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NATIONALISM AND UNIONISM IN IRELAND:
ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES

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Working Paper 2015-02

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NATIONALISM AND UNIONISM IN IRELAND: ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: Ireland's political and constitutional dilemma is that two competing nationalisms emerged in the nineteenth century on the one small island. One was Irish nationalism which harked back to an ancient Gaelic civilization and was infused with Catholic culture and sometimes Anglophobic sentiment. The other was a regional dialect of British nationalism which took on a distinctly confessional character in Ulster. The aim of this paper is to identify the role of economic *forces* and the *experience* of economic change – a rather more subjective notion – in the development of nationalist and unionist movements in recent centuries. A fundamental part of the story, it is argued, lies with deep economic structures as well as temporally-bound and changing economic forces. The economic mattered but not only the economic.

JEL classification: N33, N43.

“The first necessity for the obtaining of prosperity to Ireland is the banishment of English misrule from Ireland.”

Charles Stewart Parnell.

Introduction

Political theorists, such as the late Ernest Gellner, would suggest that nationalist ideology is a product of the modern industrialising world.² It is, therefore, a nineteenth- and twentieth-century phenomenon, not an ideology that can be found in pre-industrial or medieval times. Brian Boru was not a nationalist; neither was Oliver Cromwell. Nationalism, it is argued, is more likely to emerge in the context of rapid economic and democratic change, where there is a sense among some ethno-cultural groups that they are somehow losing out or being disadvantaged. The growth of national sentiment, therefore, forms part of a political and ideological backlash against the disruptive impact of economic and social change and the state structures that appear to house these forces. In response to the challenges and pressures of modernisation, nationalist intellectuals and ideologues strike out for political autonomy or even complete political independence. Over time, nationalist claims take on a more assertive tone, possibly culminating in political violence.

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² Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*

Within the emerging nationalist movement it is the middle classes – those involved in industry, commerce, commercialised agriculture and the professions – who tend to assume leadership roles. This is in substantial part because national demands serve the particular economic, social and prestige interests of these social groups, or so it is argued. Though it is not usually said, irrespective of social class women tend not to be to the fore in such movements, the occasional exception notwithstanding. You would not, therefore, expect the impoverished cottier-fishermen of the Aran Islands, or the women of the Scottish Highlands and Islands for that matter, to be the early activists in campaigns for national independence.

Might Gellner's framework of ideas help illuminate the emergence of nationalism and unionism in nineteenth-century Irish society?³ Ireland was deeply affected by the forces of modernisation emanating from the epicentre of the industrial revolution, the neighbouring island of Britain. By the end of the nineteenth century, much of Ireland was seen as economically underdeveloped and nationalism had swept the board as far as most elective bodies in Ireland were concerned, be it in parliament, on the boards of poor law unions, and in the new county councils. Political autonomy for Ireland, of one kind or another, seemed inevitable. Contrariwise, one part of the island, the north east, had experienced modern industrialization and a majority of the inhabitants were wedded to the union with Britain and a form or dialect of British nationalism.

The primary interest of this chapter is the role of economic *forces* and the *experience* of economic change – a rather more subjective notion – in the development of nationalist and unionist movements in nineteenth and early twentieth century Ireland. There is no suggestion of course that only economic forces mattered, nor that they operated in isolation. Monocausal explanations for complex political and ideological formations have long been out of fashion, and rightly so. But there is no sympathy here either for the more modish interpretations of historical change in which virtually everything is held to be related to everything else, and causal links are only weakly specified, if at all. By focusing attention on the economic dimensions, there is at least the possibility of probing the explanatory power of a major constellation of forces held to be relevant both by nineteenth-century Irish and British nationalists and by modern-day theorists of nationalism and Marxism.

Five indicators of economic progress

A micro-historical perspective, attentive to temporal, regional and local variations, would no doubt identify an extensive range of economic issues with a bearing on nationalism and unionism in Ireland. The strategy pursued here is different, however. An attempt is made to locate a small number of overarching themes, as summarised in Table 1, which most people, it is suggested, would regard as basic to economic well-being. The emphasis is on change over time. To this end each of the chosen economic indicators has been assigned a score of one or zero – one indicating substantial gains or improvement, and zero indicating little or no advance, or even deterioration within a

³ The life of this chapter goes back to a series of conferences in 2005 and 2006 (and perhaps earlier). I had not then had the benefit of reading Richard English's incomparable *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (London, 2006). The final chapter is a fine exploration of different theories of nationalism and goes well beyond the pioneering ideas of Gellner.

given time period. If, however, a satisfactory position in relation to a particular indicator had been reached by the start date and was being maintained, then a satisfaction rating of one is recorded. The scoring system is simplicity itself, and it is also held to be additive across the five indicators. It would not be difficult to develop a more complex schema, but the principle of Occam's razor has much to commend it in the present context.⁴

In a similar spirit of parsimony the geo-political entities are defined as nationalist Ireland, embracing most of the island and holding large or overwhelmingly Catholic populations, and Unionist Ireland where Protestants were in a majority, that is, the four north-eastern counties of Antrim, Down, Londonderry and Armagh. Needless to say there were Protestant communities and enclaves elsewhere on the island, most notably in Dublin and its environs, but the rock of Protestant and unionist identity, on which the ship of Home Rule eventually foundered, was deeply embedded in the North.

Table 1. Five Indicators of Economic Progress or Non-Progress in Ireland, North & South, 1800-1914

Nationalist Ireland (South)

		1800-50		1850-80		1880-1914
1	Living Standards	0		1		1
2	Economic crises	0		0?		1
3	Industrialisation	0		0		0
4	Emigration	0		0		1
5	Economic Justice	0		1		1
		0		2		4

⁴ Each time I presented this work at a conference I almost invariably received the comment that a more complex scale would work better. That may well be true, and it would be easy to experiment with alternative schemes. For my part, I value simplicity of exposition, provided the broad outlines of the story are not being distorted.

Unionist Ireland (North)

		1800-50		1850-80		1880-1914
1	Living Standards	0		1		1
2	Economic crises	0		1		1
3	Industrialisation	1		1		1
4	Emigration	0		0		1
5	Economic Justice	1		1		1
		2		4		5

Note on the scoring scheme: a score of 1 means a substantial gain over the period in an economic indicator (for example, achieving gains in living standards or reducing economic crises), or having already attained a satisfactory position in relation to that indicator, while a score of 0 means there was little improvement in what was an unsatisfactory position to begin with.

From the Union to the Famine

1. Trends in Living Standards, 1800-1840s

We may begin by looking at the first half of the nineteenth century, beginning with what might loosely be termed Southern Ireland. The first indicator relates to the living standards of the mass of the population. There are various measures of living standards but income is one of the most widely used. Can we say, in terms of the wages of agricultural labourers, the incomes of farmers, or the earnings of artisans and industrial workers, that there were substantial gains between 1800 and the 1840s? It seems unlikely, if only because in the neighbouring country of Britain – the world’s first industrial nation – gains in living standards were meagre in this period. Feinstein, for instance, calculated that the standard of living of the average working-class family improved by less than 15% between the 1780s and the 1850s.⁵

But there are more substantial grounds than argument-by-analogy to suggest that broadly-based improvement was not the order of the day, or the half century. As Louis Cullen has argued, the voracious demands of the United Kingdom’s wartime economy helped maintain high levels of economic activity during the course of the French Wars (1793-1815), though some underlying economic weaknesses were apparent in retrospect.⁶ After the war, demobilisation of the armed services, economic recession and

⁵ Charles H. Feinstein, “Pessimism Perpetuated: Real Wages and the Standard of Living in Britain during and after the Industrial Revolution”, *Journal of Economic History*, 58 (Sept., 1998), pp. 625-58. This debate still rolls and indeed has gone global. See in particular R.C. Allen

⁶ L.M. Cullen, *An Economic History of Ireland* (London,

deflation affected the whole of the United Kingdom.⁷ The impact was particularly severe in Ireland where far more people, proportionately speaking, lived close to the margin of subsistence. As discussed later in the context of industrialization and deindustrialization, living standards in much of urban Ireland were also under pressure. Moreover, population growth was still remarkably exuberant, despite narrowing economic opportunities. Symptomatic of these economically troubled times, the tide of emigration was rising in the decades between 1815 and 1845.

