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ABSTRACT

THE CREATION AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE IRISH BORDER

This paper helps explain how the Irish Border came to be delimited and why it was confirmed in position. It constitutes an empirical survey and analysis of the origins of partition proposals and a review of contemporaneous policies and philosophies of both individual and collective bodies within a geographical context. The core of the paper focuses on the 1911–26 period, and specifically examines the process and the initial results of dividing Ireland into two distinct political entities. Two broad phases are identified in what amounts to a unique example of boundary making. First, there is an evolutionary phase concerning the creation the Irish Border, charting the troubled passage of the third home rule bill until the final passage of the Government of Ireland Act in December 1920. The second phase concerns how the Irish Border was entrenched and consolidated, and charts the formative stages of the government of Northern Ireland referring to the 1921 elections and its devolved administration until the suppression of the Irish Boundary Commission in 1925, which left the boundary unaltered in position and entrenched in function. The paper concludes that regardless of the arguments for and against drawing a boundary in the first place, there remained a responsibility for drawing it fairly and democratically. However, of course, a fair and democratic boundary may be no more sustainable than one drawn on the basis of any other criteria.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

KJ Rankin is Research Officer at the Institute for British-Irish Studies (IBIS), University College Dublin, where he is currently conducting research for the *Mapping frontiers: plotting pathways* project in collaboration with Queen's University Belfast. His doctoral thesis is entitled "The evolution and entrenchment of the Irish Border, 1911-1926: a political geography". His general research interests include political geography, boundary studies, cartography, the Middle East, and modern Irish and British political history. He is also a Research Fellow at the Geopolitics and International Boundaries Research Centre, King's College, University of London.

THE CREATION AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE IRISH BORDER

KJ Rankin

INTRODUCTION

The Irish Border is undoubtedly one of the most atypical of international boundaries. Its historical origins, geographical context, and administrative regime deviate from orthodox characteristics and functions associated with the description and analysis of boundaries. This paper empirically examines the exercise of boundary making and the execution of partition with regard to the Irish case study and so explores the Border's creation and initial phase of consolidation from a political geography perspective. Although the period spanning 1911 to 1926 is identified as key, the evolving political geography of Ireland preceding it is of fundamental significance in conditioning the timing of partition as well as particular features of its most substantial manifestation—the Irish Border. Its irregularities, inherited from well-established county boundaries, were then magnified and thus not only greatly influenced Irish history and politics but also continue to affect the day-to-day living of local inhabitants (see figure 1).



***Figure 1: A house on the Cavan-Fermanagh Section of the Irish Border
(Gallagher, 1957: 66)***

THE PHYSICAL AND LOCATIONAL CONTEXT

The Border

The Border measures 499 km (OSNI, 1999) and separates six counties that constitute Northern Ireland and part of the United Kingdom from the 26 that constitute the territory of the Republic of Ireland. The course of the boundary is not explicitly described in statute but only implicitly inferred from the territorial definition of Northern Ireland as contained in the 1920 Government of Ireland Act. It states that “Northern Ireland shall consist of the parliamentary counties of Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone, and the parliamentary boroughs of Belfast and Londonderry, and Southern Ireland shall consist of so much of Ireland as is not comprised within the said parliamentary counties and boroughs” (Government of Ireland Act 1920, Section 1 Clause 2 (10 & 11 Geo. 5 c.67)).

Reference to the political map illustrates some striking features of the Border (see figure 2). First, the sheer sinuosity of the line is borne out by the fact that the Border is about four times the straight-line distance between Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough. Second, Co Donegal is only attached to the rest of the Republic by a territorial isthmus nine kilometres wide, rendering it necessary for some journeys to the east and southeast of the Republic to pass through Northern Ireland. Third, for only two relatively short sections of the Border does it align with the provincial boundary of nine county Ulster between Fermanagh-Leitrim and Armagh-Louth. And lastly, as the Border skirts Tyrone to the west and again to the south east, it encompasses Co. Fermanagh on three sides. As a remnant of seventeenth century county limits, the Border’s physical profile indicates that it follows many water courses but only in the highlands of the Cavan-Fermanagh section could the Border be said to accord with any significant physical impediments to movement (see figure 3).

Ireland

The fact that Ireland, as a relatively small island in global terms, has been split between two separate political entities and that its boundary follows no significant physical divisions, is symptomatic of a core dichotomy of political geography, concerning physical unity and political division that has engendered several corollary paradoxes. The geographical factors that have influenced Irish history have been profound, diverse, and variable over time and as such “have helped to unite Ireland and to divide it, just as they have helped both to unite and divide the British Isles” (Andrews, 1967: 29).

The island of Ireland is delineated as a separate entity and is the smaller and more westerly of the two major islands of the British Isles. It has a total area of 84,250 km² (OSI, n.d.). The Republic totals 70,282 km² (83% approx. of the total) and Northern Ireland 14,131 km² (17%). Johnson asserts that there are two essential physical factors in conditioning Ireland’s political geography that can be discerned from the distant past. First, there is the proximity of Scotland, as sea travel was easier than travel over land and arguably facilitated cultural contact between Ulster and Scotland, separated by only 19 km of water.

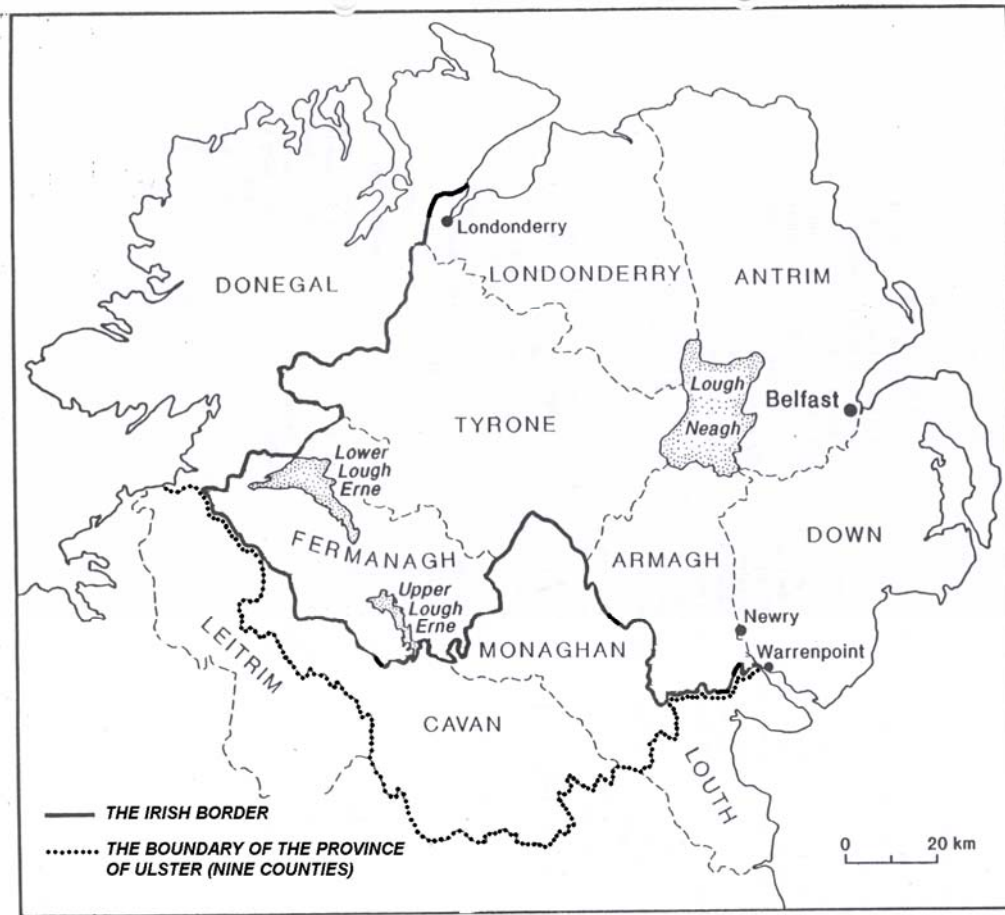


Figure 2: The Irish Border and the boundary of the Province of Ulster

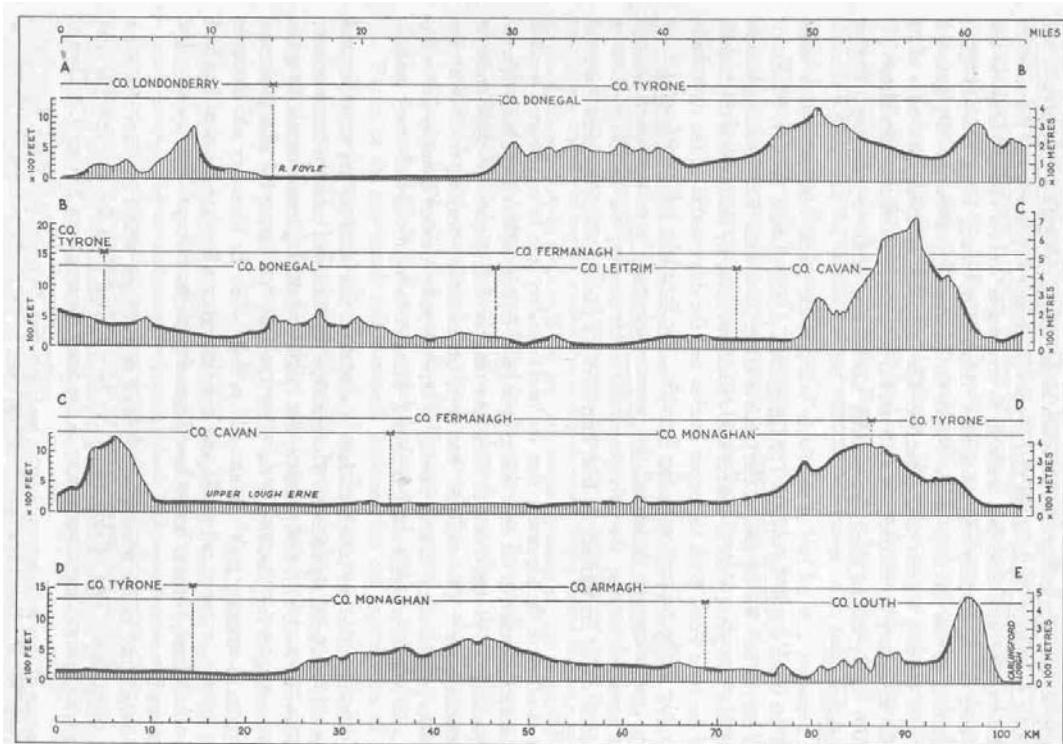


Figure 3: Profile of the Irish land boundary (rivers and water indicated by heavy lines) (Heslinga, 1979: 50)

Second, movement within Ireland was channelled along an east-west orientation due to esker distribution, thus encouraging separate development (Johnson, 1962: 82). Evans argues that Ireland's external relations have for the most part been channelled through Britain be it in cultural, commercial, or political terms but the north-east of Ireland's links with Britain have been older, closer, and more persistent (Evans, 1992: 20).

