William O'Brien And His World
by
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Preface
This is an account of a talk given in Kanturk in 2008, edited to make it readable.

The difficulty in saying something about William O'Brien lies in knowing what is generally known about him. And, if little or nothing is generally known about him, to know how much is known about the world in which he lived and acted, as a context in which he might be presented.
My impression was that he was a forgotten figure, even amongst historians in the Universities, and that mention of his name was likely to bring to mind another man of the same name, William O'Brien, James Connolly's associate who built the Transport Union into a mass organisation during the years after Connolly was killed. But if our William O'Brien was remembered anywhere, it should be in North Cork—in Mallow where he was born, and in Kanturk where the independent, Anti-Redmondist national movement which he launched had its source in *Land and Labour*.
Land and Labour is an all but an unintelligible idea in pretentiously urban Dublin, and in Cork City too. A Cork City intellectual—who was far from stupid as Cork City intellectuals go—let it be known a few years ago that he knew there had been strange goings-on among *"the upland peasants"* in the North-West of the County. But of course he could not be expected to understand their mysterious ways so as to give an intelligible account of them.

Land and Labour are opposed and irreconcilable forces in English life, and they have been so for a century and a half. Civilised life is city life. If there are people living and working on the land, and spoiling the landscape, that is a sign of backwardness, and it should be got rid of as soon as possible.
That is the English view of things. And, given the slightest opportunity, urban Ireland apes England.
England built a powerful Navy and a strong factory system and it compelled the world to supply it with food and raw materials. The Irish cities were English cities developed as part of Britain in Ireland, while the Irish countryside was part of the world that Britain exploited.

The national movement in Ireland was a movement of the countryside, and the small towns thrown up by the countryside. As the national movement squeezed the English colony—and in the South of Ireland it was never more than a colony dependent on England—it retreated homewards. The cities became increasingly populated with people from the countryside. But the municipal institutions remained under the control of the declining English remnant for a very long time. I assume it was for that reason that they lacked organic municipal life.
When I first saw Dublin it struck me as a hulk, an empty shell, in which the only sign of social life was all the big, busy Churches.
It had all those Churches and Monasteries and Convents because the English gentry in Ireland, having constructed it with a kind of grandeur during the twenty years of Grattan's Parliament, started going home when their Parliament was shifted to London, and the Church —recently released from most of the Penal Laws—moved in with its various Orders and prevented it from becoming a ghost town.
So these cities, left behind by the false start of Grattan's Parliament had no real urban life. They did not grow out of the life of the country. But they got urban intellectual pretensions which alienated them from the sources of national life. And it is necessary to these pretensions that they should not be able to understand William O'Brien, or Canon Sheehan, or Land *and* Labour.

I grew up amidst *Land and Labour* culture, whose sources lay in the culture of Young Ireland.

The Young Ireland literature that surrounded me around 1950 did not come out from the cities. It lay around me in books dating from the Young Ireland period, the Land League period, and the War of Independence period. I was familiar with Gavan Duffy, Mangan, Carlyle, Canon Sheehan, Mitchel, Darcy McGee, Aubry de Vere etc. because they were there in Gneeves, Lomanagh, Doireleigh, Ruhill, Umerabue etc.
It was not because I studied them that I was familiar with them, but because they were there. I was not studious. If I had been studious, and had been educated, I'm sure that any familiarity I had with Young Ireland culture would have been knocked out of me in school and college. That is the conclusion I have come to by discussions with people of my generation, and the generation after me, who were highly educated.
And Ireland is so highly educated today that I assume people of the present generation must have great difficulty in comprehending a view of things that was part of the commonsense I grew up in.

