PRINCETON STUDIES IN HISTORY, 13

(4)

Coercion and Conciliation in Ireland

1880-1892

A STUDY IN CONSERVATIVE UNIONISM

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PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY
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1963

ued fagging" was essential in order to keep them up to the mark.[45]

In general, the Royal Irish Constabulary, which was composed of both Catholics and Protestants, behaved in an exemplary manner during the years of coercion. If presence of mind occasionally deserted district inspectors and other officers, the succession of riots and boycotting conspiracies would have strained the patience of even the best men. The Police were never sparing in their use of batons, but much worse damage could have been done. In Tipperary, for example, a county inspector almost caused a massacre when he twice ordered his men to load and fire at a menacing crowd. The order was countermanded just in time; and Ridgeway was able to inform his chief: "I have the fellow carefully chained up here . . . a fine specimen of an overfed Bull —most of the C.I.'s are cows—fine pluck and physique but *no* brains." In the southeastern division some county inspectors were reported as being both "impotent and nerveless."[46] But these cases were the exceptions, and the majority of police officers behaved commendably in the face of constant provocation. It was always a source of frustration to Balfour, however, that the Irish executive had no power to interfere in disciplinary matters within the RIC; these were the sole purview of the Inspector General Andrew Reed, of whom Balfour had a low opinion because he kept the worst cases of insubordination secret.

By the spring of 1887 the morale and efficiency of the RIC were in a state of disrepair, and when Balfour arrived in Dublin, his first official act was to call a meeting of the divisional magistrates and ranking RIC officers in order to discuss appropriate measures for meeting any defiance of the Crimes Act. One of the fruits of this conference was a special order sent by telegram to the district inspector at Youghal in county Cork, the contents of which were allowed to leak out to the public. A riotous assembly was expected at Youghal, and the local inspector received the following instructions from his superior, Captain Plunkett, D.M.: "Deal very summarily if any organised resistance to lawful authority. If

[45] "Slacke's policy has always been to let things slide and take optimistic views, and this spirit has pervaded all ranks in his Division. There has undoubtedly been an inclination to regard the battle as won and the spurt to be over"; Ridgeway to Balfour, 3 June 1888, *ibid.*, 49827.

[46] Ridgeway to Balfour, 27 May, 6 June 1890, *ibid.*, 49811.

necessary do not hesitate to shoot them." The nationalists promptly accused the Castle of planning a "wholesale butchery."[47] As a warning to National League members, however, this order had a sobering effect. No one was killed at Youghal; and Balfour had served notice that the law would be enforced even at the cost of lives.

This new note of stringency did not ease the task of the police. On eviction sites the constabulary were reviled and attacked with stones; and in some of the most disaffected areas the natives did not dare to speak to a policeman without incurring the censure of the league. The baton and bayonet charges against rioters in the provinces made them no more popular. Sooner or later, as Balfour half suspected, a serious collision between the police and the people was bound to occur.

IV. "BLOODY BALFOUR"

The spark was struck at Mitchelstown in county Cork, on September 9, 1887. The occasion was the trial of William O'Brien and a local farmer John Mandeville on the charge of inflammatory speechmaking. The curious and idle had come to Mitchelstown from the outlying villages to watch one of the most famous Parnellites challenge the Crimes Act for the first time. To mark the event the National League called a protest meeting in the market square to which several members of Parliament, including Dillon and Labouchere, were invited. Although O'Brien failed to appear, the rally was well attended by men carrying blackthorns. When the speeches began, the magistrate in command ordered the police to clear a way through the dense crowd so that the police reporter could take note of what was said. Instinctively the audience resisted the passage of the reporter with his escort. Threats, curses, and blows followed in quick succession. Outnumbered by 100 to 1, the police withdrew, some of them badly wounded, and took up defensive positions in their barracks. In the confusion and panic that followed, the police opened fire on the advancing mob, and their volleys killed two and wounded several others. News of the clash spread rapidly, shocking public opinion in both countries. Labouchere accused the police of behaving like "wild beasts"; and Gladstone's terse comment,

[47] *Freeman's Journal*, 14-16 March 1887.

