

**From 'Stand by Their Men' to 'The Whole Human Sisterhood': Gender, Religion, and
Power in the Ulster Unionist Movement**

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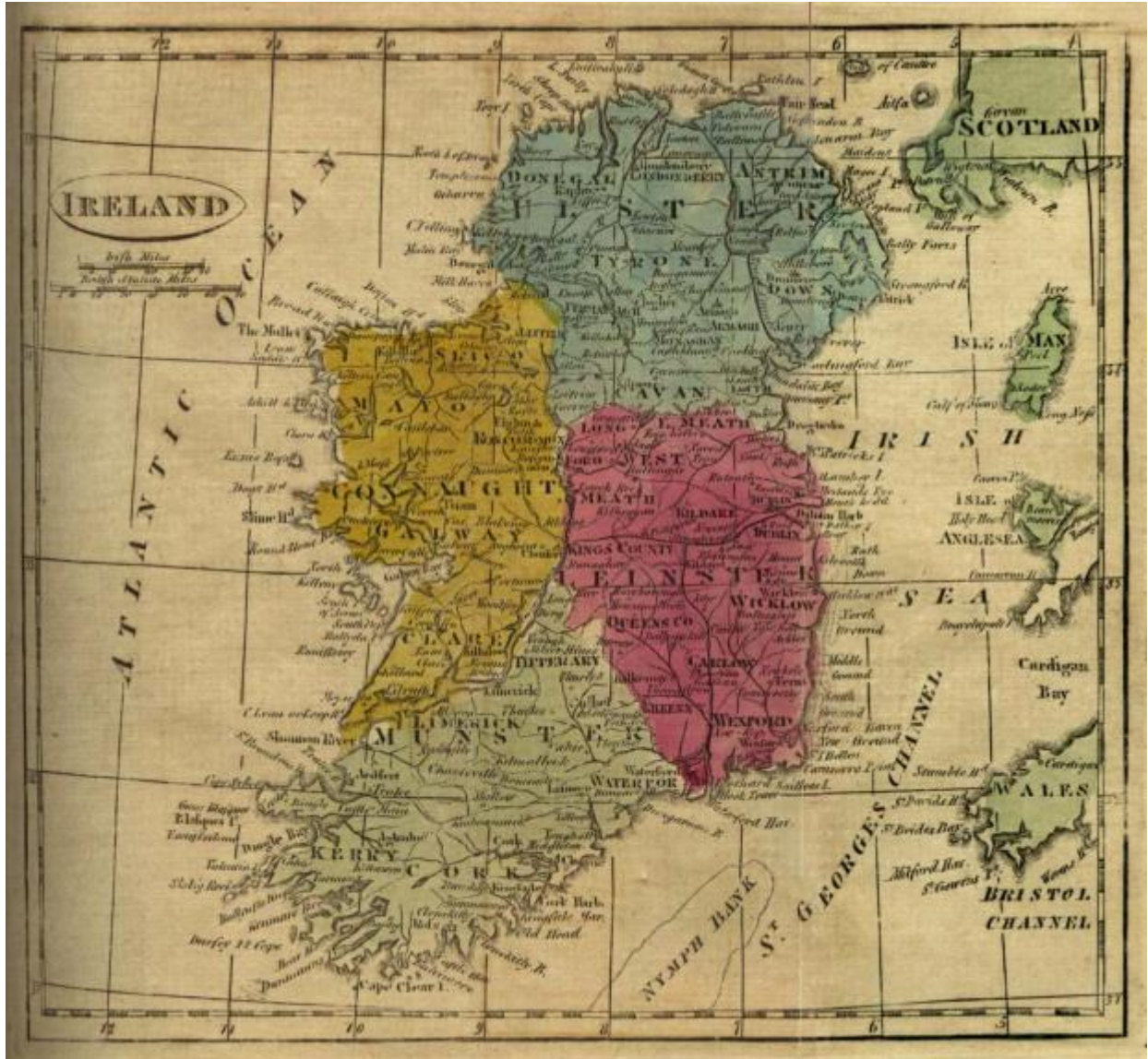
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MAP OF IRELAND 1908



Blue- Ulster

Yellow- Connaught

Pink- Leinster

Green- Munster

TIMELINE

1530s – Onset of English Reformation

1594- 1603 – The Nine Year’s War involves William III and James II’s power struggle for control of Britain and Ireland

1603-1610 – Protestant settlers arrive in Ireland and settle confiscated land from Gaelic Chiefs to form the Plantation of Ulster.

1641 – Irish uprising in Ulster region, killing Protestant settlers

1690 –Battle of the Boyne defeats the Catholic King James II, William of Orange controls region

1798 – Society of United Irishmen rebel against British rule in Ireland

1800 – Act of Union unites the Kingdom of Great Britain and the Kingdom of Ireland

1845-9 – Great Irish Famine leads to mass disease and emigration

1867 – Irish Republican Brotherhood rebels against British rule in the Fenian Rising

1886 – Gladstone’s Irish Home Rule bill introduced to Parliament and defeated

1893 – Second Home Rule bill introduced to Parliament and defeated

1905 – Ulster Unionist Council forms to block future Home Rule legislation

1911 – Women’s Ulster Unionist Council forms

1912 – Third Home Rule bill approved and set to become law in 1914

1913 – Ulster Volunteer Force forms to resist attempts to install Home Rule in Ireland

1914 – Britain declares war on Germany, delaying execution of Home Rule legislation to restore Dublin parliament

1916 – Nationalists in Dublin stage Easter Rising, proclaiming an Irish republic

1920 – Parliament passes Government of Ireland Act to partition Northern Ireland

1921 – Irish Free State Treaty legalizes the partition of Northern Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

We, whose names are under-written, women of Ulster and loyal subjects of our Gracious King, being firmly persuaded that Home Rule would be disastrous to our country, desire to associate ourselves in their uncompromising opposition to the Home Rule Bill now before Parliament, whereby it is proposed to drive Ulster out of her cherished place in the Constitution of the United Kingdom, and to place her under the domination and control of a Parliament in Ireland, Praying that from this calamity God will save Ireland, we hereto subscribe our names.¹ (Belfast, 1912)

The Woman's Declaration, reproduced above, was written by and for a group of Protestant women in the Ulster region of Northern Ireland, with "unwavering hostility" to the looming possibility that Ireland would become self-governing within the United Kingdom.² Signed on the 28th of September, 1912, since known as "Ulster Day," the document was written as the Northern Irish women's counterpart to Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant, a proclamation of loyalist commitment to the union by the Ulster community. The Ulster Day Committee in the all-male Ulster Unionist Council [UUC] did not originally invite members of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council [UWUC] to participate in the mass rally on Ulster Day, yet they ultimately allowed for a "Woman's Declaration" to appear by the men's Covenant. While 218,206 men signed the Ulster Covenant, a total of 234,046 women banded together to sign their Declaration on September 28, 1912.³

The Home Rule Crisis

In April 1886, Liberal British Prime Minister William Gladstone introduced the first Home Rule bill into the House of Commons, proposing to create an independent legislature in Ireland with limited authority. Liberals like Gladstone believed that giving Ireland their local

¹ Ulster Day 1912 Booklet, September 1912, D2846/1/2/6, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland.

² Ibid.

³ Diane Urquhart and Maria Luddy, *The Minutes of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council and Executive Committee, 1911-40* (Dublin: Women's History Project in Association with Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2001), xvii.

Parliament, which had been removed in 1800 by the Act of Union, would solve the issues aroused by Catholic Nationalists vying for freedom from British rule.⁴ Conservatives in Northern Ireland mobilized the sizable Protestant population in the region against the formation of an Irish political body, creating the Ulster Unionist Council in 1905 and the Ulster Women's Unionist Council in 1911.⁵ The Unionist platform against Home Rule was grounded in a fear that Catholics, who made up the majority of Ireland's population, would tyrannize the minority population of Protestants; they termed this feared future "Rome Rule," believing the Roman Catholic Church would exert control over Ireland.

Between the introductions of the first two Home Rule bills in Parliament from 1886 to 1893, conservative women sporadically entered into political action, protesting the Home Rule bills in the forms of petitioning, fundraising, canvassing, and organizing women's demonstrations.⁶ From the outset, most observers viewed the Ulster Women's Unionist Council as an inconsequential auxiliary group formed by loyal women who were supportive of their husbands' political aims. The conservative Belfast Newsletter proclaimed, "Nobody who has seen the spirit of these women can doubt that Sir Edward Carson is right in his belief that they will stand by their men in this crisis."⁷

The Origins of the Protestant and Catholic Divide

The twelfth-century Norman Invasion marked the inception of over 800 years of English rule in Ireland, creating the deep division between Catholics and Protestants present in Irish

⁴ Diane Urquhart, *Women in Ulster Politics, 1890-1940* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), 46.

⁵ Alan Hayes, and Diane Urquhart, eds., *The Irish Women's History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁶ Urquhart, *Women In Ulster Politics*, 51.

⁷ "Home Rule Crisis- Ulster's Resistance- The Women's Preparations- Will Stand By the Men," *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 January 1914, D2846/1/2/18, PRONI.

society today. Under King James I of England's rule in the 1530s, at the time of the English Reformation, thousands of English and Scottish settlers migrated to Northern Ireland in the early seventeenth century under the Plantation of Ulster policy, a government authorized plan to confiscate and colonize Northern Irish land. Ulster society was thereafter marked by economic divisions, as landlords were largely Catholic while urban businessmen were largely Protestant.⁸ Spatial boundaries signified the divide between the religious factions, a feature of Northern Ireland that remains unchanged. Protestants were concentrated in the Northern region of Ulster, in the late nineteenth century making up 57.3 percent of the population in Ulster's nine counties. The campaign to remain tied to Great Britain, therefore, became a mass movement for both men and women in the region, while nationalism flourished in the South.⁹

Elements of race-thinking underpinned the pitting of Catholics against Protestants in Northern Irish history. In 1888, John Harrison, a Protestant polemicist, claimed:

For more than a century the Scots of Ulster were oppressed by laws which deprived them of their civil and religious rights and crippled their trade; while all through the centuries they have been crushed, as they still are, by the presence of an inferior race, whose lower civilization makes all their ideas of comfort lower, and causes them to multiply with a rapidity which ever presses on the means of subsistence.¹⁰

Harrison positioned his fellow Ulstermen morally and hierarchically above the Catholic population, emphasizing the inferiority of the Gaelic "race," and aimed to incite fear with comments on the rapidly growing Catholic population.¹¹ The Orange Order, a Protestant fraternal organization based in Northern Ireland, was established in 1798 as an ethnocultural movement;

⁸ Graham S. Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party: Protest, Pragmatism and Pessimism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 2.

