

Erskine May, Vol. III, Chapter XVI, pp. 311-325

Ireland: Volunteers and United Irishman

The Volunteer Movement

Another decisive movement precipitated the crisis of Irish affairs. The French war had encouraged the formation of several corps of volunteers for the defence of the country. The most active promoters of this array of military force, were members of the country party; and their political sentiments were speedily caught up by the volunteers. At first the different corps were without concert or communication: but in the autumn of 1779, they received a great accession of strength, and were brought into united action. The country had been drained of its regular army, for the American war; and its coasts were threatened by the enemy. The government, in its extremity, [312] threw itself upon the volunteers,—distributed 16,000 stand of arms,—and invited the people to arm themselves, without any securities for their obedience. The volunteers soon numbered 42,000 men, chose their own officers,—chiefly from the country party,—made common cause with the people against the government, shouted for free trade; and received the thanks of Parliament for their patriotism. Power had been suffered to pass from the executive and the legislature, into the hands of armed associations of men, holding no commissions from the crown, and independent alike of civil and military authority. The government was filled with alarm and perplexity; and the British Parliament resounded with remonstrances against the conduct of ministers, and arguments for the prompt redress of Irish grievances. The Parliament of Ireland showed its determination, by voting supplies for six months only; and the British Parliament, setting itself earnestly to work, passed some important measures for the relief of Irish commerce.

Meanwhile the volunteers, daily increasing in discipline and military organisation, were assuming, more and more, the character of an armed political association. The different corps assembled for drill, and for [313] discussion, agreed to resolutions, and opened an extensive communication with one another. Early in 1780, the volunteers demanded, with one voice, the legislative independence of Ireland, and liberation from the sovereignty of the British Parliament. And Mr. Grattan, the ablest and most temperate of the Irish patriots, gave eloquent expression to these claims in the Irish House of Commons.

The Permanent Mutiny Act

In this critical conjuncture, the public mind was further inflamed by another interference of the government, in England. Hitherto, Ireland had been embraced in the annual Mutiny Act of the British Parliament. In this year, however, the general sentiment of magistrates and the people being adverse to the operation of such an Act, without the sanction of the Irish legislature, Ireland was omitted from the English mutiny bill; and the heads of a separate mutiny bill were transmitted from Ireland. This bill was altered by the English cabinet into a permanent Act. Material amendments were also made in a bill for opening the sugar trade to Ireland. No constitutional security had been more cherished than that of an annual mutiny bill, by which the crown is effectually prevented from maintaining a standing army, without the consent of Parliament. This security was now denied to Ireland, just when she was most sensitive to her rights, and jealous of the sovereignty [314] of England. The Irish Parliament submitted to the will of its English rulers: but the volunteers assembled to denounce them. They declared that their own Parliament had been bought with the wealth of Ireland herself, and clamoured more loudly than ever for legislative independence. Nor was such an

innovation without effect upon the constitutional rights of England, as it sanctioned, for the first time, the maintenance of a military force within the realm, without limitation as to numbers or duration. Troops raised in England might be transferred to Ireland, and there maintained under military law, independent of the Parliaments of either country. The anomaly of this measure was forcibly exposed by Mr. Fox and the leaders of Opposition, in the British Parliament.

The Dungannon Convention

The volunteers continued their reviews and political demonstrations, under the Earl of Charlemont, with increased numbers and improved organisation; and again received the thanks of the Irish Parliament. But while they were acting in cordial union with the leaders of the country party, in the House of Commons, the government had secured,—by means too familiar at the Castle,—a majority of that assembly, which steadily resisted further concessions.(1) In these circumstances, delegates from all the [315] volunteers in Ulster were invited to assemble at Dungannon on the 15th February 1782, 'to root out corruption and court influence from the legislative body,' and 'to deliberate on the present alarming situation of public affairs.' The meeting was held in the church: its proceedings were conducted with the utmost propriety and moderation; and it agreed, almost unanimously, to resolutions declaring the right of Ireland to legislative and judicial independence, and free trade. On the 22nd, Mr. Grattan, in a noble speech, moved an address of the Commons to His Majesty, asserting the same principles. His motion was defeated, as well as another by Mr. Flood, declaring the legislative independence of the Irish Parliament.

