

'Friends of the Union': Liverpool, Ulster, and Home Rule, 1910–1914

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It has been estimated that on a gloomy Monday evening in September of 1912 anything up to a quarter of a million Liverpool Protestants, many of them members of the Orange Order, infused with an almost religious fervour, and under the auspices of the Conservative and Unionist Party, gathered in one of their city's great parks to protest against the proposal to grant Home Rule to Ireland.¹ This fact jars with our traditional approach to the study of Edwardian Britain, which has been quick to discern the decline of religion as a political determinant, and has seen in the Tory party's three consecutive election defeats a 'Crisis of Conservatism'.² However, that is not the whole story. The party's support was still fervent in Liverpool, and the issue of Irish Home Rule consolidated their strength in the city still further. This loyalty encouraged the Conservatives, a fact recognised by the leader of the Ulster Unionists Sir Edward Carson, who wrote: 'I do not believe that [Liverpool's Unionist clubmen] . . . will for one moment countenance the idea of the great betrayal which is being attempted by the government'.³ This study will attempt to illustrate that far from being in decline, the spectacular reaction of Merseyside's 'Orange' community to the prospect of a Dublin Parliament shows us that a popular, Protestant, and Conservative political culture still existed in at least one of

¹ Although the nomenclature can be confusing, both 'Conservative' and 'Unionist' were used interchangeably in the 1900s, and I too have adopted this practice.

² E. H. H. Green, *The crisis of Conservatism: The politics, economics and ideology of the British Conservative Party, 1880–1914* (London, 1995).

³ Carson to Earl of Derby, 28 May 1913, Liverpool Record Office (Liv. RO), 920 DER(17) 33/CARSON 1913.

Britain's largest cities in the years immediately before the First World War.

The study of crowds has shown us that if confronted with precious few manuscript resources, and a total absence of oral testimony, press reports of crowd action can provide us with useful evidence of how common people felt about important issues such as Home Rule. Moreover, our knowledge of groupings within society is further enhanced by analysing great gatherings of people. Indeed, the work of Mark Harrison has greatly influenced the thinking behind this work. He convincingly argued that the function of crowds lay in providing communities with symbolic reference points, 'autonomous or quasi-autonomous vehicles for the expression of cohesion—for the expression of different versions of order'.⁴ The behaviour of Liverpool's Protestant Orange community in 1912 is a good example of this. Their different version of order saw in the defence of the Union a bundle of ideas that included the maintenance of prosperity, national security, and the continued ascendancy of the Protestant faith.

This article will argue that the importance of violence as an articulation of communal identity in Liverpool has been overplayed. The Orange half of the city saw in Irish Home Rule a threat to their own supremacy, and their epic parade through the neutral thoroughfares of Liverpool was meant as both a protest and a means of demonstrating their continued dominance of their own urban territory, for as one historian of the Orange Order has argued 'claiming physical space entailed also claiming political and ideological space'.⁵

This is a vital caveat, as, perhaps mistakenly, the history of crowds has often concerned itself with violence. Ever since Gustave Le Bon claimed in 1896 that when a man forms part of an organised crowd 'he descends several rungs in the ladder of civilisation', historians have regularly conflated crowds with riots.⁶ Even though some authors have rightly stressed the conservatism of eighteenth and early-nineteenth century crowds, this only led to a dubious teleology

⁴ Mark Harrison, *Crowds and history: Mass phenomena in English towns, 1790–1835* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 27.

⁵ Elaine McFarland, 'Marching from the margins: Twelfth July parades in Scotland, 1820–1914', in T. G. Fraser, ed., *The Irish parading tradition: Following the drum* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 60–78.

