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Understanding the Ulster Covenant



The Leaders



Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant.

Being convinced in our consciences that Home Rule would be disastrous to the material well-being of Ulster as well as of the whole of Ireland, subversive of our civil and religious freedom, destructive of our citizenship and perilous to the unity of the Empire, we, whose names are underwritten, men of Ulster, loyal subjects of His Gracious Majesty King George V., humbly relying on the God whom our fathers in days of stress and trial confidently trusted, do hereby pledge ourselves in solemn Covenant throughout this our time of threatened calamity to stand by one another in defending for ourselves and our children our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom and in using all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland. **q** And in the event of such a Parliament being forced upon us we further solemnly and mutually pledge ourselves to refuse to recognise its authority. **q** In sure confidence that God will defend the right we hereto subscribe our names. **q** And further, we individually declare that we have not already signed this Covenant.

The above was signed by me at _____
"Ulster Day," Saturday, 28th September, 1912.

God Save the King.

Introduction



Carson and Craig arrive at City Hall on Ulster Day

Many historians, especially those committed to Marxism, reject the idea that history consists of the lives of great men, preferring to focus instead on economic trends, social structures and institutional frameworks to explain the past.

On the other hand, Herbert Butterfield, the great twentieth-century British historian and philosopher of history, subscribed to a radically different perspective. In 1955 Butterfield contended: 'It is men who make history.' He believed that individuals were far more important than great systems of government or economics in our study of history.

Karl Marx had an infinitely more sophisticated understanding of history than many of his adherents in the modern historical profession. He recognized that there was validity in both approaches to history and both views had to be held in creative tension. *In The Eighteenth Brumaire of*

Louis Bonaparte (1852), Marx succinctly observed:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.

Almost a century ago, Edward Carson, James Craig, Thomas Sinclair, Fred Crawford and ordinary rank-and-file unionists found themselves most emphatically in circumstances not of their choosing. However, Carson, Craig, Sinclair and Crawford, individually and collectively, rose to the challenges presented by the third Home Rule crisis and by doing so shaped the course of modern Irish history and saved the greater part of Ulster for the Union.

Carson, an outstanding lawyer at the peak of an illustrious career, brought his charisma and his great powers of advocacy to the Unionist cause. Craig, the former stockbroker and soldier, brought his formidable organizational skills (which Carson lacked) and provided Carson with the constant reassurance which he needed. Thomas Sinclair, Unionism's foremost intellectual and finest wordsmith, drafted Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant and thereby created an inspiring text, of which Carson observed: 'I would not alter a word in the declaration which I consider excellent'. Fred Crawford, the 'self-deprecating starch manufacturer' who became 'an Ulster legend', recognized, as the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes had done in the seventeenth century, that 'covenants, without the sword, are but words'.

This publication consists of four biographical profiles which examine the crucial role played by each of these four great men in events of 1912 and in the unfolding of the third Home Rule crisis, thereby contributing to our understanding of the Ulster Covenant. The publication also considers their later careers and their place in the history of this province.

Edward Carson

Carson is simultaneously both one of the most revered and most maligned figures in modern Irish history. To Nationalists he is remembered as the principal architect of Partition, although that was not his intention. Unionists, on the other hand, see him as one of the founding fathers of Northern Ireland. Equally, that was not his intention either.

Carson was born at 4 Harcourt Street, Dublin, on 9 February 1854. His family's background on his father's side was professional and middle class. His father was an architect and two of his uncles were Church of Ireland clergymen. His mother, one of the Lamberts of Athenry, County Galway, came from a landed family descended from John Lambert, one of Cromwell's major-generals. Carson was educated at Portarlinton and Trinity College, Dublin. He was to represent his *alma mater* in Parliament between 1892 and 1918. His legal career began on the Leinster Circuit in 1878. After 1893 he built up a formidable legal practice in England. His background – by birth, 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 or contact with Ulster society.

Carson was an outstanding lawyer in an era of great lawyers. In 1900 he was earning £20,000 per annum, a huge income by early 20th century standards. He was involved in a great many famous court cases. Two examples will suffice. In 1895 Carson represented the Marquess of Queensbury in the celebrated libel action brought against him by Oscar



Carson as portrayed
in *Vanity Fair*



Wilde. Carson's cross-examination of Wilde was devastating. In 1909 Carson famously defended George Archer Shee, a 13-year old cadet at Osborne Naval College unjustly accused of the theft of a five-shilling postal order. The story became the basis of Sir Terence Rattigan's award-winning play, *The Winslow Boy* (1946).

On a number of occasions Carson was a law officer of the Crown: Solicitor General for Ireland in 1892, Solicitor General for England between 1900 and 1905 and in 1915 he was made Attorney General in the Coalition Government.

Politically, he was a very significant figure in British politics. He was a key player in the overthrow of the Asquith Government in December 1916. Between 1916 and 1917 he was First Lord of the Admiralty and between 1917 and 1918 he was a member of the War Cabinet.