⁹ Johnathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast, 1992), 443, 496. Urquhart, *Women In Ulster Politics*, 4.

¹⁰ John Harrison, *The Scot in Ulster: Sketch of the History of the Scottish Population of Ulster* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1888), 48.

¹¹ Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, 2. Race-thinking was prevalent among Protestants in Ireland, affirming their belief in the superiority of their Scotch-Irish ancestors.

their aim was to defend the “Protestant Constitution.”¹² Historian Graham Walker argues that the Unionist and Nationalist movements were similar in their abilities to create strong coalitions of individuals from varying levels of society through ethnic and religious identifications.¹³ The religious uniformity of Unionist support was unmistakable in the Home Rule crises at the turn of the century, as religious factors played an important role in motivating Northern Irish women to engage in politics.

Historiography

Historians of British history have focused an increasing amount of attention on politically involved women in England, but those in Northern Ireland remain neglected. In this thesis, I intend to historically reframe the largest female political group in Ireland’s history at the time, complicating and challenging the narrative of conservative women passively supporting their husbands’ politics. In 1983, Mary Ward noted in her book, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, that the needs of influential men shaped the public roles and, specifically, the political work of women in Ireland.¹⁴ However, the gender dynamics in the Unionist movement do not reflect this perspective of women without agency. Diane Urquhart, in *Coming into the Light*, sought to revise this history and is one of the few scholars to have carefully studied the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council. She argues that the UWUC served middle and upper-class women as a means of escape from the domestic sphere, and their participation in politics narrowed the gender divide.¹⁵ Rachel Finley-Bowman’s “United We Stand, Divided We Fall” provides a detailed

¹² Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, 2.

¹³ Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, 3.

¹⁴ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 248.

¹⁵ Diane Urquhart, “‘The Female of the Species is More Deadlier Than the Male?’: The Ulster Women’s Unionist Council, 1911-1940,” in Janice Holmes and Diane Urquhart, ed., *Coming into the Light: The Work, Politics and Religion of Women in Ulster* (Belfast, 1994), 117.

account of the UWUC in the pre-partition era. Finley-Bowman argues that UWUC women's conservatism and dedication to the status quo enabled more radical groups coming after the Council to succeed politically. However, Finley-Bowman fails to take into account political changes within the UWUC itself, viewing the group as embracing the status quo from the Council's inception to its decline. I seek to evaluate changes in the gendered relationships within the Ulster Women's Union Council and Ulster Unionist Council in the context of the war and in the growing suffragist and nationalist movements in the early twentieth century.

This thesis is organized chronologically to reveal the organization's developments from 1912 to 1922. The first chapter discusses the historical context of women's political organization in Ireland from 1886, the introduction of the First Home Rule bill to the founding of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council. The second chapter examines the early years of the UWUC and the gender dynamics between the Ulster Unionist Council and Ulster Women's Unionist Council. Chapter three examines the response that the UWUC elicited from nationalist and suffragist groups, highly critical of the Council's political actions. The fourth chapter examines Council developments in the First World War, leading to concluding remarks about the role of Ulster women in effecting a shift in gender dynamics in the political sphere. I argue that the ways in which women entered this debate over a century ago, seizing upon their gendered and religious frameworks to justify their presence on the political stage and arguing for their own interests, retains relevance.

CHAPTER I: Women in Politics

The ideology of late Victorian Conservatism, summarized well by Martin Pugh:

Espoused a collection of attitudes and precepts [...] a feeling that the sphere of politics was strictly limited; a distrust of rationalism and a corresponding fondness for experience and tradition; a belief in the virtues of hierarchy as a natural and unifying element both in the family and in the nation itself; and a disposition to accept authority, both religious and political.¹⁶

The standards for feminine behavior in Great Britain at the turn of the century were conservative and informed by a “cult of domesticity,” which dictated that noble and upper-class women be protected from the outside world by men. These standards confined women’s work and authority to the domestic sphere.¹⁷ Women were also considered the moral sex and were venerated for their piety.¹⁸ Despite social norms restricting work by middle and upper-class women, charitable activity came to be common in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, as Christian duties encouraged such engagement, and agricultural and industrial problems created social ills around Britain.¹⁹

Illustrative of these new charitable societies was the Girl’s Friendly Society, which sought to decrease the number of children born out of wedlock.²⁰ The GFS was an Anglican organization created in 1874 by Mary Elizabeth Townsend, run by Anglican associates. The society intended to preserve the “respectability” of young, working class girls, and upper-class associates taught them domestic skills and religious principles to support their future success as

¹⁶ Martin Pugh, *The Tories and The People: 1880-1935* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 70.

¹⁷ “Conservative” will be capitalized when relating to the Conservative party and its ideology.

¹⁸ Finley-Bowman. “United We Stand, Divided We Fall,” 11.

¹⁹ Finley-Bowman. “United We Stand, Divided We Fall,” 13.

²⁰ In the nineteenth century, social convention dictated that brides must be virgins at the time of their marriage. Illegitimacy of children was particularly socially discouraged through the Victorian era.

homemakers.²¹ Working class members were expected to be unmarried and possess “a virtuous character.”²² Members who married were encouraged to join the newly founded maternal reform organization, the Mother’s Union, aimed at countering such modern, urban practices as divorce, prostitution, and alcohol use through religious discipline.²³ In this way, women acquired a new kind of leadership role in their communities, albeit non-political.²⁴ Charlotte Yonge, who assisted in forming the Girl’s Friendly Society and represented traditional Anglican notions of women’s work, wrote in *Womankind* against overstepping the bounds of feminine work:

I have no hesitation in declaring my full belief in the inferiority of woman, nor that she brought it upon herself [...] It is not so essential that she should sit on ladies’ committees, preside at mothers’ meetings, hear lectures, or even attend weekday services, as that she should prevent her husband and sons from being alienated from a fireside with no-one to greet them, or her girls from being formed by stranger hands.²⁵

Home making and maternity were more significant than political pursuits in the eyes of many conservative women in England. Irish women’s philanthropic societies grew out of these social reform groups established in England, though some were explicitly committed to political issues. One Irish branch of the Girl’s Friendly Society caused embarrassment to the national organization when it distributed a circulating paper on anti-Home Rule propaganda, much like that later distributed by the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council.²⁶

The Girl’s Friendly Society and Mother’s Union’s social and non-politically oriented model of upper-class associates helping working-class members influenced later conservative

²¹ Brian Harrison, “For Church, Queen and Family: The Girls’ Friendly Society 1874-1920,” *Past and Present*, no. 61 (1973), 109.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Harrison, “For Church, Queen and Family,” 111.

²⁴ Harrison, “For Church, Queen and Family,” 121-2.

²⁵ Charlotte Yonge, *Womankind* (Wentworth Press, 1877), 1-4. Cited in Julia Bush, *Women Against the Vote: Female Anti-Suffragism in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 96.

²⁶ Harrison, “For Church, Queen and Family,” 131.

organizations, notably the Primrose League. This organization filled an educative and propagandist role, seeking to spread conservative principles through smaller social groups across Britain.²⁷ The Primrose League allowed many upper-class women to continue serving in educational and philanthropic roles, as well as expanded their scope to include involvement in electoral battles. This development was not viewed as unseemly, as their upper-class attitudes and orthodoxy kept them aligned with male aristocratic society.²⁸

Between 1880 and 1910, the structure in women-dominated political campaigns came to be modeled on female auxiliary organizations tied to the primary British political parties, including the Conservative Primrose League, the Women's Liberal Federation, and the Women's Labor League.²⁹ In this period, political parties in Great Britain were strengthened by their connections to social groups and philanthropic organizations. Several key external and internal factors motivated women to participate in politics on a large scale: While women were excluded from primary political parties until 1918 when the franchise was widened to include them, many women had earlier involvement in women's auxiliary political groups. British women were included in politics after the passage of The Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883, prohibiting the payment of political canvassers, and the 1884 Reform Act, which enfranchised well over half of British men.³⁰ This law came into effect after a period of rampant voter bribery around the 1880s, in an effort to support party fundraising, as opposed to personal funding. In 1883, sixteen Members of Parliament were unseated after allegations of their corrupt electoral practices. Accusations were also directed at Charles Vane Tempest Stewart, a wealthy British Conservative politician, landowner and benefactor, although he was never recalled. His wife,

²⁷ Pugh, *The Tories and The People*, 38.

²⁸ Pugh, *The Tories and The People*, 46.

²⁹ Urquhart, *Women In Ulster Politics*, 3.

³⁰ Urquhart, *Women In Ulster Politics*, 2.

Theresa Londonderry, had a far more successful political career; in her own words, “I flew higher.”³¹

As women’s political involvement grew rapidly at the turn of the century, aristocratic women were especially able to exert influence through personal means and through their high-ranking husbands.³² Still, however, the pattern of short-term involvement and retreat in politics was standard for upper-class women; sustained political interest was a rarity.³³ Whereas a limited number of wealthy political wives had previously involved themselves in political life, new networks of political organizing came to include more women of the middle-class. Due to the intense debate raging over the issue of Home Rule in Ireland, women involved in Northern Irish politics centered on this issue. While women in Great Britain attached themselves to Conservative, Liberal, and Labour organizations, women in Northern Ireland attached themselves to Unionist and Nationalist organizations.³⁴ They served as a useful source of unpaid labor, organizing campaigns, circulating propaganda, and giving public speeches. Though some democratization of political activity occurred, few working-class women had the time and economic freedom to actively take part in political life.³⁵

The Liberal Unionist Party, centered in London, never succeeded in unifying its English party base. The short-lived party was founded in 1886 by a faction that broke away from the Liberal Party over the issue of Home Rule, forming an alliance with Conservatives in opposition

³¹ Diane Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry: Women and Political Patronage* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 77-8. I will discuss Theresa Londonderry in greater depth in the second chapter.

³² Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry*, 2.

³³ Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry*, 3.

³⁴ Urquhart, *Women In Ulster Politics*, 3.