⁶ Gustave Le Bon, *The crowd: A study of the popular mind* (London, 1896), p. 13.

which saw 'the machine wrecker and rick-burner [giving] way to the trades unionist and labour militant of the new industrial society'.⁷ This approach cannot adequately explain the extraordinary vehemence of the crowds that gathered in Liverpool in September 1912. This work will argue that we can obviously discern continuity between the 'Church and King mobs' of the eighteenth century and the more decorous protests of working class loyalists on Edwardian Merseyside. For let us not forget that there were many instances of crowd action in the hundred years before the Great War orientated towards support for the conservative establishment, be they Jingoist crowds celebrating Imperial victories, or Irishmen rioting to defend the honour of the Pope.⁸ It is more useful therefore to apply the concept that although Victorian Britain witnessed the 'civilisation of the crowd', and 'a taming of its cruder and more violent manifestations', the newly respectable working classes could still display raw emotion when roused by issues like Irish Home Rule.⁹

Those thousands who turned out to denounce Home rule fit naturally into that sequence, and similarly, they too have suffered the weighty condescension of history. But in 1912 Protestant Liverpool was deadly serious. For although a Drumcree Orangeman in 1996 could be scoffed at for presuming that 'England will rise in our defence if we are not let down the [Garvagh] road', Liverpool actually did assemble angrily in support of Protestant Ulster in 1912, with the city's Tory press earnestly declaring that 'Ulster will not have Home Rule: England will not allow it to be forced on her'.¹⁰ Moreover, they actually believed that their demonstrations of support would be the 'death blow to Home Rule'.¹¹ It has been shown that this self importance was not unusual, as Orangeism was 'an important outlet for working

⁷ George Rudé, *The crowd in history 1730-1848: A study of popular disturbance in France and England* (London, 1981), p. 268.

⁸ See, for example, H. Cunningham, 'Jingoism in 1877-78', *Victorian Studies*, XIV (June 1971), pp. 429-53; D. M. Jackson, "'Garibaldi or the Pope!": Newcastle's Irish riot of 1866', *North East History*, 34 (2001), pp. 49-83.

⁹ J. M. Golby & A. W. Purdue, *The civilisation of the crowd: Popular culture in England, 1750-1900* (London, 1984), p. 201.

¹⁰ Ruth Dudley Edwards, *The faithful tribe: An intimate portrait of the Loyal Institutions* (London, 2000), p. 506; *Liverpool Courier* (hereafter *Courier*), 9 June 1913.

¹¹ *Courier*, 30 Sept. 1912.

class political views, providing a distillation into clearer terms of their often ethereal and irrelevant historical vision'.¹² And although hindsight has shown them to have been deluded, they were entirely convinced of the efficacy of their actions. The Liverpool Orange community adhered to values which appear as retrograde when compared to the contemporaneous advent of Labour and syndicalism, in their own city and beyond, but we have been too hasty to condemn this as evidence of class *unconsciousness*. Instead we should appreciate that the anti-Home Rule demonstrations that occurred in Liverpool in 1912 provide evidence of a sophisticated political culture that engaged the working class, of women as well as men, in a way that was truly impressive, and that episodes of violence are not the only large scale expressions of ethno-sectarian identity worthy of study.¹³

The cause of Ulster had particular resonance in Liverpool, which as recently as 1909 had endured the worst sectarian disturbances in the city's history. This had led to a Liverpool Peace Conference which eventually produced the unique Liverpool Corporation Act. This placed stringent restrictions on any religious street processions, by stipulating that the town clerk must be informed at least a week before any demonstration, thereby making spontaneous sectarian gatherings illegal, and that 'no person shall use insulting or abusive language or actions directed against the religious beliefs held by any section of the community'.¹⁴ Consequently, it has been seen by many that the decline of serious Protestant-versus-Catholic disturbances after 1909 was due to damascene conversion on the part of the city council, embodied by the measures described above. However, this was not due to the enlightenment of the city's Aldermen: rather it was the trauma of savage street conflict that forced their hand. For although it must be said that Merseyside's Tory establishment did not approve of sectarian violence, they were certainly not reluctant

¹² Donald M. MacRaidl, "'The Bunkum of Ulsteria': The Orange marching tradition in late Victorian Cumbria', in Fraser, *The Irish parading tradition*, pp. 44–58.

¹³ Works which stress the importance of violence as an expression of sectarian identity include John Bohstedt, 'More than one working class: Protestant-Catholic riots in Edwardian Liverpool', in John Belchem, ed., *Popular politics, riot, and labour: Essays in Liverpool history, 1790–1940* (Liverpool, 1992); Frank Neal, *Sectarian violence: The Liverpool experience* (Manchester, 1988).