Not that all was doom and gloom. The Catholic middle classes, in town and countryside, may well have improved their positions in the decades before the mid-century crisis. While wages and incomes fell in money terms, the cost of living probably fell more steeply, by one-third or so between 1813 and the mid-1830s.⁸ The terms of trade moved in favour of the better-off tenant farmers⁹, who were the backbone of O'Connell's agitations for Catholic Emancipation and Repeal of the Union. Catholic clergymen enjoyed greater security and substantial incomes.¹⁰ In addition, there were various innovations, some state-sponsored, in policing, education, and communications, and banking services, which on balance favoured the commercial or market-oriented segments of society.¹¹ The picture is not, therefore, a monochromatic one when viewed through the prism of social class. Still, in terms of the welfare of the mass of the people, inequality appears to have widened and there was no significant amelioration of their wretched material conditions before 1845.¹² Worse was to follow in the later 1840s, as living standards collapsed for large sections of the population. So a score of zero for changes in living standards is surely the appropriate one for proto-nationalist Ireland in the period 1800-1850.

In the more Protestant North the strains of economic and structural change were also apparent. The same economic forces affected the Protestant smallholders of outer Ulster, while in inner Ulster, where the combination of small-scale farming and handicraft weaving predominated, the earnings of weavers were being squeezed by the competitive pressures of the Lancashire cotton industry.¹³ The objective reality was a decline in the position of farmer weavers and cottier-weavers, as well as the hand spinners of linen yarns. This was also the subjective perception.¹⁴ Asked in the mid-

⁷ Roderick Floud and D.N. McCloskey eds., *The Economic History of Britain since 1700, vol.1, 1700-1860* (London, 1994).

⁸ "The Cost of Living in Ireland, 1698-1998" in David Dickson & Cormac Ó Gráda eds., *Refiguring Ireland*, Lilliput, Dublin, 2003), pp. 249-76; Liam Kennedy and Martin Dowling, "Prices and Wages in Ireland, 1700-1850", *Irish Economic & Social History*, 24 (1997), pp. 62-104.

⁹ That is, the non-agricultural goods which farmers purchased declined in price more steeply than did the products they sold in the market place.

¹⁰ Emmet Larkin, *The Historical Dimensions of Irish Catholicism* (New York, 1976).

¹¹ Cormac Ó Gráda, *A New Economic History of Ireland, 1780-1939* (Oxford, 1997).

¹² The Poor Law Report of 1836 paints a dismal picture of a narrow diet, widespread underemployment, as well as poor housing and clothing. Nonetheless, the supply of calories from a largely potato diet was more than adequate for much of the year, while turf or peat supplied a cheap source of fuel. See *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*, British Parliamentary Papers, 30-35 (1836), Appendix D and Appendix E; Joel Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850* (London, 1985), pp. 6-29.

¹³ Philip Ollerenshaw "Industry" in Liam Kennedy & Philip Ollerenshaw eds., *An Economic History of Ulster, 1820-1938* (Manchester, 1985); Brenda Collins, "Proto-Industrialization and Pre-Famine Migration", *Social History*, 7 (1982), pp. ...

¹⁴ Frank Geary, "The Act of Union, British-Irish Trade, and Pre-Famine Deindustrialization", *Economic History Review* (48, 1995), pp. 68-88.

1830s how their position compared with that at the Peace of 1815, many Ulster parishes reported either no improvement or a decline in living standards.¹⁵ So, a score of zero rather than one seems the better fit for the Northern experience as well.

2. *Economic crises*

Trends in living standards are important. More important, though, for most people are the year-to-year fluctuations. In pre-industrial societies the availability of food might change violently over time, being heavily dependent on unpredictable climatic and environmental factors. In the Irish case, severe shortages of the staple food crop, potatoes, affected the country in 1800-01, 1816-17, 1824-25, and again in 1836 and 1839, as indicated by the evidence of potato prices.¹⁶ Hunger, at irregular intervals, visited the millions mired in the poverty and squalor of the potato economy, on top of the recurrent seasonal “hungry gap” between the exhaustion of one potato crop and the arrival of the new potatoes.¹⁷ It is clear that fluctuations in food supply, and the attendant food insecurity, were a common feature of the pre-Famine economy, and that significant improvements had not materialised in the four decades after the Union. By the same token, there is no evidence either of more frequent or increasingly severe food crises – warning shots as it were – as one approaches the Great Famine itself. Then out of the blue, and with the force of a tsunami wave, the potato blight *phytophthora infestans* swept across the countryside, leaving devastation in its wake.

It is true that the Union gave more secure access to the main market for Irish agricultural exports.¹⁸ It is also the case that the United Kingdom offered a protective framework against European competitors to agricultural and linen producers in Ireland, but these may have been among the less tangible or less visible benefits of the economic union, going largely unremarked by contemporaries. In any case, it is difficult to chart major gains in food security or the cushioning of the poor against economic misfortune in this period.¹⁹

The same was true, by and large, for Protestant households in the Ulster countryside. Industrialization in the Lagan Valley, which is discussed further in the next section, conferred benefits on the emerging industrial proletariat, one in which women and children featured more prominently than adult male workers and in which Protestant workers were more firmly entrenched than Catholics. The likelihood is that this broadened the economic base of some households. But these households were also vulnerable to a new type of economic fluctuation, the business cycle. When these coincided with harvest failure, as in Belfast in 1846, the result was intense deprivation and vulnerability to famine-related disease.²⁰

¹⁵ Poor Inquiry (Ireland), Appendix D; *Reports from the Assistant Handloom Weavers' Commissioners on the West Riding and Ireland*, BPP (23, 1840).

¹⁶ A year of dearth is signalled by a spike or surge in the price of potatoes. For a more detailed view see Liam Kennedy & Peter Solar, *Irish Agriculture: A Price History, from the mid-eighteenth century to the eve of the First World War* (Dublin, 2007).

¹⁷ James S. Donnelly, Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (London, 2001).

¹⁸ David S. Johnson and Liam Kennedy, "The Union of Ireland and Britain, 1800-1921" in George Boyce & Alan O' Day eds, *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy* (Routledge, London, 1996).

¹⁹ Irish Poor Law, post 1838, sure enough, but inadequate to the task.

²⁰ Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast, 1992), pp. 292-3.

3. Industrialization

The Industrial Revolution was gradually transforming modes of industrial production in the British and Irish Isles from the later eighteenth century onwards, with profound implications for industry in Ireland. Significantly, the earliest sectors to be mechanised were in textiles, first in cottons and later in linen and woollens. Ireland's major industries consisted of the *handicraft* production of linen and woollen goods. The Irish woollen industry went into severe decline after the business recession of 1824-25. Populist critics of the Union plausibly but misleadingly linked the decadence of the industry in the southern towns of Ireland to the Union rather than to the more fundamental forces of technological and organisational change associated with modern industrialization. There is debate as to the extent of industrial decline in Ireland before the Famine,²¹ but decline there undoubtedly was in the once extensive woollen and worsted industries. Cheaply manufactured British textiles displaced handicraft production. Though a small number of Irish firms made the transition to factory conditions²², the more visible result was unemployment and underemployment in the Munster towns, Carrick-on-Suir in County Tipperary and Bandon in County Cork being particularly good examples.

The picture in relation to the leading industrial export sector, that of linen textiles, is more complicated. The mechanisation of the spinning branch of linen textiles from the end of the 1820s onwards, as a result of technical breakthroughs in the handling of flax fibres, deprived tens of thousands of hand-spinners of a livelihood.²³ These were principally women and children in north Connacht and the north midlands. Again it was easy for ideologues of the Home Rule cause to invoke the familiar fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* in relation to the Union and its alleged consequences.²⁴

The other side of the story, which apologists for the Union liked to stress, was the mushrooming of textile mills in east Ulster, building on an earlier foundation of factory-based cotton spinning in the Belfast region.²⁵ Mill workers, mainly women and children, displaced the thousands of dispersed domestic spinners in the rural economy. The new mill-spun yarn complemented and also helped break down gender divisions of labour in the handloom weaving sector.²⁶ More generally, Belfast and its environs was the local Irish expression of the industrial revolution.

Mr and Mrs Hall who visited Ireland in 1838 and again in 1840 were almost euphoric in their praise of the "new town" of Belfast, its rise, and its favourable topography:

It was something new to perceive, rising above the houses, numerous tall and thin chimneys, indicative of industry, occupation, commerce, and prosperity; the volumes of smoke that issued from them giving unquestionable tokens of full employment; while its vicinity to the ocean removed at once all idea that the labour was unwholesome, or the labourers unhealthy....the contrast between this town and the towns of the south

²¹ Geary, "Act of Union", pp. 68-88; Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved*, pp. 13-15.

²² Andy Bielenberg, *Cork's Industrial Revolution, 1780-1880* (Cork, 1991), pp. 31-38.

²³ For the wider European perspective see Brenda Collins and Philip Ollerenshaw eds., *The European Linen Industry in Historical Perspective* (Oxford, 2003).

²⁴ Johnson and Kennedy, "Union of Britain and Ireland".

