The Irish dimension to British History: From the Act of Union to Brexit

Sir David Cannadine's lecture delivered at the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin, Tuesday 15 January 2019

President Kennedy, Members of the Royal Irish Academy, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is, indeed, an honour and a privilege to have been invited to speak to this august and distinguished assembly this evening, one indication of which is that this is the first time during my Presidency that I have addressed any of the British Academy's sister organizations in any other country. It is especially fitting and appropriate that I should speak first here in Dublin, for the British Academy's relations with the Royal Irish Academy are closer and more cordial than with any other such organization, as evidenced most recently by our joint work before and since the United Kingdom's referendum on Brexit.

Prior to the vote, we held two roundtables in London and Dublin, as a result of which we produced a joint report. Since the referendum, we have worked closely on a succession of Brexit Briefings, focusing on the border, the Common Travel Area, human rights, the Good Friday Agreement, and the all-island economy. I shall, of course, return to Brexit later in this lecture, but let me just observe for now that we have it on good authority that these co-produced documents have not only been well-read in London (and no doubt here in Dublin), but also in Brussels as well. This is exactly as it should be, for they provide essential background and context without which the vexed question of the border cannot be fully understood.

I must also observe, with a combination of envy and admiration, that the Royal Irish Academy, like the Royal Society of Edinburgh, encompasses the whole range of human knowledge across the sciences, the humanities and the social sciences, whereas in Britain these activities are represented by four separate academies. Our relations with our three partners are very good, cordial and purposeful, but there is a case for saying that Dublin and Edinburgh seem to manage these things better than we do in London. And, like the Royal Society of Edinburgh again, the Royal Irish Academy is a long-established organization by comparison with which, in terms of our relatively recent origins, the British Academy seems almost an upstart, an arriviste and even something of a parvenu.

Accordingly, my presence here tonight is not only a display of solidarity, in terms of our shared belief in reason and learning, evidence-based research, free trade in ideas, and the international republic of letters, but is also an act of homage and obeisance to this Academy, which combines venerability with vigour and vitality in such a powerful and resonant way.

For anyone of my generation, it is impossible to utter the words 'President Kennedy' without thinking of an earlier figure who bore that title and that name in another country, a vivid reminder of the great significance of the importance of the Irish diaspora, especially but not exclusively in north America and the Antipodes – a major historical subject in its own right which has recently begun to receive the serious treatment it undoubtedly deserves. John F Kennedy's inaugural address, was among other things, a ringing affirmation of America's commitment to global engagement and to the unwavering support of its western allies. He also believed passionately in education and the life of the mind. I am not sure things in Washington DC are quite like that now.

But I do wonder, Mr President, how your appointment and inauguration were greeted here at the Royal Irish Academy? In my case, I must admit, the responses were somewhat equivocal, ranging from the kind, generous and effusive to the ill-informed and the downright dismaying. 'Hugely thrilled', one e-mail declared, 'that you will be the next President of the Royal Academy. I never knew you painted pictures.' 'Utterly delighted', opined a second, 'that you are to be the new President of BAFTA. I never knew you made films.' Since I became President, we have been working hard to raise the British Academy's profile, with the public, politicians, parliamentarians, civil servants, opinion formers and journalists, and I hope my successor will not be greeted in quite the same bewildered way.

Even more disconcerting was one encounter with a London taxi driver. I was on my way to a studio behind Broadcasting House to record my second series of "Prime Ministers' Props" for BBC Radio 4. Having given my destination, but not revealed my purpose, the driver turned around and inquired: 'Does that mean you are the member of an ageing rock band?', a question, I have to say, that I have never been asked before, and which I fervently hope I shall never be asked again. To which I replied, summoning up such wounded dignity as I could muster, and as I thought unanswerably: 'No, I am not a member of an ageing rock band, but I am the next President of the British Academy.' To which he responded, I fear even more unanswerably, 'Doesn't that amount to the same thing?'

In addition to being here as President of the British Academy, I ought to mention that I am the Editor of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, and so I also

bring fraternal greetings to the Dictionary of Irish Biography, which is one of the flagship enterprises that the Royal Irish Academy supports, and with which the ODNB enjoys longstanding contacts which we are eager to develop further. Indeed, I vividly remember a most enjoyable get together with the DIB's editor, Turlough O'Riordan, in of all places, Canberra in Australia. We agreed we should do more together, and I hope we shall indeed be able to do so.

