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THE HOUSE OF ORANGE CARDS

Civil War in Ulster: its objects & probable results

JOSEPH JOHNSTON, ed. ROY JOHNSTON, 1999 (first published, 1913)

Dublin, University College Dublin Press

pp. xxiv + 200

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This is a welcome republication of a book that originally appeared in 1913 during one of the most dramatic phases of Irish history. The content is little changed from the original edition except for a foreword by Professor Tom Garvin, and a provocative introduction by the editor (the author's son). Dr (Roy) Johnston also provides a series of notes explaining some of the references to contemporary events and persons, and an article from the Spectator of November 1913 by way of appendix.

Joe Johnston, a Liberal and Irish nationalist, was stirred to write the book by Ulster Unionists' vociferous opposition to the Liberal government's Irish Home Rule Bill of 1912. The leaders of Unionist Ulster, such as Sir Edward Carson, threatened to bring into effect a provisional government of Ulster if the British government tried to apply the Bill within that province. Johnston's detailed exploration of what appeared to him the likely future of this "provisional government" marks him out from the abundance of contemporary writers on the issue, and now reads as an intriguing counterfactual (pp. 46-88). He cautioned Ulster Unionists that the British Unionist leadership did not have their interests at heart. The "provisional government" of Ulster would simply not prove viable: the benign neglect alone of the Liberal government, without actual intervention or coercion, would shortly bring about the collapse of the provisional government. Johnston

graphically suggests that British Unionist leaders aiming to embarrass the Liberals were using Unionist Ulster as bait (pp. 65-6).

In spite of the contemporary alliance between the Liberal and Redmondite party leaderships, it is unusual to find a reconciliation of the Liberal and Irish nationalist faiths from this period as convincing as Johnston's. Comparison with J. A. Hobson's *Traffic in treason*,¹ which appeared around this time, is instructive. Superficially, Hobson and Johnston came to exactly the same conclusion—British Unionist indulgence of threatened violent opposition to the Home Rule Bill in Ulster was merely an unscrupulous tactic to wrest political control of the United Kingdom from the Liberal party. However, Hobson was not directly interested in or concerned with the political future of Ireland, but with social reform in Britain. Johnston's sympathy with Liberalism is evident in his book in his attacks on British Unionists' social and religious policies (pp. 38-41). Nonetheless, Johnston's paramount aim was to progress the implementation of home rule—not as a mere parliamentary victory for the Liberal party, but as a practical measure for the administration of Ireland. As Johnston saw, if home rule was to be taken seriously, Ulster Unionism in turn had to be taken a good deal more seriously than Hobson took it. Johnston, himself an Ulster Protestant (p. xi), thus endeavoured to expose Protestants' fears of oppression in a home rule Ireland as groundless (pp. 6-35, 83).

Joe Johnston, unlike many Redmondite Nationalists, thus tried to engage Irish Unionists in a political dialogue which was (ostensibly at least) focused upon their interests. The introduction of the 1912 Bill was indicative of Redmond's success only in securing the ear of Liberal ministers. Most Irish nationalists saw Ulster Unionists either as the enemy, or as a product of a historical aberration and thus best ignored. The language of Redmondite Nationalists was hardly conciliatory to Ulster Protestants. In this, however, Irish nationalists were far from exceptional: English/British nationalists similarly deployed a political language which depicted Irish nationalists as criminal or morally and politically beyond the pale, and which was thus singularly unlikely to gain acceptance in nationalist Ireland. It was in the interest of too

¹ J. A. Hobson, *Traffic in treason: a study in political parties*, (London 1914).

many leading politicians to leave Britain ignorant of nationalist Ireland, just as nationalist Ireland was ignorant of Britain. Violent conflict was fortunately delayed in 1914, but was not averted. Men and women like Johnston, the Redmondite Nationalist MP Stephen Lucius Gwynn, and the imperialist journalist James Louis Garvin, who were well informed about nationalist Irish and English political culture, were unfortunately rare. Much of the historical significance of Johnston's book lies in this exceptionality. Dr Johnston plans to produce a full biographical treatment of his father to which we look forward with interest.

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