

Bishop Charles McHugh and nationalist politics, 1914-1918.

By Manus Bradley

From 1875 until 1881, Charles McHugh was a seminarian in St. Patrick's College, Maynooth. Having been born at Dreenan in Termonamongan (Aghyaran) in 1856, a rural, mountainous parish in County Tyrone on the border with Donegal, where there was a strong sense that the surrounding planted population were interlopers, McHugh found at Maynooth a vibrant and newly confident sense of national identity.

The Maynooth of the time was experiencing a nationalist revival. In the 1870s Gaelic games were introduced and although the Chair of Gaelic was vacant until 1882, the department was active. In 1880 the Empress of Austria, on a visit to the college, presented a silver statue of Saint George and the dragon, much to the expressed annoyance of the nationalists in the college. She then sent a valuable set of cloth-of-gold vestments to make up for her mistake. In 1882 after the murder of Lord Cavendish and his Under-Secretary in Phoenix Park, rumours circulated that the culprits were to be found in the college. These rumours were unfounded but they indicate that nationalist spirit ran high in Maynooth. This was the formative milieu in which McHugh found himself at a time of revival of all things Irish and Gaelic.



Bishop Charles Mc Hugh

For a short time after his ordination to the priesthood in 1881, McHugh ministered at Termonamongan. He was then appointed to the staff of Saint Columb's College, the Diocesan College at Bishop Street, Derry. After four years as curate in Termonamongan, he was appointed to St Columb's College as President in 1890, a post he held until 1905 when he moved to Camus and Clonleigh (Strabane) as parish priest. On 14 June 1907 McHugh was appointed to the See of Derry.

At McHugh's consecration on 29 September 1907, Bishop O'Donnell of Raphoe expressed the hope that the new Bishop of Derry would "advance the course of man's salvation By good works in the temporal order... which his spiritual position would help him forward". In another address the same day Mr Charles O'Neill, the former High-Sheriff of Derry, made an emotional speech in which he spoke of casting off the "shackles of serfdom". He said that the aspirations of the people still had to be satisfied by home rule. These remarks, addressed directly to Cardinal Logue, were a forthright call on the Catholic hierarchy to help further these aspirations. The newly consecrated Bishop of Derry could have been in no doubt as to his responsibilities, spiritual and temporal.



**Bishop Mc Hugh's
Coat of Arms**

In the oratorical style of the day McHugh replied to the speeches made that day. He began by attacking the secularisation of schools, promising to safeguard Catholic Education. On the National Question he stated that next to ones obligations to religion came those to our native land. He went on to say that even though he was a priest he did not cease to be an Irishman. He stated his support for the revival of the Irish language and also the fostering of Irish industries. McHugh made it clear that he was convinced that restoration of national rights alone could bring about “the prosperity, happiness and union among all creeds and classes” which he believed all Irishmen desired as Christians.

The mixing of nationalist politics and religion was nothing new. The Catholic hierarchy had long been aware of their power to influence politics and the desire of the faithful for them to use their position to improve the lot of Catholics. During the 19th century successive Catholic bishops of Derry had been involved with the “temporal”, or as it would be called today “social“, well-being of their flock as well as fulfilling their spiritual function. The Catholic clergy were a powerful force in terms of galvanising opinion and were sensitive to the needs and aspirations of their parishioners. The movement towards home rule for Ireland that had been begun by the Liberal prime minister Gladstone in 1886 with the first home rule bill, had lost and gained impetus during the career of McHugh as priest and bishop. Although Gladstone’s two Home Rule Bills had been defeated the debate continued and the issue raised the passions of nationalist and unionist alike.

In April 1910 McHugh wrote to John Redmond, the leader of the nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster, to pledge Catholic support in the forthcoming general election in return for a pledge to pursue home rule. As if to underline his confidence in Redmond’s ability to deliver on this pledge, McHugh doubled his subscription to the Parliamentary Party at this time. Bishop O’Donnell of the neighbouring Raphoe Diocese was also an avid supporter of Redmond; some have suggested that McHugh followed the political direction of O’Donnell. During the years 1914 -1918 McHugh’s allegiance to the Parliamentary Party would be sorely tested.

