

The death and funeral of Edward Carson

Edward Carson had contracted bronchial pneumonia in June 1935 but by July he was out of danger. During this period Dr Charles D'Arcy, the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, paid a visit to see his fellow Dubliner. Carson confided to the Primate, 'I have seen much to shake my faith and what remains with me is no more than I learned at my mother's knee: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son ..."'. The Archbishop assured Ned, his old friend, that John 3:16 was 'enough'. While Carson recovered, his health was nevertheless fatally weakened. By the early autumn his strength began to ebb away and at 8:00 on the morning of 22 October 1935 at Cleve Court, a Queen Anne house in the Isle of Thanet, Kent, Carson died.

Carson had left no instructions in his will as to where he wished to be buried but in conversation with Lord Craigavon (as Sir James Craig had become in 1927) he had expressed a desire to be buried in the land, in Craigavon's words, for which 'he fought so long, so valiantly and so successfully'. In a broadcast the Prime Minister announced that the Northern Ireland Government would provide a state funeral and that Carson would be buried St Anne's Cathedral. Craigavon introduced special legislation in the Northern Ireland House of Commons to enable the burial to take place in the Cathedral. The legislation passed through all its stages there and in the Senate in one sitting.

HMS Broke conveyed the body of the former First Lord of the Admiralty to Belfast and the funeral took place on Saturday 26 October 1935. Thousands of shipyard workers stopped work and bowed their heads as the warship steamed slowly up Belfast Lough, with Carson's flag-draped coffin sat on the quarterdeck. Two petty officers and six ratings carried the coffin ashore. It was placed on a gun-carriage which was hauled by naval ratings through the streets of Belfast which were thronged by silent crowds. The funeral cortege proceeded *via* Queen's Square, Victoria Street, Chichester Street, Donegall Place, Royal Avenue and Donegall Street.

Lady Carson, Carson's second wife, and her 15-year-old son led the family mourners. The remains were flanked by Lord Craigavon, Wilfrid Spender, Fred Crawford, Dawson Bates and Lord Londonderry, men who had shared Carson's great struggle to preserve the Union. The funeral procession paused twice: outside the Old Town Hall, the headquarters of Ulster unionist

resistance to Home Rule in the years before the Great War, and the City Hall, where Carson had signed the Ulster Covenant.

The coffin was carried through the great West Door of the Cathedral by eight RUC sergeants. Primate D'Arcy led the funeral service. In his address the Primate drew attention to the personal sacrifices which Carson had made in assuming the leadership of Ulster Unionism and his broader commitment to the 'great world-wide British community'. He also told the congregation: 'Here in Belfast is most truly the place where his mortal remains should rest. It was nobly and rightly done to bring them here'.

The Primate alluded to the sacrifices which Carson had made and to the serious risks he was prepared to run when he accepted the leadership of the Irish Unionist Party in February 1910: 'He gave up a great career at the Bar, a certainty of fortune, a prospect of the highest awards the world can offer, the assurance of an easy and happy close to a life of dignity and honour. He gave up all of those at the call of a people in sore need and took risks which outside observers at the time pronounced fatal for both leaders and followers. It was a splendid and glorious resolve. May I add that there was also in it a keen insight and the mark of genius? It was a courage inspired by his realization that the cause was a great one, and the people he was called to lead were worthy - a people who would not fail him, but would follow where he led, which was, indeed, proved under God's Providence.'

The Primate also observed: 'It was not for Ulster alone, but for the great world-wide British community which he loved and for which he gave all he had'.

The coffin was lowered into the tomb. From a silver bowl, soil from each of the six counties of Northern Ireland and the City of Londonderry was scattered on to his coffin. Buglers sounded the Last Post and Reveille and the congregation sang 'O God our Help in Ages Past', the 'battle hymn' of Ulster unionism.

In 1953 H. Montgomery Hyde, the then MP for North Belfast, concluded his biography of Carson with the observation, 'Ulster's "Sir Edward" had come home to his people.' This was not entirely true because Carson's background – by birth, family background, upbringing, education and early professional career – was firmly located in southern Irish society. He never lost his Irish brogue. Before 1910 or 1911 he had little or no experience of or contact

with Ulster society. The *News Letter* editorial of 23 October 1935 observed: 'Although not, in the strictest sense of the term, an Ulsterman, he was of the stuff of which Ulstermen are made, and Ulster - the Ulster that stands for allegiance to the Crown and the British connection - took him to her heart from the day on which he donned the mantle of leadership'.

Carson was the leader of the Ulster Unionism from February 1910 to February 1921. Carson was MP for Trinity College, Dublin, for 26 years and MP for the Belfast constituency of Duncairn only from December 1918 to May 1921. Thus, the greater part of his life was spent far removed from the concerns of Ulster. Ulster was the focus of his political life for only eleven years but the people of Ulster had taken Sir Edward to their hearts.

Then Carson formally relinquished the leadership of Ulster Unionism on 4 February 1921, he did so proffering sound advice: 'From the very outset let us see that the Catholic minority have nothing to fear from the Protestant majority. Let us take care to win all that is best among those who have been opposed to us in the past. While maintaining intact our own religion let us give the same rights to the religion of our neighbours'. James Craig made strenuous efforts to follow Carson's sage advice. It is a matter of deep regret that Carson's harmonious vision has yet to be fully realized.