"Remember Mitchelstown," became a battle cry during the land war.[48]

Among the spectators at the Mitchelstown "massacre" was a tall, young lawyer with angular features named Edward Carson. As a legal officer of the Crown, he had been assigned to conduct the first prosecution under the Crimes Act. In the early stages of the riot Carson, who was well on the way to becoming the devil's advocate from the nationalist point of view, left the court house and walked with remarkable composure through the milling crowd. No one dared to assault him, although the purpose of his visit was common knowledge. The sights and sounds of the street fighting and the vicious temper of the local "blackthorn brigade" left a deep impression on Carson; and he assisted the secret inquiry into the causes of the riot with little compassion for the nationalist victims. Balfour had spotted this "provincial Irish lawyer" soon after his arrival in Dublin, and the two men took an instant liking to one another. In spite of his traditional contempt for lawyers, Balfour "made" Carson, teaching him something of the lore of politics and shaping his early career, so that London inevitably became the next world to conquer for this ambitious crusader. Carson repaid Balfour with unwavering loyalty and with a long series of prosecutions against the leading Parnellites. Under the titles of "Coercion Carson" and "Balfour Junior," he became the most respected and feared Crown counsel in the country.

As Carson once remarked, Mitchelstown also "made" Balfour, by showing that he had no intention of deviating from his policy of "kicks and ha'pence." Although aware that bloodshed might easily have been avoided, Balfour vigorously defended the conduct of the police, while infuriated Home Rulers clamored for an official investigation and for disciplinary action against the constables involved. Balfour's support of the RIC not only boosted morale but paid handsome dividends during the era of coercion when police cooperation was essential.

Immediately after the riot, the Irish Privy Council met in Dublin and the cabinet assembled in London to discuss the crisis. In Parliament the debate on Mitchelstown lasted two days; and Balfour's calm demeanor incited bitter retorts from the Opposition

[48] *Ibid.*, 10-11 Sept. 1887; Dugdale, *Balfour*, I, pp. 140-47.

benches. The Government's case rested on two points: the nationalists had provoked the riot and the police had fired in self-defense. Although Balfour regretted the fatalities, he insisted that the vindication of the law was involved and that all other considerations were subordinate to the law of public safety. After a coroner's jury in Ireland had returned a verdict of willful murder against five constables, the Government announced the appointment of a sworn inquiry.[49]

Balfour arrived in Dublin on September 14 and soon learned the depressing facts of the case. The real trouble, he found, stemmed from the chronic "helplessness of the ordinary Irish official in the face of an emergency." Lord Salisbury advised his nephew that the evidence indicated "not merely Irish blundering, which is of course perennial, but a want of definite rules." And Buller, who had been absent from the Castle during the riot, wrote to his chief somewhat pompously: "You can take a decision . . . and I can take a decision; nobody else in Ireland can." In the end, Balfour attributed the calamity to loss of nerve by the county inspector in charge and to the incompetence of Ashbourne and his legal advisers in Dublin.[50]

The Mitchelstown affair prompted Balfour to start rewriting the instructions for members of the RIC present at proclaimed meetings. After a brief stay in Dublin he left for Scotland, where he completed a memorandum for police procedure based on the errors made at Mitchelstown. The new operational orders left no room for misinterpretation: if the baton-carrying police failed to subdue a defiant mob, then a detachment armed with rifles were to open fire or use their bayonets according to the circumstances. "Both humanity and efficiency," he informed Salisbury, "seem to require this strategy." In addition, the Castle received instructions to improve their security arrangements whenever prominent nationalists faced trial under the Crimes Act.[51] For several months the Castle's secret inquiry into the Mitchelstown affair dragged on, exposing much conflicting evidence and a general desire to evade

[49] Smith to Salisbury, 10 Sept. 1887, Salisbury MSS; *Hansard*, 3d series, Vol. 321, pp. 229-336.

[50] Balfour to Salisbury, 21 Sept. 1887; Salisbury to Balfour, 15 Sept. 1887, Salisbury MSS.