By late 1913 the home rule debate had swung in favour of the exclusion of the counties of Antrim, Down, Derry, Tyrone, Armagh and Fermanagh. The British Liberal Prime Minister, Asquith, was afraid of civil war with the unionists if home rule was passed without special provision being made for Ulster. The Conservatives, in opposition, pledged that if they could they would make the exclusion of the six counties permanent.

Charles McHugh was particularly annoyed at what he considered bartering by his trusted friend Redmond; not only would a large number of Catholics remain linked with Westminster and under the direct day-to-day control of local government, heavily weighted by a Protestant majority, but

even his own diocese would be split up. The Derry diocese covered not only the largest part of county Derry but most of county Tyrone and, significantly, in this situation, a large area of county Donegal. Throughout the diocese there was alarm at the proposal for partition.

In Derry City, where the nationalists had been in the majority since the 1830s, a protest march was planned for 14 March 1914 by the Irish Volunteers. They had been founded in 1913 by Eoin MacNeill in response to the formation of the Ulster Volunteers in 1912. The express aim of the Ulster Volunteers was to resist home rule, after it seemed likely that the third Home Rule Bill of 1912 would be passed into law, following the Parliament Act of 1911. McHugh went to Letterkenny to consult Bishop O'Donnell and was in favour of the march in Derry, believing that it could do "no harm and might do much good". The Bishop's letter to Redmond in which he expressed this opinion reflected the sentiments of a great many of the people throughout the Diocese of Derry and especially those in the city.

In 1913 the city had been "very disturbed"; this had been due in part to tension surrounding the Apprentice Boys' celebrations in August. The Ulster Volunteer Force were reported to be strong in the city and outlying districts. The direct action of a protest meeting against the home rule/ partition proposals reflected the fear of Catholics that they would be completely subjugated under protestant control. Dr McHugh believed that the protest had been too long in coming and that it should have been carried out earlier. He outlined to Redmond how "the Orange faction" were always quick to point out what atrocities would be committed against them by the Catholics under home rule "while there is not a word about Catholics and what they would suffer in Ulster if the Orangeman got control". The tone of this letter to Redmond is impassioned and reflects the very real fear at the time of partition and the general heightened tension particularly in Ulster. The proposed march and monster meeting was to make the Liberal Party aware of the rights of the Ulster nationalists, who were in McHugh's words not prepared to accept "a state of things worse than if they had never stood up for home rule". He wanted to "open the eyes of the English people", to the discrimination already exercised in Ulster, believing that the English parliament and people would be sympathetic.

This notion, that if only the English people knew the reality of the situation that they might be supportive of nationalists, was later to prompt many Irish Volunteers to join the British Army at the outbreak of the First World War in the belief that they would be rewarded for standing by England at her time of need. Indeed Bishop McHugh and his priests had joined in Redmond's call for Irishmen to fight for Britain, to come to the aid of Catholic Belgium, and to further the aspiration for home rule.

McHugh's letter was in response to Redmond's letter of 26 February asking McHugh to use his influence to get the march planned for 14 March cancelled. He expressed his fear that a clash of rival forces in Derry would harm the negotiations in London. He cited a previous incident at Castledawson when Catholics and Protestants had clashed, which he said had seriously prejudiced "the nationalist case in the House of Commons". Redmond believed that Carson would welcome an outbreak of disorder. Redmond called for a continuance of the restraint hitherto shown by the nationalists in Ulster. He assured Derry nationalists that "the rights and interests of the nationalists of Ulster will not be neglected or betrayed by us". The Bishop initially argued for the march to go ahead but then gave in to Redmond's request and called for it to be cancelled. He gave in solely due to his trust in Redmond and in his political promises.

In March 1914 Asquith decided that he would allow counties to opt out of the jurisdiction of a proposed Irish Parliament for a certain number of years. On 2 March he outlined this new scheme to Redmond who accepted it. Redmond knew that in order to sway public support he would need the support of ecclesiastics and other opinion formers. In order to do this Redmond secured a proposal to have Newry and Derry treated separately from the counties, thus two towns with large catholic majorities would be preserved from unionist government. Significantly these towns were the episcopal seats of the Catholic Dioceses of Derry and Dromore. McHugh accepted the scheme and was prepared to argue Cardinal Logue around it. McHugh believed that a large number of Catholics could be preserved from protestant domination under this proposal.