²⁵ E.R.R. Green, *The Lagan Valley: A Local History of the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1949).

²⁶ Collins, "Proto-Industrialization".

startled us, making us for the moment believe we were in a clean Manchester, where hearty breezes swept into the neighbouring sea all the impurities usually inseparable from a concourse of factories.

The good health and environmental conditions might easily be challenged (though it is interesting to see these welfare issues being raised at this time) but the progressive image of the North and the relative industrial backwardness of the South certainly accorded with the self-image of proto-unionists.²⁷

O'Connell's adversary, the reverend Henry Cooke, asked provocatively: "Look at Belfast and be a Repealer if you can".²⁸ But uneven economic development served to heighten the contrast between an industrializing north and a largely non-industrializing or de-industrializing South, thus sharpening perceptions of underdevelopment over much of southern and Catholic Ireland. The even larger contrast of course was with Britain itself. In terms of industrial progress, therefore, it seems appropriate to award the North a gain (arbitrarily set at one) and the South a score of zero.

4. *Emigration*

One and a half million people are said to have emigrated from Ireland, North and South, between 1815 and 1845. This migration affected Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian communities, and the middling elements in Irish society rather than the very poor.²⁹ Another million emigrated during the terrible Famine years of the late 1840s. Though the attitudes of Catholics and proto-nationalists towards emigration were ambivalent during the early decades of the nineteenth century,³⁰ these hardened after the Famine into firm critiques of the Union. As far as public discourse went, emigration was seen primarily as a problem rather than an opportunity. Though possibly possessing a more "modern" or entrepreneurial set of attitudes towards life beyond the Irish shores,³¹ Protestants in Ireland were unlikely to have viewed mass emigration as one of the fruits of the Union, not least as it drained Protestant numbers as well as those of Catholics. As the Rev. William Fry lamented from a part of Ireland where Protestants were thinly represented: "I fear many more [Protestants] will shortly leave their old habitations, to seek for peace and quietness in every foreign land where they think such is to be obtained."³² Emigration was increasing rather than diminishing in intensity by the 1840s, so a score of zero seems merited for the both the northern and the southern political constituencies.

²⁷ W.M. O'Hanlon, *Walks among the Poor of Belfast, and Suggestions for their Improvement* (Dublin, 1853).

²⁸ Quoted in Bardon, *History of Ulster*, p. 257.

²⁹ D. H. Akenson, *Ireland, Sweden and the Great European Migration, 1815-1914* (Liverpool, 2011), pp. 93-96; *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*, Appendix F (B.P.P., 1836, 33), p. 135.

³⁰ Sarah Roddy, *Population, Providence, and Empire: The Churches and Emigration from Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Manchester, 2014).

³¹ Two contrasting viewpoints may be found in K.A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford, 1985) and D.H Akenson, *Small Differences: Irish Catholics and Protestants, 1815-1922: An International Perspective* (Kingston, 1988).

³² *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*, Appendix F (B.P.P., 1836,33), p. 506. Fry was minister for Ikerrin, Rathnavogue, and Finglass on the Offaly-Tipperary border.

5. *Economic justice*

Members of an ethno-cultural group, such as the Catholics of Ireland in the early 19th century or Ulster Protestants for that matter, were concerned not only with their own economic and social situation but their position relative to other groups as well. A sense of relative deprivation was vitally important in informing political consciousness, particularly in an era of democratising reforms.

Irish society at the time of the Union was stratified, not only along the lines of social class but on the basis of religious affiliation as well. This was particularly noticeable at the level of the landed elite, which was overwhelmingly associated with the Church of Ireland, and in much of the public sector, at local and national level, in the professions and the higher echelons of the army and later police. There was, in effect, a hierarchy of occupational roles with a strong religious colouration at the top. The origins of this cultural division of labour, to use Michael Hechter's terms, went deep in time to the seventeenth-century confiscations, plantations and migrations, and proved remarkably enduring.³³ Presbyterians had largely gained acceptance for public office by the early nineteenth century, though there were still residues of hostile attitudes towards Presbyterians on the part of Church of Ireland ministers and landowners, but it was Catholics who found the greatest difficulty in penetrating the higher strata of society.

It is likely that cultural differences between Catholics and Protestants have been exaggerated in the past, as Donald Akenson argues in his aptly-titled book, *Small Differences*.³⁴ But economic and social differences certainly existed and were *perceived* to exist.³⁵ There is little to suggest that these inequalities were being seriously eroded for Catholics during the first half of the nineteenth century, with the exception of a brief period in the 1830s under the Drummond administration.³⁶ Notions of "justice for Ireland" were certainly in the air but converting expressions of good-will into more concrete measures was far from easy.³⁷ The score for change in economic equity or justice, as this related to the Catholic population is, therefore, held to be zero. Up North the diversification of women's occupations in the first half of the century, perhaps particularly among Protestant women in east Ulster, might be held to signal an advance, however slight, in the long march towards gender equality. By the standards of the time, and notwithstanding cross-cutting tensions between Presbyterians and Anglicans on issues such as tithes, theology and tenurial relations, the position of the main Protestant groupings, male and female, is taken to be satisfactory on issues of economic justice.

³³ Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966* (London, 1975).

³⁴ Akenson, *Small Differences* (1988).

³⁵ No normative judgement is being made here. Some of the differences may have had to do with heavier investment in the acquisition of skills, literacy and education more generally on the part of Protestant groups, though a more favourable endowment of land to begin with must have mattered.

³⁶ R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (London, 1989).

³⁷ Peter Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society, 1843-1850* (Dublin, 1998).

Winners and losers

We may sum up by saying there were no visible or perceptible gains in Southern Ireland in relation to any of the five economic indicators for the mass of the people in the decades following the Union. This had little to do with the Union itself. Indeed it can be argued that the Union, in its economic implications, was beneficial for Ireland.³⁸ But so many forces – economic, political and demographic – were at play after 1801 that it is difficult to separate out the different causal strands. Paradoxically, this made it easier to ascribe the problems of making a living to a single cause: the union of Great Britain and Ireland had to be the fountainhead of the manifold ills of Ireland. Both at the level of personal experience and of political interpretation, there was apparently little to commend the Union to nationalist Ireland. The catastrophe of the Great Famine served to confirm the emptiness of the relationship.

Broadly speaking, the situation in the North of Ireland was not very different for most of the indicators, though there is no doubt that living standards were a bit higher to begin with and that the Famine had a less severe impact. In relation to the latter, some Protestants saw the Famine as mainly affecting Catholic communities, thereby serving to confirm their sense of economic superiority and the value of the Union.³⁹ More importantly though, the North scored positively in terms of the rise of modern industry and in terms of the representation of Protestants in the higher echelons of the economic and status hierarchies.

Mid-Victorian Ireland

The next two periods may be reviewed in much the same fashion, but more quickly now that the basic approach has been established. In Southern Ireland the long wave of economic expansion after mid-century resulted in expanding incomes for farmers and agricultural labourers. Improving standards of living were reflected in rising levels of literacy, housing conditions and religious piety. Urban Ireland also participated in these gains, though housing conditions in Dublin were shocking by any standards.⁴⁰

The impact of the Great Famine was still being felt in the 1850s and arguably beyond. There was a severe downturn in the rural economy at the beginning of the 1860s. The onset of an international agricultural depression after 1876 revealed how economically vulnerable some rural households still were, especially in the West of Ireland. This helped spark off the Land War of 1879-82.⁴¹ While the judgement is a bit harsh, in that differences of degree are being neglected, it seems preferable to return a negative verdict in relation to economic crises facing Southern Ireland, even in the mid-Victorian period.

It would be hard to argue a case for industrialization. Improved sea communications and, internally, an elaborate railway system, opened up small-scale industry in Southern

³⁸ Johnson and Kennedy, "Union of Britain and Ireland".

³⁹ Christine Kinealy and Gerard MacAtasney, *The Hidden Famine: Poverty, Hunger, and Sectarianism in Belfast 1840-50* (London, 2000).

⁴⁰ Mary E. Daly, *Dublin: The Deposed Capital: A Social and Economic History, 1860-1914* (Cork, 1984).

⁴¹ Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1848-1918* (Dublin, 1972). This work stimulated much of the best later work on the Irish Land War.

