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‘An experiment in constructive Unionism’: Isaac Butt, Home Rule and federalist political thought during the 1870s.

Federalism has a rich if chequered history within the political discourse of the British and Irish Isles. Federalist ideas of balancing the regional and the national, providing forums for the split politico-cultural personalities of the English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish within the common rubric of Britishness, have long been a feature of the landscape of political ideas within the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Yet ideas they remained. A central point of Linda Colley’s *Britons*, the influential study of the forging of the British nation, is that national unity between England, Scotland and Wales during the eighteenth century was achieved without the sacrifice of regional diversity;<sup>2</sup> that the Union state managed to contain that diversity within centralised legislative and executive structures until the devolution projects championed by the first New Labour Government in 1997 is a feat that has recently come under examination.<sup>3</sup> Ireland aside, the United Kingdom that came into being in 1801 following the Act of Union was remarkably successful in masking regional-national tensions, and re-imagining its form to accommodate factionalism and multiplicity, while promoting a common and unifying, yet malleable, ideal of Britishness.<sup>4</sup> Ireland is, of course, the troublesome piece of this constitutional and national puzzle: notoriously absent from Colley’s depiction of a common British nation, Ireland (or three-quarters of it) remain the only country to exit the Union state, while the six counties of Northern Ireland were, for a

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<sup>1</sup> J. Kendle, *Federal Britain: A History* (London, 1997); J. Kendle, *Ireland and the Federal Solution: The Debate over the United Kingdom Constitution, 1870-1921* (Kingston and Montreal, 1989); M. Burgess, *The British Tradition of Federalism* (Leicester, 1995); V. Bogdanor, *Devolution in the United Kingdom* (Oxford, 2001; first published 1999).

<sup>2</sup> L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, 2004; first published 1992), p. 373.

<sup>3</sup> A. Jackson, *The Two Unions: Ireland, Scotland, and the Survival of the United Kingdom, 1707-2007* (Oxford, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> P. Ward, *Britishness Since 1870* (London, 2004), p. 3.

long time, the only region of the United Kingdom to enjoy/endure devolved self-government.

Ireland's experience of the Union – and the Union's experience of Ireland – was, to state the obvious, complex. At the heart of this complexity lay a profound sense of difference – constitutionally, ethnically and nationally – with the rest of the Kingdom. Yet this problem was not felt to be insurmountable within certain intellectual and political circles throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly those drawn to the tool of federalism to redesign the British constitution. The federal ideal was envisaged as a reconciling bridge between Irish nationalism and the British state, with Ireland's sense of difference contained within the framework of the United Kingdom through a division of sovereignty and the creation of a more efficient polity. Federalism was an influential component within Irish political culture throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with advocates from both nationalist and unionist backgrounds. The first major federalist scheme devised after the passing of the Act of Union was composed by the Ulster liberal William Sharman Crawford attracted the attentions of the nationalist leader Daniel O'Connell and Young Irelander Thomas Davis during the mid-1840s, as an alternative to repealing the Union.<sup>5</sup> The collapse of Crawford's scheme left federalism without a champion in Ireland until 1870, when Isaac Butt resurrected the idea as the basis of his plan for Home Rule. Butt's federalist thought, the contemporary ideas relating to constitutional change, and the nature of debate between Irish and British thinkers and political activists are at the heart of this article.

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<sup>5</sup> J. Bew, *The Glory of Being Britons: Civic Unionism in Nineteenth-Century Belfast* (Dublin, 2009), pp. 114-18.

The fertile terrain of political thought and contemporaneous ideas inspired by Ireland's experience of Union has yet to be excavated by historians.<sup>6</sup> In exploring the discourses of federalist thought, through the writings and activism of Irish and British intellectuals, this article retraces an influential component of nineteenth-century political thought, one that continued to periodically reverberate throughout Ireland and Britain into the twentieth century. The article contends that Irish Home Rule – as it was originally conceived by Butt in 1870 – was less a rejection of British rule in Ireland and more a creative 'unionist' response to the centralised legislative and executive structures of the United Kingdom. Butt firmly believed in Ireland's right to be a vital part of the greater British whole: given his unionist credentials, he should not be framed as a 'traditional' nationalist figure in the mould of his successors. This point is often overlooked by historians of Home Rule, who incorporate the decade of Butt's leadership into the longer narrative of 'constitutional nationalism' that spans 1870 to 1918.<sup>7</sup> This has created a number of false dichotomies, which will be visited throughout this article. The tendency to view the emergence of the Home Rule movement from the 1870s from an Ireland-centric perspective has also obscured British intellectual engagement with Irish designs for constitutional reform.<sup>8</sup> As Butt and Irish Home Rulers were to find, British commentators were all too ready to engage with their ideas. Ultimately, though, in focusing chiefly on Butt's political thought, and the relationship between his ideas and wider constitutional thinking in Britain and

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<sup>6</sup> An exception is David Dwan, *The Great Community: Culture and Nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin, 2008), which explores the political thought of Young Ireland. We still lack a post-1800 study of political *mentalités* in the methodological vein of Stephen Small, *Political Thought in Ireland, 1776-1798* (Oxford, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> A. Jackson, *Home Rule: an Irish History, 1800-2000* (London, 2003); A. O'Day, *Irish Home Rule, 1867-1921* (Manchester, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Notable exceptions are T. Dunne, 'La trahison des clercs': British intellectuals and the first Home Rule crisis', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 23, no. 90 (1982), pp. 134-73, A. O'Day, *The English Face of Irish Nationalism* (Dublin, 1977), and C. Harvie, *The Lights of Liberalism: University Liberals and the Challenge of Democracy, 1860-86* (London, 1976), p. 218-42. All these works only deal with the crisis of 1885-6.

Ireland, this article engages with an elusive Irish figure on his own terms, viewing him not, as he generally suffers, merely as a preface to the more ebullient nationalism that followed in the campaigns led by Charles Stewart Parnell, John Redmond and John Dillon.

## I

Isaac Butt was a lifelong champion of unionism; yet by 1870, he nevertheless arrived at the viewpoint that concentration of political power in Westminster was destabilising and counter-intuitive to the ethos of the Union between Britain and Ireland. The development of Butt's federalist thought has only been considered within an Irish context, thus obscuring its relationship with wider British constitutional theories of the time.<sup>9</sup> This was an era dominated by the idea of organic state growth and whiggish progress, which rejected bold steps to alter the dynamics of the British polity. The standard work was Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution* (1867), the finest example of what has been portrayed as the 'Burkean insistence on experience and continuity' that dominated the mid-Victorian mindset.<sup>10</sup> *The English Constitution's* defence of the absolutist British state (its suggestive title in itself points to English assumptions of centralisation), rested on the pillars of stability, efficiency and liberal values: the inherited parliamentary tradition that Bagehot championed was held up as a moral beacon against radical change prompted by democratic excess.

While Bagehot believed that the 'English suspicion of conspicuous logic' effectively protected against broad constitutional tinkering,<sup>11</sup> re-imagining the

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<sup>9</sup> See in particular the only studies of the Home Rule movement of the 1870s: D. Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule* (London, 1964) and L. J. McCaffrey, 'Irish federalism in the 1870s: a study in conservative nationalism', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 52, no. 6 (1962).

<sup>10</sup> S. Collini, D. Winch and J. Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: a Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 198.

<sup>11</sup> W. Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (Oxford, 2001; first published 1867), p. 191.

national structures and aesthetic values of democracy was a major preoccupation of the Victorian political thinkers of his generation.<sup>12</sup> The federal idea, particularly as it existed in North America, became a vogue subject within this milieu. Alexis de Tocqueville, whose pioneering two-volume work, *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840), set the tenor of Victorian debates over the utility of federalism, outlining the case why such a system fitted the United States but was wholly inappropriate for European countries.<sup>13</sup> John Stuart Mill's *Considerations of Representative Government* (1861) teased out the empirical logic of federalism, while Edward A. Freeman's *History of Federal Government from the Foundation of the Achaian League to the Disruption of the United States* (1863) (unevenly) historicised the concept.<sup>14</sup> The principles of federalism were embedded into political discussion connected to contemporary constitutional change; such writings, debates and activism touched directly on how sovereignty, liberty and the concept of representative government were understood within Victorian and Edwardian Britain and Ireland.

Elements of Irish nationalism, however, struggled with major federalism's ideological assumption: that the idea compromises of Irish nationality for the sake of British citizenship. Indeed, its rather inglorious history within nationalist political thought reflects its association with political weakness and defeat.<sup>15</sup> Despite inspiring some of the richest ideas within federalist political thought, Ireland has been remarkably resistant to such initiatives; so much so that Bagehot's Burkean defence of the British constitution – 'Other things being equal, yesterday's institutions are by far

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<sup>12</sup> The best guide to this terrain is S. Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by H. Reeve (London, 1862), i, chap. 8. See J. Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ, 2005), pp. 192-3 for a recent discussion of this point.

<sup>14</sup> Freeman's book was styled as the first of four projected volumes, but it remained the only volume.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the negative fallout of John Redmond's call for American-style federalism in Ireland: M. Wheatley, 'John Redmond and federalism in 1910', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 32, no. 127 (2001), pp. 354-6.

the best for today’ – can be justly applied to Irish nationalist mind-set regarding ideas of Home Rule.<sup>16</sup> The theory of federalism rested on the belief that such a programme allowed Ireland to be treated the same as England and Scotland (the needs of Wales are always a little vague in Victorian and Edwardian schemes); but this was a fundamental problem for the more nationalistic within Irish political culture. As Francis Cruise O’Brien, a pre-revolution voice within the Irish intelligentsia, asserted in the *Leader* in 1910, ‘A federated United Kingdom supposes that English and Irish interests are identical. History has something to say on the point’.<sup>17</sup> While Cruise O’Brien’s statement reflected a prominent strand in thinking about Irish attitudes to federalism, it should not be forgotten that the first definition of Irish Home Rule, as articulated by Isaac Butt in an important but under-scrutinised pamphlet from 1870, was firmly federal; and while Butt was not explicit about this, his scheme actually rendered the term *Irish Home Rule* a misnomer, as he viewed the mid-Victorian Irish question from the vantage-point of the wider United Kingdom and Empire.