The situation throughout Ulster remained tense. The Ulster Volunteers became more and more daring in their shows of strength and confrontation grew ever more likely. The gun running at Larne increased the alarm of Catholics in Ulster, the Curragh Mutiny in March 1914 also fuelled their fears. The Irish Volunteers had also grown in strength since 1913 and were especially active in Derry city, they wanted to demonstrate their presence and they called on their members to join a route march on Sunday 22 March in Derry.

When Redmond heard about this march he telegraphed McHugh asking him to stop it. This would be the second time in a month that McHugh was being asked to dampen, indeed prevent, nationalist protest. Redmond said that if the march went ahead it would play into Carson's hands and be a "fatal mistake". McHugh wired back that he would stop the march if he could. McHugh dispatched the Administrator of Saint Eugene's Cathedral, Fr William McFeely, to the drilling grounds of the Irish volunteers. The administrator told them of Redmond's telegram and pointed out possible negative consequences of the march. McFeely was confronted by the sight of 300 men drilling; they absolutely refused to change their minds about the march. They were however persuaded to change the route of the march to avoid protestant areas of the city. This was a conciliatory move and would lessen the possibility of violence. The Volunteers also offered to send a deputation to meet with McHugh. This deputation spent an hour and a half debating with the Bishop whether the march should go ahead or not. The Volunteers stood by their decision to hold the route march on 22 March but said that they would consult with the Volunteer body to get their opinion. McHugh at this point took the heavy handed step of threatening "to denounce the march from every altar in the city and the suburbs". The Volunteers gave in and cancelled the march. McHugh, not content with his success in getting the march cancelled, made the Volunteers swear never again to do such a thing without consulting him. It was announced at all masses that Sunday that the route march was abandoned. McHugh feared that the violence that might result from the route march would jeopardise any opt-out of key catholic areas from a separate Ulster. He recognised too how explosive the situation throughout the northern counties had become and was not prepared to sit back and be seen to do nothing when the outcome could be violent.

The Irish Volunteers had demonstrated at Derry that they were beyond the control of the Independent Irish Party and that it would take a threat of condemnation from the Church for them to be made stand down. They were well organised and as McHugh noted in his letter to Redmond "all armed with revolvers". He also admitted that it was only recently that he had become aware of their existence in Derry.

It is clear that McHugh co-operated with the nationalist Parliamentary Party to prevent possible confrontation with unionists. This was in an effort to ensure that Asquith's proposal of February 1914 would hold and that temporary exclusion would be adopted which would come to an end after three years. Nothing like this proposal would be offered again. On the outbreak of war that summer home rule and partition were set aside until 1916 when the Easter Rising precipitated a new look at the Irish situation.

During the months of May and June 1916 Lloyd George and Redmond and the Unionists at Westminster were in negotiation. Again partition was the central question. In Derry City and in County Tyrone, both areas threatened with exclusion from a larger Ireland and both in McHugh's Diocese, there was great concern among the nationalist population. On Sunday 11 June a large conference of nationalists met at St. Columb's Hall, Derry (a Catholic church hall). The meeting was called to discuss the threatened partition. Those in attendance protested any kind of partition whether temporary or permanent. Significantly too, a large number of priests were present, reflecting the fact that the Bishops were concerned to prevent any partition. Alderman James McCarron declared that the conference was not held to criticise any party, at this stage the nationalist community in Derry for the most part still gave their backing to the Parliamentary Party. Dean James McGlinchey, an eminent priest of the Derry Diocese and a friend of McHugh, added his support to McCarron's line. Perhaps they hoped that by pledging their allegiance to Redmond their opinions would resonate more clearly with him. However they expressed the view that it should be up to people in those areas to be partitioned to decide what course the Parliamentary Party took.

On 7 June a meeting had been held at Omagh, County Tyrone another area within the Derry Diocese threatened with exclusion. It had passed several resolutions which were adopted unanimously at the Derry meeting. These were that Redmond's Parliamentary Party should be backed, but a call was made for them to "resolutely oppose any settlement which would exclude any part of Ulster from the operation of self-government". The meeting called upon nationalists north and south to take "immediate and effective steps" to stop the Lloyd George proposals. In east Tyrone too a meeting was held of the United Irish League, loyalty to the Parliamentary Party was affirmed but partition opposed. Clergy and laity were working together to prevent partition from becoming a reality. Nationalists believed that in stating their opposition to partition so clearly Redmond would not even consider adopting it.