I lived in the townland of Gneeves until my early twenties. All I knew of the world from direct experience of it was a handful of townlands west of Gneeves, towards Knocknagree. I thought Gneeves had disappeared, swallowed up by the village of Boherbue, from which it was very definitely separated when I was growing up. I worked as a labourer in the Creamery at the western edge of the village for a few years, but I took little interest in the village. It was not there that life was interesting.
A few years ago I saw Jack Roche of Meelin on television, trying to explain to a group of *Taisce* urbanisers what townlands were, and why it was townland life that was sociable. He came up against a stone wall of incomprehension, and, it seemed, a deliberate unwillingness to understand.
Anyway, I assumed that Gneeves was no more: that it was reduced to a street in Boherbue. But at this Kanturk meeting I met somebody from Gneeves. He was Danny Kane's cousin. And I think that Danny Kane is the only person to whom I am intellectually indebted. He lived next door to me. He was a couple of years older than me. And he showed me how to read before I was sent to school to spend my few years there. I think that reading independently of schooling made me immune to education and left me wayward.

My acquaintance with the Kane family also made me closely familiar with a vigorous way of life that had been widespread not long before and that disappeared not long after, but that seemed to me to be just one of the ways that people could life.
Three generations lived in a mud house with a thatched roof built in a hollow. The grandmother, with whom I got on very well, had a taste for gruel that she acquired in her youth, which was I supposed about a generation after the induced starvation called *The Famine*. Not many people ate gruel then, but she insisted on having it, and she gave me a taste for it.
I think it was around 1950 that the Kane family moved out of their mud house and into a slated house of stone in Lamanagh.
Canon Sheehan gives a description of those mud houses in one of his novels:

"It was one of the old cabins, of which hardly a trace is left in Ireland. The walls were hardened into a kind of concrete, which not only excluded the least damp, but was proof against the fierce hurricanes. There was one tiny window about a foot square, a half-door, flanked by a full door of strong red pine, a heave comfortable coat of thatch, through which projected a chimney, also of mud, but bound around with *sugans*…" (*The Graves At Kilmorna*.)

The Kanes house had, I think, three windows, but otherwise it was like that .
The boys I grew up with, and exchanged ideas with, were Danny and Teddy Kane, and Teddy O'Connor, who lived in another house in a hollow across the road, but it was not made of mud. There is no trace of either visible now.

My grandmother, a Culloty, also came from a house in a hollow, in Glencollins. She married into a small farm in Derryleigh. Across the valley from this farm was *"the Minister's farm"*. The Minister was a Church of Ireland clergyman. At the time I never wondered where his

Church might be. Later on I thought it must have been the abandoned Church in Dromagh, which was quite a distance away.
The Minister's Farm was in Stakehill. It was an area of good land, facing my grandmother's fields of rushes across the valley. She told me that the Minister was, by his own account, a *"gentleman farmer"*. So my grandfather, who died before I was born, decided to be a gentleman farmer too. The Minister would walk his land with his walking cane sometimes. So my grandfather cut himself a blackthorn stick, and, when he saw the Minister leaving his Big House in Stakehill, he would walk his fields of rushes and time it so that he was at the little stream between the two—called the Glasha—at the same time as the Minister, so as to pass the time of day with him as one gentleman farmer to another. My grandmother thought it was hilarious.
The Minister (or the Church of Ireland: I don't know how it was owned) sold the farm in the early 1950s. It was bought by the Guerins, who had a small farm in Derryleigh. On the first threshing day people came from far and wide to help, and to wonder from the inside at the Big House, with its huge kitchen with bells to summon servants to the various rooms.

O'Brien hoped that the landlords would become Protestant country gentlemen after he eased them out of their estates, and would play a part in national life in common with their former tenants. It did not happen. It was not his fault that it did not happen. The historians in our Universities prefer not to know about the land-purchase transformation of the social scene, and its ramifications, positive and negative.
I can say little more about it than the fact that it happened. And all I know about Protestant country gentlemen is my grandmother's story about the Minister and my grandfather.
Anyone who is desperate to know something about land rents and tenant right in the situation leading up to land purchase will find it in my book about O'Brien's paper, *The Cork Free Press*.
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What O'Brien Did
Landlordism was disposed of very quickly in this party of the country in my grandmother's time, and it was quickly forgotten. When I was growing up I knew that there had been Landlordism not all that long ago, but it was unimaginable to me. It was not spoken about, even by people of my grandmother's generation. And when, later on, I read the Somerville and Ross stories, where a landlord gentry interacted with peasants over whom they had authority, it seemed like science fiction.
It was in the 1970s, when I was living in Belfast, that I felt I had to find out about what O'Brien had done. I realised that what I was attempting in the North was something like what he had attempted before Partition. And so I went into it.