On two occasions very high office was, arguably, within Carson's grasp. In 1911, when A. J. Balfour finally succumbed to the 'Balfour must go' campaign orchestrated by sections of the Tory press, Carson might have become Leader of the Conservative Party instead of Bonar Law. In December 1916 he might even have become Prime Minister rather than Lloyd George.

Carson was the leader of Ulster Unionism from February 1910 to February 1921. He was MP for Trinity College, Dublin, for 26 years and MP for the Belfast constituency of Duncairn only from December 1918 to May 1921. The greater part of



Carson's funeral, Belfast, 26th October 1935

his life was spent far removed from the concerns of Ulster. Ulster was the focus of his political life for only eleven years. After 1921 Carson exhibited comparatively little public interest in Ulster politics, perhaps because he thought to do so was incompatible with his judicial role as a Lord of Appeal. He only made occasional visits to the province and the massive statue of Carson in front of Parliament Buildings at Stormont was unveiled in his presence on 8 July 1933.

Carson died on 22 October 1935 at Cleve Court, near Ramsgate, on the south coast of England. His body was conveyed to Belfast for a state funeral – still the only state funeral ever held in Northern Ireland's history – in St Anne's Cathedral where he was interred.

Carson believed passionately in the Union because he was convinced Ireland's interests were best served within the framework of the United Kingdom. His schoolboy hero was William Pitt the Younger, the Prime Minister and principal architect of the Act of Union. As a school boy he used to declaim Pitt's speeches, and his favourite was the speech in the



Carson signing the Covenant at the City Hall

House of Commons on 22 January 1799 in which Pitt made his case for the passage of the Union. Pitt said:

Let Ireland be blended with us, let her partake of every solid benefit, of every eminent advantage that could result from such an incorporation. She should be given a full participation in the wealth, power and stability of the British Empire.

Carson's aim was the comprehensive defeat of Home Rule. He believed that Home Rule was not economically viable without Ulster's – and more specifically Belfast's – heavy industry and that John Redmond, the Nationalist leader, and Irish nationalist opinion would never accept Home Rule with Ulster exclusion. Therefore, Carson believed that if he could demonstrate that Ulster Unionists were resolute in their determination to oppose Home Rule, Home Rule would be, in his words, 'dead as a stone'.

The signing of the Ulster Covenant of 28 September 1912, drilling and military preparations, the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force, the establishment of a provisional government in Belfast and large-scale gunrunning were all intended to underscore the seriousness and depth of



Drilling and military preparations

Ulster unionist opposition to Home Rule.

In November 1911 Carson drafted a memorandum suggesting that 'It might be necessary to raise the question [of Ulster exclusion] some time by amendment'. It was in this spirit that Carson supported the Agar-Robartes amendment for four-county exclusion in June 1912 and Carson introduced his own amendment for nine-county exclusion in January 1913. As late as September 1913 Carson still believed that it was possible to defeat Home Rule by insisting on the exclusion of either the whole of Ulster or even part of Ulster. However, by November 1913 Carson sadly concluded that it was no longer possible to defeat Home Rule for the whole of Ireland. Saving Ulster, or as much of Ulster as possible, from the operation of a Home Rule bill became his reluctant task.

Carson never exhibited much enthusiasm for the Government of Ireland bill which was introduced in the Commons on 25 February 1920. The bill proposed the establishment of two parliaments in Ireland, one in Belfast and one in Dublin. Northern Ireland, the area to be placed under the jurisdiction of the Belfast parliament was to be a *six-county* rather than a



Carson inspects a UVF unit, 1913

nine-county Ulster. The legislation was drafted in this way at the insistence of James Craig and the Ulster Unionist leadership. Behind the scenes, as early as November 1919 they had indicated to Walter Long, the chairman of the Cabinet committee framing the terms of the bill, that they would accept no other settlement.

As a Southern Irish Unionist, Carson's attitude to the bill was 'lukewarm'. Even before its introduction, on 19 December 1919 Carson told the House of Commons:

Ulster has never asked for a separate Parliament. Ulster's claim has always been of this simple character: "we have thrived under the Union; we are in sympathy with you, we are part of yourselves. We are prepared to make any sacrifice that you make, and are prepared to bear any burden that is equally put upon us with the other parts of the United Kingdom. In those circumstances keep us with you." They have never made any other demand than that, and I appeal to the Government to keep Ulster in their united Parliament. I cannot understand why we should ask them to take a Parliament which they have never demanded, and which they do not want.

Carson was invited to become Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister but it was an honour he declined. It would have involved operating the Government of Ireland Act which he viewed with distaste. The prospect of office had little attraction for him. As a hypochondriac, he almost certainly would have had severe doubts about the impact upon his health. He may even have believed, at the age of 66, that it was appropriate to step down and give a younger man a chance.