On 16 June the Catholic Bishops of Derry, Clogher, and Down and Connor, declared in a joint declaration that any partition of Ireland was "unthinkable". This was the first joint declaration by the spiritual leaders of the nationalist population in the areas in question. In 1917 John Dillon was to write that "we (Irish Parliamentary Party) would never have touched the question of partition if the Catholic Bishops of Ulster had not directed us to do so". The joint declaration by the Bishops however leaves no doubt as to the total opposition, indeed dismay, they felt in the face of any proposed partition.

On the day that the Bishops published their joint declaration Cardinal Logue called a meeting of the Catholic Bishops and Redmond to discuss what Lloyd George was proposing. This meeting no doubt was an attempt by the Bishops to dissuade Redmond from agreeing to partition. They had laid their cards clearly on the table. Nothing concrete emerged from the meeting.

Redmond's next move was to suggest a conference to examine the question. McHugh declared that if the Ulster nationalists did not want partition then the other provinces would have no right to vote Ulster out of the rest of Ireland under Home Rule. The Bishops meet again at their annual meeting at Maynooth in June. On his return from that meeting McHugh wrote to Alderman McCarron. He told him that the Bishops whose jurisdiction extended over the areas involved were unanimously opposed to Lloyd George's proposals. Cardinal Logue of Armagh opposed the proposals stating that "it would be infinitely better to remain as we are for the next fifty years under English rule than to accept these proposals". Mc Hugh expressed deep regret that Redmond and his fellow Parliamentary Party MPs had even considered agreeing to such proposals. He also voiced his concern for the Catholic religion and for Catholic education if the proposals were adopted.

At his meeting with the Bishops, Redmond had discussed his proposed Belfast Conference. In a letter published in the press, the outline of the Conference was given. Representation was explained and the constitution set out. It was claimed that Catholic Bishops of Ulster and individual friends had approved of these. The Catholic clergy were to be prominently involved. At the Belfast Conference Redmond managed to secure a large majority in favour of the Lloyd George proposals. The minority who opposed it were bitterly disappointed but determined not to let it rest. Significantly most priests voted against acceptance of Lloyd George's proposals. Redmond had used his threat to resign in order to rally support as well as offering assurances that the partition would only be temporary. McHugh was furious and in a letter to the Derry Journal the following day called it "the convention of false promises". He accused the Irish Parliamentary Party of failing to carry out the commission for which they were elected and was horrified at the prospect of the country being divided. He compared the struggle to hold onto an Ireland "one and undivided" with the struggle for the faith. He asked the question "are we going to surrender the inheritance of a united Ireland?" McHugh stated that in his belief "If the country is divided, Ireland's nationhood is gone" and for what, he asks, his tone becoming bitter "for a little conclave of individuals however important and indispensable they may seem to themselves".

The magnitude of the stakes and the failure of the Irish Parliamentary Party to stand up for the Ulster Catholics caused McHugh to abandon his support for Redmond's Party. He called on the people of Ireland to shake off their apathy and lethargy before it was too late. McHugh very astutely asks how it will be possible to get an area with an overall protestant majority to allow to surrender that area through parliament at a later date. McHugh recognised the permanency of partition and exclusion despite the assurances of Redmond. He called for a plebiscite for each county to decide what they wanted to do and declared Lloyd Georges proposals "rot".

On 19 July 1916 the permanent exclusion of "Ulster" was proposed by Lloyd George. Redmond rejected this immediately perhaps realising for the first time that in his efforts to move the process toward home rule he had been duped. Carson had persuaded the British negotiators to go for permanent exclusion of the six Ulster counties. Redmond's bargaining strategy of temporary exclusion for which he had worked hard at the Belfast Conference to get a modicum of acceptance collapsed. However Redmond's back-down did not satisfy McHugh. In mid July he launched the Anti-Partitionist Irish Nation League at a meeting in St Columb's Hall. Priests formed branches in Derry City and Inishowen (County Donegal). This organisation had some initial success but failed to reach a wider geographical area and by autumn it had collapsed. The setting up of this organisation indicates however the strength of opposition to what the Irish Party were doing in the name of