Ireland to more intense outside competition. Success stories such as Jacob's biscuit factory in Dublin or O'Mahony's woollen mills in County Cork did not an industrial revolution make. The withering away of artisanal occupations and small-scale provincial industry that catered for essentially local markets was far more characteristic of the period. The southern economy still balanced on an agrarian base. Over time, and despite a strain of rural fundamentalism within Irish nationalist thought, this came to be viewed as a further injury. It was assumed that industrialisation was the normal expectation; if it did not happen, then there was something deeply wrong with the political and constitutional arrangements of society. As Professor James Meenan once put it: "There has been a natural feeling that this country was cheated out of an industrial revolution in the nineteenth century by the Union with Great Britain..."⁴²

Emigration cut deeply into southern Irish society as a result of the Famine exodus. The expectation of leaving was built into the strategies of many an Irish household.⁴³ At the level of political discourse, emigration was increasingly viewed as a by-product of the Union itself. Alternative interpretations, such as that emigration was inevitable in the light of surplus labour in the countryside as well as easy access to two major and expanding labour markets, those of Britain and the United States, found little favour. The haemorrhaging of the Irish population was viewed as one further, and indeed powerful indictment of the Union.

Economic justice might take a variety of forms. Most salient is Catholic-Protestant differences, but one might also consider the dimensions of social class, region and gender. Social inequality was probably less pronounced in the decades after mid-century, as were regional inequalities, but to a large extent these were an artificial creation, the product of death and emigration among the poorer classes in Ireland during the Famine. Public policy had little to do with it. Wage differentials between the western and eastern counties diminished, and there was some convergence in terms of quality of housing.⁴⁴ The Catholic middle classes expanded in relative importance, enjoying the fruits of economic expansion, while the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland must have been a source of symbolic satisfaction. Whether the status of women advanced is a more open question. A rising incidence of unmarried females in Irish society seems open to conflicting interpretations. Less ambiguously, the gap in literacy standards between males and females narrowed, with important implications both for women's social role and their life chances as emigrants overseas. Thus in the census of 1851 only a quarter of females were returned as being able to read and write, as compared to 41% of males. Differences still persisted three decades later, but the gap was much smaller. While 62% of males were recorded as readers and writers in 1881, some 56% of females were similarly accomplished. Protestant-Catholic gaps in the literacy stakes also declined. In terms of objective measures, therefore, there are grounds for claiming some gains in economic justice, albeit of a modest kind, in Southern Ireland in this period.

⁴² James Meenan in *Commission on Emigration and Other Population Problems, 1954*, p. 402.

⁴³ David Fitzpatrick, *Irish Emigration, 1801-1921* (Dundalk, 1984).

⁴⁴ See regional maps in Liam Kennedy, *et al.*, *Mapping the Great Irish Famine: A Survey of the Famine Decades* (Dublin, 1999). But note also that gains in regional equality could actually have the effect of increasing rather than diminishing disenchantment with the political status quo. Thus the gains in literacy in the English language and the rise of trading and other non-farming occupations in the West were conducive to the diffusion of Irish nationalist sentiment.

In the North, there were broadly-based gains in the mid-Victorian period. Living standards advanced, subsistence crises were less pronounced (in part because of the increasingly industrial character of the North, though this of course exposed the province to the cyclical downturns of the industrializing world). Vast engineering and shipbuilding enterprises complemented earlier developments in linen textiles. Belfast was emerging as one of the great industrial towns and ports of the United Kingdom.⁴⁵ Poverty and urban degradation were also part of the story. Emigration from rural Ulster continued, though movement to Britain and to “loyal” Canada almost certainly had less politically charged connotations for Protestant migrants as compared to Catholic and self-styled exiles.⁴⁶ So, in terms of broad brush strokes, it is the consolidation of economic gains and further industrial advance, not the shortcomings, which command attention.

“... The last years of the Union were the best...”

What is most striking for the period 1880-1920 is how substantial were the gains made in Southern Ireland by comparison with its own past and by comparison also with the North. Incomes, on average, undoubtedly rose, probably faster than in the United Kingdom generally.⁴⁷ There were massive schemes of land reform, special assistance for the West of Ireland (through the efforts of the Congested Districts Board), the formation of a Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction to promote rural development, and the introduction of pensions for older people. Perhaps overly cynically, as this was a period of social reform within the United Kingdom more generally, these diverse measures (with the exception of the last) are sometimes bundled together as an attempt to kill Home Rule with kindness. Even emigration was on a steep downward incline after the exodus of the 1880s had subsided and movement out of Ireland, North and South, largely dried up during the years of the Great War itself. Rural housing schemes promoted by the British state benefited the most degraded elements of Irish society, the agricultural labourers. Looking at another marginalised category, there were modest gains for women also, both in home life and in the public sphere.⁴⁸ Despite these initiatives, this was also the period in which Irish nationalism made its most spectacular gains, culminating eventually in the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922 and the declaration of an Irish Republic a generation later. As David Johnson has crisply reminded us: “In economic terms, the last years of the Union were the best ones”.⁴⁹

Is this not paradoxical? Does it not cast doubt on any significant role for economic factors in the rise of Irish nationalism? Ulster Unionism fits better within an economic framework of interpretation: the North witnessed a spectacular transformation from a largely agrarian and protoindustrial society at the time of the Union to a technologically advanced industrial society by the end of that century. Adherence to the Union, relative

⁴⁵ Olwen Purdue ed., *Belfast: The Emerging City, 1850-1914* (Dublin, 2013); S.J. Connolly ed., *Belfast 400: People, Place and History* (Liverpool, 2012).

⁴⁶ The circulation of individuals and families within the Empire fitted naturally enough with an imperial consciousness, a link that has not perhaps received the attention it deserves.

⁴⁷ Tom Stark and Frank Geary, “Examining Ireland’s Post-Famine Economic Growth Performance”, *Economic Journal*, (2002, 112), pp. 919-35.

⁴⁸ On rural women, see Joanna Bourke, *Husbandry to Housewifery: Women, Economic Change, and Housework in Ireland, 1890-1914* (Oxford, 1993) and Mary E. Daly, *Women and Work in Ireland* (Dundalk, 1997).

⁴⁹ David Johnson, *The Interwar Economy in Ireland* (Dundalk, 1985), p. 5.

to the alternatives (a Home Rule Ireland or an independent Irish Republic), made good economic sense, for the Ulster unionist middle classes *and* the Protestant working class. Political allegiance and economic interest were remarkably congruent. It is the relationship between economic forces and the rise of Irish nationalism which seems curious.

On reflection, perhaps the story is not quite so contradictory. As will be suggested shortly, a more complex model of relationships between the economic and the political is necessary. Moreover, the formative period for Irish nationalism was before the 1880s, with linkages deeper in time.⁵⁰ While it would be foolish to pursue a deterministic view of the making of the Irish nation, it would be equally wayward not to recognise the channels of mobilisation and agitation from the 1820s onwards that were conducive to the rise of an essentially Catholic constitutional nationalism. Economic failure in relation to industrialization, employment and famine intensified the sense of alienation from the metropolitan centre and favoured the development of an oppositional, territorially-based ethnic politics. It is thus in the earlier two periods, rather than in the slow countdown to political independence, that Gellner's insights appear to carry most weight. It may, however, be worth emphasising the role of time lags in the system of economic and political relationships, as well as allowing a role for contingency, when seeking to trace the causal sequences.

It is true the demands for the devolution of power from Westminster to Dublin waxed and waned over time,⁵¹ but by 1880 the nationalists of town and countryside had been mobilised behind the banner of land reform and Home Rule, in the course of a crisis that owed its origin and intensity to the severe economic downturn of the late 1870s. These feedback mechanisms, from the economic to the political spheres, suggest a type of path dependence in the evolution of Irish nationalist politics.⁵² Once mobilised and locked into an inconclusive power struggle, no amount of economic improvement was likely to deflect Irish nationalists (in effect Irish Catholics) from the goal of self-government nor Ulster unionists (in effect Protestants) from support for the Union.⁵³

Economic forces and Nationalism

It may be helpful to attempt a summary of the links between economic forces and the evolution of nationalist politics, taking account both of the long and the short term. There are four elements to this understanding. First, going deep in time, there were the structures of power, authority and property relationships laid down in the seventeenth century under conditions of conquest and confiscation, which had become normalised over time, some limited challenges notwithstanding. These formed part of the larger architecture of power relationships enveloping the two islands, and whose ultimate focus was located in London. The enduring economic as well as political significance of the seventeenth century convulsions, including the inflows of settlers and economic

⁵⁰ George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland* (London, 1982); English, *Irish Freedom* (2006).

⁵¹ K.T. Hoppen, *Ireland since 1800: conflict and conformity* (Dublin, 1989).

⁵² Paul A. David, *Technical Choice, Innovation and Economic Growth: Essays on American and British Experience in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1975).