On 4 February 1921 he formally relinquished the leadership of Ulster Unionism. He did so offering 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.

Of Carson's political career, the ultimate paradox is perhaps the impressive statue in front of Parliament Buildings at Stormont: a statue to a man opposed to Home Rule in front of a Home Rule parliament. Frequently interpreted as an expression of triumphalism, in truth it is rather the symbol of failure. Carson never sought to establish a parliament in Belfast. Stormont was a by-product of his failure.



Carson's statue, Parliament Buildings

James Craig

In 1973 the Kilbrandon Royal Commission on the Constitution observed that 'the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 was the only Home Rule bill that ever came into effect and then in the one part of Ireland that had said it would fight rather than accept Home Rule'. The Kilbrandon Report described this as 'one of history's choicest ironies'.

There is a second and parallel irony: James Craig, Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister, spent almost half his political career opposing Home Rule and the remainder of his political life as the premier of a Home Rule administration.

Craig was born on 8 January 1871 in Sydenham, in east Belfast – the year after Isaac Butt launched the Home Rule movement. He was the sixth son of James Craig, a millionaire Presbyterian whiskey distiller, and Eleanor Gilmore Browne. Both parents were of Scottish descent. He was educated at Merchiston Castle School, a Church of Scotland foundation, in Edinburgh.

Craig became a stockbroker but his heart was not in buying and selling shares. It was his love of yachting and sailing which made life tolerable. He jumped at the opportunity to serve in the South African (or Boer) War, joining in the 3rd (Militia) Battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles and, subsequently, the 29th Imperial Yeomanry. He proved to be a good and popular officer and as Deputy Assistant Director of



James Craig

the Imperial Military Railways, exhibited that organizational flair which would be placed at the disposal of the unionist cause. The war also gave him a heightened appreciation of the importance of Empire and Ulster's place within it.



Craigavon House

Before the Boer War Craig had been briefly Honorary Secretary of the Belfast Conservative Association but his interest in politics was renewed by the election of Charles Curtis Craig, his elder brother, as MP for South Antrim at a by-election in February 1903. A month later James Craig contested an unexpected vacancy in North Fermanagh but was narrowly defeated by a Russellite land candidate.

The Russellite candidate won by polling the full nationalist vote in the constituency and by securing a tiny segment of the unionist vote. This experience may have exerted a disproportionate influence on Craig's

later political career: as Unionist leader, Craig feared division within the unionist community and sought to preserve – at almost any price – the unity of the unionist bloc.

In the general election of 1906 Craig entered Parliament as the MP for East Down, defeating the sitting Russellite MP, James Wood. Craig proved to be a very energetic parliamentarian, taking a keen interest in a wide range of issues: social, educational (especially with respect to teachers' salaries and the upkeep of national schools) and reform of the Army.



According to Patrick Buckland, Craig possessed 'in larger measure than most Ulster Unionists a marked administrative ability, ample reserves of determination, energy and patience and, surprisingly, an eye for the dramatic'. As the third Home Rule crisis unfolded after 1910, Craig formed a very effective partnership with Sir Edward Carson in mobilizing Ulster unionist resistance. In the words of his biographer St John Ervine: 'Each had what the other lacked. Pooling their resources, they became a third and undeniable person. Effective apart, they were irresistible together'. Carson brought his charisma and his great powers of advocacy to the Unionist cause. Craig brought his formidable organizational skills (which Carson lacked) and provided Carson with the constant reassurance which he needed.

Recognising the outstanding skill set which Carson would bring to the Unionist cause, it was Craig who at the beginning of 1910 suggested that the Unionist MPs should invite Carson to become their leader, a point evidenced by Lord Leitrim's letter to Mrs Craig in which he observed: 'It was certainly a capital idea of your husband's, getting Carson to lead us'. On 29 July 1911 Carson wrote to Craig from England:

What I am anxious about is that the people over there really mean to resist. I am not for a mere game of bluff, and unless men are prepared to make great sacrifices which they clearly understand, the task of resistance is of no use. We will be confronted by many weaklings in our own camp who talk very loud and mean nothing and will be the first to criticise us when the moment of action comes.

It was Craig who reassured Carson that Ulster unionists did mean to resist. To underscore the point, Craig organized the great demonstration on 23 September 1911 at Craigavon, his home on the outskirts of Belfast, at which Carson was introduced to the



people whom he would lead over the next decade. It was Craig who masterminded the unionist campaign. Carson provided the speeches and Craig provided the organization. Craig organised the Balmoral demonstration on Easter Tuesday 1912 and the pre-Covenant demonstrations

in September later that year. Originally Craig was deputed to draft the text of the Covenant but that duty ultimately fell to Thomas Sinclair. However, Craig did choreograph the signing of the Ulster Covenant. In January 1913 he was disproportionately responsible for the creation of the Ulster Volunteer Force. He was one of those who sanctioned the Larne gun-running and on the night of 23/24 April 1914, Craig was present at Donaghadee to oversee the unloading and distribution of the *Clyde Valley's* cargo. Craig was also at the forefront of establishing the provisional government in July 1914. Afterwards Carson candidly admitted: 'It was James Craig who did most of the work, and I got most of the credit.'