Ulster

The essence of this paper necessarily focuses upon Ulster as both a geographical and political concept. Occupying approximately the northern quarter of the island, it projects towards Scotland as a broad peninsula from a base that accords with a belt of drumlins that sweeps from Donegal town to Dundalk (see figure 4). Water drains generally northward from a watershed which broadly accords with the historic boundary of Ulster.

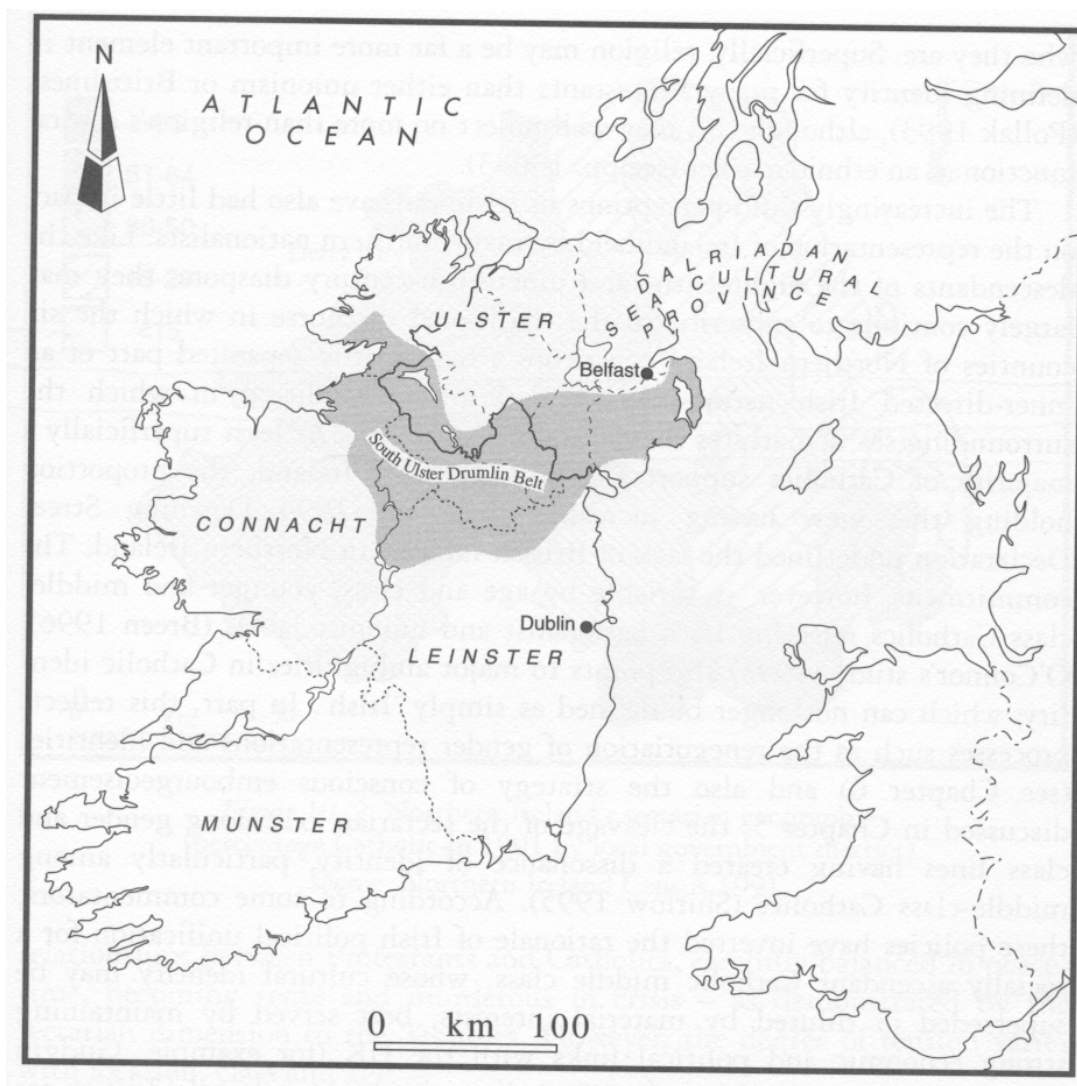


Figure 4: The South Ulster Drumlin Belt (Graham, 1997: 199)

Evans endows the province of Ulster with a “personality” that expresses a regional individuality resulting from the interaction of humans and environment through time (Evans, 1970: 4). He summarises Ulster as constituting a “strong regional variant, in habitat, heritage and history” (Evans, 1992: 77). Indeed, Ulster displays Ireland’s fragmentation in microcosm better than any other province as it possesses its own central lowlands and contains a major river divide—the Bann, just as the Shannon divides the entire island (Evans, 1992: 27). Indeed, Ulster can be seen as the most Irish of regions in terms of habitat, heritage and history. It exhibits the greatest prevalence of Gaelic place names among the provinces. According to Evans, the drumlin chain and interrupted water courses “until they were drained by man, must have provided multiple natural defences for communities in the north” (Evans, 1970: 5).

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Early and Medieval Ireland

Although distinguished by highland and natural features Ulster possessed its own variant of Hadrian’s Wall—the Black Pig’s Dyke that delimited a proto-historic Ulster. Heslinga has suggested that the sea and land components of the current Irish Border “show conformity to age old divisions over most of their lengths” (Heslinga, 1979: 138). The limits of the Gaelic O’Neill kingdom (with regard to Tyrone’s boundaries) and the Black Pig’s Dyke do provide approximate locational predecessors to the land boundary in places. The boundaries of the ancient province of Ulster remain obscure and as such the current Irish Border does not have a real locational or functional precedent. At its most extensive Ulster comprised nine counties while in the twelfth century merely approximated to Antrim and Down. “Ulster’s boundaries have constantly changed throughout history and have been interpreted differently by different political groups” (Doherty, 1989: 19).

Nationalist historiography has conveyed the image that Ireland had been a nationally and consistently united island, having possessed a cultural homogeneity and political unity. However, these assertions have been a subject for constant historical debate. Nevertheless, Gaelic society’s longevity lay in its decentralised, fragmented structure that arguably fitted with the diverse physiographical patterns of the island.

Plantation

The plantation of Ulster has been accorded a great deal of significance in Irish history but one can argue that it was less a historical event and more a geographical process. The English had previously found the Scottish influence in Ulster to be a hindrance, but as the English and Scottish crowns were united the narrow North Channel came under the control of James I, who could deploy significant manpower to consolidate and expand the Ulster colony (Andrews, 1967: 28).

According to Boal (1980: 38), the Scottish colony established in Antrim and Down that predated the plantation was significant on account of its permanence, class

cohesion, and decisive numbers, as the subsequent Ulster plantation failed to produce a similar homogeneous ethnic geography throughout the rest of the province.

With the “flight of the earls” in 1607 and the forfeiture of their lands to the crown, James took the opportunity to realise stability on his terms. The lands held by Gaelic lords reverted to his control by default, and he thereby accumulated land by confiscation and surrender in the six “escheated” counties. These were Armagh, Cavan, Coleraine (later Londonderry), Donegal, Fermanagh, and Tyrone. Antrim, Down, and Monaghan were exempted. Even the very term “plantation of Ulster” was a misnomer as it applied to mid-Ulster, did not extend over all Donegal and was ineffectual in Cavan (Heslinga, 1979: 155; see figure 5).

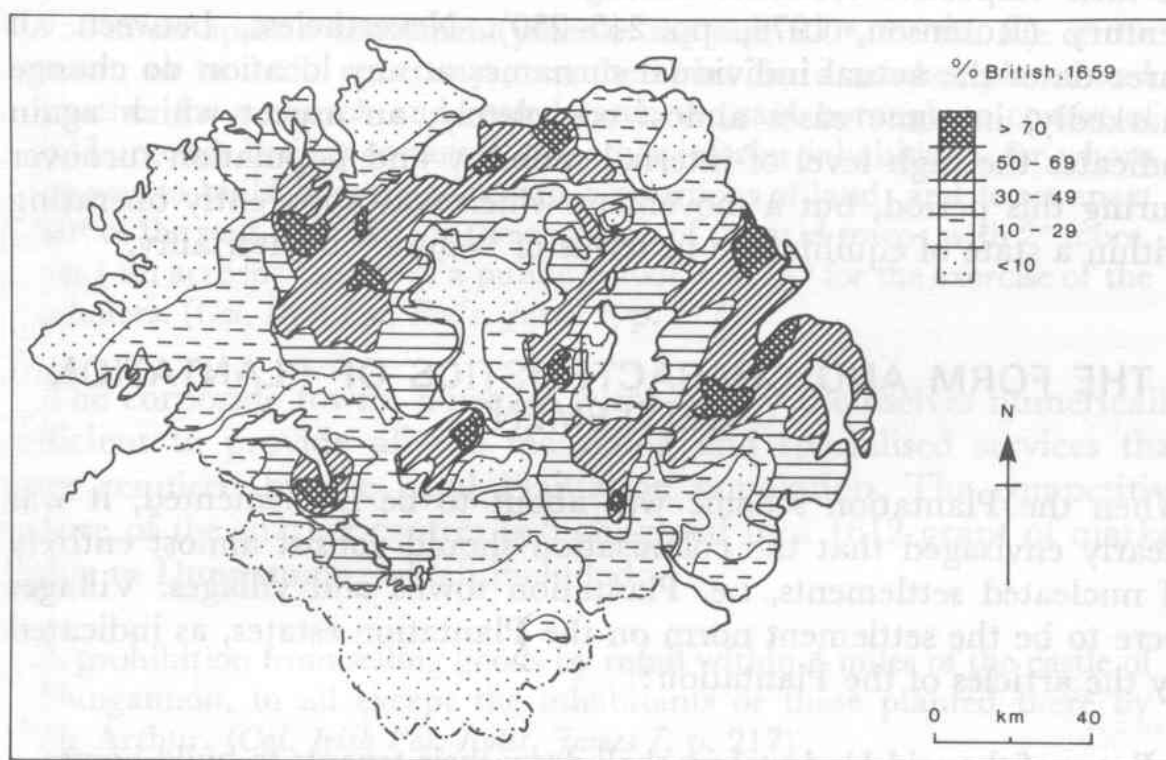


Figure 5: British settlement in Ulster, circa 1659 (Robinson, 1982: 35)

The plantation constituted an early exercise in Irish regional planning, as Ulster became significantly more urbanised and the economy transformed from one of pastoralism to one of diversified market driven agriculture (Heslinga, 1979: 155; Pringle, 1985: 103). The entire enterprise transformed Ulster society by introducing a new middle class and proletariat (Heslinga, 1979: 203). The political and strategic interests of James I and the economic ones of the planters happened to coalesce (Stewart, 1977: 47). Cores of Scottish and Presbyterian influence became apparent in south Antrim, north Down, north Antrim and north east Londonderry, and the Lagan region. English Episcopalian colonists settled in Co Londonderry and in a belt stretching from north Armagh to Fermanagh and outside the confines of the plantation, were numerous in the Lagan Valley, south Antrim, and north Down (Buchanan, 1982: 56; see figure 6).