Butt was the victim of two processes that tie in with Bagehot’s notion of ‘yesterday’s institutions’: his federal definition of Irish Home Rule was weakened by frequent relapses within nationalist Ireland to the language of the past – O’Connellite ‘Repeal’, which Home Rule was not – while the ebullience of Parnellite campaign that followed Butt’s death has obscured the logic that underpinned his conception of Ireland within the United Kingdom and Empire. Rarely is a historical figure caught so firmly within the vice of what preceded him *and* what followed; and rarely is a political thinker so distorted and misunderstood. Butt’s first (and only) biographer, Terence de Vere White, painted a picture of Butt as a young firebrand Orange-Tory who morphs into the nationalist father of Home Rule. While it is tempting to point to

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<sup>16</sup> Bagehot, *English Constitution*, p.10.

<sup>17</sup> *Leader*, 22 October 1910.

Butt's legal defence of Fenian prisoners during the 1860s as a outward sign that he lost 'his old zeal as a Tory' before embracing a 'later enthusiasm as a Nationalist' (as his biographer believed he did), his political evolution was at once more complex and (paradoxically) consistent.<sup>18</sup> Through a reading of Butt's writings during the 1860s and 1870s, he can be framed not as a nationalist thinker, but rather an inventive *unionist* political figure. The late nineteenth-century dichotomy between unionism and nationalism in Ireland, underpinned by religious and national differences, which the Home Rule debates brought to the surface, was not as all-consuming during the 1860s and 1870s: political and intellectual space existed for unionists such as Butt to re-imagine the Union to enable it to embrace Irish nationalist sentiment.

In positioning Butt and early ideas of Home Rule in this way, a point of comparison can be drawn with the recent 'unionist turn' in Scottish historiography, not least the hugely significant work of Colin Kidd.<sup>19</sup> Kidd challenges the rigid binary of unionist-nationalist labelling in Scotland by identifying a constructive unionist heart within 'nationalist' forms of political expression. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Scottish nationalism was dominated by a discourse that desired a revision of the Union of 1707, not its destruction. The national grievance was not the Union itself, but rather English interpretations of it; the ideal of partnership and true union was corrupted (as the Scots saw it) by England's arrogant insensitiveness to Scotland's historic status.<sup>20</sup> There was a thinner line than hitherto recognised between Scottish unionism and nationalism, an interpretative revision that helps historians to make sense of the seeming dichotomy between pro-imperial language and the championing of the true ethos of the Anglo-Scottish Union by *nationalists* in

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<sup>18</sup> T. de Vere White, *The Road of Excess* (Dublin, 1945), p. 183.

<sup>19</sup> For a historiographical overview, see A. Raffe, '1707, 2007, and the unionist turn in Scottish history', *Historical Journal*, vol. 53, no. 4 (2010), pp. 1071-83.

<sup>20</sup> C. Kidd, *Union and Unionisms: Political Thought in Scotland, 1500-2000* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 271. Also see pp. 260-1, 263.



Scotland.<sup>21</sup> While a very different political culture developed in Ireland after the Act of Union of 1800, similar questions can be asked of the Irish unionist-nationalist divide.<sup>22</sup> The original definition of Irish Home Rule as a federal arrangement during the 1870s marks a turning point in conceptions of Ireland's place within the Union, and, as such, deserves scrutiny as a form of nationally-minded unionism. Under the leadership of Parnell, the idea of Home Rule came to rest on the assumption that Irish nationality formed a distinctive bloc within the United Kingdom, and should receive unique recognition in the form of parliamentary devolution. The drive for devolution was, of course, saturated in the language of patriotic sentiment rather than administrative utility, with the rhetoric of nationalist Ireland bordering, from time to time, on separatism.<sup>23</sup> The pre-1880 definition of Home Rule – that of federalism – assumed a rather different conception of Ireland's relationship with the United Kingdom, with an emphasis placed on 'normalising' the Irish experience of Union through the creation of regional parliaments across the two islands. During the late 1860s and 1870s, federalist political thinkers envisaged the United Kingdom as the political entity to be reformed; for Home Rulers after 1880, the focus was more exclusively on Ireland.

Isaac Butt's conception of federal Home Rule offers an insight into the lost and misunderstood world that can be labelled as 'national unionism'. If J. W. Good's decision to include Butt and the early Home Rule movement as a variation of Irish unionism in a book published in 1920 now seems paradoxical, it is because of the overbearing influence of binary labelling, with the assumption that schemes for self-government must be nationalist-inspired and thus anti-unionist. Good, who was the

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>22</sup> See A. Jackson, *Ireland, 1798-1998: Politics and War* (Oxford, 1999), p. 215, for a reflection on this, as well as Jackson, *Two Unions*, pp. 137-8, and esp. 189-90.

<sup>23</sup> For the complex relationship between constitutional nationalism and separatism, see M. J. Kelly, *The Fenian Ideal and Irish Nationalism, 1882-1916* (Woodbridge, 2006).

literary editor of the *Freeman's Journal* in 1920 and future assistant editor at George Russell's *Irish Statesman*, was one of the few observers who accurately positioned Butt within the spectrum of Irish political thought, describing the Home Rule leader's modus operandi as 'an experiment in constructive Unionism'.<sup>24</sup> Casting Butt as a nationalist – and more particularly, as the representative of a 'curious imperial nationalism', as David Thornley writes – is to distort his political mindset.<sup>25</sup> Despite the flowering of specialist historiography on modern Ireland, the Home Rule party led by Butt and the politico-cultural environment in which the demand for self-government re-entered the dynamics of British-Irish relations during the 1870s has largely been left behind; historians continue to largely rely on two accounts published during the 1960s, by the aforementioned Thornley and Lawrence McCaffrey.<sup>26</sup> Both accounts focus on high politics, with the notable flaws of Butt's character, chiefly his chaotic personal life and lack of organisational skills, emphasised, while the depth of his intellectual capabilities is underestimated. This produces a skewed sense of perspective, a methodological problem amplified by Thornley's and McCaffrey's unwillingness to engage with Butt's pre-Home Rule life. In adopting the late 1860s as their starting points, both artificially position Butt as a *nationalist* figure, ignoring the blending of Irish Conservatism, unionism and patriotism within his national identity.

An additional problem with the work of Thornley and McCaffrey is their over-reliance on the narrative of the Irish parliamentary party in Westminster, which minimises the ideas that were developed during this period. In weighing up the considerable obstacles in the path of the federal scheme in the aftermath of Butt's by-election success in Limerick in 1871, the *Northern Whig* mischievously concluded that 'in no place could a Home Rule agitator be less dangerous than in the House of

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<sup>24</sup> J. W. Good, *Irish Unionism* (Dublin, 1920), p. 148.

<sup>25</sup> Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule*, p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, and McCaffrey, 'Irish federalism in the 1870s: a study in conservative nationalism', pp. 1-58.

Commons'.<sup>27</sup> This assessment was vindicated by the woeful performance of the Westminster-based Irish party that emerged under the leadership of Butt in 1874, which was shackled by a parliamentary grouping with a less than impressive commitment to Home Rule, a trait parodied by a number of contemporaries, such as Anthony Trollope.<sup>28</sup> One of the more thoughtful historians of Irish Home Rule has argued that many of the successes enjoyed by Parnell during the 1880s were built on foundations put in place by Butt, while adding a significant caveat: 'Butt's achievement lay not so much in winning converts to federalism as in winning support for the Home Rule movement, which was quite a different matter'.<sup>29</sup> This was unquestionably the case; nationalist Ireland had major difficulties with the concept of federalism, which undermined the sense that the Irish case was a unique grievance. But the glossing over of the idea of federalism, and its position within Irish and British debates during the 1870s, is to miss a central feature of political culture, quite detached from the wheeling and dealings of parliamentary life.

## II

The Protestant and Conservative design of the early Home Rule movement has intrigued a number of historians; given that Irish political culture became bitterly polarised during the 1880s, with the same Protestant Tory grouping emerging as unconditional opponents of Home Rule, the roots of the modern self-governing idea appear an aberration from the natural order of things.<sup>30</sup> K. T. Hoppen dismisses the patriotic Conservative moment of the early 1870s as 'Protestant day-trip to Home

<sup>27</sup> *Weekly Northern Whig*, 23 September 1871.

<sup>28</sup> A. Trollope, *The Prime Minister* (Oxford, 1983; first published 1876), esp. p. 110.

<sup>29</sup> Jackson, *Home Rule*, p. 29.

<sup>30</sup> D. Thornley, 'The Irish Conservatives and Home Rule, 1869-1873', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 11, no. 43 (1959), pp. 200-22; Jackson, *Home Rule*, pp. 19-21; J. Regan-Lefebvre, *Cosmopolitan Nationalism and the Victorian Empire: Ireland, India and the Politics of Alfred Webb* (Basingstoke, 2009), p. 73; D. G. Boyce, *Nineteenth-Century Ireland: the Search for Stability* (Dublin, 1990), p. 160.

Rule’.<sup>31</sup> The typical explanation, as forwarded by David Thornley, rests on the ‘shallowness of much of that conservative nationalism’ represented by the Protestant majority that made up the Home Government Association: their patriotism was skin deep, only surfacing after their material interests were threatened by Gladstonian Liberal policy.<sup>32</sup> Explanations for the genesis of Home Rule, therefore, tend to stress the immediate: Protestant Conservatives, rebelling against the programme of Irish reform advocated by Gladstone’s administration of 1868-73, particularly the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland and land reform, gravitated towards a coalition with nationalism.<sup>33</sup> The perceived rashness of this shift alarmed many unionist observers. Thomas MacKnight, the editor of the Belfast liberal daily, the *Northern Whig*, later recalled the ‘strange language’ of “Tory Fenianism” of the early 1870s,<sup>34</sup> in 1873, the *Dublin University Magazine*, then under the editorship of Durham Dunlop, questioned the political judgement of several members of the Home Government Association ‘from whom certainly we expected a more sensible line of conduct’. The respectable Tory element of the movement for self-government stood accused by the *DUM* with breaching a ‘serious moral responsibility’.<sup>35</sup>

The irony of the *DUM*’s criticism of the Home Rule project was probably not lost on Isaac Butt. Butt was the founder of the Home Government Association, Ireland’s leading intellectual advocate of federalism and, of course, a former editor of the *DUM*. The *DUM* was founded in 1833, and quickly became a literary space occupied by Irish Conservatives and Protestants responding to the changing world order of Ireland under the Union. The nineteenth-century descendants of the Irish

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<sup>31</sup> K. T. Hoppen, *Elections, Politics, and Society in Ireland, 1832-1885* (Oxford, 1984), p. 327.

