● North Leitrim Election of Sixty Years Ago

CHARLES J. DOLAN

Bridged the Gap in Ireland's Struggle

by GABRIEL MARTIN

"THE Liberals have shelved Home Rule, and most of them are glad to be rid of it. Our only hope now is in the earnestness and self-sacrificing devotion of the Irish people themselves," so stated Charles J. Dolan, MP, in the House of Commons, on June 3, 1907. The rumblings of discontent within the soul of a young back-bencher of the Redmondite Party, went unnoticed in the political storm then brewing over the proposed Irish Councils Bill. The rumblings were audible enough, however, for those who had ears to hear, as had Arthur Griffith, and some months later, just over sixty years ago, on February 21, 1908, the same Charles J. Dolan fought a unique by-election caused when he himself resigned from his seat at Westminster and the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), and espousing Sinn Fein was opposed and defeated by his next-door neighbour Francis A. Meehan. The election, however, gave Dolan and Sinn Fein victory in defeat creating as it did the chink in John Redmond's armour and moulding the previously lethargic units of Nationalism into a rejuvenated force which manifested itself some ten years later in the great election landslide of 1918.

Charles J. Dolan, son of a prosperous Manorhamilton merchant, came, as it were, from the steps of Maynooth, to find, he believed, his true vocation in politics. It was in 1905 that he, replacing P. A. McHugh (who had transferred to the Sligo constituency), entered Westminster as representative of the Irish Parliamentary Party, for the North



Charles J. Dolan,
bridged the gap in Ireland's struggle.

Leitrim constituency. With a great Liberal majority—387, after the 1906 General Election, to 157 Tories—the IPP, numbering 83, had no longer the "balance of power" once enjoyed by Charles Stewart Parnell. Dolan, with his education and upbringing, was not to be the normal taciturn type of parliamentarian; he was conscious of the oppression of his constituents and was never to permit the lofty dignity of his leader, John Redmond, to subjugate his ideals. Dolan's beliefs in Westminster were never to develop into the set pattern of blind fidelity and respect shared by his contemporaries. In 1907 his uneasiness erupted with the betrayal, in Dolan's eyes, of

Ireland by the Liberals in their attempt to introduce the "Irish Councils Bill" in preferment to Home Rule.

Irish Councils Bill

It was for Home Rule that Ireland waited hopefully since the days of Parnell and with Bryce's departure to Washington, leaving void the post of Chief Secretary for Ireland (named the grave of parliamentary reputations), the country bade welcome to 1907 as a year of more than hopeful prospects. Winston Churchill, Augustine Birrell and even John Redmond himself, came into the reckoning for appointment to the Chief Secretaryship. "The man here is less important than the policy," wrote the London *Daily News*, January 29, "the proposals of the Government will be far reaching—of that let there be no doubt. The University question alone is one of the first magnitude. But (they wrote, as they went on to pose the proposition which brought disillusionment to all Irishmen, even the hard core of the IPP) they will not constitute Home Rule in the Gladstone or any other sense. What will be granted to Ireland is the kind of administration as distinct from legislative autonomy which every county council enjoys throughout the United Kingdom." By the Irish Councils Bill it was proposed to establish in Dublin an Administrative Council of 100 members—one-fourth nominated by Westminster and the rest elected by the people of Ireland. This council would have complete control of all public expenditure in Ireland but was not to be conferred with legislative functions. Together with its constitution, limited powers, and being presided over by the Chief Secretary —the Bill was to prove completely unacceptable to the Irish people including Redmond and his party, who backed the appointment of Augustine Birrell as Chief Secretary, with hopes of a more embracing Home Rule Bill.

The absence of legislative power decreed that the then over-strength police force would remain, at that time a great point of contention, together with the fate of the evicted tenants which the much lauded Land Bill of 1903 failed to evolve. Showing the inseparable bonds which these contentions held, C. W. Coogan, a United Irish League (UIL) organiser visiting Leitrim declared, when referring to the large farms and demesne: "These large grazing farms will go, even if they had a policeman tied to every bullock's tail on them." Agrarian trouble flared everywhere, as the Royal Commission on "Congestion" held its sittings, and boycotts were numerous. In Ballinaglera, on the Leitrim–Cavan border, a family who acted as caretakers of three evicted farms had to journey, under cover of darkness and with police protection, to Dromahair, a distance of twenty miles, to procure essential food supplies. In returning they were waylaid at Drumkeerin by a mob 600 strong.