⁵³ I would add, despite this 'lock-in' to set political positions, the expression of Irish nationalism may nonetheless have been moderated by the extent of economic and social reform in the quarter century before the Great War.

migrants from Britain, was that the hierarchy of occupational and authority roles established then was reproduced, *mutatis mutandis*, into the nineteenth. These structures, imbued with latent economic power, conditioned social action, though in a far from deterministic fashion. While the social order had acquired a fair degree of stability during the eighteenth century, notwithstanding the stresses and strains of an evolving market economy and a variety of political challenges, there remained an ethno-religious fault line that ran through the society.⁵⁴ The upper reaches of the social hierarchy, be it in terms of landownership, political power or status, were occupied by Protestants. Social class and religious demography intersected. Or as Kerby Miller puts it: “Irish society around 1800 seems analogous to a pattern in a kaleidoscope: turned one way the design forms along sectarian lines, but when turned again the socioeconomic and cultural divisions within each religious community seem most prominent.”⁵⁵ The Protestant and unionist aspect of the class structure came to be viewed as a source of grievance by aspiring Catholics (see indicator five in the Table) from at least the 1820s onwards and probably earlier.

There is of course the danger of assuming that the stratification of society in Ireland was somehow peculiar to Ireland. As Sean Connolly has reminded us, “we must see the whole structure of confessionally based inequality as itself existing within a wider structure of hierarchy and privilege that Ireland shared with other [European] societies of the *ancien regime*”.⁵⁶ There is a danger also of succumbing to notions of historical inevitability, that the actual pathways traced out were in fact the only possible pathways. Modern Irish history (which of course cannot be divorced from its higher-level context of British-Irish relations), was more branched and pathway *independent* than is sometimes allowed. Yet it is only fair to recognise also the deep structures of modern Irish history, the intertwining of social class, religious demography, and external political authority, that at the very least constrained the range of possible developments.⁵⁷

Then there were the *generalized* economic and technological changes of nineteenth-century western society, in which Ireland also participated, that facilitated, albeit indirectly, the mobilisation of nationalist groupings and the transmission of nationalist ideas. These included a more differentiated occupational structure (reflecting a more complex division of labour), improved communications by road and railway⁵⁸, effective postal and telegraph services and increased access to learning in the English language. We see the rise, not only of national newspapers, but also of a provincial press that was often avowedly nationalist in tone. New or expanding occupational roles such as teachers in the state-funded national schools, along with journalists and lawyers, were frequently carriers of the idea of the nation.⁵⁹ These developments were part and parcel of a wider process of modernisation – economic, social, technological – in which the

⁵⁴ S.J. Connolly, *Religion, law, and power: the making of Protestant Ireland, 1660-1760* (Oxford, 2002).

⁵⁵ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, pp. 84-85.

⁵⁶ Connolly, *Religion, Law and Power*, p. 313.

⁵⁷ Joe Ruane and Jennifer Todd, *The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland: Power, Conflict and Emancipation* (Cambridge, 1996).

⁵⁸ Take for example the use made of Ireland’s extensive rail network by Charles Stewart Parnell and his Home Rule colleagues when organising political meetings and demonstrations. The humble bicycle became an important carrier of people and ideas a little later. .

⁵⁹ Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations* (translated by Ben Fowkes, Cambridge, 1985).

spread of the English language and of mass literacy were implicated. The market for ideas, particularly ethnic nationalist ideas, expanded exponentially during the course of the century, with positive feedback mechanisms lowering the unit cost of producing and diffusing these ideas. As the networks of people and institutions thickened, the benefits of adopting a nationalist stance in public affairs became all the more rewarding, leading to the further expansion of existing networks.⁶⁰ The cumulative effect was to scoop the ideological pool for ethnic nationalism, as shown by the breakthrough of the Home Rule party at the general election of 1885. An important aspect of this process was the spread of the English language which made the propagation of Irish nationalist ideas less costly, in turn encouraging the further use of the medium of English, and so on in a mutually reinforcing spiral.⁶¹ Ironically, English was the language of Irish nationalism, and British public finance the source of mass literacy and a reading public.

Third, at the level of populist discourse, there was a long litany of “wrongs”, including economic wrongs and frustrated expectations, which could be formulated into arguments decrying the Union. Some were undoubtedly valid, others were of antique origin and of doubtful relevance in the context of debates on the effects of the Union, and others again rested on misunderstanding.⁶² The economic grievances, which formed a large subset of the total, ranged from restrictive legislation by the British parliament on Irish trade and commerce in the eighteenth century to claims of a capital drain of funds out of Ireland as a result of absentee landlords, excessive increases on whiskey duties and over-taxation of the Irish more generally.⁶³ It was William Gladstone, later a great Liberal prime minister, who took the unpopular step of raising taxes on Irish whiskey to British levels, saying that he could see no reason why a man should get drunk more cheaply in Ireland than in Britain.⁶⁴ He may even have had a point. Selective recitations of injustices and wrongs were of course the stuff of political discourse, shaping and reflecting a collective sensibility attuned to the politics of grievance. The library of past and present wrongs, including those of an economic nature, were articulated in a continuous present tense that seemed to give historical depth and legitimacy to newly-minted notions of nationalism.

Conveniently the counterfactual view of Ireland’s potential implied by these criticisms was not only pleasing but located in future space. Imagined communities, to use Anderson’s term for national groupings, also tend to have imagined destinies toward which history and nationality are apparently straining.⁶⁵ The sequel to Irish independence, in a mysterious but seemingly assured way, would be a prosperous, populous Ireland. Arthur Griffith, for one, saw no reason why the island could not

⁶⁰ There is a nice illustration of these processes at work (and being frustrated) in Brinsley McNamara’s nationalistic novel, *The Clanking of Chains* (Dublin, 1920)

⁶¹ There is now a voluminous literature on “feedback” processes and cumulative causation. For brief treatments see “Circular and Cumulative Causation” by Allan A. Schmidt and “Path Dependency” by Mark Setterfield in Phillip A. O’Hara ed., *Encyclopaedia of Political Economy* (London, 1999), pp. 87-90 and 841-43 respectively. A seminal work is Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations* (New York, 1968), though my colleague Graham Brownlow points out that notions of cumulative causation can be traced back to the writings of Thorsten Veblen, in particular *The Place of Science in Modern Civilization and Other Essays* (New York, 1919).

⁶² Johnson and Kennedy, “The Union of Ireland and Britain”.

⁶³ *Report by the Committee on Irish Finance*, B.P.P., 34 (1912-13).

⁶⁴ House of Commons Debates, 1853.

⁶⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 2006).

provide a living for xx million people.⁶⁶ Nationalist priests dreamt of an Irish-Ireland in which small-scale industry complemented the endeavours of the field, with noble peasants and rural industrial workers fashioning a new civilization in contradistinction to the ugliness and immorality of the modern, urban-industrial world.⁶⁷ The images were utopian, and even archaic; the realities of independence in the Irish Free State, epitomised by the cutting of state pension benefits in 1924 (or 1923?) soon punctured the make-believe world of the ideologues. But this is with the benefit of hindsight. Such expectations were all the more beguiling because imagined material benefits landscapes could not be sampled until *after* the threshold of independence had been crossed. In this respect Ulster unionists were at a disadvantage in having to argue for an imperfect current reality as against the weakly-specified but alluring possibilities of liberation premised and promised in the nationalist vision.⁶⁸ Irritatingly also for Ulster unionists, the industrial achievements of Belfast – “it is the dark, immoral hole of a place is Belfast”⁶⁹ – were belittled and pronounced alien by the new cultural nationalism associated with the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Gaelic League and the Irish-Ireland movement. It is true some nationalist thinkers, such as Tom Kettle, recognised there was likely to be an economic cost to Irish independence but these tended to be minority voices. In the generic nationalist discourse the reassuring fact was that there was no necessity to sacrifice economic interests on the altar of nationalism.

This brings us to the final point: the actual experience of economic and social change in the century after the Union. In the final analysis, one might presume it was the *personal* and *social* experiences of material change in the century after the Union that most directly influenced Irish national sentiment and sensibility. This may well be so, but these experiences cannot be separated from the preceding discussion: the evaluation of all significant change is mediated by political entrepreneurs and public knowledge makers not to mention the filtering effect of individual and family ideologies, which in turn of course are likely to chime with wider political discourses locally and nationally. In other words, there is no such thing as direct, unmediated experience of change: normative and evaluative mechanisms are inevitably involved. But having conceded this, only the most incorrigibly anti-materialist thinker would dispute the importance of objective economic and social structures and forces external to the individual, family and community in shaping political attitudes and orientation.