³⁵ Urquhart, *The Minutes of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council*, xiv.

to Irish Home Rule.³⁶ For a period of the Liberal Unionist Party's existence, English women were involved in a women's auxiliary group, the Women's Liberal Unionist Association [WLUA], founded in 1888.³⁷ Practices in WLUA branches around Britain would feature prominently in future UWUC organizing. Lord Wolmer, a moderate Unionist whip, explained the importance of women's political contributions:

Women are for the most part rooted to the soil; they will never be a large guerilla force, but they may be an excellent territorial militia. It is for this reason that we have been urging on the LUA the desirability of employing them to work among the voters in their own neighbourhoods, to influence the people whom they know, or whom they easily could know; so that when an election comes on, instead of fetching in strangers from a distance, who have to begin by learning their way about, we may have a corps of women workers on the spot, knowing the electors personally and living in permanently friendly relations with them.³⁸

While most women gained access to political society through marriage, an elite woman's influence in society was also shaped by her ability and ambition.³⁹ The sixth Marchioness of Londonderry and Vice President of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council, Theresa Londonderry, married into one of the most influential and affluent Tory families of the period. The Londonderry line in Ireland dates back to the early 1600s, during the time of King James I, when the Londonderrys became landholders on the Ballylawn estate in County Donegal.⁴⁰ The Londonderry family rose to prominence in the succeeding centuries, purchasing land in County Down and by the late nineteenth century, they owned over 27,000 acres in Northern Ireland and 23,000 acres in England and Wales, with gross annual revenue of over £100,000. In 1816, the

³⁶ Ian Cawood, *The Liberal Unionist Party: A History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 232. This English coalition did not last, as Joseph Chamberlain's Tariff Reform policies threw their distinct economic ideologies into sharp contrast.

³⁷ Cawood, *The Liberal Unionist Party*, 148

³⁸ Cawood, *The Liberal Unionist Party*, 148

³⁹ Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry*, 4.

⁴⁰ Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry*, 4. Urquhart notes that until 1914, those with an income of roughly £10,000 per year, equivalent to £7-£7.7 million in today's values, were considered upper-class in British society.

family was elevated to the peerage and Lord Castlereigh's son, Robert Stewart, became the first Marquess of Londonderry, solidifying the family's role in the Anglo-Irish political elite. From the late nineteenth century onward, the term "Anglo-Irish" rose in usage to signal these families' ties to the English aristocratic elite, grounded by a common religion, education, language, and wealth. The role of the Londonderry family in hosting the distinguished English and Irish elite translated into political power, matched in Ireland only by the fifth Marquess of Lansdowne's efforts against Home Rule in the House of Lords.⁴¹

Theresa, the sixth Marchioness of Londonderry, came to the forefront of the Ulster Unionist movement. The Marchioness continued her family's traditionally female role, acting as a social and political hostess, which was a significant and especially visible position in Victorian society. Receptions for leading Conservative figures, much like those held for Primrose League members, strengthened the Conservative party's organization.⁴² Wealthy aristocratic families funded the Unionist cause. As Edward Carson, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Council noted, "We must now commence to work finance on a very large scale and sacrifices must commence in earnest, but I do not suppose the Unionist Party could ever let us fail for want of money."⁴³ Edward Carson was born into a wealthy Anglican family in Dublin and was educated there, before being invited to lead the Ulster Unionist Party by James Craig in 1910.⁴⁴ Carson served as the key spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Council, and became a successful and popular political figure leading the UUC through the 1910s, despite suffering neurasthenia, long periods

⁴¹ Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry*, 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ "Carson, Ulster Club, Belfast, to Lady Londonderry," 22 January 1914, D2846/1/1/114, PRONI.

⁴⁴ Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party*, 290.

of physical and mental distress, which he attempted to treat by living in German spa towns.⁴⁵

Carson was successful in building a large support base for the cause in Northern Ireland with the help of Theresa Londonderry, a close friend and colleague.

Theresa Londonderry was among the first generation of women to engage directly in politics, and she professed to believe “in causes and not in persons.”⁴⁶ The future political leader expressed her ambition in a journal at a young age, writing, “It is the one position to have in England. If you cannot be the P.M. then... be his wife.”⁴⁷ She married Charles Vane Tempest Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh, the son of Henry, 5th Marquess of Londonderry and Mary Cornelia, at the age of nineteen. Theresa Londonderry was described as a powerful woman, and Conservative politician Henry Stracey questioned whether he had “ever seen anybody have the slightest influence or power over her.”⁴⁸ As Austen Chamberlain once claimed, he could measure “the state of his own political fortunes by the number of fingers, ranging from two to ten, which [Lady Londonderry] gave him when they met.”⁴⁹ Edward Carson’s second wife, Ruby Carson, wrote in her diary that, “Lady Londonderry... tried to manage everyone... she laid down the law... very bombastic. If she wasn’t Lady L. no one would stand her for two minutes.”⁵⁰ Some criticized Theresa Londonderry for possessing masculine qualities: one account suggested she was “a born dictator... [who] loved to encounter opposition, so that she might crush it,” and

⁴⁵ "BBC - History - Edward Carson," *BBC News*.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/people/edward_carson.>

⁴⁶ Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry*, 75.

⁴⁷ Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry*, 77.

⁴⁸ Henry Stracey to Theresa Londonderry, D2846/2/8/29 PRONI. Cited in Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry*, 78.

⁴⁹ Pugh, *The Tories and The People*, 38. From Frances, Countess of Warwick, *Afterthoughts* (1931), 45.

⁵⁰ Diary of Lady Ruby Carson, 23 May 1916, D2846/1/13/1, PRONI. Cited in Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry*, 78.

another claimed that she had “the mind of a man with the temperament of a woman.”⁵¹ Her mixed reception reflects the discontent of many in finding women with an increasing amount of social and political power during the wave of early feminist thought in the twentieth century.

⁵¹ Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry*, 78.

CHAPTER II: “We Will Stand by Our Men Folk”- Gender in the Early Years of the UWUC

The founders of the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council [UWUC] were initially cautious in estimating the organization’s popularity. In January 1911, UWUC President Elizabeth Sinclair and Vice-President Theresa Londonderry planned to rent a room to hold between 40 and 50 members for their initial meeting.⁵² However, UWUC membership numbers grew dramatically in the years to come. Ulster women were seen as necessary to serve Unionist interests after the Parliament Act of 1911, which limited the power of the House of Lords to a two-year veto. As such, the government’s implementation of the Home Rule bill could only be delayed rather than indefinitely vetoed.⁵³ Women of the UWUC were needed to take on a larger role in swaying public opinion.

At the UWUC’s first meeting, Theresa Londonderry gave an impassioned plea for fellow Loyalists to help in the fight against Home Rule.

I earnestly appeal to the Loyalist women all over Ireland to do the same as we are going to do – to begin work at once, to canvass voters, to trace removals, and to endeavor to bring every single voter to the polls during elections, so that every seat in Ulster shall be won for Union ... we all know well Lord Randolph Churchill’s historical words, “Ulster will fight, and Ulster will be right.” Not only Ulster, but as heretofore the whole Unionist party will continue to fight for the Union, and I feel certain that the women of Ulster will be in no way behind the men in striving for so noble a cause.⁵⁴

Londonderry’s focus on explicitly political work suggests a move toward gender democratization in political organizing, as few women had been involved in political groups not aligned with charity work. However, from the onset, the notion of “separate spheres” for men and women in

⁵² UWUC Executive Committee Minutes, 24 January 1911, D1098/1/1, PRONI.

⁵³ Urquhart, *The Minutes of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council*, xiii.

⁵⁴ UWUC, “The Fight Against Home Rule,” 23 January 1911, D2846/1/2/3, PRONI.

Ulster society manifested itself in the UWUC's work. Members learned to frame their arguments against Home Rule in strategic ways.⁵⁵

The former notion that female involvement in politics was unseemly diminished with the influx of women in unpaid political organizing roles. The Liberal Prime Minister, H.H. Asquith, noted the change in the reception of political women in Britain after years of organizing:

Gradually trained the stolid masculine audience at political meetings [came] to regard the spectacle of women sitting on the platform – sometimes in the chair – moving resolutions and even amendments, not with a silent conventional curtsy and smile, but with flights of rhetoric, flashes of humour, as part of the normal machinery of a 'demonstration' or a 'rally.'⁵⁶

As Asquith suggests, women working in such political positions were normalized. While upper and middle-class women began working for charitable causes, by the time of the UWUC, they could be involved in purely political organizations. However, some women noted that public speaking in the political arena remained a difficulty, and involved "much anguish and soul-searching."⁵⁷ Women like Theresa Londonderry were conscious of public attitudes toward women's roles as homemakers and expressed mixed opinions on the respectability of women in political work. While Londonderry, was involved in the UWUC during the later years of her life, she noted the importance for younger women to stay away from such roles: "It is impossible for a young wife with a family to take much part in public life, if she does her duty to her husband and children, as I in an old fashioned way, think she ought to do."⁵⁸ Although Londonderry was

⁵⁵ Andrea Ebel Brożyna, *Labour, Love, and Prayer: Female Piety in Ulster Religious Literature, 1850-1914* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University of Belfast, 1999), 23. These women embraced the traditional gender roles espoused by Protestant evangelical churches in the United States and the continent in the face of a perceived threat to their religious community.

⁵⁶ Lilian Lewis Shiman, *Women and Leadership in Nineteenth-century England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 205.

⁵⁷ Shiman, *Women and Leadership*, 127.

⁵⁸ Diary extract from Theresa Londonderry, 5 December 1918, D3084/C/B/1/14, PRONI.

in the forefront of Conservative women entering into political action, she remained cautious about other women doing the same.

Women involved in the Ulster Women's Unionist Council were unpaid volunteers. In the council's first meeting, held on January 24, 1911, Elizabeth Sinclair was named the president of the UWUC. The selection of Sinclair for the powerful position was politically astute, as she was the daughter of a wealthy merchant in Belfast, and the wife of Thomas Sinclair, a leader of the Ulster Liberal Party and the early Ulster Liberal Unionist Association, which later became the Ulster Unionist Council.⁵⁹ The equally powerful Theresa Londonderry was named vice president. After choosing several honorary secretaries, namely Mrs. Mosse, Mrs. Finlay, and Mrs. Wakefield Richardson, women in the assembled group proposed to advertise for a full-time secretary in the Irish Times, Whig, and Belfast Newsletter; the salary was to come from money collected through donations and annual subscriptions.⁶⁰

No gender was specified in this advertisement. But once the council began receiving responses from several women inquiring about the job,

[and] after lengthened discussion, the Committee decided that the paid secretary should be a man, and the Hon. Secretary was instructed to write to this effect to those ladies who had answered the advertisement. It was decided that a salary of from £180 to £200 per annum should be offered.⁶¹

The decision to present the paid position to exclusively a man demonstrates the persistence of "separate spheres" with traditional economic practices, despite the fact that the organization was otherwise entirely female. Women serving the Council remained volunteers, while the lone man on the Council was eligible for pay.

