

Perspectives on Disestablishment Lecture Series

Mary E. Daly : Government and the Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland

Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin

Friday 10 January 2020

Thank you for the invitation to participate in the events to mark the 150th anniversary of the Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland. I should perhaps warn you that I am not an expert on this topic. However, I will do my best to try to enlighten you on aspects of the political context. Disestablishment is a topic that tends to be mentioned in passing in many histories of modern Ireland, yet I would argue that it was of considerable significance, not just for the Church of Ireland, but for the wider political and social history of modern Ireland.

To try to understand the background we must enter into the religious and political culture of Ireland and Britain in the early and the mid- nineteenth century. This political culture includes moves towards greater parliamentary democracy, and the history of Italian unification, which entailed removing the political power of the Papacy over a large tract of central Italy. So this is a complex and volatile mixture.

The 19th century was a time of intense religious awareness and revival, and this was true of the Protestant churches and of Roman Catholicism. There was a strong evangelical movement, and a determination to convert the Irish peasantry to Protestantism, which Desmond Bowen has described as the *Protestant Crusade in Ireland*, or indeed the Second Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church that was emerging from the penal era was also working hard to establish a public presence. For Roman Catholicism, the mid-nineteenth century was a time of major expansion. Emmet Larkin's Devotional Revolution has been critiqued at great length, but while we may argue about details the broad argument survives: In 1851 the Synod of Thurles, the first national synod since the reformation began the process of major reform, and major investment in manpower and infrastructure. It also sought – not without difficulty – to consolidate a unified Catholic Hierarchy with a common purpose on major social or political issues.

This greater religious consciousness spilled over into politics, and despite the best efforts of the Young Ireland movement, and occasionally of Daniel O'Connell, politics in Ireland became very divided on confessional lines. If, as Gilbert and Sullivan, sang, in Britain

every boy and every gal

That's born into the world alive

Is either a little Liberal

Or else a little Conservative!

In Ireland they identified as Catholic or Protestant, and efforts to establish some form of middle ground proved difficult. The assertion of Catholic rights – was all too often seen as a zero-sum game: Catholic gains equalled Protestant losses.

In 1840 the electorate for Dublin Corporation was reformed from a closed, largely-hereditary corporation run by Freeman – all Protestant - into one that reflected property-owners and propertied residents. Daniel O'Connell, the first Catholic lord mayor since the Reformation, was determined to contain the sectarian tensions in Dublin municipal politics, and for some years there was an informal power-sharing arrangement, which involved rotating Catholic/Liberal and Protestant/Conservative lord mayors – people denied its existence, but it was there, though there was some confusion when a Protestant Liberal emerged. By 1858 however, sectarian tensions were rising, and the Catholic majority on the corporation began to veto Protestant candidates whose politics were not acceptable to them. One of the most contentious issues concerned the freeman franchise. Those eligible by birth had to be admitted by the lord mayor, and as all freemen were Protestant this offered a mechanism for increasing the Protestant electorate, so the Catholic majority began to veto any candidates for mayor that did not commit to not admitting new freemen.

The worsening sectarian tensions on Dublin Corporation reflected changing politics and personalities in Dublin, in Britain and internationally. The

power-sharing compromises of the 1840s and 1850s were more in keeping with the philosophy of Archbishop Daniel Murray, a man who recalled the hardships of the pre-emancipation era, and who was prepared to serve as a Commissioner for National Education in order to advance Catholic access to schooling. By the 1860s, he had been succeeded by Paul Cullen, who had spent much of his adult life in Rome and was fully committed to enhancing Papal authority. Cullen was determined to secure Catholic rights. So the mid-nineteenth century was marked by major political disputes over matters such as appointments in workhouses: workhouse master, chaplain, matron, and school master/mistress – appointments all made by the Poor Law Guardians of the North and South Dublin Unions – boards that were dominated by propertied guardians and therefore Protestants. The jobs tended to go to Protestants. This practice reflected not simply a wish to reward those who shared their opinions, but also a deep-set anti-Catholicism – a belief that Catholicism was synonymous with superstition and a false religion, so denying inmates access to Catholic clergy or school-teachers was seen as morally appropriate.