When I am not presiding over the affairs of the British Academy or overseeing the work of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, I spend most of my time researching and writing as an historian of modern Britain, albeit with that subject very broadly defined. For that does not just mean these islands, grouped together off the coast of mainland Europe, and the complex inter-relations between them, but also encompasses the British empire of settlement and rule, and relations with the United States. And it is from these professional perspectives that I turn to the substance of my lecture this evening, which is devoted to what I have called 'The Irish Dimension to British History: From the Act of Union to Brexit.'

I chose the phrase 'the Irish Dimension', because it seems less freighted with unhappy connotations that what was once the more familiar formulation, namely 'the Irish Question.' And I'm sure I don't need to remind you that it was Benjamin Disraeli, speaking in the British parliament, who first gave this phrase prominence, when he spoke as follows:

> A dense population in extreme distress, inhabit an island where there is an established church, which is not their church, and a territorial aristocracy the richest of whom live in foreign capitals. Thus you have a starving population, an absentee aristocracy, and an alien church; and in addition the weakest executive in the world. That [Disraeli concluded] is the Irish question.

Disraeli was not wholly wrong, and within a very short space of time – he was speaking in 1844, and I am sure I do not need to remind you of the cataclysmic catastrophe that was only a few years off – the 'starving population' would be more hungry than ever. But there was also a strong element of condescension in this formulation, implying that the Irish were the problem, and that it was up to the English (or the British) to sort it out, if only the Irish would let them. But, so this way of looking at things further suggests, while the powers that be in London had undoubtedly posed the right question, they were persistently thwarted by the recalcitrant, un-co-operative and ungrateful Irish in their attempts to discover the right answer and to implement the right policies on the basis of it.

This view of things received its most famous and memorable formulation at the hands of Sellar and Yateman, in their hilarious comic history of England, entitled 1066 and All That, first published in 1930. 'Every time', they wrote there, 'the English thought they had found the answer, the Irish changed the question.' Note, once again, the easy, condescending English and British assumptions: the English knew what they were doing, and agreed what they should be doing, but it was the Irish themselves who prevented them from fixing the problem and thus from answering the question.

Having recently completed a book on the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, covering the years from 1800 to 1906, it seems to me that these formulations, harking back to Disraeli, really don't get us very far. There may be some truth in them, since there were many occasions where the British found the Irish very difficult to deal with, but they are far from being the whole truth. On the contrary, it is possible to argue that, on the one hand, the English or British did not know what the Irish question was, or if they did know, they lacked the political capacity to answer it; whereas on the other hand, it was not that the Irish kept changing the question, but rather that the English/British kept changing their minds as to how to solve it, which left the Irish increasingly baffled and confused, and disaffected and disenchanted in their relations with London.

Consider in this regard the Act of Union, passed at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, which incorporated this island of Ireland into what then became a much-extended United Kingdom, and abolished the Irish parliament which had previously met in Dublin. From the British perspective, this was in many ways a defensive measure, partly in response to the Irish rebellion (or, depending on your point of view, the 'year of liberty') of 1798, and partly out of fear that the revolutionary French, with whom the British were then at war, might invade and use Ireland as a jumping off point to attack Great Britain itself.

The abolition of the Irish parliament, and the downgrading of Dublin from being a great national capital to a marginalized provincial city naturally caused considerable resentment and widespread offence – resentment and offence which the British never really understood or made any effort to try to understand. Even more importantly, the companion piece of legislation which the younger Pitt, then Prime Minister, had hoped to pass at the same time so as to sweeten the pill, was postponed for a generation, because the political will – or political capacity – was not there.

That piece of legislation was, of course, what would become known as Catholic Emancipation: Ireland might have lost its parliament and its autonomy and been incorporated into the United Kingdom in what seemed to critics to be a quasi-

colonial way, but at least many of its people would gain the right to vote at Westminster and to play a broader part in the public life of the United Kingdom, if their civil disabilities, essentially on the grounds of their Catholic religion, were removed. That, at least, was the original scheme, in which the Act of Union and Catholic Emancipation were regarded as equally essential parts of a single political package.