[51] For the rest of this memorandum, see Appendix I.

all blame. The RIC officers in the area were found suffering from a "very bad state of discipline and morale."[52] Balfour's memorandum, however, went far to rectify some of the major defects in police tactics. And if from Mitchelstown the chief secretary earned the popular sobriquet "Bloody Balfour," he may well have saved many lives in the future by reducing the chances of another Irish "Peterloo." Irishmen did not forget Mitchelstown, but neither did the administration, and for that reason both sides profited from the costly lesson.

The proper administration of the Crimes Act thus depended on firm leadership from above and on loyalty from the ranks. And Balfour, by defending the action of the Mitchelstown police, managed to inspire confidence among the constabulary and the officials in the Castle. Here was a man upon whom they could rely even in times of adversity. This confidence, as Wyndham was quick to perceive, had long been absent from the administration in Ireland. And the reasons for Balfour's popularity among the loyalists in the country were not hard to divine. "Arthur is by no means Alexander," Wyndham wrote to his father in January, 1888, "but having for his battleground a field from which all have run away, he creates a very great impression upon men who have been used to tremble at every threat, and to truckle with the most contemptible of their opponents upon every occasion. They can hardly believe that he does not care 2d for anything which 'United Ireland' here, and the 'Pall Mall' over the way may say of him."[53]

To Ridgeway the question of efficient administration was one of loyalty pure and simple. Either a man gave his allegiance to the Castle or he belonged to the large group of Irishmen who were merely the dupes of the league: "I came to this country absolutely devoid of religious prejudices, but I have been forced to the conclusion that it is not safe to place an Irish Roman Catholic in a position where he will have unpleasant duties to perform. His connections, his women, his Priests are all at him and it requires a very strong man, or an Irishman whose connections are English, to withstand the influence thus brought to bear."[54]

Not only the quirks of Irish officials, but public opinion, too,

[52] Ridgeway to Balfour, 23 Feb. 1888, Add. MS 49808.
[53] Wyndham and Mackail, *Wyndham*, I, p. 216.
[54] Ridgeway to Balfour, 5 May 1888, Add. MS 49808.

influenced the policy of resolute government. The cabinet always worried more than Balfour about the reaction at home to prosecutions and convictions in Ireland, and colleagues often tried to soften his attitude toward the nationalist agitation. There was no doubt in their minds that tales of repression in Ireland, carefully distorted by Home Rulers, were having an adverse effect upon the electorate in England. In addition, the Government faced a steady stream of criticism from Liberal Unionists, who insisted that the constituencies would not put up with unrelieved coercion in Ireland. The loss of several by-elections at the end of the year showed that ministerial fears on this score were not groundless.

A more vivid warning to ministers occurred in November, 1887, when a demonstration led by members of the Social Democratic Federation and other radical workingman associations erupted into an ugly riot. Although the meeting in Trafalgar Square was held ostensibly to protest the imprisonment of William O'Brien, the size and vehemence of the crowd showed that the workingmen of London were more troubled by "hard times" than by coercion in Ireland. The prolonged depression meant that social disorder was a phenomenon by no means confined to Ireland. Sporadic outbreaks of violence throughout the autumn culminated on November 13 in a protest march of over fifty thousand persons, many of whom were jobless and hungry, as well as irked by O'Brien's harsh treatment in jail. When the police were ordered to disperse the crowd, they applied their truncheons with sufficient force to mark the occasion "Bloody Sunday" for posterity. Two of the most prominent agitators, John Burns and R. B. Cunninghame-Graham, M.P., were arrested and received prison terms. The immediate outcry against police brutality did not enhance the Government's cause in the eyes of the working classes and many "moderates." General Buller blamed the riot on Irish machinations; and the socialists were accused of trying to destroy parliamentary government by violent means. Too few observers interpreted the battle of Trafalgar Square as but another symptom of the endemic disease that was affecting the whole British economy, not to mention that of Europe.[55]

Against such a background of popular unrest it was only

[55] Buller to Ridgeway, 15 Nov. 1887, Ridgeway MSS; Ensor, *England: 1870-1914*, pp. 180-81.