⁵⁹ *Who Was Who*, 1897-1915, vol. 1 (London, 1920), 652. Thomas Sinclair led the Ulster Liberal Party from 1868-1886.

⁶⁰ UWUC ECM, 24 January 1911, D1098/1/1, PRONI.

⁶¹ UWUC ECM, 30 January 1911, D1098/1/1, PRONI.

The council emphasized the impact Home Rule would have on Ulster women, securing support for their cause by underscoring the domestic suffering that could come to mothers and children. In a letter from the UWUC headquarters to Edward Carson, the female authors wrote, “We realise that the civil and religious liberty of the women of Ireland and the security of their homes can only be guaranteed under the Legislative and Administrative Union of Great Britain and Ireland.”⁶² Members of a branch of the UWUC in Lisburn, close to Belfast, noted that women and children would be devastated by Home Rule, “for when bad times came and work was scarce women and children were more severely affected than the men.”⁶³ The women of Ulster used domesticity to their advantage, bolstering their claim to political action by securing sympathy and support from men and women alike.

Such questions of caring for the poor, the sick, and children featured heavily in UWUC rhetoric. In a speech made by Theresa Londonderry, she asked, “It is comparatively easy for those who have means to cut themselves adrift from this country should the government persist in their tactics, and live in either Scotland or England or any other part of the British Empire, but what about the poorer inhabitants of this Island?”⁶⁴ Fear over Catholic rule elicited arguments based upon inadequate healthcare in a Catholic-dominated Ireland. Speaking at the evening demonstration, the Duchess of Abercorn said, “One effect of Home Rule would be that the staffs of thoroughly-trained nurses in infirmaries would be done away with, and would be replaced by

⁶² UWUC ECM, September 8, 2011, D1098/1/1, PRONI.

⁶³ Minute Book of Dunmurry and District branch of Lisburn WUA, 31 January 1912, D1460/11, PRONI.

⁶⁴ Typed memorandum by [Lady Londonderry] containing an account of her visit, as president of the Ulster Womens' Unionist Council, to an anti-Home Rule demonstration in Antrim, September 1913, D2846/1/2/7, PRONI.

nuns who had little or no training.”⁶⁵ The extent to which this line of questioning was legitimate is debatable, but Protestants in Ulster often fomented anti-Catholic sentiment with such arguments.

UWUC women argued that political involvement was a natural extension of their maternal nature:

If our homes are not sacred from the priest under the existing laws, what can we expect from a priest-governed Ireland ... let each woman in Ulster do a woman's part to stem the tide of Home Rule ... the Union... meant everything to them – their civil and religious liberty, their homes and children ... once the Union was severed there could be no outlook in Ulster but strife and bitterness ... Home was a woman's first consideration ... in the event of Home Rule being granted, the sanctity and happiness of home life in Ulster would be permanently destroyed.⁶⁶

The Lurgan Women's Unionist Association, affiliated with the larger UWUC, focused on the sanctity of the home in their political arguments. Regardless of their primary motivation in the Home Rule crisis, the fact that women's organizations argued in this manner sheds light on their use of traditionally feminine roles as a political asset, without suggesting that women rather than men were more qualified to lead in the political sphere.

UWUC volunteers were not initially involved in large-scale demonstrations, but rather worked in female-dominated jobs. “The annual report submitted to this meeting laid special emphasis on three branches of work which women had taken up in furtherance of the volunteer movement. They are nursing, signaling, and telegraphing and other post office work.”⁶⁷ While at times some UWUC women organized demonstrations, many members were reluctant to do so. In an August 1911 meeting, the business on the agenda included arrangements for “the holding of a

⁶⁵ “We Will Stand by Our Men Folk,” *The Courier and Argus* (Dundee, Scotland), Issue 18286, 19 January 1912, 5.

⁶⁶ Minute book of Lurgan Women's Unionist Association, 13 May 1911, D3790/4, PRONI. Cited in Diane Urquhart, *The Minutes of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council*, xv.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Monster Demonstration of all women Unionists in Ulster, in connection with those to be held by the Men of Ulster [and] the presentation of an address to Sir Edward Carson in cooperation with all the other Unionist Organizations in Ulster.”⁶⁸ Nothing came of it. Just as many male Unionists spoke at women’s rallies, Ulster Unionist Council members invited women to hold demonstrations following men’s meetings. Yet women largely avoided such events. In a time of unrest related to industrial trade unions, Mrs. Thomas Sinclair “point[ed] out the serious risk of bringing a large number of women into the city at the present time [...] as such course might entail serious rioting, which would tell very strongly against the Unionist Cause.”⁶⁹ The executive committee unanimously decided, “no demonstration should be held until the Home Rule scheme took a more concrete form and the Bill was actually before the country.”⁷⁰

In 1914, The Times addressed the difference between the male and female council’s tactics:

The women’s side of the Ulster movement makes an almost greater appeal to one’s imagination even than that of the men. Women’s preparations are not of the kind to which the same publicity attaches as to the drilling, marching, and field movements of male volunteers. They will, however, be no less essential to the success of a campaign of resistance, and they are being made with the same earnestness and thoroughness as those of the men.⁷¹

The reporter noted that while women’s political work was less public, it was equally important as that of the more visible UUC.

The Specter of Rome Rule

Religious sentiment and social conservatism held by the women of the UWUC influenced the issues discussed by the group. However, recognizing the deeply ingrained divide between

⁶⁸ UWUC ECM, 25 August 1911, D1098/1/1, PRONI.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ “Home Rule Crisis- Ulster’s Resistance- The Women’s Preparations- Will Stand By the Men,” *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 January 1914, D2846/1/2/18, PRONI.

Protestants and Catholics in Northern Irish society, Theresa Londonderry made the decision in an executive committee meeting of the Council to “urge the Ulster case against Home Rule mainly on Social, Economical and Financial Grounds, by which course the charge of Ulster bigotry will be avoided.”⁷² In the UWUC’S Constitution, ratified during the Council’s first annual meeting in 1913, the founding women agreed that:

The sole object of the Council shall be to secure the maintenance in its integrity of the Legislative Union between Great Britain and Ireland, and for this purpose to resist all proposals, of whatever kind they may be, which have for their object the establishment of any form of an Irish Parliament. It is a fundamental principle of this Council that no other subject than the object above described shall be dealt with by the Council, it being understood that all other questions, in which individual members may be specially interested, shall be subordinated to the single issue of the maintenance of the Legislative Union.⁷³

Their decision to remain a single-issued organization was politically expedient, and UWUC organizers constantly reminded their fellow members about this policy. Unionist women were given a card to read out loud at the beginning of each political meeting, affirming that only the subject of Home Rule was to be discussed. This measure was intended to alienate as few people from the Council as possible.

Despite calls to diminish the presence of religious thought in political argumentation, Catherine Letitia Stannus from the city of Lisburn, an early member of the UWUC, commented on those who signed the Women’s Declaration against Home Rule: “Protestants and Presbyterians... signed, and they seemed very glad to be asked to do so. No Romanist signed. Some of them said they ‘dare not do it.’”⁷⁴ The Catholic community was not inclined to support Protestant attempts to counter the possibility of increased Catholic representation in politics. Local newspapers read by Protestant conservatives in Belfast used religious ideology to argue

⁷² UWUC ECM, 30 January 1911, D1098/1/1, PRONI.

⁷³ Constitution of the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council, 1911, D1098/1/3, PRONI.

⁷⁴ C.J. Stannus to Lady Antrim, 6 June 1893, D2977/39, PRONI.

against Home Rule. In a Belfast Newsletter article, the Home Rule supporter and Catholic priest, Reverend Horton, was quoting as saying, “Home Rule must mean Rome Rule, and he added Rome must persecute heretics when she had the power to do so, and since Protestants were the worst kind of heretics Home Rule Meant Persecution.”⁷⁵ The largely Protestant press spread such ideas far and wide in order to warn people of the dangers of Home Rule for the potential Protestant minority.

On multiple occasions, council members raised issues of mixed marriages between Protestants and Catholics, in reference to the highly controversial 1910 McCann legal case. In 1908, Pope Saint Pius X created the “*Ne temere*” decree, specifying the criteria for religious recognition of mixed religion marriages.⁷⁶ The decree’s predecessor came from the “*Tametsi*” ruling at the Council of Trent, which required the presence of a parish priest and two or three witnesses for a valid marriage. In the eighteenth century, Pope Benedict XIV ruled that “*Tametsi*” was not to be interpreted as affecting mixed marriages in Belgium and Holland.⁷⁷ A Catholic Priest from Limerick noted in 1825 that mixed marriages “were very frequent even among the lower orders.”⁷⁸ Despite the frequency of these marriages in the eighteenth century, requirements by the Vatican were put forward that a couple entering into a mixed marriage must promise to baptize and raise their children Roman Catholic.⁷⁹ With the “*Ne temere*” ruling, weight was added to the necessity of obtaining these promises and being married by a Catholic priest in a legally valid marriage.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ “Press Cuttings.” 1910-1935, D2846/1/2/1, PRONI.

⁷⁶ Raymond M. Lee, “Intermarriage, Conflict and Social Control in Ireland: The Decree of “*Ne temere*.”” *The Economic and Social Review*, 17, 1 (October 1985), 11.

⁷⁷ Lee, “Intermarriage, Conflict, and Social Control, 13.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Lee, “Intermarriage, Conflict, and Social Control, 14.

⁸⁰ Lee, “Intermarriage, Conflict, and Social Control, 15.