At the outbreak of the Great War Craig recruited and organized the 36th (Ulster) Division, becoming a Lieutenant Colonel and the new Division's Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General.

In the years after the War he sacrificed a very promising political career in London to become Northern Ireland's first



Prime Minister, a position that he held until his death.

Craig oversaw the creation of the institutions of the new state and defended them against internal and external threat. The years which witnessed the birth pangs of Northern Ireland were violent as the IRA sought to destroy the new state. Between 21 June 1920 and 18 June 1922 428 people were killed and a further 1,766 wounded. Over half of these occurred in 1922. In that year 232 people, including two Unionist MPs, were killed, nearly 1,000 wounded, and more than three million pounds worth of property destroyed. The IRA kidnapped a large number of prominent border unionists in February 1922 and seized part of County Fermanagh – the so-called ‘Pettigo triangle’ – in May of that year.

There were other threats to the survival of the state. As late as November 1921 Lloyd George was endeavouring to cajole and pressure Craig into agreeing to Ulster’s subordination to the Dublin parliament. There was also the uncertainty created by the Boundary Commission. Craig successfully saw off all these challenges. In 1925 the Craig government signed a tripartite agreement with the governments in London and Dublin to preserve the Irish frontier as it was. The historian Bryan A. Follis has shrewdly observed that ‘the successful birth of Northern Ireland was due to the iron will of the Ulster unionist government and the resolute leadership of Sir James Craig’.

Despite the difficulties created by the economic downturn of the 1920s and the global recession of the 1930s, Craig and his colleagues proved to be imaginative and innovative in restructuring parts of the Northern Ireland economy by nationalizing road transport and introducing new systems of education and agricultural marketing. Sir Basil Brooke, in particular, was a strikingly effective Minister of Agriculture.

Craig maintained party unity – a far more difficult task than is readily



appreciated – and for 19 years he led the Unionist Party to large majorities in five successive general elections. However, the 1925 election, and in particular the success of four independent unionists and three labour candidates, gave him a shock.

Contrary to popular opinion, the abolition of Proportional Representation in 1929 was directed against independent unionists and labour candidates rather than nationalists. In the general election of 1929 and 1938 he saw off the challenge of Temperance advocates and W. J. Stewart’s Progressive Unionists respectively. In 1938 a journalist told Craig – perfectly accurately – that he was ‘the one politician’ who could ‘win an election without ever leaving his fireplace’.

In April 1934 in a debate in the Northern Ireland House of Commons Craig famously said:

The hon. Member must remember that in the South they boasted of a Catholic State. They still boast of Southern Ireland being a Catholic State. All I boast of is that we are a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant State.



Eamon De Valera

This extract is frequently quoted to Craig’s disadvantage. The passage was immediately preceded by Craig asking Northern Ireland’s critics to ‘remember that in the South they boasted of a Catholic state’. Craig was specifically referring to Eamon de Valera’s assertion that Ireland was a ‘Catholic nation’. De Valera is rarely quoted to his disadvantage. In truth, the speech does not accurately represent Craig’s outlook because, following Carson’s injunction ‘to see that the Catholic



Craig's grave, Parliament Buildings

minority have nothing to fear from the majority', he endeavoured to conciliate the minority and establish good neighbourly relations with Dublin.

Unfortunately the Roman Catholic or nationalist community rarely responded to Craig's overtures. Cardinal Logue refused an invitation to attend the state opening of the Northern Ireland Parliament in June 1921 and declined to appoint a chaplain to the Parliament. Nationalist MPs did not take their seats in the Northern Ireland Parliament until 1925. Nationalists boycotted reviews of local government boundaries and of education. Nationalist-controlled county councils refused to recognize the Northern Ireland Parliament. Nationalist school teachers – encouraged by Michael Collins – refused to accept their salaries from the Ministry of Education in Belfast. Although one-third of the places in the new Royal Ulster Constabulary were reserved for the Roman Catholic community, Roman Catholics never took up their full entitlement.

Craig was never a bigot. Throughout his life he exhibited a great capacity for friendship which could and did extend beyond the political divide to embrace Nationalist politicians such as Joe Devlin, the Nationalist leader, and Patrick O'Neill, the Nationalist MP for Mourne. Craig's warm relationship with Joe Devlin was in marked contrast to the glacial relations which existed between W. T. Cosgrave, the Cumann na Gaedheal leader,

and Eamon de Valera, the Fianna Fail leader, in the south.