But as is well known, George III, in almost the last decisive act of his reign before he collapsed into permanent madness, refused to countenance this companion measure on the grounds that he had sworn an oath at his coronation, as every monarch since William III had done, and as every monarch since George III has subsequently done, to uphold the protestant religion by law established; and therefore he was not prepared to support this concession to the Catholic population of Ireland. Whereupon Pitt the younger decided he could not go against his sovereign's wishes, and the matter was put on hold for the remainder of George III's reign and the regency that followed.

Although they disagreed on many things, George III and his son, George IV, did see eye to eye about the coronation oath; and as regent from 1810 to 1820, and as monarch thereafter, George IV was no more enthused about Catholic Emancipation than his father had been. Only when Ireland threatened to erupt in the late 1820s, and when pressurized by the Duke of Wellington and Robert Peel, did the king grudgingly and reluctantly agree to the measure, even as some of Wellington and Peel's erstwhile Tory supporters continued to oppose it. But it was more than an entire generation late, and the ameliorative potential it might have had in 1800 had long since vanished by 1829.

This was the first time in the nineteenth century, but by no means the last, when a British government simply could not deliver what was widely felt to be needed in terms of dealing with Ireland. Here is another example, and it concerns the most tragic episode in Ireland's nineteenth century history, namely the Great Famine of the late 1840s. The causes are well known, and the consequences were terrible, as millions starved because of the repeated failure of the potato crop, and millions more were compelled to emigrate, among them the forebears of John F. Kennedy himself.

What did the British government do, and could it or should it have done more? These remain very vexed and controversial questions. It is worth noting at the outset that it was Robert – now Sir Robert – Peel who was in charge of the Conservative government when faced with this crisis, the very same man who had also been Wellington's foremost lieutenant in the Commons at the time of the passing of Catholic Emancipation. The Tory rank and file had never forgiven him

for, as they saw it, betraying the Church of England in 1829, and they never forgave him for betraying agricultural protection in 1846 by repealing the Corn Laws. Moreover, Peel only carried the measure with Whig support, the Tories were deeply split, with the Protectionists as the hard line Brexiteers of their day, and as a result, they were effectively out of power for a generation.

Peel's motives for repealing the Corn Laws remain complex, and perhaps ultimately unfathomable; but they were partly because he was deeply concerned about the rapidly deteriorating situation in Ireland, and he hoped to ensure that there might be adequate supplies of imported grain to make up for the dearth of potatoes. This did not turn out to be the case, and neither his government, nor that of Lord John Russell that followed, spent as much on public works and job creation as some contemporary critics and some subsequent historians have claimed they could and should have done. This was partly because, as the British economy moved towards a deep depression in the late 1840s, public revenues declined rapidly; but it was also because in the prevailing climate of minimalist, laissez-faire government, the very idea that Whitehall and parliament should intervene to ameliorate even such a catastrophe as the Great Famine was anathema to many. My aim here is not to defend or criticize the British governments of the time, still less to minimize the dreadful catastrophe of the famine: rather it is to point out that the governments lacked the fiscal resources, the interventionist ideological conviction, and thus the active political will, to do any more than they did. But the consequences were terrible and lasting. Much more than Catholic Emancipation, the English/British were never forgiven for standing idly by while this Malthusian disaster unfolded. Nor did the Irish forget: in 1897, at a counter-demonstration in Dublin protesting against the Diamond Jubilee, there was a procession with a coffin and the slogan was: 'Sixty Glorious Years: Ireland starved to Death.'

And so to my third example, Irish Home Rule, the cause that Gladstone took up in the mid 1880s, having already disestablished the (Anglican) Church of Ireland and having also attempted to solve the agricultural question by passing several measures to regulate relations between landlords and tenants, to the disadvantage of the former and the intended benefit of the latter. But for Gladstone, there was more to the Irish question than the three issues of religion, land and poverty to which Disraeli had drawn attention in his earlier formulation. There was also the matter of the Anglo-Irish Union itself which, Gladstone came to believe, was the greatest single impediment to the establishment of better relations between Britain and Ireland.