This returns us to the simplified world condensed in Table 1. If this model is a roughly credible representation, then for the first seven or eight decades under the Union the grand conclusion must be that there were no great gains for the nationalist or proto-nationalist peoples of Ireland. Dominating all other experiences was the catastrophe of the Great Famine. That the problems at mid-century of a potato-dependent society – *the* greatest indictment of the Irish social system – had their roots well before the Union, in ecology as much as in economy, was something beyond the national gaze. With the promptings of political activists, in Ireland and Irish-America, much of the economic experience of life in Ireland was plausibly interpreted and re-worked to fit a paradigm that indicted the Union as the protean source of Irish ills, economic and otherwise.

⁶⁶ Arthur Griffith, *The Resurrection of Hungary* (Dublin, 1918).

⁶⁷ Liam Kennedy, "The Roman Catholic Church and Economic Growth in Nineteenth-Century Ireland", *Economic and Social Review*, 10 (1978), pp 45-59.

⁶⁸ A point made to me in conversation with my colleague, Graham Brownlow.

⁶⁹ Brinsley McNamara, *The Valley of the Squinting Windows* (New York, 1919).

Two case studies, and a model

The model of interactions between the economic and the political spheres, as sketched above, has four strands: deep historic structures, processes of modernisation, political and cultural discourses, and contemporary experience of the social world. All four form an interactive system of relationships, shaping but not necessarily determining social outcomes. By way of illustrating and testing this explanatory sketch we may take two formative episodes in the development of Irish nationalism. These were the campaign for Catholic Emancipation of the 1820s and the Land War of 1879-82. Each owed much to the organisational and oratorical skills of O'Connell in the first case and to Parnell and Davitt in the second. But in both instances deep-seated inequalities of wealth, status and power, as well as the correlation with religious demography, served to structure the conflicts.

Catholic Emancipation: Daniel O'Connell's campaign for Catholic Emancipation assumed a largely Catholic colouration, despite some backing from liberal Protestants, while much landed wealth, particularly in Ulster, was thrown into the scales against pro-Emancipation candidates. By and large, the longer-run forces of modernisation – a concept that is not without its problems – favoured the popularisation of the agitation. The years of prosperity for commercial farmers, traders and exporters during the French Wars improved both the fortunes and the numbers of a small but growing Catholic middle class, one that was later to form the basis of O'Connell's reform campaign. The progress of the English language in the eastern parts of the island, as well as rising literacy levels, opened up the localities to wider messages of identity and communal solidarity. The hierarchical arrangement of the Catholic Church, with its base in parish-based communities, was also evolving into a ready-made communication system. At the level of discourse, the appeal to a mass audience invoked past wrongs and an appeal to the wider material interests of the Catholic people, and not simply a narrow focus on Catholic representation in the House of Commons.⁷⁰ Mass demonstrations, marching men, and flag be-decked platforms served to multiply the messages and the circulation of ideas.

Then there was the issue of contemporary economic experience. While the Catholic middle classes may have been motivated primarily by considerations of status and civil liberties in the 1820s, smallholders in the countryside and the poorer dwellers in the towns had little to gain from such recognition. Their participation, which was concentrated mainly in the anglicised or rapidly anglicising parts of eastern Ireland, can only have sprung from wider dreams of “emancipation”, particularly some amelioration of their impoverished state.⁷¹ Thus, the violent fluctuations in living conditions after the French wars must have found some reflection in the discontent that was channelled into O'Connell's mass movement.⁷² The course of agricultural prices in the early 1820s suggests severe economic distress. The prices of wheat and oats for the years 1820, 1821 and 1822 were only a half of those prevailing in 1817, which admittedly was a high-price year. The same was true of pig meat and there were substantial falls in butter

⁷⁰ Fergus O'Ferrall, *Daniel O'Connell* (Dublin, 1998).

⁷¹ The term “Catholic Emancipation” is something of a misnomer: the main Catholic grievances had been redressed before the formation of O'Connell's Catholic Association in 1823, and parliamentary representation was hardly of direct relevance to the mass of the people.

⁷² Liam Kennedy, “The Cost of Living in Ireland, 1698-1998” in David Dickson & Cormac Ó Gráda eds., *Refiguring Ireland*, Dublin, 2003), pp. 249-76.

prices, beef prices and mutton prices.⁷³ The implication is clear. There was a major squeeze on farm incomes, which in turn had adverse knock-on effects for other parts of this essentially rural economy.

The effects of these economic shocks were reflected in collective political action at the time, most notably in the form of the Rockite insurrection in the Munster counties of Limerick and Cork that preceded the Catholic Emancipation campaign.⁷⁴ Conversely, the improved prices and incomes of the commercially-oriented farmers and traders between 1823 and 1826 may have furnished the relatively better-off sections of Catholic society with the confidence and the resources to back a very different kind of agitation, that is, O'Connell's radical but largely peaceful constitutional campaign for Catholic Emancipation.

Seemingly inevitably there were ethno-religious reactions. An ill-conceived plan to hold a massive demonstration in the North set off an Orange counter reaction. Taking the longer view, from the 1820s onwards there are signs of dual path-dependence in the making of Irish politics, as evangelical Protestants mobilised to challenge Catholic "gains". The conflictual dance of Orange and Green, so apparent in rural Ulster in the later eighteenth century in clashes between Peep O'Day Boys and Defenders, was emerging from the localities and edging on to the national stage.⁷⁵ As dual path-dependence took firmer shape, relations between the two or three major ethno-religious blocs became less and less responsive to economic shocks.

Land War: Switching to the second half of the century, despite the social convulsions associated with the Great Famine and the operations of the Incumbered Estates Court, the structure of property and power relationships underpinning the rural social order remained largely intact. Such steep social and economic inequalities, when caught in the headlights of a new political consciousness furnished the *opportunity* for land grabs from below. Of more recent vintage, in terms of the structural features of Irish society, was the large-scale destruction, through famine and emigration, of the semi-proletariat of cottiers and labourers. This cleared the way for a confrontation between tenant farmers and landowners in a crisis uncomplicated by cross-cutting social conflicts between farmers and labourers.⁷⁶ The winds of modernisation helped the propagation of the new political consciousness. The continuing decline of the Gaelic language and the rise of a literate, newspaper-reading populace proceeded apace, even in the western regions of Ireland where the origins of the Land War were situated.⁷⁷ Post-Famine economic change, most notably the deeper penetration of market relationships in the countryside, strengthened the numbers of farmers, traders, priests and townspeople available to assume local leadership roles in the politico-agrarian movement.⁷⁸

⁷³ These price changes may be traced in some detail in Kennedy and Solar, *Irish Agriculture* (2007), pp. 132-73.

⁷⁴ James S. Donnelly Jr., *Captain Rock: The Irish Agrarian Rebellion of 1821-1824* (Madison, 2009).

⁷⁵ O'C and the North

⁷⁶ Samuel Clark, *Social Origins of the Land War* (Princeton, 1979) offers a close sociological analysis of social relations in the countryside.

⁷⁷ According to the Census of Ireland only one-in-three persons in Connacht in 1911 were Gaelic speakers and most of these had English as well. The proportion of speakers in the other provinces was smaller still.

⁷⁸ Clark, *Social Origins* (1979); Liam Kennedy, "Farmers, Traders and Agricultural Politics in Pre-Independence Ireland" in S. Clark and J.S. Donnelly Jr. eds, *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1983).

But, without the economic downturn of the late 1870s, it is unlikely that the dissident landlord, Charles Stewart Parnell, or the former Fenian prisoner, Michael Davitt, could have succeeded in mobilising the mass of the rural population behind the demand of “land for the people” and Home Rule for Ireland. It was helpful also at the level of political discourse that the tenant farmers and their representatives could, as part of the critique of landlordism, re-vision Irish landlords as “alien” by virtue of their historic origins and religious affiliation. Thus in the space of a few years, economic stimuli (including economic critiques) and political reactions conjoined to produce a nationalist mobilisation on a mass scale.⁷⁹ Individual and collective economic interests helped fire an agitation that was structured by power and property relationships, and that used increasingly the language and practices of Catholic nationalism.

In the final analysis, it is not easy to see how one might attach primacy to one or the other, to politics or to economy in relation to the Land War. Each would seem to be a necessary condition for the undermining of the long-established social order in rural Ireland, that of landlordism. Thinking about these issues more generally, perhaps it makes sense to see the economic as inextricably bound up with the political and the cultural in the development of nationalism, with multiple actions and reactions unfolding in time. So, sometimes these short-run interactions might contribute mildly, perhaps additively, to the historical flux, as for example during the tenant right agitation of the early 1850s; other times, depending on contingent forces and particular conjunctures as during the Land War, the mutually-reinforcing effects might be multiplicative, resulting in profound change. But always there were the economic and power structures, deeply embedded in time, modified by short-run processes of change (cumulatively or otherwise), serving not so much to determine as to channel and constrain political action. While omnipresent, only in times of crisis did these reveal themselves visibly.