But there was deep bitterness over workhouse politics, not least because most inmates were Catholic, though most of the poor rates were probably paid by Protestants. In the early 19th century there was a widespread consensus that politics should reflect property interests, but opinions were changing and democracy was challenging that opinion in many spheres. These contests did not remain within the board rooms – they spilled over into the newspapers, and the mid-19th century was a golden age for newspapers. The tax on newspapers had been lifted; literacy levels were rising, and there was a strong tradition of reading newspapers aloud in communal settings, and an apparent tolerance of endless columns of political speeches that would not survive for an instant today. It is worth looking online at the *Freeman's Journal*, or the *Irish Times*, or even better at some local newspapers from the mid-19th century, to understand how politically-informed our ancestors were.

The lines between religion and politics and between local, national and foreign politics became blurred. Religion was the major badge of identity; social life, preference as to where to live, were often determined by religion – so you find clustering of minorities – Society of Friends in Monkstown, non-

conformists in Clontarf. The number of Protestants living in Dublin city fell by 10,000 during the 1860s – and while many of those who moved to the suburbs – Rathmines, Rathgar, Pembroke or Clontarf – did so to avoid infectious diseases, wishing to live in modern houses and pay lower property taxes (rates), the prospect of escaping the divisive sectarian arguments in favour of a community that contained people of similar religion and similar politics was also a factor.

As a student I always found Irish politics of the 1850s and 1860s quite confusing. The 1840s were dominated by O’Connell and Repeal, followed by Young Ireland; from the late 1870s Home Rule and the associated Land League and their opponents are readily-identified. But the 1850s and 1860s were marked by an effort to establish a new nationalist political movement, and identify a causes or causes on which it might cohere. The potential alignment between Catholics and liberal Protestants, which had existed in the time of O’Connell – admittedly rocky at times – had been seriously undermined by the enactment of the 1851 Ecclesiastical Titles Act, and the support of British Liberals for Italian unification.

In 1851 the Catholic Hierarchy was re-established in Britain for the first time since the Reformation and that decision prompted a remarkable wave of mass protests against Catholicism. This protest movement undoubtedly gained some momentum from the mass emigration of the famine Irish – the mid-19th century equivalents of recent mass immigration across the Mediterranean – in relative numbers the Irish influx was greater. The Liberal government led by Lord John Russell (who had been an ally of O’Connell) passed the Ecclesiastical Titles Act preventing Catholic bishops from using diocesan titles – it was purely symbolic, never enforced; it was designed to quell public outrage, but it also inflicted serious damage on any potential alliance between moderate Irish nationalists and Liberals. Italian unification was a divisive issue– because English Liberals were wholly in favour of the movement for Italian unification, whereas Irish Catholics were passionately committed to supporting what became known as ‘the prisoner in the Vatican’. Thousands of pounds were raised in Dublin for this cause – at a time when money was urgently needed to build the new Mater hospital, Catholic schools and churches. There were mass

meetings and mass signatures of support for the papacy, and an Irish brigade was formed to travel to Italy to fight to defend the papacy.

The intensive and divisive politics of the 1860s was very evident within Dublin Corporation. The Corporation held lengthy meetings debating resolutions about 'the prisoner in the Vatican'; the failure to secure a charter for the Catholic university, and disestablishment of the Church of Ireland. [they might have been better employed improving the city's housing and health standards]. In 1860 the Lord Mayor proposed a formal vote of sympathy confirming the 'unshaken attachment of the Catholics of Ireland to the Pope at a ceremony in the Pro-Cathedral. In 1862 the foundation stone was laid in Drumcondra for a new Catholic University; Drumcondra was outside the city boundaries and was rapidly emerging as **the** Catholic suburb) – I understand that you can still see the stone. This event was disrupted by a rival parade of Dublin Orangemen, who turned it into a near-riot.