Hence his espousal of Irish Home Rule, and his two abortive attempts, in 1886 and 1893, to modify the relationship between Great Britain and Ireland – not, as his opponents insisted, as the first step towards the break-up of the United Kingdom

and thus potentially of the British Empire itself; but rather, as Gladstone insisted, because the best way to reconcile Ireland to the Union, and to safeguard the continued existence of the United Kingdom, was to give it a greater degree of autonomy and to restore its own legislature -- although only for certain domestic issues, while at the same time keeping Irish MPs in the Westminster parliament. The first bill was defeated in the Commons because many of Gladstone's erstwhile Liberal supporters rebelled, just as some Tories had earlier rebelled over Catholic Emancipation and the Repeal of the Corn Laws; the second was passed by the Commons, but it was thrown out by the Lords with the largest hostile majority vote of modern times.

Faced with the split in his own party, the intransigence of the Conservatives, and the deep opposition of the House of Lords, as well as of Queen Victoria, who was as opposed to Irish Home Rule as George III had been to Catholic Emancipation, Gladstone could no more deliver on his scheme for Ireland than the Younger Pitt had earlier been able to deliver on his. And it was not just that the measure could not be carried in parliament: it was also that there was widespread opposition to it among the electorate of Great Britain, where residual anti-Catholicism remained strong throughout the nineteenth century, and where the Liberals went down to heavy defeat at the general election of 1895. The result was that the whole issue was postponed until the early 1910s, when it re-emerged in an even more virulent and violent form.

Let me, in the light of these three examples, return to those words of Sellar and Yateman that I quoted earlier: 'Every time the English thought they had found the answer, the Irish changed the question'. To be sure, Pitt the younger, Sir Robert Peel and Mr Gladstone all thought they had the answer, respectively Catholic Emancipation, the Repeal of the Corn Laws and Home Rule. But Pitt could not proceed with his measure because the king vetoed it, repealing the Corn Laws was insufficient to deal with the demographic calamity that was the Great Famine, and Gladstone could not carry Home Rule – initially in the Commons, then in the Lords, and on both occasions with the people of Great Britain when their views were invited via the ballot box.

From this perspective, the problems with answering the Irish question lay not so much with the Irish themselves, but rather with the British monarchy, the British parliament and British public opinion. Notice also that attitudes to Ireland did not map exactly on to British party loyalties: many Tories and Conservatives were deeply hostile to Catholic Emancipation and the repeal of the Corn Laws, and Wellington and Peel had needed support from the Whigs to get their measures through; while Gladstone effectively split the Liberal Party over Home Rule, and many of his erstwhile colleagues became Liberal Unionists, pledged to maintain

the Union that they feared Gladstone would destroy. Notice finally that the governments of the Younger Pitt, Peel and Gladstone were all fatally damaged on Irish issues.

These are the three most famous examples which suggest that the attempts by Disraeli, no less than Sellar and Yateman, to define the Irish question in such a way as to put the blame four-square on the Irish, really don't and won't work. Moreover, these are but the specific examples of a more general point. On the whole, across the nineteenth century, the British parties of the right, the Tories then Conservatives, favoured repressive measure in Ireland: passing coercion acts, increasing the numbers of troops and police, arresting troublemakers and locking them up. (Hence the soubriquet 'Bloody Balfour' bestowed on Lord Salisbury's nephew and successor during his time as Chief Secretary for Ireland.) Whereas parties of the left, the Whigs and the Liberals, generally embraced a more emollient approach, letting offenders out of gaol, and trying to understand Irish grievances, with which they attempted to deal.

The difficulty was that, as the parliamentary pendulum at Westminster swung back and forth, from left to right and back again, and thus from conciliation to coercion and back to conciliation, it was increasingly difficult for the Irish to believe that there was anything approaching a consistent British policy, because in fact there wasn't. Coercion led to resentment, which conciliation briefly mollified, but then it was more coercion again, and so the cycle went on. Under these circumstances, it was scarcely surprising that the Irish found it very difficult to deal with the British, because they – the British – kept changing their minds as to what they should do. Thus may 1066 and All That be stood on its head: every time the Irish thought they understood what the British were doing, the London government changed, and the new administration decided to do the very opposite of its immediate predecessor.