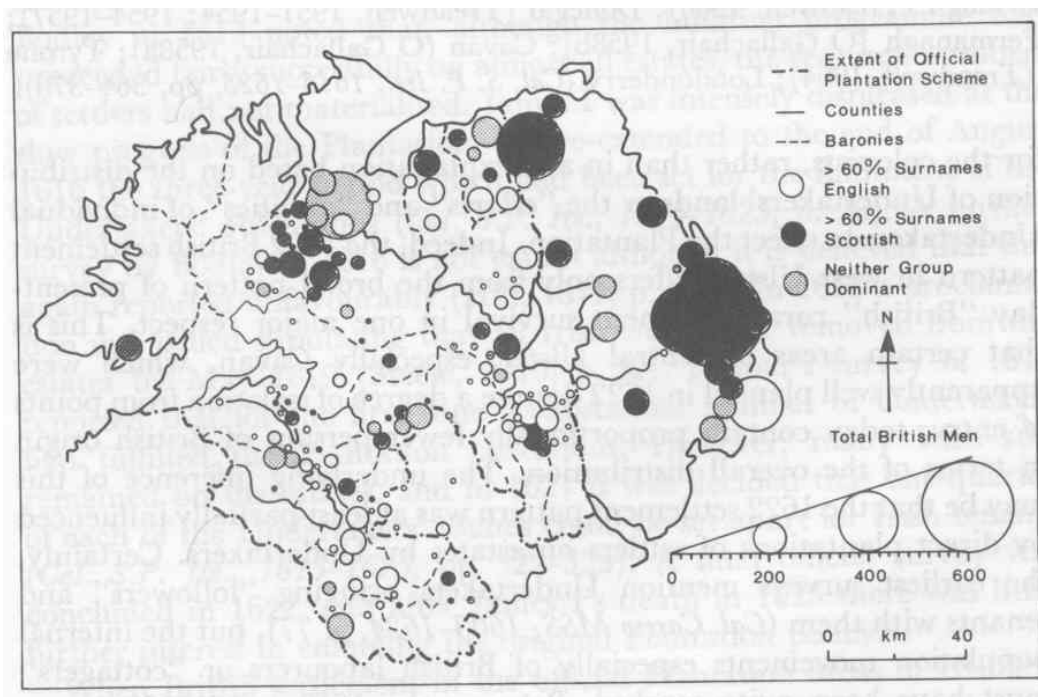


Figure 6: English and Scottish settlement in Ulster, 1631 (Robinson, 1982: 32)

Historically, Ulster has undergone a transition from being regarded once as the most troublesome and backward regions of Ireland to become the most affluent and “British” of the provinces. The north-east has proved to be the most accessible point of entry for newcomers from short distances across the sea where links intensified as communications further evolved.

Eastern Ulster was more densely populated with Protestants than elsewhere, and the grievances of the native Irish was more acute where they had been displaced in west and central Ulster. These particular areas constituted a frontier zone due to the level religious proportions that became aggravated by sectarian animosity that later erupted in 1641 (Pringle, 1985: 104). While the plantation ensured that different cultures were in close proximity, “in no county did the colonists form a majority” where they were thinly distributed in rural areas, but they did form majorities in towns (Buchanan, 1982: 62). Indeed, a crucial legacy of the religious distributions of the plantation has been the intricate pattern of enclaves and exclaves that defy attempts to draw a simple line to separate them (Johnson, 1962: 85).

From plantation to union

Ulster remained a place of unease, as the planters felt subject to harassment. Supporters of the exiled Gaelic leaders were believed to be threatening planters from the sanctuary of remote forests (Stewart, 1977: 46). Fears that the dispossessed Irish would rebel were realised in 1641, which engendered a deeply embedded siege mentality (Pringle, 1985: 106).

Charles I's execution left the way clear for the parliamentary leader Oliver Cromwell to take control of Ireland, and it was recognised that Ireland would provide a strategic counter based on accessibility, mobility, and vulnerability that royalists would seek to utilise (Sloan, 1997: 92).

The restoration of the British monarchy had little impact upon Ireland until the accession of the Catholic James II, when it became an important arena where respective interests were advanced. James failed to enforce his authority in the north, and the symbolism of the abortive siege of the renamed Londonderry entrenched images of sectarian conflict. The city had already assumed a strategic importance in exerting control over the surrounding parts of Ulster and its successful resistance to James's forces heralded William of Orange's Irish expedition and consolidation, and presaged the latter's victory at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. The north proved to be a formidable garrison against James's advances. The upshot of these particular events was a new round of confiscations and the institution of the penal laws.

The position of the Protestant minority had been secured throughout Ireland but dominance was achieved in Ulster. The maintenance of the Protestant ascendancy ensured the exclusion of Presbyterians from holding office, but it was acknowledged that they would heed rallying calls to defend the Protestant faith from perceived Catholic threats (Stewart, 1977: 92).

The internal administrative distinctions within Ireland dissipated as the old English "Pale", and the previously Gaelic territories in Ulster became ruled on the same basis. The colonisation process created a sizeable Presbyterian minority in Ulster but the penal laws restricted their land ownership. The effects of the laws were particularly effective with respect to land and inheritance rights. By 1703, the proportion of land held by Catholics in Ireland declined to 14% and in all Ulster counties bar Antrim the proportion fell under 4% (Simms, 1976: 196).

Large farm areas in the south and east of Ireland had become characterised by large numbers of landless labourers, whereas other areas, especially in the west, were characterised by pressures upon generally poorer quality land. Landlord-tenant relations were significantly different in Ulster. Arguably less endowed in soil quality, the "Ulster custom" partially accounted for the province's relative prosperity by establishing security of tenure, fixed rents, and recognising the right for the tenant to sell his interest (Heslinga, 1979: 173). The comprehensive nature of the plantation meant that it was necessary to divide lands into small holdings, and this was made more acute by continued immigration into Ulster (Gibbon, 1975: 15).

In the 1760s, agrarian movements, such as the Oakboys and Steelboys, emerged in rural areas such as Armagh and Tyrone in order to express local grievances that proceeded to produce patterns of rural sectarian confrontation (Stewart, 1977: 128). This was a local indication that there was no significant difference in the numbers of Catholics and Protestants and an intense competition for land. The attrition was later expressed through the Defenders and the Peep O Day Boys, with the latter being the forerunner of the Orange Order, established in 1795.

Although Belfast enjoyed relative affluence with its port and linen and cotton industries, hostility evolved to the Dublin-based, ascendancy-dominated administration. Thus, there was a religious, class, and regional basis upon which the apparent fissure was founded, with a perception that needs and interests were not being served (Pringle, 1985: 131). The brand of colonial nationalism exemplified by the Irish Volunteers that embraced Protestants across Ireland showed that there existed a group identity that transcended class across the country with the objective of attaining more political control (Pringle, 1985: 140). However, it differed from the orthodox modern concept of the nation in that it excluded the majority of people within the geographical framework.

The polarised nature of the religious balance of Ulster was no better reflected than in Armagh. Miller illustrates how settlement processes were conditioning a remarkable congruence between topography and sectarian geography whereby predominantly Church of Ireland areas were located in the lowland zones in the north of the county with the elevated landscape of the southern reaches of the county being dominated by Catholics. Interestingly, Miller also draws attention to a largely Presbyterian zone dividing the Church of Ireland and Catholic areas (see Miller, 2001: 583-5).

The United Irishmen, with ideals drawn from the French Revolution, were drawn from relatively small and well-defined areas in the east and centred upon the Belfast (where it was founded in 1791) and Dublin cores. With a warning as to their possible inflation, Curtin notes that the membership returns recorded for Ulster counties in May 1797 were Down 26,153; Antrim 22,716; Armagh 17,000; Tyrone 14,000; Derry 10,500; Donegal 9,648; Monaghan 9,020; Cavan 6,880; Fermanagh 2,000; Ulster Total 117,917 (see Curtin, 1993: 212 n.19 and 218).

The United Irishmen rebellion of 1798 was relatively localised, and the sectarian character of the rebellion in Wexford invoked memories of the 1641 Ulster massacre and spread considerable unease at the prospect of a secular Irish republic (Pringle, 1985: 138). However, the fact that the concept of the Irish nation had ascendancy origins ensured that it embraced the entire island of Ireland and the Presbyterian involvement endowed it with a non-sectarian idealism (MacDonagh, 1983: 18). The United Irishmen rebellion helped institute a culture of revolutionary violence in Ireland but its immediate aftermath was to destroy the Irish constitutional experiment, presaged the Act of Union, and arguably led to the evolution of Irish and Ulster "nations" as they became latterly known (Heslinga, 1979: 180).

The Act of Union

The entire episode made it clear to the British government that it was necessary to bring Ireland under direct control as an integrated part of the United Kingdom. The period exposed the paucity of Ireland's defences that was only seriously addressed following the Act of Union which aligned the political unity of the British Isles with that of its abstract geopolitical unity (Sloan, 1997: 102). Yet, Lustick observes a "breakdown of a hegemonic conception of Ireland" in analysing Irish history from the Act of Union onwards (Lustick, 1993: 57).

At the start of the nineteenth century Presbyterian-Catholic relations could not be described as hostile, but sectarian fears heightened following persistent influxes of rural immigrants into Belfast that periodically led to unrest that in a way was a continuance of rural conflicts over land (Pringle, 1985: 201).