¹⁴ Liv. RO, Watch Committee for the City of Liverpool, *Report on the Police Establishment . . . 1911*, p. 465.

to harness those same impulses in support of the Conservative Party in the years after 1912. To be sure there was a municipal determination that violence must end, but without a change in attitudes derived from 'formative experiences, long lived patterns of daily life . . . [and] tribal rewards' the new measures could prevent violence, but it could not alter the culture of the city's two distinct communities: 'rather than re-educating the rioters, the town fathers simply cracked down on them, once the threat of anarchy seemed to outweigh the political gains of further flirtation with violence'.¹⁵

This persistent sectarian division has been largely ignored. The events of the great transport strike of 1911 and its aftermath have led many to perceive a watershed in the city's cultural history. The tentative syndicalism of the strike, and the cross-community bonding as Protestants attended the funerals of Catholics shot by police, have led to the myth that class-based politics had finally arrived in Liverpool.¹⁶ However, this inchoate class solidarity still left many sectarian loose ends. Although this has been acknowledged by authors like John Bohstedt, he ends his study of ethno-religious atavism after 1911. Similarly, Andy Shallice may write of the 'vitality' of sectarian tendencies, but the years between the strike and the outbreak of war in 1914 have been strangely neglected, containing as they do an important postscript: the first instance of huge scale mobilisation of the city's Orange community after the peace conference.¹⁷

The Arrival of the *Patriotic*

In the two general elections of 1910 the Conservatives had performed relatively well, but they still emerged with fewer seats than the government. Nevertheless, the Liberals were not without their own concerns, for unlike their landslide victory of 1906, they now relied upon Labour and the Nationalists for a workable majority in the

¹⁵ Bohstedt, 'More than one working class', p. 215.

¹⁶ R. Holton, *British syndicalism, 1900-1914: Myths and realities* (London, 1914), p. 100; this fable of romantic co-operation between Orange and Green became the traditional version of events, and was first discussed in Harold Hikins, 'The Liverpool General Transport Strike 1911', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire (THSLC)*, 113 (1961), p. 191.

¹⁷ A. Shallice, 'Orange and Green and militancy: Sectarianism and working class politics in Liverpool, 1900-1914', *North West Labour History*, 6 (1979/80), pp. 15-32.

Commons. In the case of the Irish party their support came at a price—Home Rule—and for the next four years this was to be one of the defining issues of British politics. The vehemence of the opposition to a Dublin Parliament that emanated from the Protestant North of Ireland led, in 1912, to the formation of the quasi-military Ulster Volunteer Force, and the signing of the Ulster Covenant by those prepared to ‘use all means necessary’ to oppose Home Rule.

Once it became apparent that Edward Carson was to come to England via the Mersey immediately after signing the Covenant in Belfast, the Liverpool Workingmen’s Conservative Association (LWMCA) decided to lay on an impressive welcoming ceremony. This Association operated under the almost dictatorial leadership of Alderman Archibald Salvidge, a local brewer, and although not an MP or a peer, he was one of the most prominent and vocal Tory figures in Edwardian Britain. Salvidge’s LWMCA would regularly stage grand public demonstrations, calculated to impress the public, and they were assisted in this by the past masters of grand street processions, the Orange Order. By 1915 Liverpool had 197 Orange Lodges, a uniquely high number in mainland Britain, and they formed a fundamental component of the city’s hegemonic Tory establishment.¹⁸ It is no surprise therefore that they were heavily involved in the preparations for Carson’s arrival.¹⁹ To avoid any potential friction however, it seems that there was at least one influential person who was minded to take precautions. Edward Villiers Stanley, seventeenth Earl of Derby, was a landed magnate in the North West, and if Salvidge was the ‘boss’ of Liverpool he still had to defer to the ‘King of Lancashire’ as Derby was known.²⁰ Derby was an old fashioned Tory patrician who took an intense interest in the activities of his party throughout Lancashire, and Salvidge acted almost like his political agent in the city.²¹ It appears

¹⁸ These figures derive from Loyal Orange Lodge Annual Reports. I am grateful to Dr Don MacRaild for making these data available. Although P. J. Waller claimed that the city’s Orangemen numbered between 15,000 and 20,000, this would mean that each lodge had at least 200 members, which is unlikely: see his *Democracy and sectarianism: A political and social history of Liverpool 1868–1939* (Liverpool, 1981).

