

## Ireland: a great chance lost

(From Auberon Herbert's libertarian paper, THE FREE LIFE, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1890)

**W**hat is the true liberty view about Ireland? We shall please few people by our answer, but pleasing is not the aim we put before ourselves. We answer then in the first place, that undoubtedly Ireland - minus a part of Ulster - has a right to complete nationality. We have no right to argue the case from the point of England's convenience. It may or may not be convenient for England to have Ireland in tow, - we don't know and we don't care; but we are quite clear that when a country or a part of a country wishes to dissociate itself from a larger country it is right for it to do so.

But we can find little praise for the great body of actors who are mixed up in this struggle. That there is amongst the Liberal party a large number of men who are anxious to do what is right by Ireland, we gladly believe. In politics the body is always sounder than the head. There is generally this great difference between the nominal leaders and the mass; that the leaders are more or less playing a game; whilst the mass - whether right or wrong - is in earnest. We can offer our English leaders few compliments. They have tumbled into this question of Irish nationalism without preparation in mind or in morals. They are appealing to a principle in which they hardly believe, and which goes much further than they intend to go. They appeal to nationality, but are careful to explain that they mean Home Rule and nothing more. All that is very idle. A principle will not endure to be fashioned by any man to suit his own convenience. Principles are stubborn things, and refuse to be used to-day and thrown aside to-morrow. The doctrine once laid down that Ireland has a right to Home Rule - it will follow, whenever Ireland desires it, that Ireland has a right to separation. This is not frankly and honestly faced by the Liberal leaders. It arises very much from the fact that no Liberal leader makes it a duty to arrange

the furniture of his mind, and to think consistently on public questions; and also from the way in which, under the Gladstone impulse, the whole party were plunged - without volition of its own - into the Irish question.

As regards the Irish members they claim our sympathy when fighting for Irish independence - call it by whatever name you like. These great primary instincts of nations to go their own way - even if that way seem an unhappy one - must be respected. Our complaint against the Irish members is not that they are Nationalists, but that their Nationalism is not a frank or an unadulterated article. They had the choice at one moment either of fighting for Nationalism as a pure and simple cause, without hope of personal profit and immediate gain; or of putting Nationalism into the background, and maddening the whole people with the hope of spoiling the landlords, and making their position impossible. Unfortunately they chose the last course. It was the easy down-hill course, which the low aims and methods of politics naturally suggested. A politician - whether in Ireland or England - is a man who is unable to fight a battle without employing some weapon of corruption, and to the lasting injury of their country, the Irish leaders chose to make, not Nationalists, but souper-Nationalists - was not 'souper' the convert who took the mess of pottage in exchange for his new creed, like the stomach-Christians of India? - chose to make it the interest of every man who wanted to pay a lower rent to join their standard. As politics go, it was natural enough; but the evil and the curse of it will return to trouble Ireland for many a long day. Had they known how to take advantage of their great opportunity, the Irish nation might have slowly entered on a new existence, passing through the purifying fire, ordering and restraining, hardening and annealing itself, until its nobly-earned place would have been assured to it, instead of that clouded and most uncertain future which now lies before it. Their leaders struck the note of personal selfishness and personal profit; and it is not now a nation that is itself under our eyes, but a confused Rule means a general millennium, which the landlord will

cease from troubling and the tenant will pocket his rent.

In all this, as any clear sighted friend of Ireland can see, not only lies the germ of trouble, but also lies the reason why the cause of Ireland has been stained by so many blots. Those who desert high ideals and fight as politicians soon learn to acquiesce in the use of one wrong weapon after another. The Irish members may or may not have disapproved of the wrong and hateful things done in the war against the landlords - we do not feel able to judge. But one thing is clear. No man holding a position among the Nationalists, whether priest or layman, has had sufficient character and resolution to stand in front of the nation and declare that the evil things done should be absolutely crushed out and their end for very shame-sake by the party itself. Words and sentences in condemnation there may have been; but there has been not anywhere - the more's the pity - amongst the leaders of the party, force and character enough to compel the evil to yield to the good. How could there be, when political success, not Nationalism, had become the god both of Irish and English leaders?

We have no wish to judge hardly the Irish leaders. They have found the low standard of politics prevailing all round them, and in their struggle they have accepted it, and, we think, lowered it still further. We see nothing in our two English parties to make us feel sure that, given the same temptation to fight with bad weapons, they would not have done the same or nearly the same. When men once play with their own minds, make their opinions conform to their interests, and are determined to win the game in which they are engaged, it is impossible to say what they will do, and what they will forbear from doing. It is easy to say that the Irish have gone wrong, but is there more scrupulousness to be found amongst our own leaders?