Daniel O'Connell substantially united Catholics behind his call for emancipation and for repeal of the Union. His movement's bonds with Catholicism (as typified by the Catholic Association) fuelled Protestant suspicions that the current ascendancy would merely be replaced by a Catholic one. O'Connell's bid for repeal was taken to be a fundamental challenge to the generally accepted convention in Britain that the British Isles possessed an immutable political unity and that Repeal not only challenged this but also was not considered an appropriate remedy to cure Ireland's ills. The logic was that Ireland could not be an independent kingdom or nation and secede without the consent of the British parliament (Päärnilä, 1998: 40).

Foremost amongst the critics of repeal was Thomas Babington Macaulay who, in a House of Commons debate on 6 February 1833, mooted the logic of a partition and questioned why "that only a domestic legislature could remedy a domestic grievance, would in a tenfold degree apply in favour of one domestic legislature in Dublin, and another in Derry, or some other large town in the north of Ireland" (*Hansard's parliamentary debates*, series 3, vol. 1 cols. 258-9, Feb 6 1833).

O'Connell's political agenda was not well received in Ulster. With a distinct sense of territoriality emerging among Ulster Protestants following Union, it was further entrenched in response to O'Connell's growing prominence, and was seen as representing a resurgence in Catholic power. MacDonagh has pithily expressed it:

Thus there can be no doubt that a set of county limits, quite unmarked physically except on the pages of the map books, was accepted by foe as well as friend as designating some sort of sovereignty. In defiance of familiar and indisputable demographic, geographical and constitutional fact, Ulster, an entity entirely lacking in even administrative significance or religious or cultural homogeneity, was regarded as quite separate from the rest of Ireland, and taken to be a Protestant preserve (MacDonagh, 1983: 20).

The damaging effects of the famine were acutely felt in Ireland's poorest areas, which also tended to be the most Gaelic. West Ulster was hit as acutely as Munster and Connacht by the famine, and Ulster did suffer a drop in population (Gallagher, 1957: 50). Land assumed greater importance as a political issue. John Mitchel was convinced that a struggle against landlordism would cement a unity between Ulster Protestants and Catholic Irishmen and thus help remove British interference from Ireland (Cronin, 1976: 86). However, the perception held by Ulster Protestants that repeal of the Union equated to a Catholic ascendancy, and would damage their best interests, was difficult to dismiss.

The "Ulster custom" of tenant right assumed the status of common convention until superseded by extensive land purchase schemes. Such norms engendered a sense of independence and self-sufficiency that helped nurture nineteenth-century industrialisation in the shape of the flax and linen sectors more strongly in Ulster

than elsewhere. In terms of land holdings, Ulster was less inclined to export its crops and restructure organisation, and actual land holdings were generally smaller than in the rest of Ireland.

The industrial revolution accentuated socio-economic divergences (Heslinga, 1979: 203). With a substantial Protestant population that maintained close ties with Britain and an added economic dimension whereby an industrial base centred upon linen, shipbuilding, and engineering, Ulster was set apart from the predominantly agricultural provinces of Connacht, Munster, and Leinster (Buckland, 1973: xvi). Emanating from these, the issue of Ulster inevitably raised the contingent issue of the national identity of northern Unionists.

MacLaughlin argues that the socio-economic origins of Irish partition are explained by the “process of ethnogenesis in the late nineteenth century and to the replantation of the Protestant population in the north east of Ireland as a result of nineteenth century regional industrial revolution” (MacLaughlin, 1992-3: 393).

The aspiration for home rule

A specific Ulster unionism was beginning to reflect how Ulster Protestants responded to demands by nationalists for self-government. The response was not expressed solely through movements such as the Orange Order, but the binding factors became religion and efficient organisation.

It was not until 1879, when Charles Stewart Parnell assumed the leadership of the Home Rule Party paralleled by the founding of the Land League by Michael Davitt, that the home rule movement acquired significant momentum. In 1885, Parnell led the Home Rule Party to win 85 out of 103 Irish seats, (and 17 out of 33 Ulster seats), and held the balance of power in the British House of Commons. The political map was assuming a familiar shape and polarity. Prime Minister Gladstone agreed to introduce a home rule bill in 1886 in order to obtain their support but it split his Liberal Party asunder and the measure fell in the Commons. Once home rule was seen to possess momentum, there started a discourse on there being two nations in Ireland so home rule could not be granted to Ireland as a whole. Partition was advanced as a wrecking measure and was a device to make Liberals unpopular. Parnell put the home rulers’ case simply in asserting that “we cannot give up a single Irishman” (Gallagher, 1957: 62). The home rule bill fell at its first significant hurdle in the Commons.

Although the prospect of home rule had subsided, the Ulster brand of unionism was beginning to organise effectively. The 1892 Ulster Convention conveyed images of a characteristic Ulsterman with a unique sense of history, but did little to alter the nationalist mantra that they held a majority of Ulster MPs and the population would favour autonomy. Indeed, it served to convince that they could stand up for themselves but that they would not overrule the wishes of the majority of Irishmen.

The second home rule bill of 1893 passed the Commons but inevitably fell in the Lords. It brought down the Liberal administration and the Conservatives were to

hold power for the next decade, which was characterised as a general policy of “Killing Home rule with kindness”. A major initiative in this regard was the foundation of local county councils in 1898 that helped to establish the county as the key entity in local identity. The respective home rule crises eventually illustrated that if the Union could not be saved for Ireland as a whole, Protestant Ulster would save the Union for itself (Heslinga, 1979: 199).

Home rulers had been riven with division following the downfall of Parnell and rendered impotent on account of an extended period of Unionist rule. However, the fallout from a scheme to reform Irish administration, “the devolution crisis”, acted as the catalyst for Ulster unionists to create the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) in 1905. Although the Liberals had returned to power with a resounding victory in 1906, home rulers could wield no influence until the parliamentary balance was substantially altered by the two inconclusive general elections held in 1910.

COUNTENANCING PARTITION, 1911-14

The years 1910 and 1911 were key in determining the paradigm in which Ireland was to be governed and eventually partitioned. The December election in 1910 again appeared to replicate the geographical distribution of nationalism and unionism, but Nationalists now held the balance of power in the House of Commons, with home rule being widely acknowledged as the price of their support for continuing the Liberal administration. The election also held significance in hindsight, as no general election was held for another eight years. Similarly, 1911 was a census year and the next one was not to be held until 1926. Hence, many of the statistical arguments employed in the consideration of home rule and partition debates was based on increasingly dated information (see figures 7 and 8).

Table 1: Percentage religious composition of Ulster counties in 1911 census

County	Catholic %	Non-Catholic %
Antrim	20.5	79.5
Belfast County Borough	24.1	75.9
Down	31.6	68.4
Londonderry	41.5	58.5
Armagh	45.3	54.7
Tyrone	55.4	44.6
Londonderry County Borough	56.2	43.8
Fermanagh	56.2	43.8
Monaghan	74.7	25.3
Donegal	78.9	21.1
Cavan	81.5	18.5

The path for the third home rule bill was paved by the passage of the Parliament Act which removed the House of Lords veto, but endowed it with powers of delay that were to prove crucial. The bill was a modest devolutionary measure but encountered controversy from the earliest stage; an amendment proposed by a Lib-

eral backbencher to exclude Antrim, Armagh, Down, and Londonderry from the scope of the bill first placed partition as a serious proposal in public debate. The selection of these four counties appeared obvious by using simple county majorities from the 1911 census. The proposal did not garner substantial support, with Nationalists claiming that it was unnatural and unjustified in partitioning the Irish nation and the Government claiming that such a partition was unworkable, and would wreck the bill's financial dimensions. The Unionists, implicitly recognising that the amendment was unworkable, tactically supported the measure as a means of wrecking the entire bill. The amendment failed but the Unionists turned to extra-parliamentary methods to subvert the passage of the bill and this involved arguing that Ulster was being coerced. The signing of the Ulster Covenant and the establishment of an Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) were indicators of a growing militancy that was charismatically led by Sir Edward Carson. However, although great emphasis was placed on "Ulster" as a concept, ambiguity surrounded how "Ulster" was actually defined.

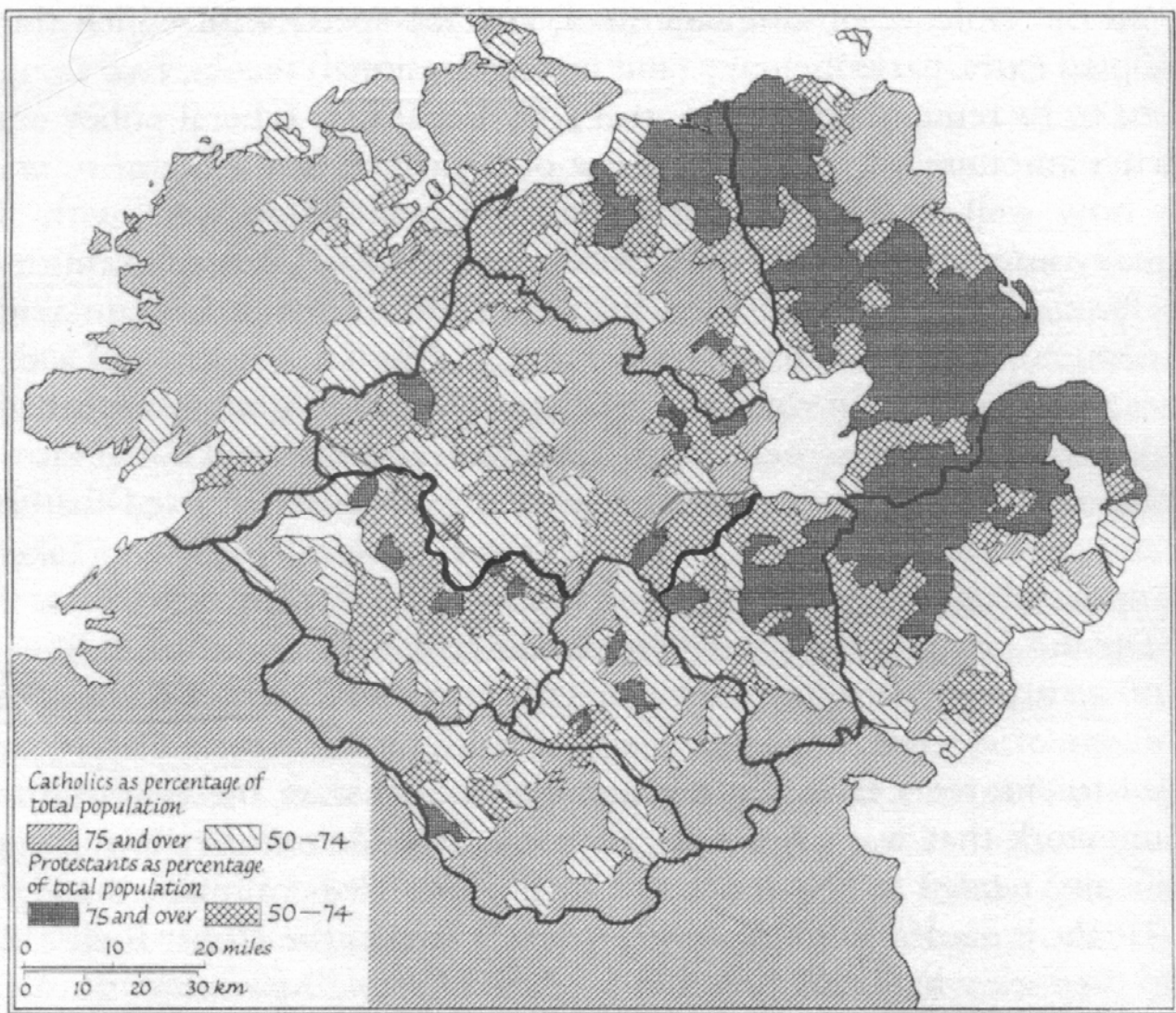


Figure 8: Distribution of religious denominations in Ulster counties by district electoral divisions at 1911 census (Foster, 1988: 464)