Landlordism was done away with under a 1903 Act of Parliament at Westminster. I found that in 1903 and the following years there had been fierce conflict over that Act. And the very surprising thing was that the conflict was not with the landlords, who were resigned by then to being bought out, but with the Home Rule Party leaders, who wanted to preserve Landlordism, for the time being, as a grievance around which national feeling could be worked up.
O'Brien had been in the thick of the land agitation since the Land League days of the 1880s and had been imprisoned for it. Through that agitation the landlord position had been eroded. The position of the tenant-famers as tenants had been improved so much that the value of the land to the landlords was much reduced.
O'Brien saw that it was becoming possible to move on from tenant-right to the abolition of Landlordism. He combined tenant-right agitation with a programme of land-purchase. And he negotiated a land-purchase scheme with representatives of the landlords, and with a Unionist (mainly Tory) Government, which was trying to *"kill Home Rule with kindness"* Those Unionists thought that the demand for Home Rule could be dissipated by establishing a *"property owning democracy"* in the land in place of the increasingly troublesome landlord system.

An Enabling Act, under which tenant-farmers—I think there were 300,000 of them—might become owners of the land by hire-purchase, was passed in 1903. This Act did not transfer the land to the tenants. It enabled them to negotiate a subsidised purchase of the land with the landlord. The subsidy was put up by the Government so that the landlords would get a better price for their land than the tenants were paying.
In order to avail of the subsidy, all the tenants of an estate had to get together and negotiate a price with the landlord, taking account of the subsidy.
The Government hoped that this process of subsidised bargaining would develop a sense of fellow feeling between the gentry and the troublesome tenant-farmers. And that it would make the tenant-farmers, who became landowners with the assistance of a Unionist Government, feel better about the Union, and lead to a decline of the Home Rule movement.

The leaders of the Home Rule Party feared that this would be the case. And the Party newspapers launched a propaganda campaign to persuade the tenants that the Land Purchase Act was a scheme to swindle them out of their money, and it was suggested that O'Brien had sold out to the landlords.
O'Brien hoped that the process of land purchase would bring the landlords who were ceasing to be landlords together with the tenants who were ceasing to be tenants, and he hoped a new political development could be based on this. And he did not think that the 'kindness' of the Unionist Government in facilitating the process and providing the subsidy would kill Home Rule. He thought the national movement would be strengthened by the removal of Landlordism in a way that left the former landlords in a position to be Protestant gentlemen. Landlordism was abolished and the national movement survived without it. Landlordism passed into history. So that was that. And the country voted to be independent fifteen years later. And, when Britain refused to abide by the vote voluntarily, the country forced it to do so by military resistance to its military rule.

Distortions
But, according to RTE in recent years, it was not that way at all. It broadcast recently a major programme about the War of Independence, focussed on the execution of a number informers by a military force of the elected Government. It presented the killings as sectarian murder, performed for the purpose of grabbing land owned by Protestants. And it had a number of academic historians on the programme to confirm that the War of Independence was largely about grabbing land from Protestants.
It seems that over the past generation the Universities have become ideologically urbanised institutions with little sense of reality, either historical or present-day, about the countryside, which is where most people lived. Their idea of the countryside and its backwardness has been learned from somewhere else. It is not worked up from the reality of Irish life.