The culmination of this new assertive Catholic politics came in 1864 with the mass ceremony to lay the foundation stone for a national monument to Daniel O'Connell: - The O'Connell Statue. The attendance was even bigger than at O'Connell's funeral; it was probably the largest mass gathering in 19th century Dublin. It began with a procession from the Mansion House to the memorial site in Lower Sackville St. (now O'Connell St), which was led by boys from Catholic parochial schools. The procession included clergy, representatives of religious societies and confraternities and city councillors. Belfast Catholics who attended the event were ambushed by irate Orangemen when they returned to their home city.

In his speech at the banquet following the ceremony, Dublin lord mayor and prominent businessman Peter Paul McSwiney, (who laid the foundation stone) lauded O'Connell's achievements in 'knocking off the trammels which bound this great Catholic country': he referred to Catholic Emancipation, and parliamentary and municipal reform. It is worth noting that the O'Connell who was celebrated in 1864 was the O'Connell of Catholic Emancipation, the man who fought for Catholic rights, not the Repealer. On 29 December 1864 in the final days of his term as lord mayor, McSwiney – who owned what later became Clery's Department store – one of the first department stores in Dublin - presided at a public meeting in the Rotunda, which was attended by

seven Catholic bishops including Dr. Cullen. This marked the foundation of the National Association, a new political movement whose policies included disestablishment of the Church of Ireland and unspecified land reform.

The status of the Church of Ireland as the established church was enshrined in the 8th article of the Act of Union. This stated that ‘the Churches of England and Ireland, as now by law established, be united into one Protestant Episcopal Church to be called the United Church of England and Ireland... the continuance and preservation of the said United Church as the Established Church of England and Ireland shall be deemed and taken to be an essential and fundamental part of the Union’.

So, it could be said that a campaign for disestablishment of the Church of Ireland challenged an article of the Act of Union, and many conservatives saw it in that light. Disestablishment had been raised before by Irish nationalist politicians – notably during the tithe war of the 1830s. But the publication of the 1861 Census gave it a new edge. For the first time, the Irish Population Census (not the census in England and Wales) asked the religion of each individual. The returns showed that of a population of just under 5.8m., the Church of Ireland accounted for 693,000 – roughly one in eight of the population. Just under one in ten – 9% recorded themselves as Presbyterian, mainly in Ulster. The census gave extensive data on the numbers of each denomination in a locality; and this data provided ample material for polemicists and journalists. There were many pamphlets and other publications on the topic: long pieces appeared in the *Freeman's Journal* setting out the salaries of clergy, and the lack of parishioners in certain parishes - all designed to call into question the church's established status.

The Irish-based campaign would have had little prospect of success, had it not attracted sympathy and support in Britain; a number of factors come into play. The 1851 religious Census in Britain -conducted on quite a different basis to the Irish religious census, showed that just 10 million of the 18 plus million adults had attended church on a specific Sunday, and under half of churchgoers had attended an Anglican service. Established churches were common throughout Europe at this time – Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic,

and they reflected the religion of the monarch, not that of the people, though the discrepancy between the two was greatest in Ireland.

Nevertheless there was growing pressure in England for the disestablishment of the Church of England coming from radical politicians who tended to be Nonconformists; the Liberation Society of England was established to campaign for an end to state support for churches. One of the prominent figures in that campaign was the radical MP John Bright. In the early 1860s he visited Ireland, meeting several Catholic bishops, and local political figures in an effort to recreate a Liberal, Irish nationalist alliance, with disestablishment as the obvious common ground. When the National Association was formed in December 1864 a message of support from John Bright was read at the meeting.

At this time the Liberal party was led by Lord Palmerston – an Irish landlord. I doubt that he was a devout Anglican, but he was certainly not a radical. The Liberal party was evolving from a party of Lord Palmerstons and other land-owning grandees, into a more middle-class, even artisan party with many nonconformist members. Palmerston died as Prime Minister in 1865 and was succeeded by Lord John Russell but it was generally acknowledged that this was only an interim arrangement. W.E. Gladstone was waiting in the wings.

The major issue in Westminster in 1865/66 was parliamentary reform – a further extension of the franchise, and potential redistribution of seats, away from rural areas to expanding cities. The question for the Liberals was how far should they go? The party was divided between those wanting a major extension of the franchise and the Adullamites, who wanted no change. Faced with these divisions Benjamin Disraeli, the Conservative leader, persuaded his party to support a much more extensive reform bill than the Liberals had proposed – this tactic in Disraeli's words 'dished the Whigs'; the Liberal party split. Disraeli's bill was carried and he became Prime Minister.