Indeed, a great deal of political rhetoric was expended on claiming respectively to represent Ulster and Ireland, but the reality was that as geographical and political terms they were by no means homogeneous. Nevertheless, Carson had said “as if men were to give up let us have done with county limits, as if men in one county are going to abandon men in another county just because there may be a majority here or a majority there” (quoted in Colvin, 1934: 402). His opposite number in the Nationalist Party, John Redmond declared that “The Irish nationalists can never be assenting parties to the mutilation of the Irish nation. The two nation theory is to us an abomination and blasphemy. Ulster is as much a party of Ireland as Munster... there is no room for diversities of the treatment of government and of administration, but a unit Ireland is and Ireland must remain” (quoted in O’Day, 1998: 257).

Carson moved his own amendment to exclude all of Ulster’s nine counties, but this was implacably opposed. Progress on the passage of the bill was interminably delayed by having to complete three passages through parliament, which enabled the militancy of unionists in Ulster to grow. By 1914, Ulster Unionists staged a propaganda coup by importing weapons, and were emboldened by the “Curragh mutiny”, which effectively robbed the Government of the ability to enforce home rule in Ulster with the army. This was in stark contrast to the landing of arms for the Irish Volunteers in Dublin, which met with bloody confrontation. The Liberal government’s resolve was beginning to waver, and behind the scenes discussions were held concerning the permanency and geographical extent of a possible “statutory Ulster”.

The Buckingham Palace conference of July 1914 encapsulated the geographical difficulty. The fate of the counties of Fermanagh and especially Tyrone proved extremely problematic, despite the fact that they contained nationalist majorities, albeit relatively small ones. This was curious as Co Armagh contained a slight unionist majority was not a significant factor in discussions. The conference highlighted the primacy that all sides placed on the county. Proposals to use poor law unions or Parliamentary constituencies floundered on a general reluctance to divide the county. Prime Minister Asquith’s account best summarised the malaise:

We sat again this morning for an hour & a half, discussing maps & figures, and always getting back to that most damnable creation of the perverted ingenuity of man—the County of Tyrone. The extraordinary feature of the discussion was the complete agreement (in principle) of Redmond & Carson. Each said “I must have the whole of Tyrone, or die; but I quite understand why you say the same” (quoted in Asquith, 1982: 109).

However, the deadlock did not translate into immediate unrest as Britain’s priority became transfixed on the early phases of the first world war. A political truce was called between nationalists and unionists but while the home rule bill completed its passage and was placed on the statute book, its operation was suspended for the duration of the war with a commitment to legislate for an Ulster exclusion.

PREPARING PARTITION, 1915-21

Although the war dominated the political agenda, Irish and Ulster issues did not completely fade away. Redmond's bold declaration of support for the war effort alienated Irish hardliners and a faction of them split from the National Volunteers to form the Irish Volunteers. Carson encouraged the Ulster Volunteers to enlist for the war effort, and they constituted their own division in the army. Redmond's political position was particularly awkward as home rule has passed through parliament but could not yet be enacted. He thought it unwise to accept an offer to join the war cabinet, while Carson and Unionist colleagues entered into coalition with recently excoriated Liberal opponents. Redmond's lobbying efforts to create a specifically Irish division were continually rebuffed, and the increased militancy of the Irish Volunteers was beyond his control. The Easter Rising of 1916 was a doomed military failure and was mainly a localised Dublin affair but its consequences were far-reaching. It helped transform home rulers into separatists, compelled the British government to realise that Ireland could not be simply ignored, and supplied a simple contrast which unionists were happy to demonstrate between loyal Ulster and disloyal Ireland.

David Lloyd George assumed the immediate task of breaking the deadlock. He managed to attain assent to a six county exclusion but the question of its permanence was unclear, and upon this point and the dissent of southern unionists prospects for an agreement disappeared. This was despite the fact that Redmond and Carson successfully persuaded their respective Ulster followers to consent to a six-county exclusion.

The coalition of separatists in Ireland began to merge under the Sinn Féin party. It made political inroads in by-elections but notably did not make significant headway in Ulster where in Tyrone and Armagh, home rulers were able to stave the Sinn Féin challenge. Although when Lloyd George became Prime Minister he established an Irish Convention, Sinn Féin boycotted it and the Ulster Unionist delegation was generally acknowledged to hold a veto on any significant proposals. It was becoming more apparent that the respective positions of nationalism and unionism were polarised but that there was also a substantial split between the Ulster and southern brands of unionism.

The end of the war instituted the term self-determination into the public consciousness which Sinn Féin would place at the forefront of the campaign at the overdue general election in 1918. The election served as an important indicator of the political geography of nationalism and unionism. Not only had an election not been held for eight years, but also electoral reform trebled the Irish electorate as well as enfranchising women of 30 or over.

While the Home Rule Party was reduced to a rump of six, Sinn Féin and Unionists could claim success. Depending on the geographic scale, one could interpret the results differently. At an all-Ireland level, Sinn Féin achieved a resounding result in terms of its 73 seats.

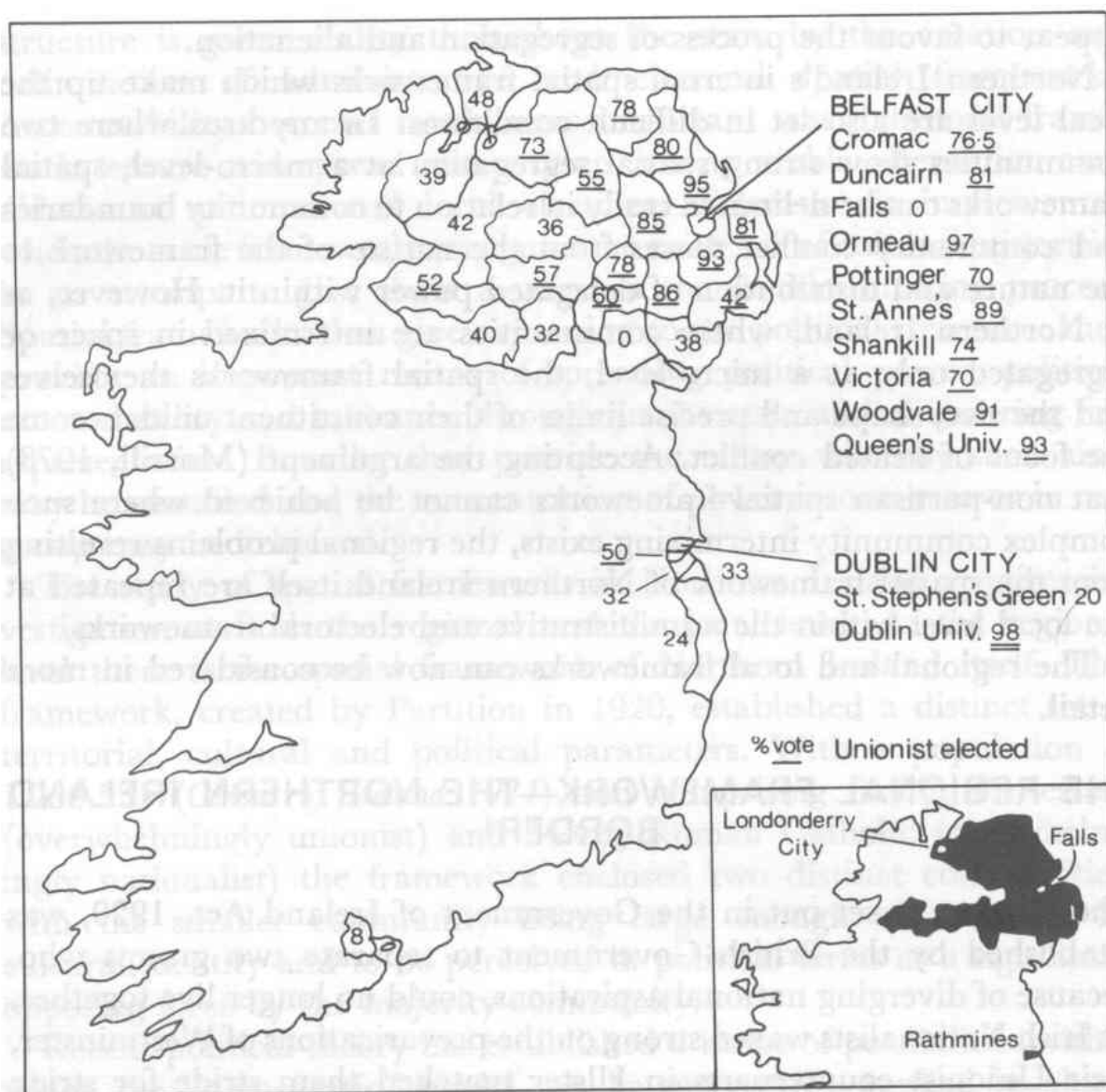


Figure 9: Distribution of Unionist support in 1918 British general election
Inset: areas returning Unionist MPs (Douglas, 1982: 108)

However, some of these were obtained without contest or via electoral pacts, and on a crude plurality of votes cast, the Nationalists were entitled to more seats (see Coakley, 1994). In Ulster, the results were clearly good for the Unionists, where they claimed 26 seats that were almost exclusively in Ulster (see figure 9). In Britain, the Lloyd George-led coalition of Liberals and Unionists won a resounding victory.

