humour, have never been equalled in the memory of the oldest inhabitant.' As in Britain, there was a sense of giving soldiers a good send-off in the knowledge of the hardships they were about to face abroad.

Ensuring that we view reactions to the outbreak of the First World War in Ireland from the perspective of those who experienced it *at the time* is crucial if we are to remove ourselves from the constraints of a 1916 'Easter Rising' dominated view of Irish involvement (or disengagement) with the British war effort. Certainly in 1914, the evidence indicates that England's difficulty was not Ireland's opportunity, but a hardship to be shared and overcome by comrades on both sides of the Irish Sea.

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