<sup>32</sup> Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule*, p. 125.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-7; McCaffrey, ‘Irish federalism’, pp. 8-9.

<sup>34</sup> T. MacKnight, *Ulster as it is: or Twenty-Eight Years’ Experience as an Irish Editor* (London, 2 vols., 1896), i, p. 225.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Home Rule’, *Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 82, no. 489 (September 1873), p. 263.

Protestant Patriot tradition, such as Butt, met the challenges posed by a loss of national leadership and the emerging Catholic democracy by fusing an outward-looking imperial identification with a sincerely held Irish nationality. This was most effectively articulated throughout the pages of the *DUM*.<sup>36</sup> As Joseph Spence put it in his masterful survey of the *DUM*, the starting point of this brand of Irish Tory philosophy, personified by Butt, Samuel Ferguson, Charles Lever, and Sheridan Le Fanu, was that there ‘was no question of Ireland being a colony: it was a nation with a historical destiny as certain as England’s’.<sup>37</sup> Under Butt’s editorship during the 1830s, the *DUM* positioned itself at the vanguard of a brand of Irish Toryism that offered a positive national introspection viewed through the prism of Protestantism and unionism.<sup>38</sup> In this formulation, the Union offered the space – in theory – to rebuild a national sense of leadership from the embers of Protestant Patriotism, while providing protection from the Irish Catholic majority through the incorporation of Ireland into the greater British whole.

Appreciating the fluid political boundaries of nineteenth-century Irish political thought is crucial to any understanding of the emergence of the Home Rule idea, and its rationale. There was a history of patriotic thought within Irish Conservatism before 1870, a point rarely emphasised in accounts that stress the short-term ambitions of the Protestant Home Rulers.<sup>39</sup> Federalism, as offered by Butt as the first definition of Home Rule, can be viewed as the logical conclusion in the constitutional thought of nationally-minded Irish Toryism, and not solely as a clinical leap by a class reacting

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<sup>36</sup> J. Spence, ‘The Philosophy of Irish Toryism, 1833-1852: A Study of Reactions to Liberal Reformism in Ireland in the Generation between the First Reform Act and the Famine, with Especial Reference to Expressions of National Feelings among the Protestant Ascendancy’ (Ph.D., University of London, 1991), pp. 9-10.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>38</sup> R. F. Foster, *Words Alone: Yeats and his Inheritances* (Oxford, 2011), p. 53.

<sup>39</sup> J. Spence, ‘Isaac Butt, Irish nationality and the conditional defence of the Union, 1833-70’, in D. G. Boyce and A. O’Day, eds., *Defenders of the Union: a Survey of British and Irish Unionism Since 1801* (London, 2001), p. 71.

to Gladstonian attack. Butt's public standing within Ireland was high by 1870: he had spent the late 1860s as a leading advocate of tenant right reform and was the chairman of the Fenian Amnesty Association, alongside his well-documented legal defence of the Fenians put on trial in 1867. Butt thus courted the support of old O'Connellites and Young Irelanders, held the respect of influential elements of Conservative Ireland, and enjoyed an 'attitude of benevolent neutrality' from the Fenians as he launched his Home Rule proposal.<sup>40</sup> This was the context in which Butt's *Irish Federalism! Its Meaning, its Objects, and its Hopes* was published in 1870, quickly going through three editions that year; the fourth and final edition appeared in 1874 as the result of a popular upsurge in favour of the Home Rule cause.<sup>41</sup> The federal underpinnings of Butt's proposal represented a fervent critique of the operation of absolute sovereignty within the constitutional framework of the United Kingdom, while maintaining Ireland's right to participate as an equal within the Union of the 'three kingdoms', thus creating a greater sense of imperial unity.<sup>42</sup> Butt's pamphlet arguably represents the most profound Irish national unionist statement of the second half of the nineteenth century: it also offers an insight into the mental world of patriotic Toryism shortly before the bitter Home Rule and agrarian disputes of the 1880s rendered such a viewpoint obsolete.

The idea of federalism was born from the broad debate sparked by the Fenian rising of 1867. While a number of writers stated the case that the attempted insurrection was more an expression of social (particularly agrarian) grievance than abstract nationality or doctrinaire republicanism, this belief went hand in hand with a

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<sup>40</sup> R. Pigott, *Personal Recollections of an Irish National Journalist* (Cork, 1979; first published 1882), p. 340.

<sup>41</sup> J. P. McAlister to I. Butt, 19 September 1874, Home Rule League Letter Book, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), D213/94.

<sup>42</sup> I. Butt, 'Advertisement to First Edition, August 1870', *Home Government for Ireland: Irish Federalism! Its Meanings, its Objects, and its Hopes* (4<sup>th</sup> edn., Dublin, 1874), p. iv.

critique of Ireland's experience of the Union's governance.<sup>43</sup> Matthew Arnold's best known work, *Culture and Anarchy*, which was published in the aftermath of the Fenian rising, played with Bagehotian language to critique the aesthetics of government that imbued the Union state: 'The British Constitution, its checks, and its prime virtues, are for Englishmen. We may extend them to others out of love and kindness; but we find no real divine law on our hearts constraining us so to extend them'.<sup>44</sup> Such an interpretation was common within Irish discourse after 1867. The young polymath, George Sigerson, for one, argued in 1868 that 'Ireland has not yet fully received the benefit of institutions analogous to those of England, that is to say, of institutions which harmonize with the popular sentiment, and are not imposed on the people against their will'.<sup>45</sup> This was, in essence, the criticism of the Union that Butt articulated from the mid-1860s until his death in 1879, countering the Bagehotian Anglo-centred constitutional narrative of the United Kingdom. Butt's powerful pamphlet from 1866, *Land Tenure in Ireland; A Plea for the Celtic Race*, made the case that Fenianism represented a war on 'the institutions of landed property': 'landlordism and the land system was the impersonation of English dominance and misrule'.<sup>46</sup> Butt believed that reform of the landed system to strengthen tenant right would weaken the appeal of Fenianism: the Irish sought agrarian justice, not an overthrow of the state or the abolition of property, although the withholding of the former risked the latter. The logic of this analysis pushed Butt into articulating an early justification of Home Rule: 'In self-governed nations, laws

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<sup>43</sup> Most famously by J. S. Mill, *England and Ireland* (5<sup>th</sup> edn., London, 1869), but for Irish perspectives on this, see, for example, H. O'Neill, *Ireland for the Irish: A Practical, Peaceable, and Just Solution of the Irish Land Question* (London, 1868), p. 2, and J. Godkin, *The Land-War in Ireland: A History for the Times* (New York, NY, 1970; first published 1870), p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> M. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and other Writings*, ed. S. Collini (Cambridge, 1993), p. 87.

<sup>45</sup> 'An Ulsterman' (G. Sigerson), *Modern Ireland: Its Vital Questions, Secret Societies, and Government* (London, 1868), p. viii.

<sup>46</sup> I. Butt, *Land Tenure in Ireland; a Plea for the Celtic race* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn., Dublin, 1866), p. 9.

and institutions are gradually moulded to the wants and wishes of the people... Had Ireland been self-governed, this must long ago have happened. Her land system must long ago have been adapted to the habits and to the necessities of the people'.<sup>47</sup>

Implicit in this argument was a rejection of the centralisation of the incorporated Union: Irish patriotism was denied a constructive outlet to shape British policy, with disastrous consequences *in* Ireland. Butt's federalism emerged out of a fevered period of activism, thinking and publishing since the mid-1860; yet, despite the radicalism of his revised viewpoint, he was far from rejecting the principle of Union itself.

There were in essence two courses open to constructively-minded unionist thinkers during the late 1860s and early 1870s. Butt's sweeping scheme to redesign the constitution of the United Kingdom was one; the other was a more cautious viewpoint, which was prominent among British unionists. This perspective centred on the idea that the Irish problem as a product of the incomplete nature of the Union, a hypothesis that emphasised the failures of England. John Stuart Mill, for example, believed that the Irish problem of the late-1860s was in reality an English problem: no British government, even that of Wellington's which introduced Catholic Emancipation in 1829, had attempted to comprehend Ireland or permit the smaller island to mould Irish policy. The solution was clear: 'Let us show that our principles of government are not a mere generalization from English facts; but that in legislating for Ireland we can take into account Irish circumstances'.<sup>48</sup> For all his anger at the gulf between (to borrow a title from a seminal article that appeared in the *DUM* during Butt's time as editor) 'English theories and Irish facts',<sup>49</sup> Mill was in essence calling for a more *complete* Union between Britain and Ireland. His analysis of the

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 71-2.

<sup>48</sup> J. S. Mill, *Chapters and Speeches on the Irish Land Question* (London, 1870), pp. 97-8; the quote is on p. 107.

<sup>49</sup> 'English theories and Irish facts', *Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 6, no. 36 (December 1835), pp. 682-96.