Sinn Féin could no more claim to represent all of Irish opinion than the Unionists could for Ulster. Barring the exceptions of West Belfast and Derry city, the respective ideologies represented contiguous areas. Nevertheless, Sinn Féin claimed that Ireland constituted a nation that deserved international recognition. The self-determination refrain was cited in this aim while the Versailles peace treaties were being settled. However, Britain, as a victorious power held an effective veto on Irish affairs in the international community.

The urgency to address the Irish issue was becoming acute when the Sinn Féiners elected in the 1918 election formed Dáil Éireann in Dublin in early 1919 in accordance with their abstentionist policy. This coincided with the start of a military guerilla campaign waged by the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Lloyd George delegated Walter Long, a former Irish Chief Secretary, to take soundings and to draft legislation for Ireland. It became clear that a partitionist solution was being sought, but there was uncertainty over geographical areas, more specifically whether the northern entity was to consist of nine or six counties. The Ulster Unionist lobby at a late stage before the bill was presented to parliament managed to ensure that the new Northern Ireland consisted of six counties despite the impulse of the Government to agree on nine counties, believing it had more geographical logic and would be more likely to facilitate future unity.

The acquiescence of the Ulster Unionists was essential to the passage of the bill as they were the only significant Irish lobby in the Commons because of Sinn Féin's self-exile. The irony was that they could not vote for the measure. They had performed the cathartic and pragmatic procedure of splitting away from fellow Ulster Unionists in Donegal, Monaghan, and Cavan on the premise that demographic and parliamentary majorities would be made secure.

During the bill's passage (this was effectively the fourth home rule bill), preparations were made to recruit an Ulster Special Constabulary, which would assist the police and armed forces under the new administration when IRA violence enveloped the south. Although the bill was ostensibly symmetrical in devolving respective powers, the proposed second chambers did not possess the same protection for minority representation. A semblance of Irish unity was to be maintained in the Council of Ireland, with matters of mutual concern regarding fisheries, railways, and animal regulations prescribed as its preserve with provision for further matters to be delegated to it, if agreed.

The Government of Ireland Act was enacted in December 1920 and elections were set in both north and south in May 1921. In effect, the Government of Ireland Act was the "Government of Northern Ireland Act". Elections in the south did not take place as every Sinn Féin candidate was returned unopposed. Forty unionist candidates were elected anyway, with Sinn Féin and nationalists winning six each. Just as much as the British Government had to address the rise of Sinn Féin, Sinn Féin itself had to tackle the fact that their doctrine sat uneasily with accommodating northern Unionists and in policy, their imposition of the commercial "Belfast boycott" from 1920, did not endear itself towards impending reconciliation.

IMPLEMENTING PARTITION, 1921-22

George's V conciliatory speech at the opening of the new Northern Ireland Parliament marked an important milestone towards a settlement. One of the northern Parliament's first acts was to nominate its representatives on the Council of Ireland. The speech began a truce in hostilities and a series of exploratory talks between the

Sinn Féin leader, Eamon de Valera, and Lloyd George. While these produced an initial stalemate, a new initiative of more wide ranging talks was accepted, and an Irish delegation led by Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith (with the notable omission of de Valera himself) met with Lloyd George and his senior cabinet colleagues. Lord Longford's account of these treaty talks summarised the influence of Ulster as "less an area or a people than as a strange abstract factor in tactics, its importance derived from its reactions on the central conflict" (Pakenham, 1992: 93).

Considering the emphasis placed upon Ulster in the talks, it is remarkable how the Sinn Féin delegation was under-prepared. Its Ulster position had yet to be sent to the delegation at the commencement of the talks but the delegation was able to exploit a key weakness in the British position, namely the inclusion of the nationalist majority counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone within Northern Ireland. There appeared to be a general acknowledgement that as Ulster could not be coerced, it in turn could not coerce other units. At this stage Sinn Féin held the tactical advantage as they could garner public opinion on their side if the talks broke down on Ulster rather than on issues concerning crown status and empire.

The idea of a boundary commission originated with Lloyd George but was conveyed to the Sinn Féin delegation through a cabinet secretary. Griffith expressed the view that a boundary commission and his preference for a plebiscite were very much the same and in correspondence with de Valera he thought that such a commission "would give us most of Tyrone and Fermanagh and part of Armagh, Londonderry, Down etc." (Pakenham, 1992: 167). This view was shared by Collins who aired it in a private meeting with Lloyd George, who did not dissuade or contradict him.

While this extensive territorial adjustment pervaded the delegation's thinking, the manner in which the Boundary Commission clause was drafted in the final document was only explicit in its ambiguity. The relevant section of article 12 read:

a Commission...shall determine in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, so far as may be compatible with economic and geographic conditions, the boundaries between Northern Ireland and the rest of Ireland, and for the purposes of the Government of Ireland Act, 1920, and of this instrument, the boundary of Northern Ireland shall be such as may be determined by such Commission (article 12, Articles of Agreement for a Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland as signed in London, 6 December 1921).

The importance of this clause cannot be understated. Without the expectations Collins had expressed on it, Collins would have not have signed the treaty and without his assent no treaty would have been signed at all. Yet it is difficult to comprehend how the clause was drafted so subjectively. In its first draft incarnation, the clause made no reference to economic and geographic conditions, but the final version, displaying some resemblance to Versailles boundary instruments, could be interpreted as placing a premium on these factors over and above that of the wishes of the inhabitants. There was even no set procedure as to how to ascertain these wishes.

The treaty debate in the Dáil was remarkable in its apparent obsession about oaths and status to the relative exclusion of partition. Sean MacEntee's was an almost lone voice in warning that the commission would be an exercise "in transferring from the jurisdiction of the Government of Northern Ireland certain people and certain districts which that Government cannot govern; and by giving instead to Northern Ireland, certain other districts—unionist districts of Monaghan, Cavan and Donegal, so that not only under this Treaty are we going to partition Ireland, not only are we going to partition Ulster, but we are going to partition even the counties of Ulster" (*Official report: debate on the Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland, 1922*: 155, (22 December 1921). However, there was a largely silent consensus that the commission would deliver vast tracts of nationalist areas to the South.

The northern government was alarmed by the treaty, not least by its commission clause. The British Government privately assured the Northern Prime Minister, Sir James Craig, that the Commission would involve a small-scale exchange of territories that would tidy anomalies and inconvenient sectors of the original boundary. However, the divergence of expectation became manifest in early 1922, when Collins and Craig held face-to-face talks. Both of them would rather not have recourse to article 12 but agree a new line on the basis of consent. However, Craig found the extent of Collins's territorial expectations impossible to countenance.

Collins's northern policy amounted to an amazing paradox, by engaging the northern and British Governments, and attempting to destabilise the northern Government by facilitating IRA activities. The Craig-Collins pacts of 1922 were the first attempts made at cross-border co-operation and while some initiatives were made in policing, neither side was willing to fully implement their commitments.

Minor border skirmishes were a regular occurrence. A clash between USC and IRA forces took place at Clones railway station that was attributable to the fact that the Specials' journey from Newtownards to Enniskillen necessitated travelling through Free State Monaghan. However, a more dramatic incident occurred in Belleek and Pettigo where anti-Treaty IRA forces had occupied a section of Fermanagh, which was isolated from the rest of the county by Lower Lough Erne. Winston Churchill, as British Colonial Secretary, sanctioned the British army to expel the invaders and occupy the fort at Belleek, situated in Free State territory.

This was the only event that constituted an overt military confrontation across the Border, and ensured that the British army would hold a superiority of force in a conflict conducted via conventional means. Collins bemoaned the northern government's alterations to local government and electoral reforms, which were seen as securing Unionist domination at all levels of administration. But with his death in August 1922, the Free State Provisional Government adopted a passive northern policy under the leadership of WT Cosgrave and placed its trust in the full execution of the Boundary Commission.

CONFIRMING PARTITION, 1922-26

Final ratification of the Treaty was not achieved until December 1922, and so a curious tripartite relationship was given legal footing. There was a devolved government in Northern Ireland that was still an integral part of the United Kingdom; an Irish Free State government that held Dominion status within the British Empire; and, the United Kingdom government based in Westminster. The confusion was proved by there being three governments possessing different levels of autonomy. The Irish Free State was placed in an anomalous position on northern issues in sometimes treating the British government as an opposing protagonist and sometimes as an arbitrator and enforcer empowered to regulate the northern government's actions.

Ratification also meant that the execution of the Boundary Commission was necessarily subject to initial delay, but only then did the ambiguities of the commission's terms of reference begin to manifest themselves fully. The core dichotomy surrounded whether the commission was entitled to make substantial territorial awards or mere adjustments to the boundary line. Both contentions could claim to have terms of reference justifying their positions. Nationalists believed that stress on the "wishes of the inhabitants" meant at least transferring contiguous nationalist areas to the south, while unionists preferred to concentrate on the qualifying phrase "in accordance with economic and geographic conditions", which was interpreted as substantially maintaining the integrity of Northern Ireland's territory.

The passage of time was ensuring that the Border was acquiring inertia. While its final position was sidelined, its functional dimension was actually being underscored by the Free State with its imposition of a customs barrier from April 1923. From the Free State perspective, it had a treble effect and intent of raising revenue for the exchequer, symbolically asserting its independence, and, akin to the Belfast boycott three years earlier, applying economic pressure on the northern administration. This action is overlooked in the general literature but the addition of economic to administrative boundary functions contributed to the widening divergence of north and south. Indeed, the imposition of tariffs seemed a discordant policy out of kilter with the Free State's aspiration to abolish partition, and a curious one considering that the Boundary Commission had yet to consider its remit.

Cosgrave's northern policy was conditioned by observing the terms of the treaty and the operation of article 12. To this end, a North East Boundary Bureau (NEBB) was established as a propaganda and research body to prepare the eventual case for the commission. It briefed the Free State cabinet on possible territorial claims that could be justified under article 12. Both minimum and maximum claims were sweeping (see figure 10). The bureau set about co-ordinating cases at a local level.