Accordingly, it was not so much that Ireland was Britain's problem, rather it would be more accurate to suggest that Britain was Ireland's problem. Most British policy-makers knew very little first-hand about Ireland, they tended to settle for short term solutions to long term problems that were inadequate or contradictory, and when they took up and embraced larger and more imaginative schemes, they found themselves in serious difficulties in terms of parliamentary support. Moreover, public opinion in Britain was generally hostile to Irish Catholics, party identities were fissured and sundered over the Irish issue, and some of the greatest nineteenth century prime ministers were discredited or fell from power over Irish matters. More than any other, Ireland was the subject that preoccupied, and in some ways poisoned, British politics in the nineteenth century – just as Britain was the subject that preoccupied, and in some ways poisoned, Irish politics, too.

This brings me, as my title promised, to Brexit. But how so, exactly? Simply put, the answer is that Europe has become to British politics since 1979 what Ireland was to British politics for so much of the nineteenth century. Consider the parallels. Just as the younger Pitt, Peel and Gladstone were all ultimately defeated by Ireland, so Thatcher, Major and Cameron were brought down by Europe, and when it happens, the same will surely be said of Theresa May – whenever she finally quits 10 Downing Street. Just as the parties of both left and right were divided as to how to deal with Ireland, so they have been over how to deal with Europe, where on both the right and on the left, there are those who are for the EU, those who are against it, and those whose views lie somewhere in-between. Just as the younger Pitt and Gladstone were unable to pass the Irish measures they advocated in the British parliament, so it seems highly unlikely that Theresa May will ever be able to get her Brexit deal through. And just as anti-Catholicism was a powerful force in nineteenth-century British politics, so hostility to Europe, much fomented by UKIP and the tabloid press, has become a powerful force in our own time.

Yet it is not just that Europe has become as difficult and divisive an issue in the politics of our own time as Ireland was during the politics of the nineteenth century: it is also, and here is the final extraordinary twist to the story so far, that the Irish issue has re-emerged as being a crucial element in the current Brexit imbroglio: partly because Theresa May, having lost the general election, depends on the support of the Democratic Unionist Party in just the way that Gladstone needed the parliamentary votes of the Irish Home Rulers; partly because, while the DUP is hostile to the EU, the people of Northern Ireland voted overwhelmingly in favour of remain; but also because the issue of the border between the six counties in the north and the Republic of Ireland has assumed such central importance – a border, it is worth remembering, that came into being because, by the early 1920s, the only solution to the Irish question appeared no longer to be Home Rule for a still-unified Ireland, but partition of the island instead.

In recent years, then, issues concerning Ireland and issues concerning Europe have converged for British policy makers in a uniquely intractable combination. As a friend of mine said to me a few days ago, while we were discussing these extraordinary connections, coincidences and contingences: you simply could not make it up! And the fact that I am delivering this discourse on these vexed and interlocking subjects of the relations between Ireland, Britain and Europe, here in Dublin on the very evening that Theresa May's Brexit deal will be voted on and may be voted down by the British parliament, just as Gladstone's Home Rule Bills were earlier rejected, leaves me wondering just who it was at the Royal Irish Academy who had the foresight and the prescience to arrange this meeting and this discourse on this night of all nights.

Let me offer one final perspective on these extraordinarily complex and controversial matters. Self-evidently, the relations between Great Britain and Ireland, and latterly between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, that have received the most attention have been those between governments, civil servants, diplomats and policy makers. For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, those relations were not particularly good, and it was only in the 1990s and 2000s that they significantly improved, that the Good Friday Agreement was negotiated, and that peace broke out in the north, thanks to the committed involvement of high level figures in London, Belfast, Dublin and Washington DC --- a committed involvement which has, alas, been somewhat less in evidence of late.