Economic forces and Ulster Unionism

One might wonder if the narrative on the unionist side of the street is pretty well the mirror image, albeit inverted, of that on the nationalist side. It is apparent that Ulster Protestants, unlike Irish Catholics, had made modest economic gains during the first half of the nineteenth century, downward pressure on the piece rates of handloom weavers notwithstanding,⁸⁰ and that substantial gains had accrued during the next quarter century with the growth of shipbuilding, engineering and factory weaving. These business achievements were extended further in subsequent decades. By 1914 the North of Ireland had two of the world’s leading shipyards, Harland & Wolff and Workman Clark. It was a world leader in the manufacture of linens. A range of smaller industries including Mackies and Sirocco in engineering, Dunville and Bushmills in distilling, Gallahers in tobacco manufacture, Cantrell & Cochrane in mineral waters, the Belfast Ropeworks and the shirt making industry in Derry filled out the picture of

⁷⁹ Liam Kennedy, "The Economic Thought of the Nation's Lost Leader: Charles Stewart Parnell" in G Boyce and A O' Day eds., *Parnell in Perspective* (Routledge, London, 1991), pp. 171-200.

⁸⁰ *Reports from the Assistant Handloom Weavers' Commissioners on the West Riding and Ireland*, (1840).

industrial progress.⁸¹ So, looking across the nineteenth century, and viewing particularly the second half of that century, it seems clear that the favourable economic experience of Ulster Protestants under the Union gave ample reason to support the Union (Table 1).

Was that how Ulster businessmen saw the story? We may turn to one of the best-informed and articulate members of the business class, John Milne Barbour, for an answer. Milne Barbour was president of the Belfast Chamber of Commerce when he gave evidence on the Home Rule controversy before members of the Committee on Irish Finance on the 20th July 1911.⁸² Later on, he was to become Minister for Commerce in the Northern Ireland government. In a series of remarkable exchanges, principally with the Roman Catholic bishop of Ross, Dr Kelly, Barbour set out the business objections to devolution for Ireland. By implication, the benefits of Union membership were asserted.

Chairman: “Have you personally much apprehension of the effect on trade of the establishment of Home Rule?”

Barbour: “I should be very sorry indeed to see it introduced.”⁸³

The first worry voiced by Barbour was that access to loan capital on the London financial markets, on which much of Ulster industry depended, might be adversely affected. Under close questioning by the committee he conceded that a solvent firm in Ireland would be able to raise loan capital just as cheaply in the wake of Home Rule as beforehand. However, he (and other investors) worried about the uncertainty the new constitutional arrangements might entail. While he did not anticipate a flight of capital from Ireland in the event of a devolved parliament in Dublin, in his view “new capital certainly would not be attracted”. He was not, however, able to explain very satisfactorily why an Irish parliament, admittedly dominated by agricultural interests, should seek to damage the industrial sector.⁸⁴ A sharp reminder from the Bishop of Ross, Dr Kelly, that there was the beginning of an industrial awakening in the south of the country brought forth the rejoinder that the major manufacturing enterprises in Ulster, and Ireland more generally, were dependent on British, American and world markets. The implicit criticism here was that the Irish industrial revival – paralleling the literary, cultural and language revivals – was oriented in the main towards the very limited home market. Some of its more parochial advocates were overtly protectionist. Ulster industry, by contrast, competed profitably and proudly in Empire and world markets. Should an Irish state go down the road of economic protectionism (as in fact it did for several decades after 1931), this would be at the expense of the export-oriented industry of the North.⁸⁵

Bishop Kelly returned to the attack: surely he, Mr Barbour, would agree that, just like an ordinary household, the public finances of the national household would be more

⁸¹ Philip Ollerenshaw, “Business and Finance, 1780-1945” and John Lynch, “Labour and Society, 1780-1945” in Kennedy and Ollerenshaw eds., *Ulster Since 1600* (2013).

⁸² *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Committee on Irish Finance*, B.P.P., 30 (1913), pp. 174-85.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Q. 4395.

⁸⁴ Industrial protectionism, for instance, was against the economic interests of farmers. The farming sector benefited from internationally competitive prices for its farm inputs and for consumer goods. Protection would have had the effect of raising costs and prices, something which both industrialists and farmers in Ireland would have wished to avoid.

⁸⁵ David Johnson, *The Interwar Economy in Ireland* (Dundalk, 1985); Cormac Ó Gráda, *A Rocky Road: The Irish Economy since the 1920s* (Manchester, 1997).

effectively and more efficiently conducted by an Irish administration? The reply was discomfiting: “I often think there has been very little legislation initiated by Irishmen; nearly all our greatest benefits have been initiated by Englishmen”. While agreeing that “national extravagance”, or high public spending should be curtailed, he added that he had never seen “any really good proposal for the more economic administration of Ireland”.⁸⁶ The only major point of agreement between the Bishop and the captain of industry was that the recently-introduced National Insurance scheme – one of Lloyd George’s great reform measures aimed at protecting workers livelihoods in times of unemployment and denounced by the Irish Bishops – bore heavily on Ireland, and even here Barbour professed himself happy with the reform in principle.

Barbour was polite but unyielding on the key economic issues as they touched on the Union. Then the cross-examination took an unexpected and, as it turned out, a prophetic turn. In the world of politics Barbour opined that minorities sometimes controlled the state of play. “So it is conceivable”, he worried, “that a minority interest in Ireland might be the more virulent minority, and that a separatist party might eventually be able to control things in an Irish parliament. It is a strange thing, but it does happen.” This was indeed prescient when one considers that these opinions pre-dated by a number of years the arming of the Ulster and Irish volunteers and the 1916 rising. But perhaps most surprising, having addressed the major economic problems at length, was Barbour’s dramatic admission, if it was such, later in the session:

Sir William Plender: “Is the feeling against Home Rule more religious than economic?”

J. Milne Barbour: “I think it is very largely religious”.

Plender: “More so than economic?”

Barbour: “Yes, I really think it is”.⁸⁷

The unimportance of the economic?

So, the game is up for the advocates of economic interpretations? It begins to look as if the real issues in Ulster were ethnic and cultural after all. (Religion in the context of the exchanges quoted above should be understood as an ethnic and cultural signifier – with religious affiliation, world view, and denominationally-determined socialising patterns at the heart of a nationalist or a unionist identity.) If true, this would also open up a striking asymmetry in the argument of this chapter: economic structures and forces seemed to be profoundly important in the evolution of nationalism but of secondary import, if even that, in the Ulster unionist case. In this topsy-turvy world the material motivations of the South begin to contrast with the more romantic leanings of the Protestant North.

This will not do, even if there is much of substance in what Barbour had to say in relation to the nationalism and unionism *of his time*.⁸⁸ Unionists liked to parade apparently cool, largely rational arguments about free trade, fiscal responsibility, and the like, but the politics of the late period of the union were infused with hot, emotion-

⁸⁶ *Minutes of Evidence*, QQ 4476-4478.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, QQ 4565-4566.

⁸⁸ Graham Brownlow, “The Political Economy of the Ulster Crisis: Historiography, Social Capability and Globalisation” in D. George Boyce and Alan O’ Day eds., *The Ulster Crisis, 1885-1922* (London, 2005), pp.27-46.

charged issues about identity, militarism, masculinity and culture, notions that had a particular attraction for the younger age cohorts.⁸⁹ By the beginning of the twentieth century, if not a decade or two earlier, economic experience as a determinant of political affiliation had been superseded by more holistic concerns (as was conceded earlier in the discussion of the five indicators for the sub-period 1880-1914). The ethno-political pathways were now well marked, and the passions of orange and green tended to trump material calculation, particularly among the rising generations.

But economic forces still mattered for the development of unionism, broadly in the manner expounded earlier for Irish nationalism. The outward-oriented, dynamic nature of the Ulster economy helped to secure Protestant allegiance to the unionist cause, from at least the 1840s onwards. This is simply to say that the Protestant and unionist position was grounded in positive economic experiences under the Union, one reflected in and reinforced by unionist discourses surrounding these experiences.⁹⁰ The generalised economic forces making for the propagation of a nationalist sense of identity, as discussed above, operated in parallel fashion to produce a mass Protestant and unionist populism. But the contemporary did not exist independently of the past. Again, as in the case of nationalism, the institutional legacy of the seventeenth century was present in the social structure of the nineteenth century. But in Ulster the social structure had been radically amended and supplemented by the emergence of a new class of industrial capitalists. With few exceptions its members were Protestant in religious outlook and unionist in terms of political identity, and these new elites – John Milne Barbour is a representative voice – shared with the older landed ascendancy a fear of Dublin-based devolved government.⁹¹ A potential cleavage in the social structure, in the form of divisions between industrial and agrarian capital, was resolved through a commonality of economic and class interests. (An intriguing counterfactual supposition might be to wonder what the attitudes to Irish nationalism might have been, had a substantial fraction of the capitalist class in Ulster been Catholic.)