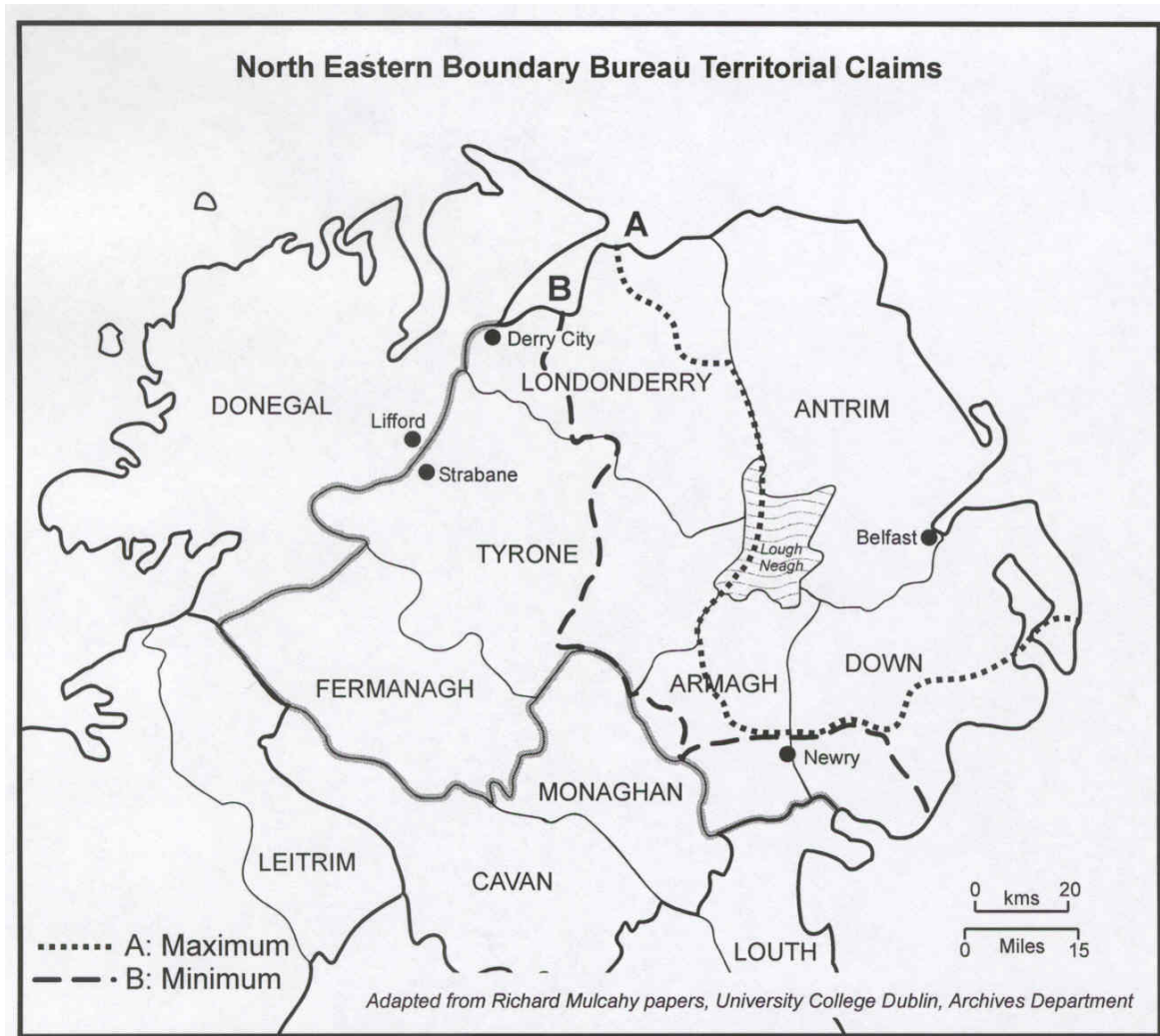


Figure 10: Maximum and minimum claims to be made under article 12 (Rankin, 2001: 954)

However, considering the extent of faith that the Free State was placing in the Commission, it was reluctant to establish it on account of the destabilising civil war it had been addressing. Once the civil war had ended, it tried to expedite developments by appointing Eoin MacNeill as its commissioner. Britain, too, had entered a period of political instability and successive governments were reluctant to traverse Irish controversies again. Nevertheless, the northern government possessed a significant power for delay. The article stipulated that it was to appoint its own commissioner but there was no provision catering for its refusal to do so. Hence, lengthy recourse to law and new legislation eventually allowed the British Labour government to appoint a commissioner on Northern Ireland's behalf.

Almost three years after the signing of the treaty did the Boundary Commission hold its first meeting in London in November 1924. It was chaired by Richard Feetham, a judge from South Africa, who served with MacNeill, and Joseph Fisher, a lawyer and former editor of the unionist newspaper the *Northern Whig*. The chairman would be crucial in casting decisions in the likely event of Fisher and MacNeill cancelling each other out. In some respects, the commission resembled

international precedents in employing staff that were involved with the Upper Silesia Commission, but in others it was a pale imitation in terms of its powers and resources.

Crucial in framing any eventual award would be how the commission would interpret its own terms of reference. It was resolved that it was not its task to reconstitute the two territories afresh but to settle the boundary between them. It also asserted that the commission could alter the boundary in favour either Northern Ireland or the Irish Free State and that the burden of proof lay upon the respondents for whichever course, otherwise the *status quo* would hold good. Founded upon these principles it was affirmed that the commission was free to decide on its own methods for ascertaining "the wishes of the inhabitants". On the crucial question of majorities, "substantial" rather than "bare" majorities would be necessary to justify a change in the boundary; and the territorial unit to be employed in ascertaining such wishes would be the smallest available one for which data could be provided. These powers as defined would inevitably disappoint long-held nationalist expectations and presaged a much narrower geographical coverage than some had anticipated the commission would encompass (see Boundary Commission, 1969).

In December 1924, the commission conducted a preliminary tour of the Border area which notably omitted eastern Tyrone. After receiving written submissions of evidence, it held a series of oral hearings, held *in camera*, in locations including Rostrevor, Armagh, Enniskillen, and Omagh. A major paradox in the commission's methodology was that the wishes of the inhabitants was interpreted from 14 year old census data whereas the primary purpose of the hearings was to investigate economic and geographic conditions, which unionists were largely happy to emphasise.

Strategy and tactics did as much to divide as well as unite nationalists. The ultimate aim was of course to abolish the Border and partition altogether but nationalists found it awkward to argue for a new unwanted boundary. In geographical terms, the parochial nature of nationalist claiming areas adjoining the Border detracted from more expansive and general claims.

The northern government had throughout refused to officially co-operate with the commission and the calling of an election for April 1925 was clearly aimed at expressing and consolidating unionist opinion on the Border question to the exclusion of any other issue. With there being no public indication of the commission's thinking anticipation and speculation were both rife and variable. However, there was evidence that discussions had taken place between the British and Free State governments over the possible transfer of administration for postal services but little indication as to its geographical scope.

The commission's deliberations were not confined to that body itself. In defiance of a commitment to treat the commission's dealings as confidential, Joseph Fisher conducted periodic correspondence with Unionist figures as to progress. Nearing the conclusion of its operations, Fisher has assured Carson that Ulster "will remain a solid and close-knit unit with five counties intact and the sixth somewhat trimmed

on the outer edge. No centre of even secondary importance goes over, and with Derry, Strabane, Enniskillen, Newtownbutler, Keady and Newry in safe keeping your handiwork will survive. If anybody had suggested twelve months ago that we could have kept so much I would have laughed at him" (quoted in Hand, 1973: 274).

When this notion was found expression via an inspired forecast map that appeared in the hardline unionist newspaper the *Morning Post* in November 1925, the entire political situation was plunged into crisis, especially placing the Free State Government in jeopardy. Although the forecast was not strictly accurate, it acquired substantial currency in public opinion (see figure 11). In the Free State, the shock of the meagre territorial gains forecast was overwhelmed by the prospects of having to cede territory especially in the east Donegal area around Derry city. There was a cumulative threat to the governing Cumann na nGaedheal Party of a back-bench revolt, the exploitation of the situation by Eamon de Valera from his self-exile of abstentionism, and even the possibility of the armed forces resisting territorial transfers.

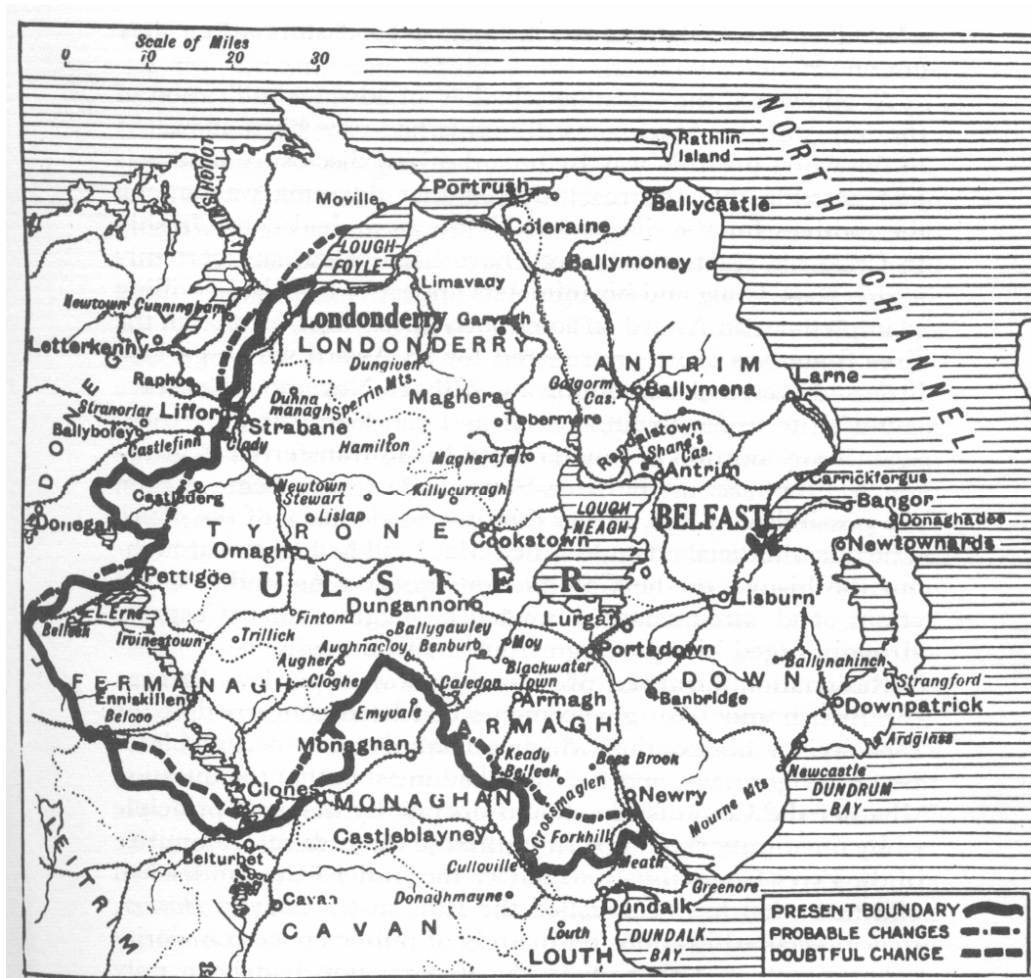


Figure 11: Boundary Position Forecast (*Morning Post*, 7 November 1925)

The official report was only released in 1969 and confirmed the substance of the *Morning Post* forecast. Taking Newry as a case in point, its fate was keenly con-

tested, and especially taken by nationalists as a measure of the commission's success. It possessed trade and transport significance and approximately three quarters of its population was reported to be in favour of transfer to the Free State. The Commission concluded that the preservation of Newry and its hinterlands were vital in uniting the supply, marketing, and export aspects of the local linen industry. The link between port revenues and coal supplies convinced the commission that Newry was inextricably linked with its northern hinterland. This was the archetypal case study of economic and geographic conditions overriding the wishes of the inhabitants. Overall, the Free State would have gained 31,319 people and 282 square miles of territory but lost 7,594 people and 78 square miles. The boundary would be shortened from 280 to 229 miles and the Commission suggested new boundary delimitations in Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough (see Boundary Commission, 1969: 143 and figure 12).