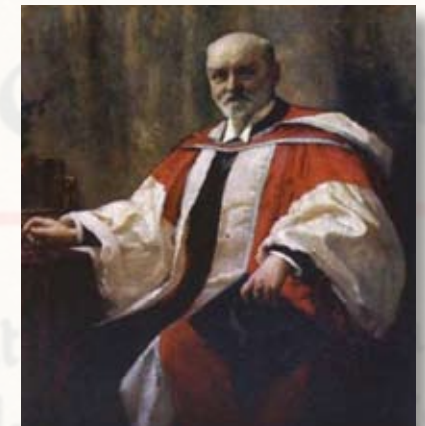
At the outset of the Second World War, Craig said: 'We are the King's men, and we shall be with you to the end.' However, Craig did not live to see the end of the war, as he died on 24 November 1940. Special legislation was rapidly passed to enable the burial of his remains in the grounds of Parliament Buildings at Stormont.

Although Craig was an important opponent of Home Rule and spent almost half his political career opposing it, he went on to spend his remaining years as a very effective Prime Minister of a Home Rule administration. Nevertheless, there was a strong underlying consistency to his entire career in that he personified the iron determination of Ulster Unionists to remain British.

Thomas Sinclair

Thomas Sinclair, the man pre-eminently responsible for the success of the Ulster Convention of June 1892 and the wordsmith who framed the Ulster Covenant of September 1912, is a largely forgotten figure in modern Ulster.

He was born in Belfast on 23 September 1838. He was educated at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution and the Queen's College, Belfast. One of his teachers, James McCosh, the Scottish-born Professor of Logic and Metaphysics and future President of Princeton, had a profound influence on Sinclair. Sinclair



Thomas Sinclair

graduated with a first-class honours degree in mathematics and a gold medal in 1856, and subsequently was awarded a Master's degree and another gold medal in 1859. Many regarded him as the best student Queen's had ever seen, prompting the College authorities to confer the honorary degree of D.Litt. on him in 1882.

Despite a glittering academic career which opened up the prospect of a future spent in the professions or academia, Sinclair entered the family business – J. & T. Sinclair, Provender Merchants – founded by his father and uncle. He became head of the firm on his father's death, a position which he was to occupy till his own death.

Sinclair was the most prominent Presbyterian layman of his time. From an early age he taught Sunday School. At 28 he was chosen and ordained an elder of the church and a year later he was appointed Clerk of Session in Duncairn Presbyterian. With the abolition of the *Regium Donum* (coinciding with the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland) he conceived the idea of the Commutation and Sustentation Fund, persuaded the General Assembly of its value, and set about organising it; all at a time when he was still in his early thirties. Presbyterianism was central to Sinclair's family background. Much of the family's wealth was donated to the Church and Presbyterian causes. Sinclair Seaman's Church in Corporation Square was built as a memorial to John Sinclair, his uncle.

An active Liberal and a great admirer of W. E. Gladstone, Sinclair believed fervently in the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, land



Sinclair Seamen's Church

reform and non-denominational education. Predictably, he welcomed disestablishment in 1869 and Gladstone's two land acts of 1870 and 1881.

The years 1868 to 1885, corresponding with Sinclair's close involvement in the affairs of the Ulster Liberal Party, marked the steady erosion of the Conservative Party's long hegemony in Ulster and were years of electoral advance for Ulster Liberals. While it would be wrong to suggest that the Liberal advance was due to Sinclair's activities alone, Sinclair was recognised as a leader of Ulster Liberalism and a highly articulate critic of Conservatism. His contribution was considerable.

Gladstone's reported conversion to Home Rule stunned Ulster Liberals. They were comparatively slow to abandon Gladstone but when 'The Grand Old Man's' espousal of Home Rule was placed beyond all reasonable doubt, Sinclair in April 1886 forcefully enunciated the Liberal Unionist viewpoint:

We shall show the world that come what may Ulster will never consent to yield up her citizenship, or be expelled from the Imperial Parliament to be degraded to a junior partnership in a subordinate colony.

For Sinclair and Ulster's Liberal Unionists, the bottom line was 'there must be no Home Rule plank in the Ulster Liberal platform'. That remained Sinclair's firm conviction until the day he died.

The Ulster Unionist Convention, held on the eve of the General Election of 1892, was Sinclair's idea: he translated it into a practical proposition, organised it and made one of the best speeches of the day. He was proud of his Ulster-Scots ancestry, regarded himself as an heir to both the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the American Revolution a century later, and explained the policy of passive resistance with which Unionists intended to confront Gladstone's prospective second Home Rule Bill should it become law. Sinclair appreciated that rioting mobs did not

command sympathy and would only alienate support on the mainland. A peaceful, orderly and disciplined community, stoically confronting prospective tyranny, presented an image better calculated to win friends and admiration.