There actually was a survival of Landlordism in parts of the country after the 1903 Act. This was due in part to the influence of the Home Rule leaders, who discouraged land purchase, and in part to the different form that Landlordism took in the Midlands.
Where tenant-farmers rented farms from a landlord, the transfer of ownership was straight-forward. The tenant-farmer paid the money and got the form. But, where Landlordism took the form of large ranches, the breaking up of the ranches into individually-owned smaller farms was more problematic. O'Brien had hoped to get tenant-farmer purchase done quickly and then deal with the ranches. That was delayed by the opposition of the Home Rule leaders.
It has been proved conclusively, in refutation of RTE's *Coolacrease* programme that the killings at Coolacrease were not a land grab, and were not part of a war on Protestants, but were an integral part of the War of Independence. But the fact that there was a remnant of Landlordism in parts of the country gave RTE's academic experts something to work on in creating confusion.

All For Ireland
In the final phase of the land-purchase agitation, O'Brien's movement joined forces with the tenant-right movement in Protestant Ulster led by T.W. Russell. Many of the Protestant tenant-farmers were members of the Orange Order. The Orange Order was led by aristocrats,

great landlords. The landlords in the Orange Lodges painted the land-purchase movement led by O'Brien as a Fenian plot to outwit the Ulster Protestant community and take it over. But the Orange farmers were not easy to outwit. I have seen reports of discussions in Lodges, where the farmers made it plain that they were going to have the land, and if the aristocrats wanted to remain their leaders, they would just have to put up with losing a lot of their land.

Having co-operated with the Orangemen on land-purchase, and seen how the Orange farmers handled their gentry on the issue, O'Brien tried to establish a common political movement with the Protestants. The tenant-right leader, T.W. Russell, was willing to have a go at it. But the basis of political agreement could not be the Home Rule Bills of 1886 and 1893, against which the Ulster Unionist alliance had been formed.

O'Brien had, in any case, come to the conclusion that Home Rule could not be gained in the English Parliament through an alliance with one of the big English parties against the other. And he saw the pursuit of Home Rule by this means as leading to Partition, without even Home rule being gained.

He took Ulster Unionism to be a serious force which could not be swept aside as the Home Rule leader John Redmond expected. In 1969, knowing little about O'Brien, I saw Ulster Unionism as a serious force on which Jack Lynch's denial of its reality would have no effect. It was when I came across O'Brien's campaign to prevent Partition in that period that I decided to read everything of his that I could find.

In a couple of years around 1903 a number of things happened together, which interacted with each other. The consequences of that interaction are still working themselves out: Orange and Green united for land purchase, and the possibility of a degree of political unity was investigated; the Home Rule leaders attacked land purchase; the Home Rule leaders drew a specifically Catholic body into the structure of the Party; the move towards a political alliance of Orange and Green was aborted by the increasingly assertive Catholicism of the Party in politics; and the land purchase movement in Cork seceded from the Party, ran against it in the 1910 elections, and won all but one of Cork seats from it.
All that remained in the North of the *rapprochement* attempted by O'Brien and T.W. Russell is the Independent Orange Order, whose 12th of July meetings are attended by Ian Paisley.

Home Rule
The conflict within the national movement began in 1904 over the Irish Council Bill. Ten years later Redmond, with his sulky acceptance of Partition as a temporary measure which it was beyond his power to avert, tacitly conceded O'Brien's case against him. But then, in a desperate attempt to retrieve the situation, he committed the Home Rule Party to Britain's World War.
The Unionist Government that brought in the 1903 Land Act thought about establishing an Irish council, in order to consolidate the grass roots unity shown in the land agitation. It would have been an all-Ireland body with a limited degree of devolved authority. It was not Home Rule. Its power would have been less than the power of the Irish Parliament envisaged by the Home Rule Bills. But Home Rule was dead. Protestant Ulster was highly organised against it, and the Ulster Unionist alliance was part of the British Unionist Party. And it was one of the principles of the British Unionist Party (which was an alliance of the Tory party and the social reform wing of the Liberal Party) that Irish Home Rule was out of the question. The Unionist Government of 1895-1905 took the governing of Ireland more seriously than any previous Government had done. Its policy of *"killing Home Rule with kindness"* required it to remedy Irish grievances within the Union and to establish a form of government in Ireland that did not immediately strike the populace as alien. Rule through Dublin Castle was alien. It was hoped that the establishment of an Irish Council, connected with the County Councils which had been put on a democratic footing a few years earlier, would give the populace a sense of being part of the state, and not just subject to it.
O'Brien supported the project because it was an all-Ireland measure. The Ulster Unionist leaders opposed it for that reason. And the Redmondites opposed it because its purpose was to weaken the Home Rule movement by appeasement. The measure was killed by the Ulster