National Convention

Dublin's Mansion House was filled to overflowing long before the appointed time when, on May 21, 1907, the National Convention of the UIL took place. This Convention was to consider the Irish Council's Bill and Redmond's political ingenuity was to be very much in evidence. He himself presided at the Convention and delegates came from England, America and Australia with hundreds failing to gain admission. In a motion moved by Redmond and seconded by A. J. Kettle, the Convention declared the (Irish Councils) Bill to be "utterly inadequate in its scope and unsatisfactory in its details and worthy only of rejection by the Irish Nation." The audience cheered lustily on rejection of the Bill. The Convention called on the IPP to oppose the Bill in the House of Commons and to press upon the Government to introduce "a measure for the establishment of native parliament with a responsible executive having power over all purely Irish affairs." Redmond promised to press for:

(1) A measure giving compulsory powers to the Estates Commission to re-instate evicted tenants.

(2) A University Bill on the lines indicated by Bryce, and
(3) Immediate legislation on the lines of the party's Land Bill, amending the Act of 1903.

Speaking at this meeting were A. J. Kettle, Sheehy Skeffington, E. T. Keane (Kilkenny), Joe Devlin (Belfast), Father Casey (Abbeyfeale), John O'Callaghan (Sec., UIL, in America), Frank O'Connor (Western Australia), Peter Bradley (Newcastle-upon-Tyne), Dr. Timmons (Boston), and T. P. O'Connor, MP on behalf of the UIL of Great Britain. Charles Dolan tabled a motion calling for the withdrawal of the members of the IPP from Westminster, but by the skilful manoeuvring of Redmond and Healy, the motion was not put to the Directory. The IPP agitation against the Bill at Westminster was successful and on June 3, 1907, it was announced in the House of Commons that the Bill would be dropped. The University Bill was not to be proceeded with that year and the Government would proceed with the bill for the compulsory re-instatement of tenants.

The IPP in its dissatisfaction over the Bill actually thought of contesting seats for Parliament in England in opposition to the Liberals. Serious thought was given to contesting a bye-election that July in the constituency of Jarrow. The IPP did not contest however and Peter Curran, self-made Labour man and a blacksmith, was victorious. In his campaign he used quip: "So you want to know if I'm an Irishman, look at my face—it's the map of Connaught." A test of strength by the IPP was not, however, to be long denied them as the irrepressible Charles J. Dolan brought the contest to them from within their own ranks and on their own soil, but from a different platform.

Dolan Breaks with the IPP

To Charles J. Dolan, the deferment of Home Rule at this time was the last straw. He had found in his short experience at Westminster that the jovial apathy of the Parliament there to every Irish question was sickening. Irish business was always being placed on the long finger and invariably the members of the IPP had to speak to an audience comprised of themselves alone. Dolan announced to his constituents on one occasion: "Just eighteen months ago you sent me to Westminster. You gave me a mandate, strive for whatever remedial measures that lay within our reach. But I was not long there until I realized the truth of Davitt's statement, that no Irish grievance, however just, could be settled on the floor of the British House of Commons." Dolan began to preach "Abstentionism" and the North Leitrim executive of the UIL passed a motion on June 16, 1907, declaring their support for Dolan's withdrawal. Some days later Dolan wrote to Sir Thomas Esmonde, Bart., MP, Chief Whip of the IPP.

"At a meeting of the North Leitrim executive of the UIL, a resolution was adopted calling on the Irish Party to withdraw in a body from Westminster, as a protest against the betrayal of Ireland by the British Liberals, and I was requested to bring forward this resolution at the meeting of the Directory. As the Directory did not accept the resolution it becomes necessary for me to resign my membership of the Irish Party, and I beg to request that you will have my name removed from the list. I take the step because I am convinced that unless the Irish Party sever their connection with the British Parliament, Ireland will gradually come to occupy the same position in that assembly that Scotland occupies . . . the most saddening feature in the situation is the inability of many well-meaning Irishmen to understand why we want to recall our members. It seems to them absurd and childish . . . in the present crisis the proper attitude for Ireland to assume is withdrawal from England's Parliament. This policy alone can restore the dignity of the Home Rule Movement and raise it to the level of international politics. . . . Sooner or later a great convention will be called together to decide whether we are to continue to tread the primrose path that leads to National extinction

or whether we are to embark on a great and comprehensive struggle for our constitutional rights. . . . As the North Leitrim executive of the UIL has expressed approval of my views, I do not intend to resign my seat."

Dolan was joined in withdrawal by MPs O'Mara and Esmonde, but whereas the counselling of Tim Healy caused the latter to return to the fold, Dolan was not to be captivated.