¹⁹ On 24 Sept., the *Courier* published a photograph of Salvidge and some senior Orangemen surveying Sheil Park, the proposed site of the demonstration.

²⁰ R. S. Churchill, *Lord Derby ‘King of Lancashire’, The official life of Edward, seventeenth earl of Derby* (London, 1959).

²¹ D. J. Dutton, ‘Lancashire and the new Unionism: The Unionist Party and the growth of popular politics, 1906–1914’, *THSLC*, 130 (1981), pp. 131–48.

that Salvidge had wanted to stage the demonstration at St George's Plateau (Liverpool's equivalent of Trafalgar Square) as was customary, but this was also the scene of violent disorder in 1909 and 1911. Derby therefore insisted on an alternative venue, to which Salvidge reluctantly agreed 'to eliminate even the remotest possibility . . . of friction with those who disagree with us, especially at a time when peace has been secured, and the prospects of maintaining it are so bright'.²²

It appears increasingly obvious that 1911 was perhaps not the watershed that historians have otherwise claimed, as 1912 saw the ratcheting up of tensions that had existed in the city for a hundred years, as the prospect of being forced to abandon fellow loyalists generated a feverish political climate in Liverpool. Indeed, the Liberal intention to get Home Rule on the statute book prompted James Thompson, secretary of the LWMCA, to write a fiercely worded letter to the *Courier*. Under the heading 'LIVERPOOL STANDS BY ULSTER', he saw fit to make the staggering claim that:

In the Liverpool district there is the same loyalty, the same determination to fight in the last ditch in defence of the Union as was so remarkably shown yesterday in Ireland, and if it should be necessary for Ulster to 'hold the pass' I can honestly promise from a long and intimate knowledge of the spirit of the people of Liverpool and the surrounding constituencies that *at least 50,000 men will be ready and willing to stand by their fellow Loyalists in Ireland*. We await events, but at the right time the call, if necessary, will be made, and it will not be made in vain.²³

This bellicose epistle set the tone somewhat and there was obvious concern that the intended demonstrations would produce antagonism between the city's Protestant and Catholic communities. To allay these fears the *Courier* commented in an article addressed to the 'Friends of the Union', that 'the many thousands of Unionist workers and Orange brethren and sisters who will be found in the ranks on Monday are not of class likely to violate the spirit which animated the Peace Conference'.²⁴ The sarcastic tone of the city's Labour paper, the *Forward*, sounded somewhat more sceptical, asking Salvidge in an open letter whether 'no doubt you will offer to mobilise the LWMCA to march on Dublin, storm the Home Rule Parliament and hang Messrs Redmond, Devlin and O'Connor in

²² Salvidge to Earl of Derby, Liv. RO, 920 DER(17)33/ SALVIDGE 1912.

²³ *Courier*, 11 Apr. 1912, my emphasis. ²⁴ *Courier*, 28 Sept. 1912.

front of Trinity College, unless the local football or music hall attraction makes the proposed excursion impossible'.²⁵ Nevertheless, the Liberal *Birkenhead News* was sanguine about the chances of a pacific gathering come Monday evening. 'Now whilst the Orange drum has generally been regarded as a potent force in Liverpool Conservatism, it will take a good deal of provocative talk and action to engineer even a small riot in Liverpool', and that surely F. E. Smith, the controversial MP for Liverpool Walton, 'does not mean that Liverpool will rise in armed rebellion?'²⁶ He might have done, and Smith certainly knew how to play to an audience—note his claim in Belfast that 'if the Unionists of Liverpool are told that they have no concern with the quarrel, and that they must stand idly by while the liberties of Ulster are usurped, the rifles will go off themselves'.²⁷ But it is more valuable to examine the restraint, and to a certain extent, the decorum of the events of those two remarkable autumnal days.