Unionist/Redmondite alliance against it before it left the starting blocks. In O'Brien's opinion, it was the Redmondite opposition that convinced the Government that carrying on with it would be futile.

The Liberal Party won the 1906 election by a big majority. It did not need Redmondite votes to govern. During the ten years of Unionist dominance (1895-1905), an element had developed in the Liberal leadership which rejected Gladstone's view of the world and of Ireland. It now took up the Unionist project of establishing an Irish Council. And again the project was defeated by an alliance of Redmondites and Ulster Unionists.
O'Brien says in his memoirs that Redmond agreed with him privately about the Council Bill, and had also agreed with him about Land Purchase. The propagandists of the present-day cult of Redmondism, who picture him as a prudent and far-seeing 'moderate', try to make something of his private views and to give them priority over his public actions. But politics consists of public actions. And Redmond's public action was to shoot down the council Bills, Unionist and Liberal.
Having prevented a reform that was perhaps possible, the Home Rule Party could only wait for the Liberal Party to lose its majority and become dependent on it again. And, while it was waiting, the Ancient Order of Hibernians honeycombed the Party and gave it a semblance of life.

AOH
The AOH traced its origins to the 1641 attempt by the dispossessed natives of Ulster to uproot the Anglo-Scottish Protestant Plantation. Protestantism was not incidental to the Plantation. The Plantation was not merely a land-grab: it was a Protestant land-grab. Sectarianism was essential to its purpose. Earlier English settlements, intended to dominate the Irish in the English interest, had tended to come under Irish influence. In the secular cultural interchange between English settlements and the Irish, Irish culture maintained itself.

The destruction of the traditional religion in England, brought about by the action of the state, led to the emergence of a strain of religion that was fanatical, or fundamentalist (or *"radical"*, as we now say when describing Islam) that was not subject to the secular influence of custom and tradition. This kind of religion, sometimes called Puritanism, was a source of great trouble within the English state itself from the 1620s to the 1690s. But it enabled England to establish in Ireland, for the first time, a colony that was immune to Irish influence.
The ethnic cleansing and colonisation known as the Ulster Plantation was conducted under the first Stuart King of England, James 1. The fact that it was done by the Stuarts had a disabling effect on the Irish. The traditional culture of Ireland saw the Stuart monarchy as legitimate, and it was loyal.
In the 1630s, Charles 1, who was at odds with fanatical tendencies in the English Parliament, placed Thomas Wentworth (later the Earl of Strafford) in control of Ireland. Wentworth had led the Parliamentary opposition to the King in the late 1620s, but he concluded that Parliament had fallen under the influence of Puritan impossibilists. He then went into the service of the King and set about developing Ireland into a stable base for the monarchy. For this purpose he arranged that there should be an Irish Parliament in which all the main segments of the population were represented. He was working towards a secular regime in which all major interests and religions might have a place.

In 1641 the English Parliament went into rebellion against the King. One of its great complaints was what Wentworth was doing in Ireland. Wentworth was recalled to England, seized by Parliament and killed. A thorough Puritan treatment of Ireland was then expected. Charles 1 was king only in name. The spell of the Stuarts was broken. Wentworth's *status quo* could not continue. And the Irish in Ulster set about defending themselves by reclaiming what had been theirs from time immemorial.
I could never see anything reprehensible in what was done by the natives of Ulster in 1641. Neither could Charles Gavan Duffy, an exemplary 'moderate' Young Irelander, 200 years later when he wrote *The Muster Of the North*. Such things happen in conquests, and it is unreasonable for conquerors to strike moral attitudes when their conquest is contested.