In a 1910 legal case, Catholic Alexander McCann sought to divorce his young, Protestant wife, Agnes McCann. Reverend William Corkey, Minister of Townsend Street Presbyterian Church in Belfast, Agnes McCann's congregation, published a letter in the local press responding to this case. In the letter, Corkey wrote that Agnes and Alexander were married in a Presbyterian ceremony years before "Ne temere" was implemented, and the couple agreed to continue separately attending churches within their respective denominations. Agnes McCann alleged that years later, Alexander McCann's priest came to their house and informed them that "Ne temere" invalidated their marriage retroactively, prompting Alexander to request Agnes remarry him in a Catholic ceremony. The Vatican informed the plaintiff that the Catholic Church did not deem his marriage legitimate since a Catholic priest did not wed the two.⁸¹ When Agnes refused the Catholic ceremony, Alexander abused her and left her, taking his children with him.⁸² In the case, Alexander McCann denied that any priest urged him to remarry his wife, and Agnes McCann refused to name a specific priest who had visited their home to deliver news of canon law.

The case gained widespread public attention, arousing moral panic within the Protestant community in Ireland. Protest meetings spread through each major Protestant denomination in Belfast.⁸³ When the issue was raised in the House of Commons in February 1911, Sir Edward Carson noted that the Catholic Church's treatment of Mrs. McCann was a "grave public scandal."⁸⁴ Unionists asserted that the "Ne temere" decree foreshadowed the poor treatment Protestants would receive if Home Rule legislation passed in Parliament. A writer for The

⁸¹ A.C. Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 130.

⁸² Lee, "Intermarriage, Conflict, and Social Control, 16.

⁸³ Lee, "Intermarriage, Conflict, and Social Control, 17.

⁸⁴ Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland*, 130.

Northern Whig commented, “The case sheds a flood of light upon what would happen if the Church of Rome were to be established in Ireland, as under Home Rule it would be.”⁸⁵ One of Corkey’s colleagues suggested, “the claim of that church always has been to control the individual, the home, the school, the nation.”⁸⁶ Protestant critics of the ruling also noted the danger in the Pope, leader of a sovereign state, invalidating British law. Corkey argued that the decree “will affect the peace and harmony of thousands of homes. We believe with Lord Rosebury that ‘the roots of empire are in the home’, and if the decree of a foreign power can come into a free British home and break it up, that decree becomes a menace to the State.”⁸⁷ As Corkey, a leader in the Northern Irish Presbyterian community suggests, the danger of this Papal decree was the precedent it may set for Papal law being weighted more heavily than British civil law in an Ireland under Home Rule.

In 1911, members of the UWUC responded to the “Ne Temere” decree with a petition to Parliament to reconsider such stringent marriage decrees, argued from the position of protecting the home. UWUC women partnered with women from Dublin, Great Britain, and Scotland, ultimately gaining signatures from 104,301 women to protest the decree and enforce standard English common law.⁸⁸ “Mrs Sinclair [...] said that this was a question which affected women particularly and in connection with which women should make a special effort. Mrs Sinclair said that 10,000 women in Edinburgh were banded together in an effort to obtain a strict enforcement of the law of the land on this matter and the Unionist Women of Ulster should not be behind in

⁸⁵ Lee, “Intermarriage, Conflict, and Social Control, 25. From Corkey’s personal writings published in 1961.

⁸⁶ Lee, “Intermarriage, Conflict, and Social Control, 19.

⁸⁷ Lee, “Intermarriage, Conflict, and Social Control, 20.

⁸⁸ UWUC ECM, 25 September 1911, D1098/1/1, PRONI. Cited in Urquhart, *The Minutes of the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council*, xvi.

their efforts.”⁸⁹ In a council meeting, “on the proposal of Mrs Finlay seconded by Mrs Mercier-Clements it was considered better to recommend the Executive Committee to consider the question of Mixed Marriages and the advisability of presenting a petition to Parliament on the matter. This was unanimously agreed to.”⁹⁰ The impulse to petition Parliament suggests the importance of this issue to the women in Ulster and their self-professed jurisdiction over all matters affecting other Protestant women.

Relationship with the Ulster Unionist Council

In an early executive committee meeting, Lady Londonderry moved “that a vote of thanks be sent to the Ulster Unionist Council for the cordiality with which they have welcomed the formation of the Women’s Ulster Unionist Council.”⁹¹ Powerful men in Ulster politics were inextricably linked to the executive committee of the UWUC. President of the council, Elizabeth Sinclair, proposed “that the wives of Ulster Peers, having seats in Parliament, and the wives of Ulster Members of Parliament be immediately coopted members of the Executive Committee, as specified in paragraph 6 of the Constitution.”⁹² Indeed, the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council, created six years after the formation of the Ulster Unionist Council, closely aligned itself with its male counterpart. Members of the UUC spoke often at UWUC meetings, in particular, Theresa Londonderry’s good friend and colleague, Edward Carson. In a letter explaining his inability to attend a January 1912 meeting, he suggested that either Lord Selborne, Lord R. Cecil, or Ronald McNeill should take his place as guest speaker: “I do not think it is a good thing always to have

⁸⁹ UWUC ECM, PRONI, 22 September, 2011, D1098/1/1, PRONI.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ UWUC ECM, 30 January 1911, D1098/1/1, PRONI.

⁹² *Ibid.*

myself or W. Long, and we grow stale if we speak too much...”⁹³ While women led these meetings, male guest speakers came frequently.

Theresa Londonderry’s close friendship and professional relationship with Ulster Unionist Council leader Sir Edward Carson illuminates the relationship between the men’s and women’s Unionist groups. Carson, a good friend of Theresa and Viscount Castlereagh, wrote her hundreds of letters, many of which illuminate changes in male politician’s perception of women’s work at the time. Unfortunately, many of Theresa Londonderry’s letters to Edward Carson were lost in the bombing of his London home in World War I.⁹⁴ Carson frequently visited the Londonderry estate, Mount Stewart, in County Down, Northern Ireland. A 1913 letter reveals the closeness of the friends and colleagues: “I am sure the most interesting chapter in my biography will be the one headed ‘Visits to Wynard and Mount Stewart’ - but how will the biographer ever really understand how delightful those visits have been and why you and his Lordship have always been so kind to me...”⁹⁵ In addition to social visits and letters, Carson wrote to Theresa Londonderry regarding his opinions on other politicians and on news from London. Early into the Home Rule crisis, Carson’s letters reveal a sense of him as the leader of a weak and subdued Ireland: “I feel very doubtful about the way our leaders intend to fight Home Rule but in any event I will lead for myself this time. The whole country is in a shocking state – everyone is demoralised and weak and still the country is calling out for a strong man.”⁹⁶ As of August 1911, in the UWUC’s infancy, Carson’s letter reveals his self-conception as the strong man who will lead Ireland away from destruction.

⁹³ Carson, 5 Eaton Place, London, to Lady Londonderry, 28 November 1911, D2846/1/1/75, PRONI.

⁹⁴ Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry*, 76.

⁹⁵ Carson, Rottingdean, to Lady Londonderry, 22 September 1907, D2846/1/1/6, PRONI.

⁹⁶ Carson, Rottingdean, to Lady Londonderry, 27 August 1911, D2846/1/1/68, PRONI.

Carson's letters reveal Theresa Londonderry to be a keen strategist and a colleague whose opinions Carson found valuable. On September 22, 1911, Carson noted:

Just as I am writing I have received your note. I am so glad you are coming to Belfast. I quite agree that riots in Belfast are to be deprecated and anything that is done must be organised and orderly. I do not know why you ask me if I want another split in the party? If you mean do I want the party to be more active and to show more life and fight I certainly do and I am sure the whole party in the country is crying out for something more than 'the gentlemanly party'. I do not think you know the depth of despair and dissatisfaction which exists and I would rather be out altogether if we are to dribble along on the old lines. However it will be very nice to see you and talk it all over and agree or disagree at Belfast...⁹⁷

Carson's discussing party politics in such depth with Londonderry suggests how much he respected her ideas. In a 1912 letter, Carson wrote to wish her well on an upcoming meeting: "I am sure your meeting in Ulster Hall will be a huge success. I do not think you want me to suggest a topic, and your letter to the meeting on Thursday was excellent."⁹⁸ Other letters contain laudatory remarks about Theresa Londonderry's leadership: "I think your women's meeting was a great success and your speech covered all the ground. I was glad to be able to go there for a few minutes as they have all done so splendidly [...] What makes me most affected is the fact that these people are not even fighting for bread and butter for the great sentiment – it is wonderful! and what an example to others [...]"⁹⁹ Although the UWUC in many ways remained overshadowed by the UUC, Carson's remarks reveal a close and mutually respectful relationship between the two leaders; this solidarity is evident in the close workings of the Councils.

⁹⁷ Carson, Park House, Drumoak, Aberdeenshire, 16 September 1911, D2846/1/1/69, PRONI.

⁹⁸ Carson, 5 Eaton Place, London, to Lady Londonderry, 13 January 1912, D2846/1/1/78, PRONI.

⁹⁹ Carson, Ulster Club, Belfast, to Lady Londonderry, 22 January 1914, D2846/1/1/114, PRONI.

CHAPTER III: Nationalist and Suffragist Response

In 1912, the Ulster Women's Unionist Council [UWUC] sent a letter to The Spectator, a conservative newspaper in London, painting a portrait of the Council's success with inclusivity:

The Ulster Women's Unionist Council was initiated, under the leadership of Lady Londonderry, in Belfast on January 23rd, 1911. There are now affiliated associations in every county of Ulster except Donegal, which it is hoped will shortly join our ranks. We number 100,000 women, who consist of Liberals and Conservatives, women in favour of suffrage for women, and women opposed to it, Tariff Reformers and Free Traders, Presbyterians, Wesleyans, Methodists, and members of the Church of Ireland. Socially, our membership runs through the whole human sisterhood. Not the least striking part of our great meetings was the sight throughout the Ulster Hall of all classes of women sitting side by side, all swayed by one thought and all united in one effort and determination.¹⁰⁰

The phrase, "whole human sisterhood," is notable for its propagandistic potential. Because the UWUC solely focused on the issue of Home Rule, the organization was able to appeal to a larger swath of the population. Discussion of social issues, such as universal suffrage, was thereby barred from their conversation.¹⁰¹ As women in high positions in the UWUC were the wives of Members of Parliament, they held a position of political power unlike most other women calling for change. Although the UWUC did contain active suffragists, its leadership never allowed the issue of suffrage to overshadow that of Home Rule, unlike more outspoken members of the Nationalist movement. Nationalists and suffragists fought against the UUC and UWUC on the platform of gender relations among the two Unionist organizations, and the UWUC's decision to remain formally impartial on the issue of votes for women.