Irish land question during the Famine, which he repeated in his *Autobiography* of 1873, hinged on the perception that the English anchor of the Union ensured that the United Kingdom could not move with the shifting tides of its peripheries.<sup>50</sup> Mill was representative of a wider strain of British and Irish unionism that believed what needed to change in the aftermath of the Fenian rising was not Ireland's constitutional arrangement with the Union, but the mindset of the British – and more accurately, the English. This was akin to A. V. Dicey's later vision of the Union as a state of mind rather than solely a 'mere work of legal ingenuity'.<sup>51</sup> The most profound moral change that could occur in Ireland rested on the ability of the English to introduce radical *economic* change to elevate land poverty: such a move required breaking the sanctity of property rights within British political culture.<sup>52</sup> The reforming spirit of Gladstonianism, which offered the glittering prize of Irish improvement through land, church and education legislation, was interpreted by a number of contemporary observers in the early 1870s as representing a fundamental shift towards 'a thorough, a real, a complete union with England'.<sup>53</sup>

Butt, however, rejected the interpretation that the Union could exist in its present form, believing that it must be altered, through de-centralisation, to save it: the unionist state of mind needed to be coerced into being. The tracks that took Butt towards a federal goal were laid in the context of frustrating (from an Irish perspective) campaigns for tenant right reform and a Fenian prisoner amnesty during the late 1860s: Butt was a prominent member of both movements, and the shift within

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<sup>50</sup> J. S. Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson (London, 1963-1991), i, p. 220.

<sup>51</sup> A. V. Dicey, *Why England Maintains the Union: a Popular Rendering of 'England's Case Against Home Rule'* (London, 1887), p. 56.

<sup>52</sup> Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, pp. 146-9.

<sup>53</sup> J. F. Barry, *The State of Parties in Ireland* (Dublin, 1871), p. 77. Also see H. D. Hutton, *History, Principle, and Fact; in Relation to the Irish Question* (London, 1870), p. 24 and Rev. M. MacColl, *Is There Not a Cause? A Letter to Colonel Greville-Nugent, MP, on the Disestablishment of the Irish Church* (London, 1868), pp. 113-14.

his political thought towards Irish self-government arose from disillusion with the British response he courted. In 1866, Butt had argued, like Mill, that land reform in the shape of exceptional legislation which granted tenant farmers a stake in the soil would promote social and moral improvement in Ireland.<sup>54</sup> By 1871, however, he had moved well beyond this, criticising the entire nature of the Union state as it existed: ‘The whole system of Irish government is one of neglect of Irish interests and contempt and defiance of Irish opinion’.<sup>55</sup> Butt’s liberal opponents in Ireland, such as the *Northern Whig*, rejected the concept that there was a singular notion of ‘Irish opinion’ (‘the Irish members [of parliament] themselves are never agreed upon the fundamental principle of any one measure’).<sup>56</sup> Yet the cumulative effects of the sustained campaign for tenant right reform during the 1860s, the Fenian rising and its aftermath, the popularity of the Amnesty Association, a body that made sympathy for the Fenians a respectable pastime, gave coherence to various critiques of the Union, opening the possibility of an anti-Liberal political alternative for Irish nationalists.<sup>57</sup> Butt was a crucial bridge in explaining the shift from sectional discontent, such as agrarianism and prisoner agitation, towards the broader and more nationally-orientated principle of Home Rule. In 1867, he rejected the argument made by some unionists that Ireland’s grievances should not receive exceptional legislation as this undermined the spirit of the Union: ‘The whole government of Ireland’, Butt asserted, from the Battle of the Boyne to the present day, is one long-continued exception of

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<sup>54</sup> Butt, *Land Tenure in Ireland*, p. 54. Also see a more restrained version in I. Butt, *Fixity of Tenure: Heads of a Suggested Legislative Enactment* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Dublin, 1867).

<sup>55</sup> I. Butt, *The Irish Deep Sea Fisheries: a Speech, Delivered at a Meeting of the Home Government Association, 1871* (Dublin, 1874), p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> *Northern Whig*, 14 September 1871.

<sup>57</sup> R. V. Comerford, *The Fenians in Context: Irish politics and Society, 1848-82* (Dublin, 1998; first published 1998), p. 174.

Ireland'.<sup>58</sup> Whether the Fenian prisoners received an amnesty was a decision that determined, Butt argued early in 1870, 'whether we are admitted into a partnership with England on equal terms, or whether we are to be governed as a conquered country'.<sup>59</sup> Taken as a whole, Butt's pamphleteering activities through the 1860s and 1870s constituted a sustained critique of the post-Famine Union, from a Conservative perspective: he provided the rationale for Home Rule, while offering an illuminating case study into the radicalisation of Irish sentiment in favour of self-government.

When Butt first published his federalist proposal, nationalism in Ireland was in a period of flux. Sympathy with the dignity, if not the actions, of the Fenians, paired with dissatisfaction with Gladstone's limited Irish programme brought a number of 'old' O'Connellite and Young Ireland Repealers out of a national cocoon: as a correspondent of John Martin, an 1848 rebel, declared in 1868, the time was nigh when 'Repeal will not have to be whispered in private in the fashionable world'.<sup>60</sup> The preface of Butt's first edition of *Home Government for Ireland* was dated August 1870, several months after the founding of the Home Government Association: the advancement of federalist ideas was made within the wider context of nationalist frustration with the lack of representative government in Ireland. In 1869, O'Donovan Rossa, a Fenian, topped a by-election in Tipperary as a protest candidate against the government's refusal to concede a prisoner amnesty; the result was deemed void, and in February 1870, another Fenian, Charles Kickham, came within four votes of holding the seat. In July 1870, the *Nation* carried a snapshot of the mood of nationalist Ireland, delivered with a rhetorical clout reminiscent of the Young Ireland generation:

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<sup>58</sup> I. Butt, *The Irish People and the Irish Land: a Letter to Lord Lifford* (Dublin, 1867), p. 183. A good expression of the anti-exceptional legislation case is found in 'Mentor', *The Case of Ireland Stated, Irrespective of Party Considerations* (Dublin, 1867), p. 44.

<sup>59</sup> I. Butt, *Ireland's Appeal for Amnesty: a Letter to the Right Honourable W. E. Gladstone, MP* (Glasgow and London, 1870), p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> L. J. O'Shea to J. Martin, 13 October 1868, John Martin Papers, PRONI, D2137/1/42.

‘If our experience of that Parliament has taught us any political truth more clearly than another in the course of the last seventy years, it is that there is to the rational judgement no medial stage, between the absolute fact of provincialism we suffer, and the absolute fact of autonomy we claim’.<sup>61</sup> Butt was, of course, central in channelling this anti-government sentiment and moulding it into the language of Home Rule; yet his formula for self-government appears rather at odds with the rhetorical flourishes of the time. This was due to his conflating of unionist *and* national principles, a design that promised responsible government based on property and intelligence. The advertisement to the third edition of *Home Government for Ireland*, dated November 1870, explicitly expressed the inherent conservatism of the idea of self-government: a federal scheme, Butt argued, would satisfy the growing Irish longing for a national parliament imbued with the finest traditions of local patriotism, while maintaining the unity of the Empire, the position of the monarchy and without threatening the rights or liberties of the propertied classes in Ireland. Butt had previously argued that the application of ‘justice and liberality’ in Ireland would create loyalty and contentment with the British connection;<sup>62</sup> by 1870, he advanced to the view that only an Irish legislature offered the means to reach this end result. Butt’s conception of federalism represented the means to dampen the separatist impulse of Irish nationalism, channelling its restless energy constructively through the creation of national and imperial political spaces.<sup>63</sup>

Butt rejected the O’Connellite idea of Repeal of the Act of Union, which was still prevalent within nationalist discourse after the Famine. For Butt, Repeal was anti-imperial, and hence damaging to Ireland’s standing in the Empire. Repeal implied a

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<sup>61</sup> *Nation*, 23 July 1870.

<sup>62</sup> I. Butt, *The Irish Querist: a Series of Questions Proposed for the Consideration of all who Desire to Solve the Problem of Ireland’s Social Condition* (Dublin, 1867), p. 30.

<sup>63</sup> Butt, *Irish Federalism*, pp. viii-ix.

return to the pre-1800 political landscape, with the second coming of ‘Grattan’s Parliament’, the ‘independent’ (it was in actually far from it) Irish assembly that was abolished on the passing of the Act of Union.<sup>64</sup> Critically, this notion of Irish self-government surrendered Irish representation at Westminster, which threatened (in Butt’s eyes) to relegate Ireland’s status as an integral component of the imperial metropole, thereby turning the clock back to the provincial eighteenth-century conception of ‘colonial-national’ independence. Butt’s strain of Irish Toryism rejected Repeal on these grounds during the 1830s and 1840s;<sup>65</sup> his national unionism strengthened this conviction during the 1860s and 1870s. ‘[I]n a Federal Union’, Butt asserted in 1870, ‘Ireland would take a higher place, and would exercise a greater influence than she did so, or ever could do, under the Constitution of 1782’.<sup>66</sup> The task pursued by Butt was thus immense: his federal ideas were targeted at Irish Repealers who were not only sceptical of the *performance* of the Union but, in several notable cases, of the *principle* of Union, as well as ‘thoughtful and intelligent Englishmen’, the only class who could deliver federal legislation.<sup>67</sup> It was to be a difficult balancing act.

In moving towards the federal ideal, Butt categorically rejected the notion that Gladstonian Liberalism, despite its reforming zeal, could sufficiently reshape the Union in a manner that would promote harmony across the three kingdoms. The knee-jerk Liberal assault on the pillars of the Protestant Ascendancy – most notably, the Church of Ireland and land – was in itself an illumination of the perceived corruption of the original ethos of Union. ‘We are not now governed by a Parliament administering a treaty of Union’, Butt asserted, ‘but by a supreme Parliament claiming

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. iv.

<sup>65</sup> Spence, ‘Philosophy of Irish Toryism’, pp. 55-6.