Despite the assertions of the *Irish News* that Sinclair had become a reactionary, Sinclair did not cease to be a committed reformer. He and his friend, Thomas Andrews, were enthusiastic supporters of the Recess Committee and its report recommending state promotion of agriculture and industry. Both men were supportive of the efforts of Horace Plunkett and the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, formed in Dublin in 1894, and they welcomed the establishment of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction in 1889. They both supported the extension of democratic local government to Ireland and continued to be enthusiastic land reformers. Both men had considerable influence with Joseph Chamberlain, the Liberal Unionist leader, the Colonial Secretary and one of the most influential British politicians of the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century. They also exerted considerable influence with successive Chief Secretaries, especially with Gerald Balfour.

Horace Plunkett's praise for the work of the Ulster Liberal Unionist Association is a more judicious assessment of Thomas Sinclair's politics than that offered by his detractors:

The only expression of real political thought which I have observed in Ireland since I have been in touch with Irish life has emanated from the Ulster Liberal Unionist Association, whose weighty pronouncements, published from time



Joseph Chamberlain



Eve of Covenant rally, Ulster Hall

to time, are worthy of deep consideration by all interested in the welfare of Ireland.

The *Ulster Liberal Unionist Association: A Sketch of its History* (1914) constitutes the most comprehensive rebuttal of the *Irish News* charge that Sinclair and Ulster Liberal Unionists had become reactionaries. What the *Irish News* could not forgive was that Thomas Sinclair was an intellectually formidable opponent of Home Rule who presented the unionist case to two Liberal Prime Ministers, Gladstone and Asquith.

For a man of his years, Sinclair was remarkably active during the third Home Rule crisis. He was present at the great Craigavon demonstration on Saturday 23





Queen's University, Belfast

September 1911, which coincided with his 73rd birthday. He did not speak but Thomas Andrews spoke eloquently on behalf of Ulster's Liberal Unionists. On the following Monday Sinclair began drawing up the constitution for a provisional government. At the first pre-Covenant rally at Enniskillen on 18 September 1912, he explained the document that he had drafted, and attended the eve-of-Covenant rally in the Ulster Hall on 27 September.

Sinclair was chairman of the committee which organised the Presbyterian Anti-Home Rule Convention on 1 February 1912, and chaired the proceedings. Later that year, in May, he presented the case against Home Rule to Scottish Presbyterians in the Synod Hall in Edinburgh. Sinclair was also prolific in presenting the unionist position in articles. A particularly fine example entitled 'The Position of Ulster' may be consulted in a volume of essays edited by S. Rosenbaum with the title *Against Home Rule* (1912). The article bears testimony to the elegance of his prose and the integrity and consistency of his arguments against Home Rule.

As one of the leaders of Ulster Liberalism, the first President of the

Liberal Unionist Association, the architect of the Ulster Convention, a Privy Councillor and a member of the Standing Committee of the Ulster Unionist Council, Sinclair had a very strong interest in politics but it was not an all-consuming passion. For example, Sinclair was a keen cyclist, and also a founder member of Royal Belfast, the first golf club in Ulster.

Thomas Sinclair was never a city councillor nor a member of the Harbour Board, although he was twice President of Belfast Chamber of Commerce. He was never a Member of Parliament, declining on one occasion the opportunity to become MP for North Antrim. Yet with justice the Revd J. C. Johnston was able to ask: 'Which of our parliamentarians might not covet his influence?'

Sinclair was a man of wide interests but he took an especially keen interest in education in all its aspects and at every level. In his estimation the Queen's College was inadequately funded by the state. Accordingly, he was one of the organisers of a public fund to make good the shortfall so that his *alma mater* might rank as a centre of academic excellence. Despite his interest in and love of his College, he declined A. J. Balfour's offer of the Presidency of the Queen's College. In 1908 he declined a seat on the Senate of the new Queen's University and subsequently declined the opportunity to become a Pro-Chancellor. He did, however, become chairman of Convocation.

In 1914 J. R. Fisher, in his account of the Ulster Liberal Unionist Association, handsomely acknowledged Sinclair's contribution to the work of the Association, describing him as 'the man ... foremost among its founders and who has been its intellectual leader and standard bearer throughout'.

Thomas Sinclair did not live to see the resolution of the third Home Rule crisis. He died on 14 February 1914.

Fred Crawford

Over a century ago the respectable members of the most prestigious club in Belfast were pained to discover that one 'Hugh Matthews' of 'The Reform Club, Belfast' had advertised in French, Belgian, German and Austrian newspapers for ten thousand second-hand rifles and two million rounds of ammunition. However, there was no 'Hugh Matthews' listed among the club's membership.

When the matter was raised with the Club Secretary, he astounded everyone by freely admitting that he himself was the culprit. The guilty party's name was Major Frederick Hugh Crawford.

Fred Crawford, the 'self-deprecating starch manufacturer' who became 'an Ulster legend' was a man focused on one big idea, which he articulated in this way:

From the very first, I came to the conclusion that our resistance, to be successful, must eventually come to ARMED resistance...I knew that mere words were useless.....I was determined to do all in my power...even by force if necessary.

