2 Union to Partition: 1800–1920

Introduction

Nineteenth-century Ireland showed great continuity with its past. All its old conflicts continued, its lines of differentiation remained, and the social structure kept its familiar pattern. Developments in Protestant–Catholic relations throughout the century were conditioned by the past, so that progress, in some ways, always went backwards, back to the plantation and the sort of society it helped to shape, back to old battles and events, returning to the same zero-sum notions and anti-Catholic ideas that existed in the sixteenth century. However, as time evolved Ireland was increasingly unable to live with its past because the old conflicts and fissures caused tremendous strain in its social structure. Protestant and Catholic people emerged in the nineteenth century as solidaristic communities, transcending fault-lines within each as they confronted the other as a separate community in a zero-sum conflict in which it seemed that they did not have mutually compatible sets of interests. Political and economic developments in the nineteenth century divided the island of Ireland into two identities, mutually sculpted in opposition to each other, and it became increasingly difficult to contain both in the one territory. Social structural strains eventually developed to the point that the colonial society planted in the sixteenth century was overturned – at least in twenty-six of its counties. Union to partition was a journey to nationhood in which anti-Catholicism lost its power as a resource to shape economics, politics and society, but the journey for some Catholics took a route to the new state of Northern Ireland, where old and familiar anti-Catholicism played a critical sociological role in Ulster’s own version of the ascendancy.

Union with Britain

The English government’s response to the republican violence by Protestants in Ireland was to incorporate the country into Union with Britain in 1800. The Irish Parliament was initially dissolved but many members of the elite within the Protestant ascendancy were absorbed into the metropolitan core to maintain access to office and power; a local administration also remained in Dublin Castle. The Orange lobby was against Union because management of Catholics locally, with its implications for the maintenance of Protestant privileges, was taken over by London and they feared the consequences of this for Catholic emancipation. Some radicals from the United Irishmen also opposed Union because it was seen as a means of reinforcing English control on Irish matters. A radical strain in Protestantism survived – New Light in...
theological terms and liberal politically – which later supported Catholic emancipation. In other words, Union was not yet seen as the guarantor of Protestant position and privilege and had not become the single cleavage around which Protestant and Catholic political differences were fought (for a critique of Union, see Kennedy, 1996: 37–48). This did not occur until the 1830s. By then, however, Protestantism and Unionism became inseparable to all but the most liberal Protestant, with reformed theology providing what sociologists call a ‘sacred canopy’. The Protestant religion overarched Unionist politics, Protestant privilege, and the shared communal identity which bonded Protestants together in a class alliance; Unionism was distinguished by this class alliance and Protestantism was its ‘sacred canopy’. An Orange song gave voice to the alliance guarded by Protestantism: ‘Let not the poor man hate the rich/nor rich on poor look down/But each join each true Protestant/for God and for the Crown’ (quoted in Devlin, 1981: 18).

The hierarchy within the Catholic Church initially supported Union. Political accommodation with the English government and civil authorities in Ireland had developed to the point where the Church accepted the monarch’s right to veto nominations for bishoprics in Ireland and it accepted a salary from the state for its priests in return for support for Union. The leading bishops were led to believe that Union would result in more favourable treatment for Catholics in relation to tithes and parliamentary representation; Catholics were still required to abjure certain Catholic doctrines and beliefs before they could sit in Parliament, and the government promised repeal of such an oath. England seemed to offer a more tolerant Protestant majority than Ireland, and some Catholic bishops were liberal and ecumenical by temperament. The Bishop of Derry between 1798 and 1823 earned the nickname ‘Orange Charlie’ for his friendliness to local Protestants; he suspended one of his priests for radical remarks about Catholic emancipation (Rafferty, 1994: 114).1 The majority of Northern bishops favoured Union (ibid.: 127). But emancipation was delayed for another thirty years. English duplicity in the past had led some Catholics, like Daniel O’Connell, to criticise the Union from the beginning. O’Connell later began the Catholic Association to fight for Catholic emancipation, with the support of the Catholic Church. While it is popular to see the Catholic Association as a form of Irish nationalism, O’Connell did politicise Ireland’s Catholic population and opposition to Union was part of Catholic political maturation. Union, in other words, did not achieve what English policy makers intended, for the old fissures and modes of differentiation in Ireland continued. Rather than obliterating the conflicts by incorporating them into Britain’s wider social structure, Union ensured that Ireland’s fissures now affected the core of British society, and British governments proved more willing to respond to Catholic grievances than local Protestants.

In his campaign against Union, Daniel O’Connell is reputed to have said that Ireland’s Protestants were political Protestants only; that is, they were Protestants by reason of their participation in political power rather than in commitment to reformed theology, and once they were put on an equal plane with Catholics the religious bigotry and opposition would wither away. This was not an unreasonable