nationalism and particularly McHugh's break with Redmond. The nationalist population of Derry had been split by the crisis. McHugh had disrupted the "political consensus of Derry nationalism". On the same day, 19 July 1916, in a letter to the Derry Journal, McHugh is vociferous in his opposition to any even temporary partition as countenanced by Redmond. He makes the point that despite the opposition of the representatives from the areas involved to the proposals at Redmond's Belfast Convention that they were "being forcibly ejected from Ireland by Ireland's sons". McHugh regarded this as being more "despicable" and "objectionable" than anything attempted by England as it was sanctioned by the Irish Parliamentary Party, those "whom we elected to win for us freedom". The real fear was that the six Ulster counties were simply being abandoned by the rest of Ireland. Referring again to the Belfast Conference he called it "the conference of false pretences". There can be no doubt as to the depth of McHugh's alienation from Redmond and his party at Westminster.

In 1905 Sinn Fein had established itself as a political organisation in Derry City and nationwide but in Derry it remained politically weak due to the influence of Bishop McHugh and his clergy. It stated that among its aims were the revival of the Irish language and also the fostering of Irish industries. It also had the object of counteracting the influence of the Catholic clergy in politics. In 1916, according to police reports, Sinn Fein were active in Derry City and Magherafelt. The name "Sinn Fein" was applied to those who took a more radical stance to that of the Redmondite party. However the ground had been prepared by the Easter Rising and its bloody aftermath and by Redmond's failure to deliver home rule, for Sinn Fein to emerge as a coherent and unified political force in 1917.

McHugh's Irish Nation League had been still-born, but in its organisation some Derry Diocesan clergy had become highly politicised. Priests in Inishowen, the part of Derry Diocese which would have been cut off if partition was accepted, were prominent in running branches of the Irish Nation League. It comes as no surprise, then, that in September 1917, Fr Phillip O'Doherty, parish priest of Carndonagh, (he had written a splenetic pamphlet in 1916 entitled "Through Corruption to Dismemberment", an attack on the Irish Independent Party) and Fr James Morris, parish priest of Malin, both ran Sinn Fein clubs. These priests used their influence in the clubs to press home their religious views and anti-English ideology. Significantly these two men were Parish Priests and not curates and were contemporaries of Bishop McHugh. In August 1917 the Pearse Sinn Fein Club was set up in Derry City. When it was established it was strictly secular, as the original 1905 club had been, but one month later these two Inishowen priests were present in Derry to welcome Eoin MacNeill to a Sinn Fein Meeting. In January 1918 Peadar Pearse's mother visited the Derry Sinn Fein Club then had lunch with the Mother Superior at The Mercy Convent at Pump Street. De Valera visited in February for a meeting at St Columb's Hall attended by many clergy.

Evidence of Derry diocesan clergy's involvement in Sinn Fein is fragmentary. Some were involved at the club level and others at the financial level, sending money to the Sinn Fein Victory Fund in March 1918. Fr James McGlinchey, Dean of St. Columb's College and a friend of McHugh, was described as "a familiar and always welcome figure in the Sinn Fein rooms". In 1916 he had been an advocate of the Nationalist Party. He now wholeheartedly backed Sinn Fein and wrote in a letter to Dr McGinley, the Sinn Fein leader in Derry, that it was the party with "the only true principle of Irish nationality". During 1917 and 1918 Dean McGlinchey was a prominent and vocal supporter of Sinn Fein. McHugh, as his Bishop, did not intervene to stop this high profile campaign of support, nor did he object to his priests' involvement with Sinn Fein at parish level.

The Westminster General Election of December 1918 was fought on an electoral pact by the Nationalist and Sinn Fein Candidates. The Derry clergy and Bishop McHugh played a role in ensuring that no seat would be lost to unionists because of a clash between nationalist candidates. In a letter published in the Derry Journal on 27 November, a Sinn Fein spokesman praised Bishop McHugh for his support of such arrangements. Bishop McHugh even donated £10 to the Sinn Fein candidate Eoin MacNeill's campaign expenses. A priest, Fr Lawrence Hegarty, Administrator of St. Eugene's Cathedral, chaired MacNeill's victory meeting in St. Columb's Hall. The break with the traditional nationalist party had been made within the ranks of the Derry diocesan clergy. Bishop McHugh had lost faith in those whom he feared might destroy Ireland's nationhood by agreeing to partition. The Irish Parliamentary Party was not to be trusted. Sinn Fein had emerged as a new political force. The clergy and Bishop of Derry were still playing a significant role in local politics even in such a new scene.