Yet across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and on into our own time, relations between Britain and Ireland have occurred at many levels, and they have sometimes taken surprising forms. As Roy Foster so brilliantly argued, there were, have been and still are what he termed 'varieties of Irish-ness' – social, cultural, economic, geographical, political – just as, by the same token, there were, have been and are varieties of Britishness, Englishness, Scottish-ness and Welsh-ness too. This is another reason why the simple formulations of the Irish question, addressed by a monolithic England/Britain in relation to a no less monolithic Ireland, is wide of the mark, since the east-west interactions across the Irish Sea have taken and do take many, myriad and multifarious forms, which may be very different from the official interactions at government level, or from the popular agitation associated with the late eighteenth-century rebellion, the eventual passing of Catholic Emancipation or the later violence associated with the Land War and the so called 'Plan of Campaign'.

It's a well-known fact that many men (and they tended to be men) made careers by leaving Ireland for England, from Jonathan Swift, Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century, to Oscar Wilde and Edward Carson in the nineteenth, to Brendan Bracken and Brendan Behan in the twentieth. Only Roy Foster, himself an Irish-born historian, could get away with calling them 'Micks on the Make' in a book entitled Paddy and Mr Punch, but there can be no doubt that great-power Britain offered a bigger arena for their talents than post-Union Ireland. Nor were they the ones to benefit in this way.

For even as many people in nineteenth century Ireland chafed under what they saw as the constraints and humiliations of British Rule, there were others who saw the chance to be connected, not just with the United Kingdom, but with the greater British Empire to which that gave them access, as a great opportunity. This was true for many impoverished Irish aristocratic families, who took up proconsular posts overseas, such as Lords Dufferin and Minto; and it was no less true for many

Catholics as well as Protestants at a much lower social level, for whom military service in the growing and expanding British Empire offered an escape from poverty and penury at home.

Consider in this regard Arthur Wellesley, first Duke of Wellington. Born in Dublin, the son of an Irish peer, he saw military service in India and then in Europe. But between those appointments and engagements, he was Chief Secretary for Ireland. But having left for the Iberian Peninsula, he never returned to Ireland, and when he died in 1852, Tennyson eulogized him in his majestic funeral ode by writing 'the last great Englishman is low'. This was not strictly accurate, since Wellington was Irish-born and raised; but this later, Anglicized characterization, which Wellington himself in later life did much to promote, says a great deal about nineteenth-century British attitudes towards Ireland.

Finally, and here we come much closer to home, I note that, although Irish nationalism in the twentieth century has on the whole taken a republican and anti-monarchical form, it has rightly been observed that 'the language of Irish separatism was often an oddly royalist one', as the Royal College of Surgeons, the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal Dublin Society and the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland all retained their royal prefixes. In republican Ireland, there is a Royal Irish Academy, whereas in the monarchical United Kingdom, there is no Royal British Academy. Such are some of the many contradictions and paradoxes of Anglo-Irish relations, that have existed for a long time, and which may even survive in the vexed world of Brexit in which we find ourselves today.

Let me draw these remarks, and this discourse, to a close. Today has been for me what I might a day of two presidents: yourself, President Kennedy, and the President of Ireland, Michael Higgins, whom I met earlier this morning. He and I discussed a variety of matters of what might be termed mutual interest, and I also took the occasion to remind him of some words he had spoken, some months ago, at the launch in this city of the new Cambridge History of Ireland. 'A knowledge and understanding of history', President Higgins observed in that occasion, 'is intrinsic to our shared citizenship. To be without such knowledge', he went on, 'is to be permanently burdened with a lack of perspective, empathy and wisdom.' And, he continued, 'to be without historical training, the careful and necessary capability to filter and critically interpret a variety of sources, is to leave citizens desperately ill-equipped to confront a world in which information is increasingly disseminated without historical perspective or even regard for truth.'

Or, as he put it on another occasion, history is 'essential to understanding who we are today', as it is to debunking myths, challenging inaccuracies and exposing deliberate amnesia or invented versions of the past. Amen to all of that. The

provision of historical perspective and the regard for evidence-based learning are among the essential foundations and vital supports of any free, healthy and mature society. They are also two of the many important and admirable activities of the Royal Irish Academy, and I acclaim those efforts, salute those aspirations, and pledge my support and that of the British Academy for all that you will be doing in the years ahead – and, I hope and believe, of all that our Academies will be doing together in the years ahead.