natural that Salisbury should advise his nephew to use moderation in enforcing the Crimes Act. "The only course," Salisbury wrote, "is to go on 'pegging away.' You will soon by experience learn the precise limit of your powers,—and then within those limits you will be able, without ever, or often, incurring a defeat, to inflict an intolerable amount of annoyance."[56]

To Balfour the success of his undertaking also depended upon the cooperation he received from his colleagues in London. With his uncle there was no problem. But for his purposes a cabinet that was ignorant of conditions in Ireland was virtually useless and, even worse, inclined to be timid. It was vital, he believed, to keep ministers well informed about the scale of the nationalist agitation; and to achieve this end he suggested in October that a cabinet memorandum on Irish affairs be circulated from time to time. Salisbury took up this proposal with enthusiasm. Such a report would, he hoped, relieve ministers of their chronic anxieties about Ireland: "They are very apt to imagine that when they hear nothing, nothing is being done." The first such brief on Ireland was being read by ministers within a week. On that occasion Balfour specially requested that the memorandum be kept out of the Irish lord chancellor's hands. "How they all hate Ashbourne!" was Salisbury's pained remark to W. H. Smith. The cabinet circulars proved valuable, for they educated ministers about the difficulties facing the Irish administration, and they spared members much needless argument on points of fact. At the same time the Irish committee of the cabinet received a new stimulus under the more dynamic lead provided by Balfour. With the passing of the Crimes Act and the scheduling of legislation to relieve distress, the committee found its burdens and responsibilities enormously increased. But by expediting decisions on matters relating to Ireland the committee more than justified its existence.[57]

V. PROSECUTIONS

Balfour's conception of Parnellism was clearly reflected in his administration of the Crimes Act. Regarding the agitation for Home Rule as nothing more than insurrection in disguise, he

[56] Dugdale, *Balfour*, I, p. 147.

[57] Balfour to Salisbury, 17 Oct. 1887; Salisbury to Balfour, 20 Oct. 1887; Salisbury to Smith, 30 Oct. 1887, Salisbury MSS.

treated the participants as rebels. Under the Crimes Act no distinction was made between political and nonpolitical prisoners. The moonlighter or boycotter was, in his opinion, no more guilty than the man who incited him to perform the act. In other words, the Dillons and O'Briens, the parish priests, and league organizers who exhorted the peasantry to defy the law deserved just as harsh treatment as those who obeyed their orders. The category of political crimes as distinct from common misdemeanors simply did not exist for the Irish executive; and the sooner the agitators entered prison, the better for Ireland and the Unionist party. In laying down this policy Balfour not only made little allowance for public opinion, but grossly underestimated the ease with which nationalist prisoners became martyrs to the cause of liberty.

In their campaign against coercion the Parnellites and their Liberal allies fixed upon prison treatment and the arbitrary powers of Irish judges as the two most effective weapons in their arsenal. In the war of words that filled *Hansard*, the newspapers, and the public platforms of Great Britain during these years, Home Rulers spared few aspects of Balfour's administration. The chief secretary answered his critics with irony, contempt, and a wealth of statistics; but he did not always succeed in exonerating his subordinates, and the tedious repetition of such words as "tyranny" and "atrocity" convinced many people that Dublin Castle was inhabited by sadists.

The stream of invective directed against the administration did not, however, deter Balfour and his aides from implementing the clauses of the Crimes Act. The Castle made it quite clear that priests and members of Parliament were just as eligible for prison as the humblest moonlighter. As of August, 1888, some twenty-one members of Parnell's party had received prison terms ranging up to six months with hard labor, and by the end of the year eleven more were facing prosecution.[58] Parnell himself refrained from participating in the land agitation and thereby escaped prosecution. But his more industrious lieutenants—men like Dillon, O'Brien, Sheehy, Crilly, and others—received the brunt of coercion.

Dillon and O'Brien spent a large part of this period either

[58] *Annual Register: 1888*, p. 155; Balfour to Salisbury, 28 Dec. 1888, Salisbury MSS.