Legislative Independence Conceded

In the midst of these contentions, Lord Rockingham's liberal administration was formed, who recalled Lord Carlisle, and appointed the Duke of Portland as lord-lieutenant. While the new ministers were concerting measures for the government of Ireland, Mr. Eden, secretary to Lord Carlisle,—who had resisted all the demands of the patriots in the Irish Parliament,—hastened to England; and startled the House of Commons with a glowing statement of the dangers he had left behind him, and a motion to secure the legislative [316] independence of Ireland. His motion was withdrawn, amidst general indignation at the factious motives by which it had been prompted. On the following day, the king sent a message to both houses, recommending the state of Ireland to their serious consideration: to which a general answer was returned, with a view to the co-operation of the Irish Parliament. In Dublin, the Duke of Portland communicated a similar message, which was responded to by an address of singular temper and dignity,—justly called the Irish Declaration of Rights. The Irish Parliament unanimously claimed for itself the sole authority to make laws for Ireland, and the repeal of the permanent Mutiny Act. These claims the British Parliament, animated by a spirit of wisdom and liberality, conceded without reluctance or hesitation. The sixth Geo. I. was repealed; and the legislative and judicial authority of the British Parliament renounced. The right of the Privy Council to alter bills transmitted from Ireland was abandoned, and the perpetual Mutiny Act repealed. The concession was gracefully and honourably made; and the statesmen who had consistently advocated the rights of Ireland, while in opposition, could proudly disclaim the influence of [317] intimidation. The magnanimity of the act was acknowledged with gratitude and rejoicings, by the Parliament and people of Ireland.

But English statesmen, in granting Ireland her independence, were not insensible to the difficulties of her future government; and endeavoured to concert some plan of union, by which the interests of the two countries could be secured.(2) No such plan, however, could be devised; and for nearly twenty years the British ministers were left to solve the strange problem of governing a divided state, and bringing into harmony the councils of two independent legislatures. Its solution was naturally found in the continuance of corruption;

and the Parliament of Ireland,—having gained its freedom, sold it, without compunction, to the Castle.(3) Ireland was governed by her native legislature, but was not the less under the dominion of a close oligarchy,—factions, turbulent, exclusive [318] and corrupt. And how could it be otherwise? The people, with arms in their hands, had achieved a triumph. 'Magna Charta,' said Grattan, 'was not attained in Parliament: but by the barons, armed in the field.' But what influence had the people at elections? Disfranchised and incapacitated, they could pretend to none! The anomalous condition of the Parliament and people of Ireland became the more conspicuous, as they proceeded in their new functions of self-government. The volunteers, not satisfied with the achievement of national independence, now confronted their native Parliament with demands for Parliamentary reform. That cause being discussed in the English Parliament, was eagerly caught up in Ireland. Armed men organised a wide-spread political agitation, sent delegates to a national convention, and seemed prepared to enforce their arguments at the point of the bayonet. Their attitude was threatening: but their cause a hollow pretence. The enfranchisement of Catholics formed no part of their scheme. In order to secure their assistance, in the recent struggle for independence, they had, indeed, recommended a relaxation of the penal laws: a common cause had softened the intolerance of Protestants; and some of the most oppressive disabilities of their Catholic brethren had been removed:(4) [319] but as yet the patriots and volunteers had no intention of extending to them the least share of civil or political power.

Failure of Irish Parliamentary Reform

Mr. Flood was the organ of the volunteers in the House of Commons,—a patriot second only to Mr. Grattan in influence and ability,—and jealous of the popularity and pre-eminence of his great rival. In November 1783, he moved for leave to bring in a bill, for the more equal representation of the people. He was met at once with the objection that his proposal originated with an armed association, whose pretensions were incompatible with freedom of debate; and it was rejected by a large majority.