The AOH, in a *History* published in 1910, claimed organisational continuity with the 1641 rising. I don't know how far-fetched that claim is. But it is clear that the Catholic in the North had reason to maintain a defensive organisation in the 19th and 20th centuries, as they had in the 17th. The doubt is about the 18th century, when the Plantation—or part of it—aspired to make common cause with the Irish.

After the failure of the United Irish movement, the Act of Union and the 1832 reform of the franchise, Plantation attitudes began to revive strongly among the Ulster Protestants. Although Ireland remained part of the British State until 1919 or 1922 (take your choice), the political system of the British state ceased to be operative in Ireland in the mid-19th century. Daniel O'Connell, though a Whig-Liberal, had prevented the Whig Party from setting down roots in Catholic Ireland. Liberal and Tory politics continued in Ulster until 1885, with the possibility of Catholics playing a part in Liberal politics along with Protestants. But after 1885 Protestant Ulster organised itself as a bloc against Home Rule. Ulster Unionism was a powerful amalgamation of economics, politics and religion, with all but a handful accepting the Orange Order as a central institution of public life.
The Catholics were an excluded body from this power-structure, as they had been from the power-structure of the state in the whole island until a couple of generations earlier. In 1900 the Ulster Catholics needed a defensive organisation under the Orange Unionist system. And Joe Devlin, in West Belfast, founded—or renovated—the AOH for that purpose.

The South
But in the rest of the island separate Catholic organisation in public affairs—a necessity under the sectarian British system—had done its work. The Penal Laws had been repealed under pressure, their residue in municipal affairs had been overcome, the Anglican church had been dis-Established, and the Landlordism established under the Penal system was being removed. There was no longer a reason for separate Catholic organisation in politics for the removal of disabilities. The religious disabilities had been removed, and the Irish were organised politically in a national movement.

If the national movement was largely confined to the Catholic population, that was because Protestants for the most part would not participate in it. The reason the Protestants refused to participate was not that the Home rule movement had Catholic religious aims. It was that they had for generations been a garrison caste in Ireland, remote from the populace even when dispersed amongst them, and they could not contemplate immersion in the vulgarity of popular politics—the politics of the populace.
In England the populace had accepted the hegemony of a ruling class of gentry over two centuries, and when vigorous elements from the bottom made their way to the top they took on the tone, the accents, the manner, the ways of speaking of their betters. That was how the process of upward mobility happened. Both the Tories and Liberal tended to it. (The Labour Party was not yet a significant force at this time. when it did become significant, after 1919, it too was taken in hand in this way.)
But in Ireland there was no ruling class. The caste of Protestant gentry was to have been the ruling class, but it kept aloof, living its own separate and exclusive life on its rents in its Big Houses. And, when it lost its rents, it could not see itself joining the raw populace which it had failed—or refused—to influence.

AOH Intrusion
So the national movement was made up of Catholics because the Protestants as a body saw themselves as superior and British and would not join it.
Then the largely Protestant landlord class relinquished their land under pressure from a land-purchase movement, in which Catholic tenant-farmers had combined with Ulster Protestant tenant-farmers. And O'Brien saw a possibility of broadening the national movement by scaling down its immediate aims in order to effect a political alliance with the Ulster Protestant allies of the land-purchase movement.
But at that moment a Catholic secret society became part of the structure of the Home Rule Party. Joe Devlin built his AOH into the Party with the active support of John Dillon and the consent of John Redmond. And the Party carried the AOH all around the country until it

reached North Cork, where it was rejected. And the Party itself was rejected in Cork at the 1910 Elections, on the ground that it was still dragging its heels on land purchase and was sectarianising the national ideal.