Suffragist Response

As the Ulster Women's Unionist Council refused to take up the issue of votes for women, many suffragists viewed the Council with hostility. Female anti-suffragism has been portrayed

¹⁰⁰ "Ulster Women's Unionist Council Letter to the Editor of the 'Spectator,'" *The Spectator*, July 13, 1912. <<http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/13th-july-1912/12/ulster-womens-unionist-council-lto-the-editor-of-t>>

¹⁰¹ Urquhart, *The Minutes of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council*, xv.

by suffragists as a small movement characterized by what historian Julia Bush describes as “bizarre, narrow-minded irrelevance.”¹⁰² While many historians have accordingly cast aside the significance of anti-suffragist groups, the groups must be considered, as the anti-suffragette movement was substantial. Members of the Women’s League and National League numbered 42,000 by 1910, whereas the suffragist Women’s Social and Political Union joined with the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies numbered 55,000 members.¹⁰³ As these numbers suggest, both camps of women were reasonably well-matched in size.

The UWUC remained unresponsive to suffragist questions and public argumentation regarding their neutrality on the subject of votes for women. Historian Dana Hearne frames the UWUC as willingly placing themselves in a subordinate position to men, as affirmed by the nationalist and suffragist publication, The Irish Citizen.¹⁰⁴ This publication, founded in 1912 “to further the cause of Woman Suffrage and Feminism in Ireland [and] the self-determination of Ireland,” harshly criticized the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council throughout the 1910s.¹⁰⁵ Suffragist groups viewed the UWUC’s involvement in home-based work to serve the UUC as subservient labor unbecoming of a female political organization. In The Irish Citizen, one writer noted that these Protestant women acted “as mere subordinates to the men’s organisations instead of acting by themselves and on their own behalf.”¹⁰⁶ To illustrate this point, the publication noted that these women were engaged in what they perceived as inconsequential and servile activities, such as making 100,000 pairs of pajamas for men in the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force. The UWUC ignored such criticism.

¹⁰² Bush, *Women Against the Vote*, 1.

¹⁰³ Bush, *Women Against the Vote*, 3.

¹⁰⁴ Dana Hearne, “The Irish Citizen 1914-1916: Nationalism, Feminism, and Militarism,” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 18, 1 (1992), 4.

¹⁰⁵ Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, *The Irish Citizen*, October 1919.

¹⁰⁶ *The Irish Citizen*, April 25 1914, 386.

The suffragist Women's Social and Political Union took no stand on the issue of Home Rule but emphasized the necessity for women to be fully incorporated into the British or Irish government's leadership. In a statement issued by the Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser, the WSPU "announced that it would whole-heartedly and actively support the Irish women's demand for the suffrage, not on party grounds, but on the principle that whatever the system of government prevailing in Ireland women should have a share in it."¹⁰⁷ Seemingly impartial on the issue of Home Rule, the well-known suffragist organization demanded female representation in future Irish rule.

In contrast to the women of the UWUC, who rallied around the British government during World War I, feminists of the Irish Women's Franchise League [IWFL] strongly opposed the war. The IWFL presented a manifesto to the Foreign Office in 1914, noting, "In this terrible hour, when the fate of Europe depends on the decisions which women have no power to shape, we, realizing our responsibilities as the mothers of the race, cannot stand passively by. Powerless though we are politically, we call upon the governments [...] to avert the threatened unparalleled disaster."¹⁰⁸ In addition to condemning the war from the viewpoint of "mothers of the race," the IWFL campaigned for votes for women throughout the war, deeming it the single most important political issue of the day.

Nationalist Response

Nationalists working to establish Ireland as an independent country found themselves embroiled in infighting related to the issue of suffrage. Many found problems with women creating political stirrings about the vote and dividing the party rather than devoting

¹⁰⁷ "Anti-Home Rule Campaign." *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, (Manchester, England) Issue 17143, October 16, 1914, 12.

¹⁰⁸ *Irish Citizen*, 8 August 1914, 89. Cited in Finley-Bowman, "United We Stand, Divided We Fall," 183.

themselves to their greater cause. However, a sizable number of Nationalist women were outspoken about their desire for the franchise. Constance de Markievicz, a suffragist and Nationalist convicted of wrongdoing in the Easter Rebellion wrote: “Today the women attached to national movements are there chiefly to collect funds for the men to spend. These Ladies’ Auxiliaries demoralise women, set them up in separate camps and deprive them of all initiative and independence. Women are left to rely on sex charm, or intrigue and backstairs influence.”¹⁰⁹ Some Nationalist women attacked the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council for what they perceived as their complacency and support of an unjust system.

In April 1914, Nationalist women formed Cumann na mBan, or the Women’s Association, a paramilitary organization founded to enlist women throughout Ireland to fight for independence from Britain. Members of this organization were largely middle-class, educated, Catholic women, who took great risks in fighting alongside men.¹¹⁰ Helena Molony, a nationalist, though not a member of Cumann na mBan herself, noted, “You say, truly, ‘there can be no free nation without free women, but neither can there be free women in an enslaved nation [...]’”¹¹¹ In a principled rebuff of the idea that the issue of votes for women was most significant, Molony drew a parallel between the enslavement of women by men and the enslavement of Ireland by Great Britain, drawing the conclusion that Ireland must be freed before women could be freed from patriarchal structures of control.

While the Irish Nationalist movement professed to be open to women’s involvement in the movement for Home Rule, many more traditional male Nationalists refused to expand the

¹⁰⁹ Constance de Markievicz, *Irish Citizen*, 23 October 1915. Cited in Margaret Ward, *In Their Own Voice: Women and Irish Nationalism* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1995), 47.

¹¹⁰ David George Boyce, *Nineteenth Century Ireland: The Search for Stability* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2005), 273.

¹¹¹ Senia Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women, 1900-1918* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 143.

scope of women's roles. One Nationalist man writing to The Irish Citizen in his description of the "radical" women he saw in politics: "Why not use whips on the shoulders of those unsexed viragoes? Slender, springy, stinging riding whips would serve the purpose admirably, and if freely used would teach them a lesson they are badly in need of."¹¹² Such writing illustrated misogynist attitudes found in the Nationalist ranks and ongoing infighting within the Home Rule movement over the issue of suffrage and female representation in politics. Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, a militant feminist, protested against the lack of female representation in the movement, requesting that the Volunteer executive include a statement of women's equality in their manifesto and give women roles in the executive; the Volunteer executive refused his request, which Sheehy-Skeffington saw as "in the highest degree significant."¹¹³

While Theresa Londonderry never endorsed suffragist arguments, she was frustrated by being forced to hold an ancillary role in the Unionist political movement. In an effort to combat being entirely overshadowed, Londonderry sought out the company and "familiar conversation with the men who counted in the direction of the causes in which she believed – the Union with Ireland and the Unionist Party."¹¹⁴ She noted the discrepancy in women's treatment in society: "pronouncing for the advantages offered a man."¹¹⁵ Londonderry agreed with Lady Mary Wortley Motagu's assertion that she "would have vastly preferred to play a man's part rather than have devoted her talents to the tasks which lie before a woman."¹¹⁶

¹¹² *The Irish Citizen*, February 14 1914, 305.

¹¹³ Hearne, "The Irish Citizen," 3.

¹¹⁴ *The Times*, 17 March 1919. Cited in Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry*, 79.

¹¹⁵ "Tempest v. Ord, Chancery Papers brief affidavit of the Countess of Antrim," 20 April 1818, D654/G1/3, PRONI. Cited in Urquhart, *The Ladies of Londonderry*, 79.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Although Londonderry never openly espoused the core beliefs of the suffragist movement, there is evidence that she expressed frustration at the lack of opportunities afforded to women.

CHAPTER IV: Militarized and Political Women

The Ulster Volunteer Force

Some within Northern Ireland were willing to go to great lengths to maintain Ireland's union with Britain. By 1913, male Unionist and Orange Order club members formed the Ulster Volunteer Force [UVF], a military body purportedly set on ensuring the defeat of Home Rule through force should constitutional bulwarks fail. UVF activity was aimed at warning Britain and the Nationalist communities of Unionist resolve to remain tied to Britain. The Ulster Volunteer Force's first affiliated female organization was the Women's Legion, formed in 1915 by Theresa Londonderry's daughter, Edith, the 7th Marchioness of Londonderry. The Women's Legion became the first female voluntary military organization to serve in the First World War. This semi-militaristic organization articulated the notion of gender difference, as women "[performed] their duties as women, and not as makeshift men."¹¹⁷ As such, women's roles in serving the Ulster Volunteer Force were distinct from the outset. "The largest number of women are naturally to be found in the nursing section [...] Seven hundred Belfast women have already passed in first aid and nursing, and 300 more are now qualifying in the city alone."¹¹⁸ The Belfast Newsletter quoted a man in Ulster saying:

Much useful work has been done by the women of Ulster in furthering the Ulster Volunteer movement. First aid and ambulance classes have been held in various parts of the country, and women have fitted themselves to render practical and efficient help to the Volunteer Force if the need should arise. Others are prepared to act as signalers, telegraphists, and in connection with the postal system.¹¹⁹

While men took part in drill parades and practiced athletic skills, women served in roles assisting the men. In a public speech delivered by Theresa Londonderry, the Marchioness emphasized the

¹¹⁷ Edith Londonderry typescript, "Armistice Day," 1933, D3099/3/25, PRONI.

¹¹⁸ "Home Rule Crisis- Ulster's Resistance- The Women's Preparations- Will Stand By the Men," *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 January 1914, D2846/1/2/18, PRONI.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

responsibility for women to support men carrying out the Ulster Covenant by preventing Home Rule.

It may mean that those dearest and nearest to us will have to fight, but I know that no one Ulster woman will shrink from that position... I know that every one of you will strain every nerve to help the men to carry out their Solemn Covenant, and not in any way to make them falter in their grim determination.¹²⁰

The female role in this narrative is passive and self-sacrificing. Londonderry suggested that the woman's duty is to allow men to perform the heroic task at hand.