On another occasion he formulated this concept in a slightly different manner:



Fred Crawford

The Reform Club, Belfast



I predict that Home Rule will never be killed until we show any British Government which brings it forward that we will resist it to death, even with arms, if necessary.

Crawford's dogged determination and devotion to task almost single-handedly transformed Ulster resistance from idle threat to physical reality.

Frederick Hugh Crawford was born into 'a solid Methodist' home and a family with a strong sense of their Ulster-Scots ancestry on 21 August 1861.

The first member of this remarkable family to settle in Ulster, Revd Thomas Crawford, was ordained at Donegore in 1655. The family produced a long line of notable Presbyterian ministers and medical doctors, but Fred's grandfather moved into chemical manufacture in Belfast and the family abandoned their ancestral Presbyterianism for Methodism.

In *Guns for Ulster*, his account of the gun-running, Crawford wrote about his Ulster-Scots ancestry:

From these settlers sprang a people, the Ulster-Scot, who have made themselves felt in the history of the British Empire and, in no small measure, in that of the United States of America.

On another occasion, Crawford observed:

I am ashamed to call myself an Irishman. Thank God I am not one. I am an Ulsterman, a very different breed.

Crawford was educated at Methodist College, Belfast, and University

College, London, where he distinguished himself as an athlete and a rifle shot. He then served an apprenticeship at Harland & Wolff. One frosty morning in December 1881 a gangway collapsed, throwing several hundred men into the dock. Crawford recalled: 'I was the means of getting some of them out with a certain amount of inconvenience to myself and a good ducking which I did not relish as the dock was partly frozen over'. For this exploit he was awarded a bronze medal by the Royal Humane Society and a solid silver cup along with an address by his colleagues in the shipyard.



In the uniform of the Mid-Ulster Artillery

Crawford missed the drama of the first Home Rule crisis of 1885-6 through serving as an engineer with the White Star Line. However, his return from Australia in 1892 to join the family business coincided with the onset of the second Home Rule crisis. He became convinced that if Ulster was to successfully resist Home Rule, Ulster must ultimately rely on armed resistance.

As a member of Lord Ranfurly's Ulster Loyalist Union, in 1893 Crawford imported small quantities of weapons and formed a secret society called Young Ulster. One condition of membership consisted of the possession of either a revolver or a Winchester carbine and one hundred rounds of ammunition. He also started drilling, as well as importing and concealing rifles. He even manufactured his own ammunition.

It was also during the second Home Rule crisis that Crawford allegedly approached Lord Ranfurly with a scheme to kidnap Gladstone on the

promenade at Brighton and whisk him off to a remote South Sea Island and abandon him there with a supply of writing material, a few axes, a grindstone and 'a really good library'. To Crawford's intense irritation, Lord Ranfurly is supposed to have declined to fund the project. This, however, is one of a number of myths which Keith Haines, Crawford's recent biographer, dispels. The story would appear to be a complete fabrication.

In 1894 he enlisted in the Mid-Ulster Artillery and subsequently was transferred to the Donegal Artillery. Like James Craig, he served in the Boer War. He achieved the rank of Major, was decorated and mentioned in despatches. During the conflict he acquired a great deal of knowledge about modern weaponry and warfare. After the Boer War he remained on the Army List and attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

With the return of a Liberal Government at the end of 1905 and the Liberal landslide in the general election of 1906, Crawford feared the introduction of a fresh Home Rule bill. This did not materialize immediately because the Liberal Government with its huge parliamentary majority was not dependent on the votes of Irish nationalist MPs. Crawford attached very little significance to this fact and his mind returned to his firm conviction that if Ulster was to successfully resist Home Rule, it must ultimately rely on armed resistance.

However, by January 1910 the Liberals had lost their huge independent parliamentary majority and were wholly dependent on the support of Irish nationalist MPs. In November 1910 Crawford was the key mover and shaker in the establishment of a secret sub-committee of the Ulster Unionist Council to import guns. In March 1911 the UUC approved the first major expenditure for the importation of guns and by the early summer of 1911 at least 2,000 rifles had already been imported.



City Hall Marshals, Ulster Day

On 28 September 1912 Crawford commanded the marshals who escorted Carson and the Unionist leadership from the Ulster Hall to the City Hall. The marshals, smartly turned out in their neat suits and bowler hats, were drawn from the City's Unionist Clubs and the County Grand Lodge of Belfast. They ensured the smooth and efficient signing of the Covenant at the City Hall.

Contrary to the received wisdom, Crawford did not sign the Covenant in his own blood, another myth dispelled by Keith Haines. Admittedly, his Scottish ancestors may have signed seventeenth-century covenants in their own blood.

When the Ulster Volunteer Force was formally established by the UUC on 31 January 1913 Crawford became Director of Ordnance. This appointment would have made very little difference to Crawford because he simply continued doing what he had already been doing: quietly and efficiently importing arms.