I imagine that the attraction of the AOH for Party members was that it gave them something to do between elections. And, even at elections, there was really little for them to do. Most constituencies were not contested against the Party. Election campaigns consisted of demagogic speechifying, with the Election result being certain. I assume the introduction of the religious element by the AOH provided a semblance of internal life for Party branches.

Home Rule And The British Constitution

The Liberals won an overall majority in the 1906 Election and had no need of the Home Rule Party. The new Liberal leaders (Asquith, Haldane and Grey) had also ceased to be Home Rulers. They took up the Unionist idea of an Irish Council, but dropped it when Redmond opposed it. And they kept the Home Rule leaders happy by not ironing out a financial hiccup in the land-purchase arrangements.

In 1910 they failed to gain an overall majority at Westminster, but were the largest party by a small margin. They held a second election the same year, but failed again to get a majority. They then made an alliance with Redmond, under which they undertook to bring in another Home Rule Bill if he enabled them to pass a Budget which the Unionists were fundamentally opposed to.

This brought the Home Rule Party into domestic British politics. In 1891 Redmond led the Party faction that supported Parnell's demand that the alliance with the Liberals should be broken and the complete independence of the Party restored. But in 1910 he bound the Party to a tight alliance with the Liberals of a kind not seen before—an alliance which made the Irish Party a player in an internal British party dispute, while still remaining a separate Irish Party with its different aims.

O'Brien judged that what Redmond set out to do could not be done. He was convinced that Britain would not stand for being manipulated by an outsider who happened to hold the balance of power in Parliament. And it didn't.

Redmond enabled the Liberals to carry the Budget. But, when the Liberals tried to enact a Home Rule Bill—curbing the powers of the House of Lords in order to do so—the Unionist Opposition went outside Parliament in its determination to prevent the Bill from being enacted. It argued that it was unconstitutional for the government to make a fundamental change to the constitution, without the clear support of the body politic of the state. The Liberal Party held Office only with the support of the Irish Party. And the Irish Party was not part of the body politic of the state, committed to living within the Constitution of the state. It was manipulating British politics from outside.

The fact that there was no such thing in law as the British Constitution is beside the point. The British Constitution is an ongoing argument between the major British political parties about what it is.

The Unionist argument that the Home Rule Bill was unconstitutional because it was only carried with the support of an Irish Party lying outside the Constitution made sense in Britain. The Unionist Party gained in strength by its opposition to the Bill, inside Parliament and outside, from 1912 to 1914.

O'Brien's understanding of British politics led him to expect this. Therefore he did not support the Home rule campaign of 1912-14. He considered it divisive, mischievous and futile.

It was no use Redmond denouncing Unionist action as unconstitutional or illegal. There was no Constitutional Court to put a case to. There was only the electorate. And the Liberals and Home Rulers refused to put the matter to the electorate.

The Unionists said that, if an election was held and the Liberal/Home Rule alliance won, they would accept the Home Rule Bill. They were confident of winning. The Liberals and Home rulers were not. No election was held on the issue. (An election was due in 1915 but was called off because of the World War launched by the Liberal Government, with Unionist and Redmondite support, in August 1914. When a General Election was eventually held in

December 1918, Home Rule was overwhelmingly rejected in favour of Independence by the Irish electorate.)

As for the legality of the Unionist opposition to Home Rule, which went to the length of raising a private army in 1913-14, the Liberal Government did not dare to apply the law to the matter. The Unionist Opposition was half of the British Constitution, and a Government dependent on the Irish Party knew it would be suicidal to prosecute its leaders as criminals. Law is subject to constitutionality in England, and constitutionality was political.

O'Brien understood these basic realities of the situation and acted accordingly. Redmond had been a clerk in the House of Commons for some years, and he believed in the illusions which Parliamentary ideologists spun around it for mass consumption.