Historian Sarah Benton notes that the formation of the Ulster Volunteer force in 1913 served as a motivating force in the embrace of mass militarism in Ireland. Sir Edward Carson's biographer depicted the military unit as exclusively masculine: "As a body the men were magnificent, hardy toilers from shipyard and factory marching shoulder to shoulder with the clergy, doctors, lawyers, business men and clerks."¹²¹ This movement's ethos was centered on virility as a civic virtue, as the Ulster Unionist Council pushed forward the idea that military training and strength would instill civic virtues in men and combat the perceived effeminacy of British society.¹²²

As elements of violence and war permeated the Ulster Women's Unionist Council, ideas of self-sacrifice for family and country were especially emphasized for women. Under the headline, "The Women's Determination," correspondents from the Daily Mail noted:

Among the women of a more refined class the spirit is that of willingness for self-sacrifice in the cause. Kindly folk in England prepare homes for them in their hour of need, but few will go. Whatever others imagine of the future the women believe it will be bloody, and are

¹²⁰ "Home Rule Crisis- Ulster's Resistance- The Women's Preparations- Will Stand By the Men," *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 January 1914, D2846/1/2/18, PRONI.

¹²¹ H. Montgomery Hyde, *Carson: The Life of Sir Edward Carson, Lord Carson of Duncairn* (Octagon Books, 1974), 341. Cited in Benton, "Women Disarmed," 154.

¹²² Benton, "Women Disarmed," 155. Benton contrasts this Protestant ethos with that of Catholics who fought for Home Rule, as stories of martyrdom and blood sacrifice aligned with tales of the saint martyrdom.

prepared to stay and endure. This intense spirit, like many things in Ulster, is difficult of understanding to the logical Saxon mind, but it is the quintessence in the women be racial hatred, bitterer perhaps in the women because of its foundation in religious fears.¹²³

The article's emphasis on selflessness and religious fervor sheds light on the view that women were seen as best equipped to unify the country and martyr themselves for the nation.

UWUC in World War I

World War I changed the fate of the Home Rule debate. Before the war's outbreak, English Members of Parliament scrambled to solve the "Irish problem," with paramilitary troops training and tensions rising on both sides of the political spectrum. One Unionist wrote: "The govt. are now behaving atrociously and trying to get the Home Rule and Welsh Bills- as the Nationalists have told them that Redmond will not be able to hold Ireland, unless he has the Bill. The same old game- 'England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity.'"¹²⁴ In April 1911, Prime Minister H.H. Asquith put forward third Home Rule bill, after having been forced to form a coalition government with the Irish Parliamentary Party, led by John Redmond, who called for another Home Rule bill to be put forward. Asquith acquiesced, despite the Protestant opposition's fury in Northern Ireland.¹²⁵

In the face of a growing potential of Home Rule coming to Ireland, in a letter from UUC secretary Richard Dawson Bates to UWUC secretary Mr. Hamill, Bates acknowledged the potential utility of extending the vote to women in order to boost the number of Conservative, Protestant voters:

I am authorized to inform you that the draft articles of the Provisional Government already approved by this Council include a franchise for women on the basis of the register for

¹²³ "Home Rule Crisis- Ulster's Resistance- The Women's Preparations- Will Stand By the Men," *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 January 1914, D2846/1/2/18, PRONI.

¹²⁴ Boyce, *Nineteenth Century Ireland*, 283.

¹²⁵ "BBC - History - Edward Carson," *BBC News*.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/people/edward_carson.>

local government purposes. In taking this step the Council are merely following the policy which they have consistently adopted of co-operating with your Council, and which has been at all times heartily reciprocated [...] In the event of a Nationalist Parliament being forced upon us, it will take considerable time to hold the necessary elections under a new franchise, and to meet the difficulty that will arise in the meantime through women not being represented upon the Provisional Government, it has been decided to propose, at a meeting of this Council, to be held on the 24th inst., that your Council be invited to submit names of women willing to act upon the various committees which will be on that date established.¹²⁶

In the past, Bates had referred to the UWUC as weak, calling the Council “a more or less effete organisation.”¹²⁷ In light of his anti-suffragist position, he shows a sense of desperation to hold onto power in Ireland by his willingness to allow women into the political arena in the event of a change of power in Ireland. Although the third Home Rule bill passed through Parliament, it was never executed, as the issue was put on hold by the war. Parliament concluded that special considerations had to be made for the Ulster region, to recompense the many Ulster Protestants who enlisted in the British forces.¹²⁸

Unionists promised a political truce after the outbreak of the war, and the primary political activities of the UWUC were suspended shortly afterward to concentrate on the war effort.¹²⁹ As the Council noted in its annual report, “during the time of the great struggle in which we are engaged between the allied forces and Germany... a great deal may be done by our members to help our people in maintaining duty and discipline in the home and also by teaching patriotism and love of country.”¹³⁰ By the end of the war, Home Rule was no longer an acceptable policy response to Protestant fear and Catholic discontent in Ireland.

¹²⁶ “Ulster and Women’s Suffrage,” *The Cornishman*, British Library Newspapers, Part III: 1741-1950 (Penzance, England), Issue 1850, September 18, 1913, 3

¹²⁷ Richard Dawson Bates to Edward Carson, 8 October 1918, D1505/A/28/43, PRONI. Cited in Urquhart, *Women In Ulster Politics*, 70.

¹²⁸ Finley-Bowman, “United We Stand, Divided We Fall,” 168.

¹²⁹ Urquhart, *The Minutes of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council*, xvii.

¹³⁰ UWUC, *Annual Report of 1915*, 19 January 1915, D1098/1/3, PRONI.

Although members of the UUC and UWUC formally vowed to cease their political campaign efforts, many worried about Nationalist propaganda and rebellion. In a letter from Richard Dawson Bates to Theresa Londonderry, the UUC party member stressed that though UWUC members “are doing war work, they should not lose sight of the main object of the association, namely, the defeat of Home Rule.”¹³¹ Lady Lillian Dean Splender of the Belfast branch of the UWUC expressed such worries, saying “Personally we [Lillian and her husband Wilfred] feel that this is the one moment of all others when we should not give way, for what could weaken us so much now as a dismemberment of the United Kingdom [...] Who can doubt that the Nationalists would seize the very first opportunity to help Germany against us?”¹³² This anxiety was not misguided, as Catholic dissatisfaction over the suspension of Home Rule led to open drilling and parading in the years following 1914. By 1916, tensions in Dublin had reached a fever pitch, culminating in the Easter Rising, in which Nationalists declared their independence from Britain by seizing the Dublin Post Office. This rebellious act led to a series of executions and the imposition of martial law upon Ireland.¹³³

During the war, the UWUC’s Advisory Committee meetings went from weekly occurrences to monthly events, and the Executive Committee came to meet only twice a year. The UWUC protested against the exclusion of Ireland from British conscription for the war and recruited for Voluntary Aid Detachments and soldiers for Ulster and imperial military forces.¹³⁴ “To-day our men are responding to the call of the King and rallying around the flag; and we feel

¹³¹ Richard Dawson Bates to Theresa, 6th Marchioness of Londonderry, 3 January 1917, D/2846/1/1/8/65, PRONI. Cited in Urquhart, *The Minutes of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council*, xix.

¹³² Lady Lillian Splender, *The Diaries-1914*, 30 July 1914, D1633/2/19, PRONI. Cited in Finley-Bowman. “United We Stand, Divided We Fall,” 169.

¹³³ Finley-Bowman. “United We Stand, Divided We Fall,” 175.

¹³⁴ Urquhart, *The Minutes of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council*, xviii.

it is our duty to see that families and dependents are cared for, and that any want and suffering which may result shall be minimized as much as possible.”¹³⁵ Although the UWUC made it their official aim to care for Ulster men serving in the war, they refused to officially assist the British government to register women for war work. The Labour Exchange and Unemployment Insurance Divisional Office for Ireland had directly asked the Executive Committee to help in female registration for the ambulance corps, nursing, and supply distribution. Yet the Executive Committee resolved, “that individual Members of the Council and its Affiliated Associations be recommended to assist in carrying out the scheme to the best of their ability, but as a Council we cannot take the scheme up officially.”¹³⁶ However reluctant the Council was to register all local women in war work, members of the UWUC served their country in the associated Ulster Volunteer Nursing Corps.

In order to assist in these matters, in autumn of 1916, the UWUC began running a formerly French hospital as the “Ulster Volunteer Force Hospital.” They funded this project in part with the Ulster Women’s Gift Fund to “look after the welfare and comfort of those Ulstermen who at the call of King and Country have so willingly gone to face all the hardships and horrors of modern war.”¹³⁷ In the standard fashion of an auxiliary organization, UWUC women assembled packages for men serving in the Ulster Regiments in the war, which included cigarettes, tobacco, socks, shirts, handkerchiefs, razors, pipes, candy, paper, soap, tea, and

¹³⁵ Urquhart, *The Minutes of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council*, 188. This quotation comes from the Council Minutes of 18 August 1914.

¹³⁶ UWUC Minutes, 27 April 1915, D1098/2/1/2, PRONI.

¹³⁷ The Ulster Women’s Gift Fund, October 1916, D2846/1/9/8, PRONI. Cited in Finley-Bowman. “United We Stand, Divided We Fall,” 170. The Council collected nearly £2,000 from 1915-1917 with the Ulster Women’s Gift Fund.

sugar.¹³⁸ These packages were delivered to over 20,000 soldiers, and the UWUC members had raised £120,000 for the Ulster Gift Fund, second in Britain only to British Red Cross Society.¹³⁹

In response to the ensuing turmoil after the mass jailing from the Easter Rebellion, Prime Minister Asquith set cabinet member David Lloyd George to Dublin to mend Britain's relationship with Ireland. After his failure to do so, politicians ultimately negotiated a partition between the North and South of the region, which would take place on 3 May 1921 under the Government of Ireland Act of 1920.¹⁴⁰ To neither side's satisfaction, the Northern Irish counties, namely Ulster, Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, and Tyrone, were to remain under British rule.

Reacting to this turn of events, Lady Dufferin of the UWUC noted, "just now we seem to be in the centre of crisis. Our Women are naturally much upset [...] Of course we all felt heartbroken over the proposed partition of Ulster and are still hoping some better solution of our difficulties may come."¹⁴¹ However upset women of the UWUC were, Lady Dufferin cautioned against UWUC independent action on the matter. "No scheme can come forward except through the [Ulster Unionist] Council—we must not act prematurely in any way [...] We must do nothing to weaken Sir E. Carson's position. He is the only strong leader we have and any expression of opinion that weakens his authority would be bad for Ulster."¹⁴² Lady Dufferin's statement reveals a posture of deference and worry that women's decision-making could hinder male authority.

