

VISIONARY: Joe Devlin saw, before the Sinn Féin government in Dublin did, that British proposals to partition Ireland would permanently entrench unionist majority misrule



Partition has failed – time to start again

IT IS SAID that history never repeats itself, though historians often do. Now I'm not so sure. As we face into the centenary of partition next week, the echoes between then and now are shocking: violence on the streets, loyalists on the rampage, a British government in disarray – using deceit and blatant lies to get their way.

The man who brings this strikingly to light is Eamon Phoenix, historian of this parish, and with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the recent history of this place.

In preparation for next week's centenary of the partition of Ireland, I have been working my way through his magnificent survey of Northern Nationalism which was published by the Ulster Historical Foundation in 1994. On its cover is a fine portrait by Sir John Lavery of a man history has overlooked.

Joe Devlin was born on the lower Falls in 1871, and was one of the first journalists on the *Irish News* when it was founded in 1891. Wee Joe Devlin was also a commanding presence in the House of Commons, and an articulate spokesman for constitutional change in Ireland as it struggled to free itself of imperial rule.

He was a Cassandra figure though too, warning with uncanny accuracy about the impact of partition on the nationalist population in Northern Ireland. He knew – because he had seen sectarianism at first hand – that a gerrymandered statelet would unleash its evils unchecked. Few who mattered listened.

Devlin saw, before the Sinn Féin government in Dublin did, that British proposals to partition Ireland would permanently entrench unionist majority misrule.

But he was one of the lone Irish voices at Westminster opposing the Government of Ireland Act.

In one of those maddening what-ifs of history, Sinn Féin's decision to embrace abstentionism had altered the dynamic in Westminster, and gave

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– started by an incendiary speech on the Twelfth by Sir Edward Carson.

In a warning to the British government, Carson mobilised the UVF: "We tell you that, come what will, in the last resort, we will rely upon ourselves, and, under God we will defend ourselves."

He went on to say: "Those are not mere words. I hate words without action."

There had been some 20 deaths in Derry the previous month. Over the next two years hundreds lost their lives in Belfast, thousands were driven from their jobs and their homes. The phrase generally employed for this violence is 'sectarian', which implies a degree of blame on either side.

While the violence was not all one-sided, the Belfast pogrom was the moment when unionism asserted its right to create a 'Protestant state for a Protestant people', a right underwritten by the Government of Ireland Act, imposed by an imperial parliament which turned a deaf ear to Devlin and nationalists in the north east of Ireland.

Referring to the pogroms, Devlin said: "If that is what we get when they have not their parliament, what may we expect when they have that weapon, with wealth and power strongly entrenched? What will we get when they are armed with British rifles, when they have cast round them the imperial garb, what mercy, what pity, much less justice or liberty will be conceded to us then?"

History provide him unerringly right.

Those who are opposed to change should remember next week is not just the centenary of Northern Ireland, it is also the centenary of the United Kingdom in its current form. The UK is not so old that it cannot change again.

Northern Ireland was born out of the lies and deception of another age – nationalists were told it was a temporary measure, unionists assured it was permanent.

It was, is and remains a failed political entity. Its time is up.

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ON THIS DAY

APRIL 29 1921

Rosslea Tragedies Recalled

COUNTY Court Judge Johnston, KC was engaged for several days at Newtownbutler Quarter Sessions in Enniskillen in investigating claims for compensation for the burning of houses in Rosslea on February 21st and the burning of other homes in the district on March 22nd.

On the morning of 21st February a Unionist named Lester was shot and seriously wounded while taking off his shutters and that night a large number of houses occupied by Catholics were burned. On March 22nd houses occupied by Unionists were burned [in what] was regarded as a counter-reprisal. One witness stated that Mr Lester was shot in the morning and later in the day some police came into the town and told the people that they could not be responsible for what might happen. Evidence was given that some people left the town.

A witness was asked by the Judge who were the men who committed this destruction and he replied that they were supposed to be from [Ulster] Volunteers. Major Falls, solicitor for Fermanagh County Council said there were counter-reprisals in March. Two men named Gordon and Nixon were shot dead and a great number of houses burnt.

Colonel Madden [a Monaghan landlord] said that no portion of the compensation for the burnings should be levied off the County Monaghan. He quoted from an article in the *Impartial Reporter* (a Unionist paper) after the Rosslea burnings: "It was well known that in County Fermanagh the resolve of the county was three for one – three lives should be taken if one were taken and three houses burned if one were burnt".

Replying, Major Falls described Fermanagh as one of the most peaceable and law-abiding counties in the whole of Ireland while Monaghan simply reeked with blood and burnings. The evidence showed that, on the night the Rosslea houses were burned, two bodies of armed men, marching in military order, were seen coming along the Monaghan Road into Rosslea and that night a man named Finnegan, from Smithboro, County Monaghan, was accidentally killed.

Judge Johnston said: 'As regards the [February] event the attacking party were friends or sympathisers with Lester who had been shot earlier. I have come to the conclusion that they came from County Monaghan. In the various cases one-sixth of the compensation is to be levied on Fermanagh and five-sixths on Monaghan. (This case gives a remarkable insight into the nature of the bitter sectarian violence which erupted around Rosslea involving both the UVF and the local IRA. A peace conference in Clones is said to have finally quelled the violence.)

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