O'Brien had been active as an agitator in the country, he had been jailed for agitation, he had written propaganda in prison, he had been welcomed to the Commons by his jailors, he had negotiated a deal with the power-structure of the state which changed the human landscape of the country, he had opposed the sectarianism of the Home Rule Party, and he had kept himself free from Parliamentary delusions at that critical time in 1912-14.

He knew that Redmond's ploy would come to grief on the realities of British politics, and would do incalculable damage in the course of failing.

He was the greatest Irish political leader between O'Connell and De Valera.

Post-Script
[That, in substance, is as far as I got in the talk at Kanturk two years ago. I had intended to fill it out with extracts from O'Brien's speeches and writings, but that remains for the future. I referred briefly to O'Brien's position on the World War, and his subsequent support for Sinn Fein, and for the opponents of the Treaty.
I was questioned about why I thought O'Brien was right on the last point, in view of the 1922 elections.
The document signed under duress was not a Treaty. Treaties are made between sovereign authorities. The British Government never recognised the elected Irish Parliament as legitimate.
The document signed by Collins etc. under duress was an Agreement between a sovereign authority and a group of rebels with whom it decided to make a deal.
Collins and his colleagues, who accepted rebel status by signing, had to meet as the Parliament of Southern Ireland, under the 1920 British Government of Ireland Act, in order to be set up in authority in Ireland. They had all rejected that Act when it was passed, but they met under it early in 1922, and were set up as the Provisional Government on British authority and continued to govern until the Fall of 1922, being kept strictly under British supervision and control the whole time. It was this Provisional Government that launched the 'Civil War' under British orders.
An election was held in early June 1922. The Parliament, or Dail, that it elected did not meet until September.

The 'Civil War' was not launched by the authority of whatever it was that was elected on 16th June 1922. If that elected body had met before the 'Civil War' was launched, it is unlikely that it would have voted for war.

When those elected representatives met in September, the 'Civil War' was an accomplished fact. It dominated the situation. The Provisional Government was an arbitrary Executive power, unrestrained by an Irish Parliament and armed and egged on by the British Parliament, on whose authority it acted. And Collins himself had died in the course of the war he had launched on orders from Whitehall, under threat that if he did not obey this order, the British Army would take the country over again.

As for the election of June 1922, to a body which did not meet until September, it was a thoroughly confused affair. An election agreement had been made between Treatyites and Anti-Treatyites (the Collins/De Valera Pact) under which they would not contest seats against each other, and the representatives would meet as the Dail and share ministries on a 60/40 basis, reflecting a Dail vote in January.

As I understand it, under this arrangement the Anti-Treatyites would have put up with the 'treaty', holding a junior position in a kind of Coalition and letting the Treatyites get on with the business of establishing the overall framework of a 'Treaty' Constitution. That arrangement would have suited Collins's *"stepping stones"* strategy very well. But it did not suit Whitehall at all. So Collins was summoned to London and ordered to break the Election Pact. He did so on the eve of the election. There was therefore no clear issue in the Election.

While rummaging around in the British Public Record Office, I came across a protest from Collins to Whitehall, saying he wished they didn't make it so obvious that they were giving him orders. When Whitehall makes something obvious, it is because they wish it to be obvious. And the last thing they wanted in 1922 was to fudge through the 'Treaty' in a way that secured a *de facto* acceptance in 26 Counties, while leaving Sinn Fein more or less intact as a party, and the IRA intact as a force for Collins's *"stepping stones"*.

If O'Brien treated the view that the 1922 Election gave democratic authority to the 'Treaty' as absurd, he was right.

The argument for the Treaty at the time was that it was necessary in order to ward off a comprehensive British reconquest by the Boer War methods of twenty years earlier: Concentration Camps etc. It was said that, by submitting to it, something could be held onto that could later be used for breaking free of it.

That argument was not entirely without merit. Britain is certainly capable of doing fearsome things. But I cannot see what it has to do with democracy. Or is democracy submission to threats made by a foreign power?]