<sup>66</sup> Butt, *Irish Federalism*, p. v.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. iv.

and exercising the supreme control and absolute power of legislation, exactly as if Ireland and England had always been one country, as if an Irish Parliament had never existed, and a treaty of Union never had been made'.<sup>68</sup> This was not the essence of Union, the conciliatory Pittite definition of which Butt eagerly articulated as a Home Ruler.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, as an illustration of the degree of consistency in Butt's political thought, his famous stand for the Union in the Repeal debate with Daniel O'Connell at the Dublin Corporation in 1843 should be read alongside his later, more 'patriotic', pronouncements:

I am quite willing to discuss this question as an Irishman. I am not – I cannot be indifferent to the prosperity of the British Empire... I believe with Pitt that no one can speak as a true Englishman who does not speak as a true Irishman, or as a true Irishman who does not speak as a true Englishman. I am satisfied that we have all a much greater stake in the strength and in the prosperity of the Empire at large, than we can have in any petty and separate interest of any of its component parts.

Butt's biographer, who quotes this section of Butt's reply to O'Connell, believed that 'No clearer statement of the position of the Irish Unionist has ever been made'.<sup>70</sup> Yet there was little in Butt's argument for the Union in 1843 that was inconsistent with his rationale for Home Rule thirty years later.

A feature strangely lacking in *Irish Federalism* is any sense of meaningful analysis of historical and contemporary federal examples to illuminate the case Butt

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>69</sup> For Pitt's ideas and rhetoric connecting conciliation to the Union legislation, see P. Bew, *Ireland: the Politics of Enmity, 1789-2006* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 54-6.

<sup>70</sup> White, *Road of Excess*, p. 67.

was pressing. Discussion of the ‘real-life’ experiences of federalism is relegated to a few pages, and centred on the Achaean League, the dominion of Canada and the Swiss Cantons. The federal system of the United States, which formed a crucial component within the worldview of other intellectuals who wrote about constitutional reform during the 1860s and 1870s, such as Bagehot and Freeman, gains one sentence in Butt’s pamphlet. The very reason why the constitution of the United States was a vogue subject within British circles at this time – the American Civil War – lends a feeling to the enterprise that Butt strategically left out a prolonged discussion of the highest profile case of federalism for fear of (further) antagonising educated opinion hostile to the principle of dividing sovereignty. The historical lineage of the United States since the 1780s was often partnered with post-revolutionary France throughout nineteenth-century British political thought as cautionary tales of democratic oppression.<sup>71</sup> On the commencement of the American Civil War, only nine years before the publication of Butt’s pamphlet, Bagehot wearily recorded that ‘it is impossible for Englishmen not to observe that the whole mischief has been, not caused but painfully exacerbated by the unfortunate mixture of flexibility and inflexibility in the United States Constitution’.<sup>72</sup> The only reference to the American example in Butt’s pamphlet is a single colourless sentence referring to the United States as ‘only another illustration of the universality of the instinct which teaches men that nations as well as individuals may combine, and that there is no inconsistency between the existence of a legislature regulating the internal affairs of each portion of the confederation and a central legislature, directing with efficiency and unity the combined power of all.’<sup>73</sup> Butt’s Irish Tory ideals clearly had little in

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<sup>71</sup> J. W. Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought* (Oxford, 1988), p. 123.

<sup>72</sup> *Economist*, 20 April 1861.

<sup>73</sup> Butt, *Irish Federalism*, p. 16.

common philosophically with the radicalism of Thomas Paine, one of the most prominent voices of revolution in America; yet their common advocacy of federalism illuminates the utility of the concept across the political spectrum and demographic circumstance. ‘Our citizenship in the United States is our national character. Our citizenship in any particular state is only our local distinction’,<sup>74</sup> Paine asserted in 1783. Butt was in essence articulating a similar dichotomy within his own national and local context, but did not wish to use the Paineite example to illuminate his case, a decision most likely influenced by the shadow of the Civil War in the US.

Other Home Rulers did, however, embrace the case study of US federalism. Butt’s conception of Home Rule owed much to Rev. Thaddeus O’Malley, the self-styled ‘father of federalism in Ireland’, who edited the *Federalist* newspaper during the 1840s.<sup>75</sup> O’Malley broke his retirement in 1873 to publish a substantial pamphlet, *Home Rule on the Basis of Federalism*, which represented the most sustained expansion of Butt’s ideas. O’Malley quoted Tocqueville, ‘the chief political philosopher of our generation’, on the virtues of the American constitution, concluding that ‘Federalism is, therefore the acme in the science of government; it is the eclecticism of political philosophy’.<sup>76</sup> The deployment of federalist ideas by O’Malley rested on his longstanding belief that a division of sovereignty within the United Kingdom was necessary to achieve religious freedom for all in Ireland (for which an *Irish* government was essential), while finally copper fastening the incomplete Union of 1800.<sup>77</sup> This was the thread that bound together the arguments of a leading figure within the Home Government Association, John George MacCarthy,

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<sup>74</sup> T. Paine, *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings*, ed. M. Philp (Oxford, 1998), pp. 76-7.

<sup>75</sup> A. Webb, *A Compendium of Irish Biography: Comprising Sketches of Distinguished Irishmen, and of Eminent Persons Connected with Ireland by Office or by their Writings* (Dublin, 1878), p. 403.

<sup>76</sup> T. O’Malley, *Home Rule on the Basis of Federalism* (London, 1872), p. 32.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. v-ix.



who published a sizable volume on Home Rule in 1871. Again, quoting Tocqueville, MacCarthy forwarded the thesis that federalism recognised the diversity of the states that formed the US, but the unifying constitutional framework made separation impossible, as evident with the close of the Civil War in 1865.<sup>78</sup> The constitutional lessons for Ireland and Britain, MacCarthy believed, were obvious.

Given this, it is telling that Butt chose not to pursue this line of argument in his own contributions to political literature. His dismissal of the United States as ‘only another illustration’ of federalism, rather than the model par excellence, represented an effort to downplay the negative connotations of federalism and democracy within *British* (quite apart from Irish) political thought. It is no coincidence that the beacon of the federal ideal according to Butt was Canada, which, unlike its North American neighbour, was an integral component of the British Empire. Butt reasoned that federal self-government transformed Canadian attitudes, channelling rebellion into responsible government, while strengthening the imperial transatlantic bonds. Given that this example also highlighted a precedent for federalism within the British Empire, it was unsurprising that Butt exploited it. The Canadian parallel became a staple of Home Rule discourse during the 1870s, and remained in use by imperially-minded nationalists throughout the Edwardian period.<sup>79</sup> The metaphor, however, became twisted over time: Butt saw Ireland as a Quebec to the United Kingdom’s Canada, while a later generation of Home Rulers saw Ireland *as* Canada itself. The nebulous use of federalist ideas did, however, open transatlantic links for Butt’s movement. While the organisational spread of the Home Rule League (the body that the Home Government Association morphed into in 1873) remained patchy through the 1870s, there were various efforts to cultivate Canadian links: Home Rule League

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<sup>78</sup> J. G. MacCarthy, *A Plea for the Home Government of Ireland* (London, 1871), p. 42.

<sup>79</sup> C. W. Reid, *The Lost Ireland of Stephen Gwynn: Irish Constitutional Nationalism and Cultural Politics, 1864-1950* (Manchester, 2011), pp. 95-6.

correspondence reveals links with sympathetic Irish associations in Quebec and Montreal, with the Irish side deploying the example of Canada to explain the fundamental principles and goals of the Home Rule project.<sup>80</sup>

The tensions between the seemingly inevitable march of democracy and intellectual fears of this impending new world order distinguish British and Irish political thought during the 1860s and 1870s, particularly in the aftermath of the US Civil War and the second reform act. But whereas historians have viewed democracy as an essential component of nineteenth-century Irish nationalism,<sup>81</sup> it should not be forgotten that the Home Rule ‘craze’, as A. M. Sullivan put it, was triggered by an Irish Tory unionist with deep suspicions of the involvement of the masses in politics.<sup>82</sup> The colours that Butt wore politically may have altered from his early *Dublin University Magazine* days, but his central philosophy had not. His hostility to crude democracy and his fears of a tyranny of the unenlightened majority form a central component of his argument for federalism in 1870. Butt reasoned that the reform acts of 1832 and 1867 had inadvertently heightened the problems of the British-Irish connection. By disproportionately increasing Irish representation in parliament, while also expanding the political nation through the increased franchise, the age of reform transformed the dynamics of the Union: Irish grievances were amplified within the public sphere, and a political culture developed in Ireland under the leadership of Daniel O’Connell that prized nationalist sentiment. ‘The moment the Irish vote appeared as a distinct power’, argued Butt in 1870, ‘detached from, and uninterested in, the questions of English policy, that moment the system of intrigue

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<sup>80</sup> Rev. J. Galbraith to Edward Murphy, 13 August 1875; J. P. McAlister to T. Moloney, 5 April 1876, Home Rule League Letter Book, PRONI, D213/130-4 and D213/192-3.

<sup>81</sup> As most recently articulated in E. F. Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism, 1876-1906* (Cambridge, 2007).