After signing the solemn Covenant against Home Rule in the Ulster Hall, Carson and his Unionist colleagues boarded the steamer *Patriotic*, and left Belfast Lough to the strains of 'Rule Britannia', 'God Save the King' and 'Auld Lang Syne', sung by an emotional crowd of some 70,000. After an overnight journey, the ship was met with an equally poignant reception as it steamed into the Mersey at seven in the morning. 'LOYAL LIVERPOOL STANDS BY LOYAL ULSTER', intoned the *Courier*, 'A GREAT POPULAR WELCOME—NEARLY 100,000 PEOPLE'. It was undoubtedly an impressive scene, and the city's Tory press allowed themselves a measure of extravagance: Carson's welcome had 'stirred their hearts and sent the blood tingling through their veins'. The whole episode, they believed, deserved a place in the annals of the city's glorious history: 'There have been many impressive greetings on Liverpool's promenade in honour of valiant warriors homeward bound from fields of conquest, of great statesmen intent on empire-building missions, and of illustrious men who have written their names on the scroll of fame', but they had all been surpassed by this extraordinary expression of loyalism. 'No reception was ever so

²⁵ *Liverpool Forward*, 27 Sept. 1912.

²⁶ *Birkenhead News*, 28 Sept. 1912; Smith was described as 'the most fascinating creature of his times' in George Dangerfield, *The strange death of Liberal England* (London, 1935, 1997), p. 55.

²⁷ *Belfast Weekly News*, 25 Sept. 1912.

unique in its character, so touching in its cordiality as that which awaited the gallant Unionist leaders'—in short it had been a 'welcome worthy of British patriots'. Representatives of the LWMCA and the Orange Order had assembled at preordained locations and had marched with 'bands playing and banners flying' from all points of the compass to be at the Pier Head at the allotted hour. The Conservative workingmen of Sandhill, it was reported, had arrived with a banner which had on its front the legend: 'Ulster we are with you to a man to maintain the Union at all costs; under no circumstances accept Home Rule', while on the reverse it read simply 'One King, One Religion, One Empire'. As well as the marchers many sympathisers, 'men and women of all ages and classes', had adopted the role of street liners; fulfilling that task so efficiently that one could have 'walked on the heads of the densely packed mass of humanity from Sir Thomas Street to the Pier head. It was a magnificent display'.²⁸

Even the Liberal press was impressed. 'It was a Sunday morning of unwonted excitement for the city', admitted the weekly *Liverpool Mercury*, and over 60,000 hardy souls had missed their breakfast, and tramped through pouring rain 'mostly on foot' to be present at the Pier Head. There was a number of Orange bands *en grande tenue* waiting to entertain the sodden multitude with 'hymn tunes', and Pastor Wise (Liverpool's most infamous Protestant demagogue) 'helped the memory of the singers by repeating the first lines of the verses'. When the ship hove into view Carson and Smith could be seen on the upper deck 'indulging in hearty handshake', and this 'little piece of theatricalism' as the paper put it, 'stimulated the beholders to renewed vociferations' and frenzied waving of flags and handkerchiefs'.²⁹

When Carson and his entourage had disembarked, they were ceremoniously welcomed to the city by Alderman Salvidge, who asked them to accept a formal address and declared that 'we Unionists of the Port which is connected with Belfast in so many ways, stand by Ulster in this great struggle for political justice, Imperial unity and religious liberty'. Carson, standing bareheaded in the rain, was clearly moved, and, 'though somewhat tired by his arduous campaign', he was in 'warrior mood'. He began by paying Liverpool

²⁸ *Courier*, 30 Sept. 1912.

²⁹ *Liverpool Mercury* (hereafter *Mercury*), 6 Oct. 1912; Wise's controversial career is discussed in Waller, *Democracy and sectarianism*, p. 240.

the compliment that having just left the solemnity of a determined Ulster he had found himself at home 'in another Belfast'. He then modestly deflected Salvidge's praise by underlining the significance of those early morning crowds. 'I am nothing in this fight. It is the cause that matters, and it is the cause the men of Liverpool now, and at all times, have sustained'.³⁰ He then shook hands with Salvidge 'as a token from Ireland to England' before joining the Alderman in awaiting carriage along with Smith, the Marquess of Londonderry, and Lord Charles Beresford.³¹ Before leaving the landing stage another verse of Ulster's recently-adopted battle hymn 'Oh God our help in ages past' was lustily sung, and a procession was then formed to escort the leaders to Salvidge's headquarters on Dale Street. Before they could leave the Pier Head, however, the horses of the two main carriages were un-harnessed and the vehicles were then drawn by 'sturdy men to the gaily decorated Conservative Club'. This unusual action was in fact an old English tradition (virtually obsolete by 1912) often associated with urban elections, which signified both literal support and ceremonial welcome.³²