By the end of 1867 the Liberal party was deeply divided between the radicals and the old-style Whigs, and they desperately needed a political cause on which they could unite. That turned out to be Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland - which was chosen by Gladstone, the new leader of the

party, probably because it was the one issue that could unite a disunited party. Gladstone's adoption of disestablishment can be seen as an example of crass political opportunism, dressed up as a highly-moral cause. [Some historians argue that the same applied to his adoption of Home Rule in the mid 1880s]. Gladstone was a dedicated member of the Anglican Church, and an amateur – perhaps not so amateur theologian, as is evident in the collection in the Gladstone Library – St Deniol's Library – in Hawarden.

In the 1840s, when Gladstone was a Tory MP, he resigned from Peel's government when they increased the government grant to Maynooth College. In 1838 he had written a pamphlet defending the established church, where he said that 'disestablishing the Church of Ireland would purchase Irish Catholics' applause at the expense of their spiritual interests'. He claimed that if the Church of Ireland was disestablished Irish Protestants might not resist Repeal (of the Union). But in the 1860s disestablishment of the Church of Ireland was opportune in British domestic politics, and Gladstone claimed that it offered a mechanism for solving the Irish question.

The late 1860s is one of those rare occasions when Ireland intruded into Westminster politics – we have seen this happen again recently. It intruded for various reasons. The 1867 Fenian uprising had a relatively limited immediate impact in Ireland; it proved much more significant in England. The Fenians – a radical secret movement was heavily organised among Irish emigrants in Britain, and an attempt to release an arrested Fenian leader in Manchester resulted in a policeman being killed and the execution of three men – the Manchester Martyrs, prompting mass demonstrations throughout Ireland. In December 1867 a bomb that exploded at Clerkenwell in London killed 12 people.

In March 1867, before the Manchester Martyrs and Clerkenwell, John Francis Maguire, MP (and editor of the *Cork Examiner*) moved a motion calling for an inquiry into the state of Ireland. Gladstone, leader of the opposition, supporting the motion, moved a resolution in favour of disestablishing the Church of Ireland and this resolution, and a number of related resolutions – ending the Regium Donum – state support for the salaries of non-conformist clergy – and ending the Maynooth grant, - were carried against the government.

The 1868 general election was fought on the issue of disestablishing the Church of Ireland. This cause was carefully calibrated – it appealed to the radicals in the Liberal party and radical voters, but it very clearly distinguished between Ireland and England, and this reassured the more whiggish/conservative (small c) members and voters. Indeed, it could be presented as a reform that would strengthen the status of the Anglican Church. Disestablishment was a popular cause in Ireland; it appealed to nonconformist voters and the Liberals secured seats in Ulster on this occasion. Catholic bishops and clergy worked to persuade voters – remember that men voted in public – to support candidates who favoured disestablishment, and 66 of the 105 Irish MPs elected did so. Ireland provided over half of Gladstone's parliamentary majority, and a useful buffer if Liberal MPs failed to support his disestablishment bill. Gladstone lost his seat in Lancashire – probably reflecting strong anti-Catholicism in the area and strong Anglicanism in that area.

Gladstone began his first term as prime minister, and he devoted much of his time to the legislation to disestablish the Church of Ireland. This is a rare bill/act that was largely drafted by a prime minister. There was some desultory discussion of concurrent establishment – in other words placing the Roman Catholic church in Ireland on a similar basis to the Church of Ireland – with the government paying clerical stipends and presumably having a role in the appointment of bishops. Some of those matters had been aired in the early 19th century during efforts to negotiate the introduction of Catholic Emancipation, but the Irish Catholic Hierarchy was adamant that they would not become a state church. There is some irony in this stance, because in the 1860s the Irish Catholic Hierarchy and its laity were protesting against the loss of the Papal States, and Pope Pius IX was a strong supporter of an established church – but on this issue – as on others relating to democracy and nationalism, Irish Catholicism went its own way. Archbishop Cullen showed some interest in acquiring the Church of Ireland glebes, because the property held by the Church had to be disposed of; it is probably best that he was not successful, because that would have created a real sense of enforced transfer of power. The glebe houses and glebe land remained in the hands of the Church of Ireland.