<sup>82</sup> A. M. Sullivan, *New Ireland: Political Sketches and Personal Reminiscences of Thirty Years of Irish Public Life*. (16<sup>th</sup> edn., London, 1882; first published 1877), p. 349.

and bargains, and compacts, became the inevitable result – and from that moment the House of Commons was incapable of fulfilling, even for England, the true functions of the representation of the people'.<sup>83</sup> The Union state, in other words, was threatened by the politics of reform, as it bred incompatible political cultures; democracy threatened to outgrow the structures of the United Kingdom. In this context, it made sense for England to have a parliament that represented only English affairs, as much as it did for Ireland to have its own assembly. There was no 'representative system' of government (Butt meant this on national rather than class terms) within the United Kingdom as the centralised structures indirectly encouraged competition and disunity, rather than union and harmony, between the component parts. The logic of Butt's point was that only through substantially redrawing the constitutional map of the United Kingdom could long-term stability be achieved; the additional benefit that he stressed was the potential to combine aristocratic responsibility with democratic sentiment. If democracy is the future, reasoned Butt, its populism can be checked in the upper houses of the United Kingdom's regions, which, in Ireland, will be occupied by the propertied classes and Irish hereditary peers. Federalism thus presented the upper orders in Ireland with the means to contribute to national politics, a sphere that was largely cut off in 1800 with the abolition of the parliament in Dublin. Butt made a special reference to the perceived threat to Protestant liberty by an Irish parliament inevitably dominated by Catholics: the political, religious and property rights of Irish Protestants cannot be guaranteed within the current system, he argued, but can be protected within a federal constitution that claimed their allegiance. For Butt, though, federalism was more than protection of the order from which he came: it represented the means to re-assume the leadership of the nation. '[I]t is the duty of the upper class

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<sup>83</sup> Butt, *Irish Federalism*, p. 48.

of Irish society to place themselves in the front of a national government for self-government. It is the opportunity of a reconciliation with the people which they may never have again'.<sup>84</sup>

Butt's yearning to inspire the Irish aristocratic and landed classes to assume a leadership role within the national movement remained one of the most enduring ambitions of the Home Government Association and its successor body, the Home Rule League; in a revised form, it was also a component of Parnell's political thought during the Land War.<sup>85</sup> William Shaw, the Protestant Liberal MP for Bandon and a notable convert to the Home Rule cause, expressed his belief to Butt in April 1870 that while 'the great body of the people' will support a Home Rule organisation through nationalist sentiment, 'it will be essential to get the better class well with it'.<sup>86</sup> This desire to win over the 'better class' was a cornerstone of the emerging language of conservative Home Rule. At the meeting of the Home Government Association in September 1870, Shaw affirmed the movement's non-revolutionary objectives.<sup>87</sup> Those most able advocates of federalism with the Home Government Association, Thaddeus O'Malley and John George MacCarthy, both highlighted the need to blend new ideas with old traditions. They supported the concept of a bicameral Irish parliament, with a strong heredity element in the upper house: for O'Malley, this would ensure that as much as possible from the past constitution was kept 'in the old grooves'; for MacCarthy, federalism would 'conserve ancient rights and local institutions', while constructing 'a bulwark against revolution'.<sup>88</sup> This, of course, referred to the potential of federalism to dampen the spirit of Fenianism through the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 54-6, quote on 56.

<sup>85</sup> P. Bew, *Enigma: A New life of Charles Stewart Parnell* (Dublin, 2011), pp. 68-9.

<sup>86</sup> W. Shaw to Butt, 23 April 1870, Isaac Butt Papers, National Library of Ireland (NLI), MS 8692(6).

<sup>87</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 2 September 1870.

<sup>88</sup> O'Malley, *Home Rule on the Basis of Federalism*, p. 48; MacCarthy, *Plea for the Home Government of Ireland*, pp. 160-1.

patriotic appeal of a local parliament; Butt, however, also saw the new constitution as a buffer to resist the spread of English socialism into Ireland, protecting the Irish from the excesses of increasing democratic sentiment in the rest of the United Kingdom. Federalism, as articulated by Butt and his supporters in Ireland was a radical counter-revolutionary idea, a framework to create representative government across the two islands, while enhancing aristocratic political power and offering protection against democratic despotism. It marked the logical conclusion to Butt's (and Irish Toryism's) inner blend of idealism and pessimism that imbued his earlier politico-cultural writings and novels.<sup>89</sup>

### III

The problem with the articulation of Home Rule as a political idea that combined self-government and unionism with a decidedly anti-democratic tinge was that it appeared too cautious from an Irish nationalist perspective, and too radical from a conservative vantage point. Butt also failed to connect his constitutional plan to wider ambitions for imperial federation, which was, given the contemporary British interest in such thinking, a point missed.<sup>90</sup> Success for the Home Rule movement under Butt's command during the 1870s cannot be read as popular advocacy of federalism; for all of Butt's careful formulations in connecting Irish self-government with the wider scheme of a federal United Kingdom, many enemies – and even more damagingly, friends – of Home Rule saw it merely as the return of old fashioned Repeal, the very thing it was not. This misunderstanding and distortion of federalism was amplified by an ideological incoherence within the Home Rule movement. One of its more senior figures was the former Repealer, William O'Neill Daunt: in private correspondence

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<sup>89</sup> For these, see Spence, 'The Philosophy of Irish Toryism'.

<sup>90</sup> For emerging ideas of imperial federation, see D. Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900* (Princeton, NJ, 2007).

for the League, he stressed the need for members to focus solely on Home Rule. ‘If dissension is to be avoided we must as an Association look to Home Rule and it alone as our business’, he informed an English supporter. ‘On nearly every other subject the members utterly disagree’.<sup>91</sup> Even on the definition of Home Rule, however, there was little consensus. The Home Government Association attracted a number of Repealers and Young Irelanders, including the 1848 rebel, John Martin, who won a by-election in Meath in 1871 under the banner of Home Rule. At his victory banquet, Martin declared that he was elected on the principles of ‘simple Repeal, and restoration of the national constitution suppressed by the act of Union’. The major difference implied by Martin between his Young Ireland roots and the new politics of Home Rule was merely the latter’s absolute commitment to non-violent means.<sup>92</sup>

Home Rule as nationalist Repeal and not unionist federalism as articulated by Butt occurs again and again within political circles and printed works connected to the Home Government Association. This trend is most starkly highlighted in the short-lived weekly newspaper founded in September 1870, the *Federalist*. The *Federalist* was not the official organ of the Home Government Association, but an independent supporter of the work of the federal movement. This is, however, not to say that there was a consensus on the political idea of the newspaper’s title. Addressing the question ‘what is federalism?’ in February 1871, the *Federalist* replied that it was ‘the Repeal of the Legislative Union between Great Britain and Ireland’. A follow up question, ‘what is meant by Federal Repeal?’ was answered by ‘Simple Repeal accompanied by such securities against Ministerial craft and English usurpation, base and treacherous representatives, and political subserviency’.<sup>93</sup> Throughout the *Federalist*’s six-month existence, there was not one discussion of the form of United Kingdom-wide

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<sup>91</sup> W. O’Neill Daunt to J. Gleeson, 19 June 1873, Home Rule League Letter Book, PRONI, D213/9.

<sup>92</sup> *Freeman’s Journal*, 7 February 1871.

<sup>93</sup> *Federalist*, 18 February 1871.

federalism that Butt advocated; similarly, there was a profound lack of imperially-minded discourse that harmonised with the sentiment of the federalist ideal. The *Federalist* insisted that ‘our programme is the same as O’Connell’s – simple Repeal’, thus flattering out the nuances of Butt’s articulation of federalism.<sup>94</sup> The federalist ideal was as much about creating a vehicle for union within Ireland as it was about reshaping the constitutional design of the United Kingdom. Yet the stark difference between the rhetoric of nationalist Repealism and the imperial concerns of Irish Tories such as W. Foster Vesey-Fitzgerald, who stressed above all else that ‘there is no safety for the empire except in well-arranged federation’ were obvious to contemporary observers.<sup>95</sup> The *Times* took an accurate snapshot of the confused nature political culture in Ireland in 1871: ‘Home Rule is in danger of being pulled in pieces between the advocates of Federalism, Separation, and simple Repeal’.<sup>96</sup>

This confusion was the price that Home Rule paid for rapid electoral success as a protest movement. On founding the Home Rule movement, Butt’s vision was of an elite pressure group, inspired by, and drawing energy from, national ideals, but ostensibly led by ‘respectable’ (a euphemism for non-nationalist) figures from Irish society. Butt warned Irish readers of his federalist pamphlet that patience was required, as the ‘time may be far distant’ when the ambition of constitutional reform was met. Indeed, in the first edition of *Irish Federalism*, he implied that he did not want to take Home Rule into the formal political arena.<sup>97</sup> The success of a number of individuals whom adopted the Irish self-government banner to win by-elections from 1871 to 1873, coinciding with the collapse of Gladstone’s constructive Irish policy, dramatically accelerated Home Rule, propelling it from an abstract debating point in

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<sup>94</sup> *Federalist*, 25 February 1871.

<sup>95</sup> *Freeman’s Journal*, 24 January 1873.

<sup>96</sup> *Times*, 19 October 1871.

<sup>97</sup> Butt, *Irish Federalism*, pp. iv, vi, 65.

learned journals and drawing rooms into a parliamentary programme backed by a political grouping in a remarkably short period. This process occurred much quicker than Butt would have hoped for, given (as he was aware) the lack of support for his scheme in Britain. Although he won a parliamentary seat at a by-election in 1871, Butt was careful not to identify himself as a formal candidate sponsored by the Home Government Association; instead, he stood as an independent Home Ruler. During 1871, when other candidates preaching Irish self-government were picking up parliamentary seats, Butt insisted to A. M. Sullivan that ‘the Home Rule organisation as a body ought not to interfere at present in any election’.<sup>98</sup> His instinct was to demarcate the work of the Home Rule organisation and parliamentarians, to separate the national movement from the political movement. This cautious approach, however, quickly broke down as the idea of Irish self-government, if not federalism, became popularised during the 1870s. After a handful of by-election victories in 1871 and 1872, the impatient John Martin pressured Butt to press for a Home Rule debate in parliament, a course of action the leader wished to avoid as he was aware it would result in a demoralising defeat.<sup>99</sup> Thus when he found himself leading a parliamentary grouping of (nominally) fifty-nine Home Rule MPs after the 1874 general election, Butt was caught between Irish expectation for change and British hostility to it, which culminated in the heavy defeat of his self-government motion in the House of Commons. The failure to secure substantial concessions for Ireland, in terms of land and education reform, never mind federalism or any form of administrative devolution, left Butt’s long-term conception of political change dangerously open to criticism from the more impatient and straight-forwardly nationalist activists in Ireland, buoyed by Home Rule electoral success. This was the context for the rise of

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<sup>98</sup> Butt to Sullivan, n.d. [1871], Isaac Butt Papers, NLI, MS 831.