This was made all the more noteworthy considering that the occupants of one of the carriages were Lord 'Charlie' Beresford, tattooed admiral and third son of the Marquess of Waterford, and his pet bulldog, 'a formidable looking beast' beribboned in red white and blue. This fearsome animal, to his lordship's delight, was 'a general favourite with the admiring crowd, and received its fair share of applause; but it evinced only a rather bored interest in what was going on'.³³ To many however, this bluff seaman was the personification of John Bull; and the many popular depictions of him gave 'a sense of security: England was safe as long as Lord Charles and the Navy were on guard'.³⁴ Thus on a morning of symbolism the

³⁰ *Courier*, 30 Sept. 1912.

³¹ Described as 'reactionary' by one author and as a 'cur' by the Irish Secretary Augustine Birrell, Londonderry was a massive landowner in Ulster and Co. Durham: Edward Pearce, *Lines of most resistance: The Lords, the Tories and Ireland, 1886-1914* (London, 1999), p. 393.

³² James Vernon, *Politics and the people: A study in English political culture, c. 1815-1867* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 83-84. This was often accompanied with a rendition of 'See the Conquering Hero Comes'.

³³ *Mercury*, 6 Oct. 1912.

³⁴ Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the coming of the Great War* (London, 1992), p. 501. Beresford's customary breakfast greeting at this time was 'Good morning, one day nearer the German war'.

sight of the hero of *HMS Condor's* famous assault on Alexandria and a British bulldog being towed by working men through the packed streets of Liverpool would have had particular resonance for such a patriotic crowd.

The procession through the city owed much to the carnivalesque traditions of popular political gatherings: it being noisy, generally good natured and colourful. Following the coaches, roughly four abreast, came the 'Unionist army' as the *Courier* loved to call their constituents, 'with their bands playing and their banners, their yellow sashes and their red, white and blue rosettes . . . which . . . leant such colour to the animated scene'. After some time this human cavalcade arrived at the Conservative Club where the Unionist panjandrum was to have a well earned breakfast. Nevertheless the crowd demanded more speeches, to which Carson reluctantly agreed. 'I believe that your coming out this morning tells us that you are not to let us go' at which point there were many loud cries of 'we will come over if you like!' At this point an admirer of Carson seized his hand and exclaimed without noticing the irony, 'It's been marvellous, sir. Nothing like it has been seen at Liverpool since Crippen was brought back from America!'³⁵

F. E. Smith followed Carson and said that 'you have always recognised for the 25 years that Home Rule has been a battle cry, that the quarrel of Ulster has been the quarrel of Liverpool'. After a hearty rendition of the National Anthem the Unionist leaders were 'cheered to the echo' as they descended from the platform and into the Club, no doubt content with the awesome reception they had received.³⁶

It is doubtful whether a demonstration of this kind could have passed off as peacefully if it had taken place three years earlier, but it appears that the events surrounding Carson's arrival were entirely free from disorder. Even the *Daily Post*, always alert to any instance of Tory rowdiness, had to concede that the proceedings were marked by 'the utmost good humour and regard for order'. Although one of the hypotheses of this study is that there were obviously important continuities of outlook between the city's two pillarized communities from 1909 to 1912, nevertheless there is perhaps some evidence of a subtle change in the temper of the city's public

³⁵ A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Ulster crisis: Resistance to Home Rule, 1912-1914* (Aldershot, 1993), p. 66.

demonstrations. Note for example an almost comical interlude, reported with some amazement by the *Daily Post* on 30 September. It appears that a section of marchers on their way to the Pier Head came across two nuns who had just left mass and were preparing to cross the road. 'To allow them an immediate and unobstructed passage the procession instantly halted, and courteously remained at a standstill'. Although this was more likely to be just gentlemanly behaviour, rather than a new found respect for the Catholic faith, it was significant enough for the paper to comment on it, and to remark that the marchers' behaviour 'was evidently much appreciated by the nuns, and agreeably impressed all those who beheld it'.