The Church of Ireland was a substantial landowner – and disestablishment involved divesting the church of its landed properties. There were approximately 10,000 tenants, many of them small tenants. They were the first Irish tenant farmers to become peasant proprietors – roughly 70% bought their farms under a government-funded scheme. Although this scheme was designed purely with church lands in mind, it proved a template for Irish land reform – much more successful than Gladstone’s convoluted 1870 Land Act which pleased almost nobody, and the Church Temporalities Commissioners later evolved into the Irish Land Commission – the body that handled peasant purchase and later land distribution. The Church of Ireland was very fortunate in this land reform. They got out of land just in time – the late 1870s brought a significant long-term decline in the value of land, not to mention the land war, boycotting and the Plan of Campaign – while members of the Church as lay landlords were very much in the firing line, the church as a church was not.

Denominational disputes did not disappear from Irish political life after 1870; there were often very bitter rows over public appointments – in a country where secure jobs were hard to achieve. But the toxic arguments that had prevailed during the 1860s became less bitter and the emphasis shifted from issues that went to the heart of religious divisions to wider political/social questions.

Theo Hoppen has written a brilliant book called *Governing Hibernia*, where he suggests that successive British governments wobbled between treating Ireland as just like Britain (M Thatcher made such a comment about Northern Ireland), and viewing Ireland as different and therefore needing a different approach. Disestablishment is one of the major examples of the latter approach – it recognised that Ireland was different. Vincent Comerford states that ‘It was the acceptance by Westminster of the principle that Irish majority opinion should decide a major Irish constitutional issue’ – though I wonder does he overstate this? There was strong British opinion in favour of disestablishment. Disraeli and the Conservatives opposition in the Commons was not very passionate about opposing the disestablishment of the Irish church; the Lords dedicated most of its time to improving the terms for clergymen and the Church more generally.

While Disestablishment can be represented as the first breach of the Act of Union, it would be difficult to argue that it weakened the Union – on the contrary. We might suggest that Disestablishment meant that the Church of Ireland secured Home Rule – the capacity to determine its own affairs and govern itself – free of Westminster, and of Lambeth. The new structures that were put in place – the Representative Church Body and the Synod gave power to parsons and laity in addition to the Irish bishops. It became an Irish Church. Disestablishment, plus land reform, facilitated the emergence of a common Protestant/Unionist identity – that included both the Church of Ireland and nonconformists and this gave greater strength to Protestant voices in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Removing the Church of Ireland from the Act of Union was very much in the church's interest when the debates over Home Rule, partition and long-term government of Ireland North and South took place some decades later. I don't want to go too far into counter-factual history – but it's worth some very brief consideration. What kind of clauses would have materialised in Home Rule Bills if the Church had continued to feature in the Act of Union? Disestablishment happening against the background of 1920 Government of Ireland Act, or the 1921 Treaty would have been toxic. While members of the Church of Ireland were targeted during the Anglo-Irish War, churches were not. Above all, disestablishment in 1870 meant that there was never a prospect of making the Rome Catholic Church the established church in an independent 26-county Ireland, though that is what Pope Pius XI wanted in the 1937 constitution.

It is early January and I cannot resist the temptation to quote Mrs Alexander, the formidable wife of the Bishop of Derry. This is hymn that she composed which was sung in the Cathedral in Derry on January 1 1871

Look down, Lord of heaven, on our desolation!

Fallen, fall, fallen is now our Country's crown,

Dimly dawns the New Year on a churchless nation,

Ammon and Amalek tread our borders down.

It would be naïve to under-estimate the psychological impact of Disestablishment on leaders and members of the Church of Ireland, but Disestablishment meant that they were no longer part of the Irish Ancien Regime;— the landlords disappeared, the Church survived; the Union ended, the Church survived. After Disestablishment the Church became more Irish – with all the complexities that that entailed, while retaining close links with the Anglican community world-wide.