During the course of 1913 Crawford imported thousands of rifles, some machine-guns and significant quantities of ammunition. However, in June 1913 he suffered a major setback when the Customs authorities and the police managed to seize a thousand rifles and bayonets in Belfast.

Crawford was becoming increasingly frustrated at piecemeal acquisition of arms. Crawford favoured gunrunning on a far more ambitious scale. Two crucial factors tilted the argument in favour of Crawford's preferred method of proceeding.

First, in December 1913 the UVF leadership in County Antrim pressured the Unionist leadership for large-scale gunrunning because the County Antrim volunteers had only 200 rifles for 10,700 men.

Secondly, a bold political stroke was required and by 1914 was essential because, according to the terms of the Parliament Act of 1911 (which deprived the House of Lords of its veto), Home Rule would reach the statute book by the summer of that year. Nothing then would stand between Ulster and Dublin rule but armed resistance. Thus, it was in January 1914 that Carson and the Unionist leadership sanctioned Crawford to undertake a daring mission, worthy of a John Buchan thriller, to Germany to purchase guns and ammunition and land them in Ulster. Only twelve men knew about the mission. Carson told Crawford: 'Crawford, I'll see you through this business, if I should have to go to prison for it'. Those words meant a great deal to Crawford. He always referred to Carson as the leader and esteemed it a great honour to be asked to be one of the pall-bearers at Carson's funeral in October 1935.



SS Clyde Valley, renamed Mountjoy II

In February 1914 Crawford purchased a huge quantity of guns and ammunition from Benny Spiro, a Jewish arms dealer in Hamburg.

Crawford spent March and early April trying to arrange the shipment of his purchases to Ulster. He transported the guns and ammunition he had purchased, using a Norwegian collier called the *Fanny*, to the Tuskar Rock, a group of hazardous rocks off the south-east coast of County Wexford. There, he rendezvoused with a vessel called the *Clyde Valley* and the *Fanny's* cargo was transferred to the *Clyde Valley*. On the night of 24/25 April the *Clyde Valley's* cargo of 35,000 rifles and 3,000,000 rounds of ammunition were successfully unloaded at Larne, Bangor and Donaghadee and swiftly and efficiently distributed by the UVF across the province. Through superb staff work and meticulous planning, Ulster not only had the will, but now the means to oppose the imposition of Dublin rule.

Ironically, at almost the same time as Ulster acquired the capacity to resist Dublin rule, the Government, after the so-called Curragh 'Mutiny', found itself in the position of being unable to impose Dublin rule on Ulster. The incident at the Curragh did not technically constitute a mutiny because no

orders were given, and therefore no orders were disobeyed, but as a result the Government was deprived of the option of using the army to coerce Ulster. That being the case, the only alternative was compromise. It was to this end that the Buckingham Palace Conference of 21-24 July 1914 was convened but the necessary compromise proved elusive. Already Ulster Unionists had set in motion, steps to establish the provisional government that had been planned away back in September 1911. Ulster, Ireland and the United Kingdom as a whole seemed to be on the brink of civil war.

Carson warned that the great crisis of 'our country' and 'our fate' was imminent 'unless something happens'. What intervened was the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914.

On 10 May 1940, when King George VI invited him to form a government, Winston Churchill recorded: 'I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and this trial'. Fred Crawford may have entertained similar thoughts on the night of the 24/25 April 1914. For Crawford, life thereafter was something of an anticlimax.

At the special meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council on 10 March 1920 to consider the terms of the Government of Ireland Act Crawford spoke in favour of six-county exclusion rather than nine-county exclusion. In April 1920 he issued a leaflet entitled *Why I voted For the Six Counties* justifying his stance.

In 1920 he also assisted in reviving the UVF and urged unionists and Orangemen to join the newly-constituted Ulster Special Constabulary.

At the outbreak of the Second World War he volunteered for service but his offer was politely declined.

When Crawford died in November 1952 Basil Brooke, the then Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, accurately described him 'as a fearless fighter in the historic fight to keep Ulster British'.



*In the uniform of a
District Inspector, RUC*



*The silver casket presented to Crawford
"to commemorate signal services
rendered by him to Ulster, culminating
on the night of April 24th 1914"*



Understanding the Ulster Covenant

The Origins and Background to the Ulster Covenant

Why Unionists opposed Home Rule

The Events of the Ulster Day, 28th September 1912

Ulster Day Poetry - Rudyard Kipling & WF Marshall

As we approach the centenary of the signing of the Ulster Covenant in 1912, the purpose of this publication is to examine the role of the leaders of Unionist opposition to Home Rule. Biographical profiles of Edward Carson, James Craig, Thomas Sinclair and Fred Crawford consider the contribution of these individuals during the “Ulster Crisis” whilst also examining their later careers and their place in the history of Northern Ireland.



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