<sup>99</sup> J. Martin to Butt, 12 April 1872, Isaac Butt Papers, NLI MS 8694 (4).



obstructionism as a parliamentary weapon within an increasingly important wing of the Irish party, which represented the gravest threat not only to Butt's leadership of the movement, but also his desire to articulate a constructive and 'loyal' political vocabulary in relation to Home Rule. The filibustering actions of Charles Stewart Parnell and Joseph Biggar from 1875 captured the Irish imagination in a way that Butt could not, and split the party;<sup>100</sup> they also gravely undermined Butt's proselytising mission by raising the hackles of the British political classes. The damage was such by 1878, in the context of Parnell's ascent, the Irish Protestant historian, Richard Bagwell, wrote with authority that 'Mr Butt's once notorious pamphlet is ancient history now'.<sup>101</sup> Parnell abandoned the last vestiges of federalism in favour of a 'simpler' Home Rule scheme on assuming the leadership of the Irish party in 1880; it is not a coincidence that this was a demand made by John Devoy, a leading figure in the American-Irish Fenian nexus, as part of the New Departure programme of combining constitutional and revolutionary strategies into a single national movement.<sup>102</sup>

What of that 'notorious pamphlet' of 1870? Butt's proposal for federalism was read widely throughout Britain, gaining commentaries from many leading contemporary journals. On the whole, though, opinion was heavily stacked against Butt and the argument for profound constitutional change. Reviews typically stressed two factors: the alliance between Irish Tories and nationalists was believed to be temporary, meaning that the demand for Home Rule would end when Orange and Green would (inevitably) revert back to form; and the 'ancient constitution' of the United Kingdom made schemes of federalism impossible to implement. Another

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<sup>100</sup> *Nation*, 8 and 15 July 1876.

<sup>101</sup> R. Bagwell, 'Home Rulers at Home', *University Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 2 (February 1878), p. 212.

<sup>102</sup> M. Keyes, 'Parnellism: the role of funding in the journey from the semi-revolutionary to the purely constitutional', in C. Nic Dháibhéid and C. W. Reid, eds., *From Parnell to Paisley: Constitutional and Revolutionary Politics in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), p. 16.

important theme was the perception of an incompatibility between Irish civil society and the responsibility of government, with the inherent danger of a clergy-driven oligarchy masquerading as democratic will in Ireland. In 1837, John Stuart Mill privately wrote that one answer to Ireland's problems lay in 'a good stout Despotism';<sup>103</sup> many observers during the early 1870s shared this sentiment. The anonymous reviewer for the liberal-inclined *Edinburgh Review* went further than most:

If a home-parliament [in Ireland] were conceded tomorrow, there would be an immediate agitation set on foot by these wretched prints for complete independence, with visions of land-confiscation, pillage, and revenge, held out to the ignorant expectations of an impulsive peasantry.

'The two chief governing powers of Ireland are the Secret Societies and the Confessional', proclaimed the *Review*, asserting that a lack of an 'independent national life' doomed any notion of responsible self-government in Ireland.<sup>104</sup> The Irish problem, from the vantage point of British observers such as the *Edinburgh Review*, lay in the barbarous and utterly alien political culture, which evolved in Ireland throughout the nineteenth century. Trollope hysterically dismissed the political lineage between O'Connell and Butt as 'the natural declension of a political disease' that inflicted nineteenth-century Ireland:<sup>105</sup> such an ailment had no single remedy, but would be made worse by self-government. Again and again, British commentators spoke of the need for a more 'complete', 'equal' and 'real' Union between Great Britain and Ireland rather than radical reform or separation to erase this

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<sup>103</sup> Mill to J. P. Nichol, 21 December 1837, Mill, *Collected Works*, xii, p. 365.

<sup>104</sup> 'A review of Isaac Butt's *Irish Federalism*', *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 133 (April 1871), pp. 523, 525.

<sup>105</sup> Trollope, *Autobiography*, p. 73.

difference, but without any concrete ideas on how to achieve this aim.<sup>106</sup> The *unionist* underpinnings of Butt's proposal, and the potential benefits of institutionalising Irish sentiment within a redesigned Union, were largely ignored by British observers, who felt that federalism was an inappropriate framework for the United Kingdom.

The two pillars of federalist thought in Britain in 1870 were John Stuart Mill and Edward A. Freeman. The politico-philosophical weight of these two thinkers was considerable; crucially, both staunchly opposed the application of federalist principles to the United Kingdom, which posed an immense intellectual challenge to Butt's conception of Home Rule, and indirectly fuelled the rise of more 'simpler' notions of Irish self-government during the leadership of Parnell. That Mill and Freeman were hardly unbending opponents of progressive thought in relation to Ireland made their opposition more substantial. Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) contained a detailed discussion of the practicability of federalism, but he stopped far short of advocating such a scheme for the United Kingdom on the behest of Ireland. While there was a marked change in his tone on Irish matters before and after the Fenian rebellion – *Representative Government* claims that 'there is next to nothing' to keep Britain and Ireland apart,<sup>107</sup> while his *England and Ireland* pamphlet of 1868 is a tour de force in righteous anger directed at British policy in Ireland – the consistent aspect was Mill's hostility to internal federalism. For all of *England and Ireland's* rage against the injustice of the 'foreign' Irish land system, Mill refused to consider any tinkering with the structures of Union. 'Separation would be disastrous',

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<sup>106</sup> In sequence: 'Irish federalism', *Spectator*, 3 September 1870, p. 1057; 'The past and future relations of Ireland to Great Britain', *Macmillan's Magazine*, vol. 24 (May 1871), p. 43; 'The Irish temper', *Examiner*, 18 November 1871, p. 1134.

<sup>107</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, xix, p. 551.

he argued; ‘an attempt at federal union would be unsatisfactory while it lasted, and would end either in reconquest or in complete separation’.<sup>108</sup>

Such an argument did not stop John George MacCarthy from drawing on Mill’s repertoire to make the point that Home Rule was not an unprecedented measure within the context of the Empire: Mill’s outline of colonial self-government was utilised by MacCarthy to counter the British argument that federalism was a step into the unknown.<sup>109</sup> MacCarthy also exploited a perceived inconsistency in Mill’s application of federalism. Mill’s theory of representative government rested on the ideal of the nation-state: ‘Where the sentiment of nationality exists in any force’, he argued in *Representative Government*, ‘there is a prima facie case for uniting all the members of the nationality under the same government, and a government to themselves apart’. Later, in the same work, Mill describes the Irish as being ‘sufficiently numerous to be capable of constituting a respectable nationality by themselves’.<sup>110</sup> MacCarthy struggled to square these assertions with Mill’s refusal to consider granting Ireland a form of self-government within the larger rubric of federalism.<sup>111</sup> The point missed by MacCarthy was that Mill had several exceptions to the rule:

Experience proves, that it is possible for one nationality to merge and be absorbed in another: and when it was originally an inferior and more backward portion of the human race, the absorption is greatly to its advantage. Nobody can suppose that it is not more beneficial to a Breton, or a Basque of French Navarre, to be brought into the current of the ideas and feelings of a highly

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<sup>108</sup> Mill, *England and Ireland*, p. 36.

<sup>109</sup> MacCarthy, *Plea for the Home Government of Ireland*, p. 46.

<sup>110</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, xix, pp. 547, 550-1.

<sup>111</sup> MacCarthy, *Plea for the Home Government of Ireland*, pp. 173-5.

civilized and cultivated people – to be a member of the French nationality... than to sulk on his own rocks... The same remark applies to the Welshman or the Scottish Highlander, as members of the British nation.<sup>112</sup>

Mill included the Irish in this, too, and his ideas of Union hinged on a negative interpretation of the Irish mindset, a diseased body politic amplified by British misrule. The English-Scottish Union worked well, according to Mill, because it enshrined Scottish cultural distinctiveness through the co-existence of two legal systems within one state.<sup>113</sup> What was needed was to address Irish grievances in a similar way: Irish ideas must be instilled as the driving force behind Irish policy, but within the parameters of the United Kingdom. Ireland was not politically or culturally mature enough for any form of self-government; ironing out the problems within the Union state was imperative. ‘The difficulty of governing Ireland lies entirely in our own minds’, Mill asserted in *England and Ireland*; ‘it is an incapability of understanding’.<sup>114</sup> While Butt saluted Mill’s progressive economic ideas in relation to Ireland,<sup>115</sup> the cause of Home Rule hit a sizable intellectual obstruction in Mill’s philosophical understanding of the Irish question, which rested on a belief in the constitutional status quo.

While Mill found his work cited – and distorted – by Home Rulers – he did not actively participate in debate with the Irish constitutional reformers. Edward A. Freeman, the Oxford historian, did, however, contribute to the discussion on Butt’s federalist scheme, albeit in an unsympathetic manner. Freeman, who later presided

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<sup>112</sup> Mill, *Collected Works*, xix, p. 549.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 444.

<sup>114</sup> Mill, *England and Ireland*, p. 42.

<sup>115</sup> Butt, *Irish Deep Sea Fisheries*, p. 10.

over the Oxford University Home Rule League, which was established in 1887,<sup>116</sup> delivered a series of devastating blows against federal Home Rule in 1873 and 1874. In an article in the *Fortnightly Review* from 1873 that reflected on developments in contemporary European federalist thought, Freeman concluded that a ‘Federal union may be looked on as the half-way house between total separation and perfect union’. He added, however, a significant caveat to this potentially creative constitutional arrangement: ‘it is the nature of a half-way house that people should meet at it whose faces are turned different ways. And it often makes all the difference in the world as to success or failure in which way a man’s face is turned’.<sup>117</sup> Freeman did not address the notion of British federalism in the article, but it was clear that he believed that Ireland and Britain were facing the wrong way. The following year, after Butt moved a failed motion in the House of Commons to create a parliamentary committee to investigate the ‘present parliamentary relations between Great Britain and Ireland’,<sup>118</sup> Freeman launched an assault on Irish ideas of federalism, dismissing Butt’s plan as ‘wild and impracticable’. What greatly animated Freeman, however, was MacCarthy’s selective use of his work on federalism to buttress the Irish case. Like his treatment of Mill, MacCarthy ignored Freeman’s negative views on the utility of federalism in a British and Irish context, focusing instead on lines written by the historian that could be interpreted to philosophically support the Home Rule case. MacCarthy was returned to Westminster as the Member of Parliament for Mallow in 1874. In a parliamentary speech advocating Home Rule in July of that year, he cited a passage from Freeman’s *History of Federal Government*: ‘Federalism is the true solvent. It gives as much union as the members need, and not more than they need’.