But there was another division, wearing familiar ethnic and religious markings, that seems to confound this economic reasoning. What of northern Catholic workers, whose livelihoods were also bound up with the success of industrialization in the Lagan Valley, but who remained resolutely attached to Irish nationalism during the various Home Rule crises? Had the economic issues really mattered, it might be argued, then the Catholic shirt-makers of Derry or the Catholic mill workers of Belfast should have been aligned politically with the Protestant textile, engineering and shipyard workers, whose various livelihoods depended on international markets and the emerging social reforms of the British state. It was not so: political allegiance cut across putative class alliances. In Belfast Catholic workers supported the nationalist Joe Devlin while Protestant workers, in the main, supported unionist candidates, and, later on, the labour unionist association.⁹²

⁸⁹ Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery eds., *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1997).

⁹⁰ As with Irish nationalist narratives, Ulster unionist interpretations of the past were characterised by silences and selective recall. To fix on an egregious illustration, the Great Famine of the 1840s found little or no place in the folk memory and populist writings of Ulster unionists. Kinealy and MacAtasney, *Hidden Famine* (2000), pp. 1-9.

⁹¹ Stephen A. Royle, "Workshop of the Empire, 1820-1914" in Connolly ed., *Belfast 400*, pp. 199-235.

⁹² Henry Patterson, "The Decline of the Collaborators: The Ulster Unionist Labour Association and Post-war Unionist Politics" in Francis Devine, Fintan Lane and Niamh Puirseil eds., *Essays in Irish Labour History: a Festschrift for Elizabeth and John W Boyle* (Dublin, 2008), pp. 238-56.

One way out of this dilemma might be to adopt an orange Marxist position: that urban-based northern nationalists were the victims of “false consciousness”, in thrall to the hegemonic influences of an Irish Catholic bourgeoisie.⁹³ This, however, is no more convincing than putting the boot on the other foot: northern unionists were the dupes of an Ulster Protestant bourgeoisie who failed (and continue to fail) to see their “real” class interests and their place in the Irish nation. Short of an appeal to congenital worker stupidity, it must be said that ideologies, political alliances and mobilisations, be they of the orange or green variety, that have endured for more than a hundred years and that show no sign of dissolving, can hardly be understood in terms of what is essentially wishful thinking. If anything, false consciousness was in the mind of the analyst.

There are in fact reasons why northern Catholic workers should not necessarily identify their interests with unionism. Admittedly the arguments are weaker in relation to the economy, but even here some qualifications are in order. Catholics were concentrated in lower-paid sectors, and they experienced job discrimination in the labour market as well as artificial ceilings to their career aspirations.⁹⁴ While the extent of these barriers is still a matter of controversy, a role for discrimination is not in doubt.⁹⁵ Moreover, northern Catholic workers had no difficulty in adopting trade unionism which served a subset of their interests, though not the rounded set of political, cultural and economic objectives to which they subscribed under the banner of nationalism. The most compelling economic argument of all resided in the calculus of the imagination, or rather the incalculable calculus of the imagination. Ireland free *would be* Ireland prosperous, as nationalist discourses from O’Connell to Parnell, and onwards to Arthur Griffith and Sinn Féin had reassured generations of nationalists. Visions of an as yet unrealised future were worth the risk and could be far more compelling than prosaic policy prescriptions, as demonstrated down the ages in virtually all countries by social movements of a religious or secular hue. Moreover, nationalism, in Ireland as elsewhere, appealed to the whole person, and travelled well across gender and class boundaries, satisfying needs as diverse as the rational, the emotional, the symbolic, the aesthetic and the aspirational, as well as the irrational, the vindictive and the neurotic.

Returning to Ulster unionism, industrialization had manifold implications for the practice as well as the making of unionist politics. Industrialization generated wealth and resources which helped fund Ulster unionist political campaigns and later the arming of the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1913-14.⁹⁶ From the captains of industry there emerged some effective political leaders, the most prominent example being that of James Craig of the Ulster distilling family. Indeed the economic and political timing was fortuitous: the era of the home rule challenge was also the period when the business strength of Ulster unionism was reaching a triumphant crescendo. The implications at the level of ideological discourse and collective self-image have been mentioned above. But the most powerful contribution from the economic sphere to Ulster Unionism arose indirectly rather than directly. Business success bred, literally, demographic strength, a necessary condition for successful resistance to Home Rule and the later brands of Irish

⁹³ This seems to be implicit if not actually explicit in the influential publication, *The Economics of Partition*, produced by the Irish Communist Organisation, later the British and Irish Communist Organisation (Belfast, 1969).

⁹⁴ A.C.Hepburn, *A Past Apart: Studies in the History of Catholic Belfast, 1850-1950* (Belfast, 1996).

⁹⁵ John Whyte, “How much Discrimination was there under the Unionist Regime, 1921-1968” in Tom Gallagher and James O’Connell, *Contemporary Irish Studies* (Manchester, 1983).

⁹⁶ Timothy Bowman, *Carson’s Army: The Ulster Volunteer Force, 1910-22* (Manchester, 2007).

nationalism in an era characterised both by democratic reform and resort to political violence.⁹⁷

Conclusion

By the late nineteenth century the two ethnic groupings were “locked-in” to either unionist or nationalist postures. The mutually hostile embrace ensured positive feedback mechanisms within each camp, thereby reinforcing the sense of group solidarity and commitment to Irish nationalism or Ulster unionism, as the case might be. In effect, this was, and it still is (in the twenty-first century), a type of dual path dependence. To borrow an image from econometrics, unionist and nationalist positions on a range of political and constitutional issues tracked each other through time in a closely-bound relationship, one in which the political stance of one was typically the inverse of the other.

The role of the economic, if comprehended more broadly to embrace the three dimensions of structure, process and economic discourse, interacted in complex ways with emerging political, cultural and even theological stances. Indeed, taking the longer view, what we have is something akin to cumulative causation, as outlined by Gunnar Myrdal in a very different historical context.⁹⁸ It probably does not make much sense to try to find a *primus motor* or original mover in the system of historical relationships from the seventeenth century onwards. Rather the emphasis might be on the economic as both cause and effect of the unfolding historical forces that helped form nationalism and unionism in the nineteenth century.

Having reinstated the case for the importance of the economic, as understood in the three-fold sense of structure, process and discourse, a word of caution is due, perhaps overdue. Whether these deeper structures and the experience of economic change in nineteenth-century Irish society were a *necessary* condition for the development of Irish nationalism and unionism, in the absence of which alternative historical pathways might have opened up, is difficult to say. An agnostic position, while emotionally unsatisfying, may be the better part of intellectual valour. The intuitive sense of this chapter is that the rise of regionally-based nationalisms is compatible with a wide range of economic circumstances, beyond those sketched by Gellner and his followers, particularly if there is a substantial inheritance from the past of cultural and ethno-demographic materials for nation-building.⁹⁹ Ulster unionism is clearly anomalous in terms of such earlier frameworks, as there was no sense of missing out on the heart beats of economic modernisation and industrialization. Sure enough there is a case for emphasising the relatively recent origins of nationalism in world history, but this too can be overdone. It is hard to make much sense of the two nationalisms on the island of Ireland without reference to the deeper historical foundations. A parting economic shot is in order in relation to the triumph, or partial triumph of Ulster unionism, as distinct from the making of British nationalism in Ireland. The process of industrialization in

⁹⁷ “Did Industrialization Matter? Nationalist and Unionist Conflict in Ireland” (unpublished paper, Institute of Irish Studies, Queen’s University, Belfast, 2005).

⁹⁸ Gunnar Myrdal, “Institutional Economics”, *Journal of Economic Issues*, 12 (Dec. 1978), pp. 771-83.

⁹⁹ The comparison with economically-developed Catalonia and the emergence of Catalan nationalism, for instance, is instructive, and the contrasts – a separate language and a separate Catalan capitalist class – suggest there were different pathways into the world of nationalisms.

north-east Ireland was critical, though not in the sense usually understood. It was the demographic implications of industrialization and urbanisation that really mattered. This is because in the absence of industrialization there would not have been a sufficiently populous Protestant presence for effective opposition to Home Rule and the creation of the statelet of Northern Ireland. But unfolding that particular argument is work for another day.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ See “Did Industrialization Matter?” (cited earlier).