Mr. Flood renewed his efforts in the following year: but the country party were disunited; the owners of boroughs were determined not to surrender their power; the dictation of the volunteers gave just offence; and the division of opinion on the admission of Catholics to the franchise was becoming more pronounced. Again his measure was rejected. The mob resented its rejection with violence and fury: but the great body of the people, whose rights were ignored by the patriots and agitators, regarded it with indifference. The armed agitation proceeded: but the volunteers continued to be divided upon the claims of the Catholics,—to [320] which their leader Lord Charlemont was himself opposed. An armed Protestant agitation, and a packed council of borough proprietors, were unpromising instruments for reforming the representation of the people.

A close and corrupt Parliament was left in full possession of its power; and Ireland, exulting in recent emancipation from British rule, was soon made sensible that neither was her commerce free, nor her independence assured. The regulation of her commerce was beyond the power of the Irish legislature: the restrictions under which it laboured concerned both countries, and needed the concert of the two Parliaments. Mr. Pitt, wise and liberal in his policy concerning Ireland, regarded commercial freedom as essential to her prosperity and contentment; and in 1786, he prepared a comprehensive scheme to attain that object. Ireland had recently acquired the right of trading with Europe and the West Indies: but was nearly cut off from trade with England herself, and with America and Africa. Mr. Pitt offered liberal concessions on all these points, which were first submitted to the Parliament of Ireland in the form of eleven resolutions. They were gratefully accepted and acknowledged: but when the minister introduced them to the British Parliament, he was unable, [321] in the plenitude of his power, to overcome the interests and jealousy of traders, and the ignorance, prejudices, and faction of his opponents in the House of Commons. He was obliged to withdraw many of

the concessions he had offered,—including the right of trading with India and the foreign West Indies; and he introduced a new proposition, requiring the English navigation laws to be enacted by the Parliament of Ireland. The measure, thus changed, was received with chagrin and resentment by the Parliament and people of Ireland, as at once a mark of English jealousy and injustice, and a badge of Irish dependence. The resolutions of the Irish Parliament had been set aside,—the interests of the country sacrificed to those of English traders,—and the legislature was called upon to register the injurious edicts of the British Parliament. A measure, conceived in the highest spirit of statesmanship, served but to aggravate the ill-feelings which it had been designed to allay; and was abandoned, in disappointment and disgust. Its failure, however, illustrated the difficulties of governing the realm through the agency of two independent Parliaments, and foreshadowed the necessity of a legislative union. Another illustration of the danger of divided councils was afforded, four years afterwards, by the proceedings of the Irish Parliament on the regency.(5)

Liberal measure of 1792-3

[322] A few years later, at a time of peril and apprehension in England, a policy of conciliation was again adopted in Ireland. The years 1792 and 1793 were signalled by the admission of Catholics to the elective franchise, and to civil and military offices,(6) the limitation of the Irish pension list,(7) the settlement of a fixed civil list upon the crown, in lieu of its hereditary revenues, the exclusion of some of the swarm of placemen and pensioners from the House of Commons, and the adoption of Mr. Fox's protective law of libel.(8) Ireland, however, owed these promising concessions to the wise policy of Mr. Pitt and other English statesmen, rather than to her native Parliament. They were not yielded gracefully by the Irish cabinet, and they were accompanied by rigorous measures of coercion.(9) This was the last hopeful period in the separate history of Ireland, which was soon to close in tumults, rebellion, and civil war. To the seething elements of discord,—social, religious, and political,—were now added the perilous ingredients of revolutionary sentiments and sympathies.

The United Irishmen

The volunteers had aimed at worthy objects; yet their association was founded upon revolutionary principles, incompatible with constitutional government. Clamour and complaint [323] are lawful in a free state: but the agitation of armed men assumes the shape of rebellion. Their example was followed, in 1791, by the United Irishmen, whose original design was no less worthy. This association originated with the Protestants of Belfast; and sought 'a complete reform of the legislature, founded on the principles of civil, political, and religious liberty.' These reasonable objects were pursued, for a time, earnestly and in good faith; and motions for reform, on the broad basis of religious equality, were submitted to the legislature by Mr. Ponsonby, where they received ample discussion. But the association was soon to be compromised by republican leaders; and seduced into an alliance with French Jacobins, and a treasonable correspondence with the enemies of their country, in aid of Irish disaffection.(10) Treason took the place of patriotism. This unhappy land was also disturbed by armed and hostile associations of peasants, known as 'defenders' and 'peep-of-day boys.' Society was convulsed with violence, agrarian outrage, and covert treason.