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<sup>116</sup> *Oxford University Home Rule League: List of Members, 1891* (Oxford, [1891]), p. 3.

<sup>117</sup> E. A. Freeman, ‘The growth of commonwealths’, *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 14, no. 82 (October 1873), p. 455.

<sup>118</sup> *Hansard*, 30 June 1874, vol. 220, cols. 700-17.

MacCarthy argued that this sanctioned the Home Rule case, more so when the present structure of centralised government – one that ‘forces a system suitable only for one homogeneous community on two communities which are clearly are not homogeneous – was considered.<sup>119</sup> Freeman rejected this reading of his work, referring MacCarthy to his theory that federalism only thrived in cases where the desired outcome was further *unity*, not a deeper sense of detachment. This was the besetting flaw in the Irish scheme when applied to the unified British state, and one that made references to the US model by Home Rulers intellectually redundant. ‘I have always held that a Federal system is the right thing when it is a step in advance’, Freeman asserted, ‘but that it is a wrong thing when it is a step backwards’.<sup>120</sup> British and Irish understandings of the applicability of federalism to the United Kingdom were, in essence, fundamentally different: Home Rulers desired to split a unitary state to create a federal structure, a scheme that Mill, Freeman and, later, A. V. Dicey, viewed as destructive. For these thinkers, federalism only had a basis in an ethos of unifying small states, not dividing a single entity. The lack of constructive constitutional ideas for addressing Irish grievances was, however, damaging to the idea of Union. MacCarthy drew on Freeman’s own writings to advance the case that federalism was the only viable bridge to harmonise Ireland’s relations with the wider Kingdom. Ireland ‘is too far off for the same perfect incorporation which unites the three parts of Great Britain’, MacCarthy quoted from Freeman’s writings: the logic of this made federalism imperative for imperial unity.<sup>121</sup> The *Spectator*, which was sympathetic to the Irish cause during the 1870s, was impressed by MacCarthy’s adroit use of Freeman’s ideas to press an idea that the historian opposed, but delivered a

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 2 July 1874, vol. 220, col. 878.

<sup>120</sup> E. A. Freeman, ‘Federalism and Home Rule’, *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 16, no. 92 (August 1874), p. 212.

<sup>121</sup> *Nation*, 12 September 1874.

grim judgement on the chances of constitutional reform. ‘The truth is, that unhappy as the relations between the two countries are, they are far too close to admit of the kind of separation implied in Federalism... History has gone beyond the point where federalism is possible’.<sup>122</sup> That Freeman ended his life as an advocate for Gladstonian Home Rule but not federalism appears to bear out the *Spectator’s* gloomy forecast for the political ideas of Isaac Butt and his circle.

#### IV

Federalism slipped off the Irish political agenda after Butt’s failure to move a Home Rule motion in the House of Commons in 1874. By that year, P. J. Smyth, an influential old Repealer and Home Rule MP, was delivering blistering attacks on federalism, condemning the idea as a national heresy, a campaign he stepped up from 1876 in the context of the frequent use of parliamentary obstruction from the Parnellite wing of the Irish party.<sup>123</sup> The defeat of federal Home Rule, and its replacement by a simpler notion of Irish self-government detached from wider British constitutional restructuring, seems, in retrospect, inevitable; but this should not distract historians from the importance of the idea during the early 1870s in the political imagination of a number of Irish thinkers who desired to balance Irish national sentiment, British unity and imperial integrity. Previous accounts of Butt’s leadership of the Home Rule movement relentlessly focus on the parliamentary narrative of the 1870s, failing to place the notion of federal Home Rule into its wider intellectual milieu. Such interpretations thus miss the nuances of Irish political culture, and the *mentalités* therein. In defining Home Rule as federalism rather than parliamentary devolution (as the scheme later became in Irish mindsets and British

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<sup>122</sup> *Spectator*, 12 September 1874. MacCarthy’s letter to the *Nation* also appeared in this issue.

<sup>123</sup> *Nation*, 6 June 1874; *Spectator*, 16 September 1876.



legislation), Butt's conception of the political nation lay within a Greater Britain, a sum greater but representative of its component parts; Home Rule as devolution undermined this cosmopolitan ideal, emphasising instead Ireland's uniqueness within the Union and its historical sense of grievance. Butt's abhorrence of this provincialism manifested itself in his firm opposition to 'simple' Repeal throughout the 1870s, a point that split the Home Rule movement before Parnell formally dropped the federalist baggage on assuming the leadership of the Irish party in 1880. The early 1870s represented something of a turning point, when ideas of federalism, and thus of cementing Ireland's place within the Union, were mainstream within Irish political culture; from 1880, this was resolutely not the case, as the rhetoric of Irish nationalism assumed a more exclusive and Ireland-centred form.

The exchanges between federal Home Rulers such as Butt, John George MacCarthy and Thaddeus O'Malley, and the opponents a federal United Kingdom, reveal much in the way of contemporary ideas of the relationship between the state and nations, and Ireland's place within the United Kingdom. The impossibility of federalising the United Kingdom was stressed by Mill and Freeman, and, later, Dicey, on the grounds that federalism was a tool to permit diverse states to achieve a sense of structured unity rather than for a unified state to divide sovereignty and potentially follow the stream of separatism. On looking back on Butt's *Irish Federalism* pamphlet in 1882, Dicey believed the scheme to be the most revolutionary ever submitted to the British parliament.<sup>124</sup> This, despite the inherent conservatism that underpinned Butt's conception of federalism; but for Dicey, federalism could only work when the component regions were driven by the need for unity, not separatism, which underpinned the essence of the Irish demand. 'If there be no desire to unite,

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<sup>124</sup> A. V. Dicey, 'Home Rule from an English point of view', *Contemporary Review*, vol. 42 (July 1882), p. 75.

there is clearly no basis for federalism'.<sup>125</sup> Still, while the idea of federalising the United Kingdom had little traction during the 1870s, it is striking how unionist political thinkers from a variety of backgrounds, such as the Round Table circle, returned to what was basically Butt's vision of Home Rule during the crises sparked by Irish nationalist demands in 1886 and 1910-14.<sup>126</sup> Even within nationalism, Butt's influence stretched beyond his death in 1879. While the Parnellite strand of John Redmond's political leanings has received attention in recent years, his Buttite inheritance remains to be explored by historians, shaping as it did his conciliatory rhetoric, imperial sensibilities and openness to a federalist solution.<sup>127</sup>

While British intellectual opinion in the age of Isaac Butt was resolutely opposed to federalising the United Kingdom, the federal ideal struggled to capture the hearts and minds of Irish nationalism for different reasons. There were considerable misunderstandings over the definition of Home Rule, with the unionism of Butt's political ideas undermined by the assumption that the new credo of the 1870s was a return to the nationalism of O'Connell. Time and time again, supposed advocates of federalism championed a 'return' to an old form of Irish government (as represented by repealing the Act of Union') rather than a new constitutional structure that would have had a profound impact on the fabric of British political life. This internal contradiction shaped the evolution of Irish nationalist discourse and actions from the mid-1870s through to the introduction of the first Home Rule bill in 1886; the reaction against the conservative Buttite conception of the Irish future, which was born from a sense of frustration with its limited progress, radicalised the Parnellite agenda. What

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<sup>125</sup> A. V. Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn., London, 1889), p. 132.

<sup>126</sup> See, for example, J. Kendle, *The Round Table Movement and Imperial Union* (Toronto, 1975).

<sup>127</sup> For the Parnellite influence on Redmond, see Paul Bew, *John Redmond* (Dundalk, 1996) and Dermot Meleady, *Redmond: the Parnellite* (Cork, 2008). Redmond's family connections with Butt – John's father was a Home Rule MP during the 1870s – have been explored in James McConnel, 'John Redmond and Irish Catholic loyalism', *English Historical Review*, vol. 125, no. 512 (2010), p. 95.

gave it coherence was the twinning of Home Rule and land reform, two policies pioneered by Butt, albeit, crucially, in separate spheres. By the early 1880s all had changed; a version of Repeal that could incorporate separatist sentiment was installed as the aspiration of the Irish nation; the Irish Tories that Butt hoped to inspire to assume the leadership of the nation had long fled the Home Rule movement, frightened of the pure milk of nationalism that fused liberalism, Catholic democracy and land agitation. As the British-Irish dilemma entered into a more critical phase after the undermining of federalist political thought, what was left was a diverse and eclectic range of writers to lament what might have been had a more conciliatory Buttite approach shaped nationalist political actions beyond the mid-1870s.<sup>128</sup>

A sense of Ireland's place within the United Kingdom and its Empire underpinned federalist political thought during the 1870s; later conceptions of Home Rule focused more on moving away from these entities. The first and original definition of Home Rule, as championed by Butt, was thus unionist in its intention, conservative in its form, but, as Dicey later declared, radical in its effect. Ireland was the awkward component in nineteenth-century ideas of how to construct a Greater Britain, with advocates of imperial federation generally unwilling to engage with the Irish question because of its domestic implications.<sup>129</sup> This failure of political vision in reshaping the Union between Britain and Ireland had profound consequences, which became brutally apparent in later generations. Federalism as a form of unionist Home Rule represented, for Butt and the Toryism he represented, the means to repair the Union while simultaneously injecting unity into Irish political and cultural life by taming the aggressive side of Catholic democracy. The ambition of federalist ideas

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<sup>128</sup> These included F. H. O'Donnell, an early supporter of the more aggressive parliamentary tactics embraced by Parnell: see his *A History of the Irish Parliamentary Party*, 2 vols. (London, 1910), i, p. 3; and the later forger of the Parnell and crime documents, Richard Pigott: see his *Personal Recollections*, p. 438.

<sup>129</sup> Bell, *Idea of a Greater Britain*, p. 135.

drastically outweighed its success; but excavating the diverse national *mentalités* in the age of Isaac Butt illuminates many contours of pre-Parnellite Ireland and Britain that later became obscured and misunderstood.