Arthur Griffith,
frequent visitor to Leitrim in 1907–08

A short time later, Dolan was to espouse the Sinn Fein policy and Arthur Griffith had found his first parliamentaryelectoral candidate. The IPP called on Dolan to resign his seat at Westminster, but Dolan refused, saying that he did not intend to resign until the people were better educated on the Sinn Fein policy. For this purpose, in July 1907, he founded a weekly penny newspaper, which he entitled *The Leitrim Guardian*, with offices in Manorhamilton and Seán MacDiarmuida acting as Editor.[1] Dolan retained his seat until making his application for the "Stewardship of the Chiltern Hundreds," in a letter to the then Chief Whip of the IPP, Captain Donolan, on January 27, 1908. His seat was then rendered vacant at Westminster and the election date was fixed for February 21, 1908. Dolan was an automatic candidate for Sinn Fein and his fellow townsman and next-door neighbour, Francis A. Meehan, Co. Co., and President of the North Leitrim Executive of the UIL, was eventually selected as his opponent by the IPP.[2] Then began one of the hottest election campaigns ever experienced in this country—sabotage, blood, victimisation, bribery and impersonation became the day to day activities of the pre-election campaign.

Charley Og, Sinn Fein

The legendary figures of the respective parties encamped in North Leitrim, with Manorhamilton as its capital. Newspaper correspondents came from all over the British Isles, hordes of extra police, telephonists and swashbuckling terrorists of the IPP swelled the population of the constituency. Despite being waylaid, beaten and spat upon, Dolan emerged with honour unscathed, distinguishing himself with his youthful oratory, courage and unselfishness. Well did the poet Keaveney refer to him as Charley Og Sinn Fein:

Abroad there is a lady fair, Miss Freedom is her name,
The Harbinger of Liberty, the faculty of fame,
Monarchs all admire her, she dwells in France and Spain,
The foster sister of a youth, called Charley Og Sinn Fein.

Dolan's plank was for freedom and

[1] The offices from which C. J. Dolan's *Leitrim Guardian* was edited were situated in the business establishment known then as "Balam's" in Manorhamilton. Now known as that of Joseph Mitchell & Co., it is of interest to note that the Editor of the present magazine worked in the same establishment for a number of years.

[2] Though calling on Dolan to resign his seat from July of 1907, when he renounced the IPP—the Redmondites seemed in a quandary as to whom to select as an opponent to Dolan. Daniel Boyle of Manchester—a native of Leitrim—was being considered, but on February 11, 1908, at a closed meeting in the Courthouse, Drumkeerin, F. A. Meehan was proposed by Fr. Charles Flynn, Killargue, and seconded by Patrick Flynn, JP, Carrick-on-Shannon, and nominated unanimously. F. A. Meehan was remembered by the writer of this article as a kindly gentleman wearing a hard hat, and the owner of a licensed premises in Manorhamilton. Together with other toddlers on our way to school, I was often treated to a penny by him, and in those days a treat such as this remained long in memory.



Sean T. O Ceallaigh,

campaigned in "Dolan's" Election

industrial development as a means of prosperity. Redmond, Healy, McHugh, Devlin and Nugent confined themselves to scorn at the action of a "youth" in seeking to take glory from men who were at Westminster when he (Dolan) was sucking "sugar candy." Sean T. O Ceallaigh, Charles Gavan Duffy, Thomas Cuffe, Bulmer Hobson, Paidin O'Keeffe, Diarmuid Lynch, Jim Lawless and, of course, Seán MacDiarmuida and Arthur Griffith, together with Dolan and his loyal band of townsmen, namely John Gallen, Patrick Fox (Sec.), James McGauran, Patrick Ferguson and Patrick Wilson, all members of the local Sean Misteil Sinn Fein Cumann, worked unceasingly in the cause. All travelled the roads and bothreens of North Leitrim expounding the Sinn Fein policy. The result of the election showed Meehan victorious with 3,103 votes to Dolan's 1,157, from a qualified electorate of 6,324—the absentees, "undecided," to quote Dolan, as he walked away disappointedly from the election count and into political oblivion.

He had faced the challenge and scorn of British parliamentarianism with all the odds stacked against him. His rejection by the constituents, whose sorry plight he pledged to remedy, dejected him, and with a broken heart he turned to America. There he became a member of the Judiciary of the State of Montana, where he died in exile some years ago, soon after retirement from office.

Charley Og Sinn Fein, remembered in the humble lines of a local poet—forgotten by the Irish Nation, his ideals brought him the loneliness of Emmet, but his courage and unselfishness bridged the gap in Ireland's struggle from Stephens to the GPO.

"Without knowing the history of a time, we cannot accurately comprehend its philosophy."—Thomas Davis.

BOXTIE

Boxtie on the griddle,
Boxtie on the pan,
If you don't eat Boxtie,
You're not a Leitrim man.



Ingredients: 1-lb. grated raw potato; 1-lb. boiled mashed potatoes, 2 teaspoons salt, ½-lb. flour.

Method: Squeeze the grated raw potato in a cloth to remove moisture. Mix mashed and grated potatoes with sifted flour and salt. Make dumplings on a floured board. Cook in boiling salted water for 35 minutes. Serve hot with plenty of butter and well-sweetened white sauce or fried with back rasher for breakfast—a "treat."