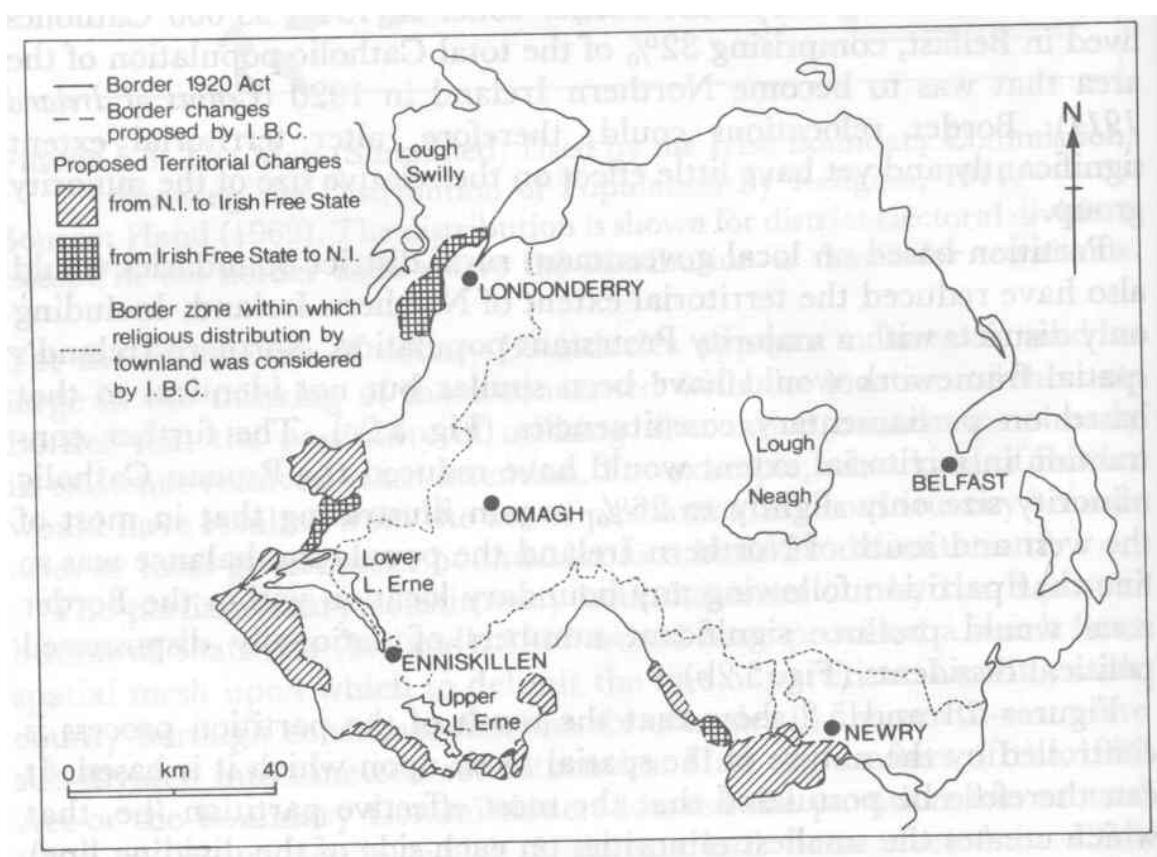


Figure 12: Irish Boundary Commission proposals (Douglas, 1982: 112)

The Free State acted quickly in urging MacNeill to resign, but the remaining commissioners continued concluding their work without him. There was urgency in that the publication of the Commission's award would have immediate legal effect, so the Free State engaged in hastily arranged talks with the British and Northern Ireland governments. These culminated in a Boundary Agreement signed on 3 December 1925, which contained three main elements. First, the Boundary Commission's report would be suppressed and the existing Border would remain unchanged. Second, a financial settlement would relieve the Free State from liabilities due under article 5, the other dormant clause of the Treaty. And third, the Council

of Ireland was consigned to history, with its powers transferred to the respective Irish governments and substituted by a mere aspiration to co-operate on matters of mutual concern.

OVERVIEW

The existence of the Irish Border constitutes the latest of many phases in the evolving political geography of the island of Ireland, which has been primarily conditioned by the interdependence of geography, history, and politics. These have manifested themselves in a series of dichotomies that derive from how the physical landscape has influenced, and is influenced by, human activity.

The Irish Border can have many dimensions depending upon the context of scale. At one level, it constitutes one of many international boundaries that have proliferated in world history. At another, it is the sole example of an international boundary in both Ireland and the British Isles archipelago. Indeed, considering the United Kingdom's long involvement in boundary making across the world, the Irish Border is its only land boundary with another state. The entire exercise of boundary making is intrinsically one of simplifying reality. While every international boundary is unique, the Irish example deviates greatly from what would be regarded as general norms. No explicit description of the course of the boundary accompanied its original delimitation, with a line in Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough never being officially delimited at all.

There was an ultimate irony in that both Irish nationalists and Irish, and not Ulster, unionists wished to conceive any boundary as an entirely maritime one but, of course, such concurrence would not extend to where it would be. This reflects the twin-faced territorial imperative that Ireland is a single entity or a component in the wider archipelago. Ulster's distinctiveness predates both partition (which in fact partitioned Ulster) and the plantation. Topography, history, religion, and economics have all conspired to sustain "suspicions of an ancient frontier" (Evans, 1992: 31). However, locating precisely where such distinctiveness begins or ends is a matter for perennial debate. Conversely, Ireland has only been politically united under British rule and as such the concepts of political unity and independence in Ireland appear to have been mutually exclusive.

Questions of scale dominate the political geography of the island of Ireland in that geographical majorities and minorities can be easily created, manipulated, or subverted. The cascading spiral of territorial scale that ranges between island, province, county, constituency, rural district, district electoral division, and townland can give differing complexions in representing political geography. A great deal of the issues concerning the creation of the Irish Border involves problem of definition and redefinition. The ideological contest between Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism (or regionalism) in their purest senses was as much about their geographical incompatibility as anything else. Added to this, they were in no way homogeneous with regard to their respective geographical frameworks. The process and result of Irish partition was indicative of this as it involved a territorial compromise, with a 32

county Irish nationalism facing conversion into a 26-county nationalism, and nine - county Ulster unionism becoming a six-county version.

Nationalist grievances over the Irish Border derive from an objection to there being one at all, but regardless of the arguments for and against drawing a boundary in the first place, there remained a responsibility for originally drawing it fairly and democratically. However, of course, a fair and democratic boundary may be no more sustainable than one based on any other criteria. The Irish Border was not originally conceived as an international boundary but as an internal division between devolved administrations under the Government of Ireland Act. It then acquired a duality, following the 1921 treaty, as a boundary between the United Kingdom and the Irish Free State, and the boundary between Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State. Its course was subject to alteration pending the Boundary Commission, but following its demise, its position was confirmed while its status has evolved into that of a fully-fledged international boundary between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom.

That the base for partition, and thus the boundary, has been the county, is testament to the obsessive degree of attachment both unionists and nationalists have devoted. Indeed, while there was acquiescence in partitioning the country, and even the province of Ulster, this did not extend towards partitioning a county. While scale can account for this unwritten but prescriptive and generally accepted convention that the county was an indivisible building block, identity partially accounts for why the territorial basis for partition was not finer. At a larger scale, nationalists had already compromised on the territorial imperative for the entire island a single political entity, but ultimately this was as prescriptive as the discredited ideal of "natural boundaries", be they islands, mountains or rivers.

Initial proposals to divide Ireland were on the basis of modest devolutionary administrations that were to remain under within the ambit of the United Kingdom. The potential position of a boundary was to deviate between, nine, six, and four-county plans. From 1916 onwards, the six-county unit assumed an inertia, after apparent consent achieved on a settlement which later proved illusory, but nevertheless a lasting precedent was set.

The 1920 Government of Ireland Act altered the equation substantially in endowing the excluded northern area with a devolved administration of its own, but apart from an eventually aborted Council of Ireland this was as far as the symmetry of partition was to extend, with significant distinctions with regards to minorities and parliamentary structures. It was acutely ironic that unionists in six counties had now effectively manifested themselves as home rulers.

Plans to include all of Ulster's nine counties in the new "Northern Ireland" with a view to facilitating future unity was effectively vetoed by Ulster unionists who were keen to procure a secure 2:1 majority in six counties than handle a slender and precarious 9:7 balance. However, with the Act being virtually ignored in the rest of Ireland, the boundary was not quite secured. The 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty endowed the Border with a temporary and qualified recognition but established a disparity

between a devolved government within the United Kingdom and the newly autonomous Dominion of the Irish Free State.

The provision for the Boundary Commission had been agreed by the Irish negotiators upon the logic that reducing Northern Ireland's territory would hasten its disintegration and subsequent prospects for unity. This was grossly simplistic and arguably counter-productive in that reducing Northern Ireland's would inevitably create a stronger unionist majority and fallacious to equate territorial with economic viability. The initial tactical advantage offered by the Boundary Commission was converted into a potentially devastating political liability.

The Boundary Commission saga confirmed the territorial framework of Northern Ireland as it exists today and with it transferred attention to constitutional rather than territorial structures. The Irish Border can understandably be regarded as symbolising the conflict between unionism and nationalism, but it is also an archetypal example of the interplay between politics and geography whereby abstract political concepts are applied in different spatial scales.

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