¹³⁸ The Ulster Women's Gift Fund, October 1916, D2846/1/9/8, PRONI. Cited in Finley-Bowman. "United We Stand, Divided We Fall," 170.

¹³⁹ UWUC Minutes, 1915, D1098/2/1/2, PRONI.

¹⁴⁰ Finley-Bowman. "United We Stand, Divided We Fall," 178.

¹⁴¹ Harriet Dufferin and Ava to Lady Londonderry, 6 July 1916, D2846/1/8/38, PRONI. Cited in Finley-Bowman. "United We Stand, Divided We Fall," 178.

¹⁴² Ibid.

Women's Suffrage

Women in England and Ireland began overstepping gendered boundaries with the passage of the Representation of the People Act of 1918, which extended the vote to women over 30 who met property qualifications and to all men in the country. More forceful writing on the part of UWUC women could be seen in letters to the editor of The Spectator around this time. One Councilwoman demanded to have her voice heard in the political debate, saying, “If what we are prepared to sacrifice is the measure of what we deserve to attain, surely the women of Ulster have a claim to be heard. And we now appeal confidently to the English electorate [...], not only to listen to us, but to make it possible for us to be heard.”¹⁴³

The growing female demand for increased visibility was soon after expressed as Theresa Londonderry raised the idea of no longer being relegated to an auxiliary group:

I went all over the Ulster Volunteer Force and was astonished at the wonderful things we are doing there... I cannot help thinking that so much secrecy about everything is most deleterious to the well-being of the nation. Asquith's pronouncement makes me feel that the Unionist Party should organise, and what is more, though you know I am not a suffragette, I think the women should be organised. I understand the suffrage women are strongly in favour of the Union between Great Britain and Ireland, but have some ridiculous, socialistic propositions which will do no good.¹⁴⁴

In letters, Carson showed regard for Theresa Londonderry as a woman with valuable ideas, yet Londonderry expressed her resentment for her exclusion from the negotiations and important policy decisions that shaped Ireland's future. Members of the UWUC increased efforts to formally enter the UUC after 1918. Theresa Londonderry raised her problems with a lack of representation in the greater UUC with Carson, yet was compelled to emphasize her rejection of the more “radical” communist groups and suffragette women's organizations in her request for a greater voice in the direction of Irish politics.

¹⁴³ “Press Cuttings.” PRONI, D2846/1/2/1. 1910-1935.

¹⁴⁴ Theresa Londonderry to Edward Carson, 18 January 1918, D1507/A/26/8, PRONI.

In contrast to the sentiments contained in her letter urging women to follow Carson's lead, the Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava raised the issue of a gender-integrated UUC with Richard Dawson Bates, the secretary of the UUC.¹⁴⁵ In a significant departure from her formerly deferential position toward the UUC, Lady Dufferin used forceful language when she wrote, "we have been ignored... [we] do not want a separate party here with separate policy but ... a distinct recognition."¹⁴⁶ UWUC members felt that they had been neglected by UUC leadership, particularly during the war, and had not been consulted during political discussions about partition.¹⁴⁷ Members of the UWUC expressed outrage toward this decision. In a written declaration to the UUC, UWUC women wrote:

During the last four years of war, our opinion on any one political matter has never been asked. We ourselves have been mute, under what we consider has been a slow and insidious disintegration of our power [and we] realise many anxieties, difficulties and dangers that have been faced by the Men with regard to the Vote for Women, and its possibility for future elections. But [...] we have not been treated as comrades [...] We must have more power for immediate action [...] let us stand out now for the rights and liberties of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council.¹⁴⁸

This letter, a far cry from early UWUC letters, reveals a significant change in the Council's membership, as women demanded recognition for their efforts and a new egalitarianism, as they wanted to be taken seriously as "comrades" to the Unionist men for whom they had worked so diligently for nearly seven years.

Although Edward Carson was publicly known as an anti-suffragist, by 1918, he agreed to discuss the issue of joining the Ulster Unionist Council with the Ulster Women's Unionist Council. In September 1918, Carson expressed his hopes of more gender equality in future Ulster politics, saying: "I hope you will bear in mind how necessary it is that the women should have

¹⁴⁵ Urquhart, *Women In Ulster Politics*, 69.

¹⁴⁶ Edith Wheeler to Theresa Londonderry, 8 October 1918, D1507/A/28/43, PRONI.

¹⁴⁷ Urquhart, *Women In Ulster Politics*, 69.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

their full share in the organisation in Ulster. I did my best when I was over to lay the foundation of this policy.”¹⁴⁹ Carson’s request for Londonderry’s opinions reveal a changed attitude regarding the acceptability of women’s participation in the UUC. Although Richard Dawson Bates held women of the UWUC in low regard, he allowed that “to prevent any friction it would be as well to give them a small direct representation.”¹⁵⁰ His acknowledgment of the idea that the politically expedient decision would be to give women direct representation in the UUC suggests his understanding of the change in public opinion on the issue. Historian Martin Pugh interpreted similar developments, suggesting that after male members experienced the advantages of women’s participation in politics through their work in auxiliary organizations and wartime activities, men were more receptive to the idea of women voting and engaging more directly in politics.¹⁵¹

In an Executive Committee Meeting around the time of partition in March 1921, women read a resolution from the South Antrim Women’s Unionist Association [SAWUA]: “This Meeting of the S.A.W.U.A. is of opinion that the time has arrived when Women’s Unionist Associations in Ulster should cease to exist and that in future Ulster Unionist Associations should include men and women.”¹⁵² In another letter in this meeting, this time from the Belfast Women’s Advisory Council, the Council:

Ask[ed] the Committee to give consideration ‘to the urgent need for the inclusion of women among the candidates for the coming election to the Northern [Ireland] Parliament’ ... such inclusion is especially needed in view of the nature of the problems with which the new Parliament will have to deal. These must include Poor Law reform, which will necessitate re-organisation of the system of Medical Relief, some form of

¹⁴⁹ Carson, Orion Bugalow, Birchington, Thanet, 4 September 1918, D2846/1/1/153, PRONI.

¹⁵⁰ Richard Dawson Bates to Edward Carson, 8 October 1918, D1505/A/28/43, PRONI. Cited in Urquhart, *Women In Ulster Politics*, 70.

¹⁵¹ Martin Pugh, “Women’s Enfranchisement in Britain.” In *Suffrage and Beyond*, Daley and Nolan, eds., (1994), 321. Cited in Finley-Bowman, “United We Stand, Divided We Fall,” 195.

¹⁵² UWUC Minutes, 1 March 1921, D1098/2/1/2, PRONI.

provision for necessitous widows with children, and drastic reform of the laws affecting the unmarried mother and her child [...] In all these questions the assistance of competent women is especially necessary... The Secretary was instructed to reply stating that the matter had already been under consideration.¹⁵³

While the issues deemed critical for women to focus are centered on the family unit, the widespread idea among Unionist women that women should run as candidates for Parliament was novel. The UWUC in the 1910s helped create the conditions to make such elections possible, and the Executive Committee's discussion of women taking on the role of political candidates reveals their enthusiasm for increased women's involvement. The Ulster Women's Unionist Council was no longer comprised of women simply "standing by their men."¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ "Home Rule Crisis- Ulster's Resistance- The Women's Preparations- Will Stand By the Men," *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 January 1914, D2846/1/2/18, PRONI.

CONCLUSION

Women of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council have been portrayed throughout history in several limited ways. One idea characterizes UWUC women as docile and accepting of their gendered roles in society, and the other suggests that these women were feminists of a sort. I have intended to add nuance to this discussion, understanding the older, wealthy group of women to have modified gender roles without repudiating them. Their rhetoric respected tradition, promoting ideas of women as mothers of the nation. The UWUC used such ideas to assert a new public authority in conservative political activism. The Council created a precedent for women to involve themselves not merely in charitable work, but also in political organizing. The UWUC assisted the UUC through periods of intense uncertainty, sharing in their excitements and frustrations as they waged a Parliamentary and public opinion battle against Home Rule. They penned their own constitution, participated in and organized demonstrations, and offered political guidance to the male organization.¹⁵⁵ In a period without the female franchise, this activism was unprecedented, surpassing women's involvement in the Primrose League and similar organizations.

The legacy of the Unionist movement has been mixed. Partition allowed Northern Irish regions to retain their connection to Britain, an outcome that may have changed had Unionists not vocalized their discontent with the proposed Irish governing body. A great deal of this activist work was conducted by women of the UWUC, who were able to work in a political capacity as a result of the circumstances of the 1910s. Women in the movement were successful in their contributions to a political coming of age in Britain, as the country moved closer to political equality and men's expectations about women's roles were altered. After 1922, Ulster

¹⁵⁵ Finley-Bowman, "United We Stand, Divided We Fall," 238.

Women's Unionist Council efforts turned toward maintaining partition and organizing for social and political aims particular to the region. While membership went into a steep decline in the 1930s, the Council remained, and by the 1970s turned to organizing for a peaceful end to "The Troubles," guerrilla warfare which erupted in Northern Ireland.¹⁵⁶

In 1892, Liberal leader William Gladstone wrote a widely-circulated letter to Liberal Member of Parliament Samuel Smith, expressing his disapproval of women's suffrage: "There has never within my knowledge been a case in which the franchise has been extended to a large body of persons generally indifferent about receiving it."¹⁵⁷ This widespread indifference, according to Gladstone, was the reason for delaying a Parliamentary vote on widening the franchise. As women of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council originally outlined their duties as supporting Ulster men in whichever ways possible, and remained singularly focused on the Unionist cause to retain a high membership. The UWUC outwardly expressed no desire to involve themselves in the Suffragist movement, garnering great ill-will from Suffragist organizations. Yet by the time in which the vote was extended to them, political circumstances and attitudes had changed, and UWUC women took advantage of developments in gender relations and found the authority to speak their minds to their former figures of authority in the Ulster Unionist Council.

¹⁵⁶ Finley-Bowman, "United We Stand, Divided We Fall," 233.

¹⁵⁷ Letter to Samuel Smith, April 11, 1892. Cited in Shiman, *Women and Leadership*, 204.

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