Religious Animosities

[324] Meanwhile, religious animosities, which had been partially allayed by the liberal policy of the government, and by the union of Protestants and Catholics in the volunteer forces, were revived with increased intensity. In 1796, Lord Fitzwilliam's brief rule,—designed for conciliation,—merely raised the hopes of Catholics, and the fears of Protestants. The peasantry, by whom the peace of the country was disturbed, generally professed one faith: the gentry, another. Traditional hatred of the Romish faith was readily associated, in the minds of

the latter, with loyalty and the protection of life and property. To them papist and 'defender' were the same. Every social disorder was ascribed to the hated religion. Papist enemies of order, and conspirators against their country, were banded together; and loyal Protestants were invited to associate in defence of life, property, and religion. With this object, Orange societies were rapidly formed; which, animated by fear, zeal, and party spirit, further inflamed the minds of Protestants against Catholics. Nor was their hostility passive. In September 1796, a fierce conflict arose between the Orangemen and defenders,—since known as the battle of the Diamond,—which increased the inveteracy of the two parties. Orangemen endeavoured, by the eviction of tenants, the dismissal of servants, and worse forms of persecution, to drive every Catholic out of the county of Armagh; [325] and defenders retaliated with murderous outrages. In 1796, the disturbed state of the country was met by further measures of repression, which were executed by the magistrates and military with merciless severity,—too often unwarranted by law. To other causes of discontent, was added resentment of oppression and injustice. The country was rent asunder by hatreds, strifes, and disaffection, and threatened, from without, by hostile invasion, which Irish traitors had encouraged. At length these evil passions, fomented by treason on one side, and by cruelty on the other, exploded in the rebellion of 1798.

Footnotes.

1. Plowden's Hist., i. 535-555. Mr. Eden, writing to Lord North, Nov. 10th, 1781, informs him that the Opposition had been gained over, and adds: 'Indeed, I have had a fatiguing week of it in every respect. On Thursday I was obliged to see fifty-three gentlemen separately in the course of the morning, from eight till two o'clock.' Beresford Corr., i. 188; Correspondence of Lord Lieutenant, Grattan's Life, ii. 153-177.
2. Address of both Houses to the king, May 17th, 1782; Correspondence of Duke of Portland and Marquess of Rockingham; Plowden's Hist., i. 606. The scheme of a union appears to have been discussed as early as 1757.—Hardy's Life of Lord Charlemont, i. 107. And again in 1776; Cornwallis Corr., iii. 129.
3. See a curious analysis of the ministerial majority, in 1784, on the authority of the Bolton MSS. Massey's Hist., iii. 264; and Speech of Mr. Grattan on the Address, Jan. 19th, 1792; Irish Deb., xii. 6-8; and Speech of Mr. Fox, March 23rd, 1797. He stated that 'a person of high consideration was known to say that £600,000 had been expended to quell an opposition in Ireland, and that as much more must be expended in order to bring the legislature of that country to a proper temper.'—Parl. Hist., xxxiii. 143; Speech of Mr. Spring Rice. April 23rd, 1834; Hans. Deb., 3rd Ser., xxii. 1189; Plowden's Hist., ii. 346, 609.
4. Viz. in 1778 (17 and 18 Geo. III. c.49, Ireland), and in 1782; Plowden's Hist., i. 555, 559, 564, 579; and supra, p. 110.
5. Supra, Vol. I, 194.
6. Supra, p. 110.
7. Supra, Vol. I, 259.
8. Supra, Vol. II, 262.
9. Plowden's Hist., ii. 471. In 1805 Mr. Grattan stated that this policy of conciliation originated with ministers in England; but being opposed by the ministry in Ireland, its grace and popularity were lost.—Hans. Deb., 1st Ser., iv. 926; Moore's Life of Lord E. Fitzgerald, i. 218; Hardy's Life of Lord Charlemont, ii. 294-300; Grattan's Life, iv. 53-114.
10. In 1795, the Irish Union Societies were formed out of the United Irishmen. The correspondence appears to have commenced in 1795.—Plowden's Hist., ii. 567.