Of course the new found phlegm of the Orangemen needed to be met halfway by the city's Catholic community, who, ordinarily, would have found these Tory theatrics, to say the least, provocative. And so it was that the *Daily Post* under the subheading 'LIVERPOOL HIBERNIANS STAND ALOOF', reported that the Liverpool County Board of the Ancient Order of Hibernians had met to discuss the Unionist demonstrations. And after considerable deliberation, P. J. Kelly moved the following resolution, which turned out to be of critical importance:

Resolved: that this meeting . . . hereby calls upon the members of the order [of Hibernians] in Liverpool and district and upon our countrymen in the city to avoid coming into contact in any way whatever with the demonstration of Orange bigotry which takes place in Liverpool tomorrow night. Further that this branch will take the earliest opportunity possible of answering the lying statements which have been circled by the Orange libellers in Belfast.³⁷

The antipathy emanating from the city's Catholic Irish bloc remained palpable, but it seems that they were increasingly aware that the Nationalists in Ireland now held most of the cards. It would be unwise therefore to cause trouble in Liverpool, when they could sit back, and, with a certain measure of *schadenfreude*, observe what they took to be the Orangemen's desperate posturing. In any case it has been posited that even the Nationalist Party in the city was becoming less interested with Ireland and Home Rule, and instead increasingly saw itself as a predominantly *Catholic*, rather than Irish, body concerned with the physical needs of its co-religionists in

³⁶ *Courier*, 30 Sept. 1912.

³⁷ *Liverpool Daily Post & Mercury* (hereafter *Daily Post*), 30 Sept. 1912.

Liverpool. Thus it became 'a creature of local rather than national politics'.³⁸ So the Catholic Irish community, although by no means detached from events, were not being as agitated as they once would have been.

Was all this merely for the consumption of Liverpool and Belfast? In many ways it was, but Carson's arrival on the Mersey was reported in the big national dailies with almost as much fervour as the Liverpool press. The *Daily Telegraph*, for example, noted that Salvidge had originally intended that the ceremonies should not begin until the Monday, but that 'local enthusiasm could not be restrained'.³⁹ The *Pall Mall Gazette* was also impressed by the zeal of the demonstrators, and pointed out that although 'rain had been falling heavily', huge numbers of people 'numbering not far short of a hundred thousand', had made their way to the landing stage or had lined the processional route.⁴⁰ Similarly, *The Times* thought the loyalists of Liverpool were 'the British reserves in support of Ulster'. But what struck them as most impressive was the almost exclusively proletarian composition of the crowds. 'The multitude was composed entirely of the working classes', claimed *The Times*, 'thousands of them wore the Orange regalia. The war cries they shouted were those of the democracy of Belfast'.⁴¹ The *Manchester Guardian* reported that the landing stage when the *Patriotic* drew near 'justified the crowded appearance given to it pictorially in the advertisements of steamship companies', and that as the thronged shoreline had waved 'hats and sticks and scarves' Carson 'waved his own hat in reply'.⁴² The *Daily Mail* made much of the gathering as a public spectacle, stressing the somewhat cacophonous music that accompanied the procession.⁴³

As was often the case, the *Daily Post* struck the only discordant note. The paper printed a letter firstly from a Dr Permewan, a former Liberal candidate for Walton, who issued 'A Plea for Statesmanship'. He reminded the *Post's* readership of the dangers of religious bigotry. 'How easily that spirit can be roused, and how hard it is to allay we in Liverpool have ample knowledge'. He then levelled his criticism at what he saw as the irresponsibility of the

³⁸ Bernard O'Connell, 'The Irish Nationalist Party in Liverpool, 1873-1922' (MA, University of Liverpool, 1971), p. 91.

³⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 30 Sept. 1912.

⁴⁰ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 30 Sept. 1912.

⁴¹ *The Times*, 30 Sept. 1912.

⁴² *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Sept. 1912.

⁴³ *Daily Mail*, 30 Sept. 1912.

Ulster campaign. 'Is it wise or statesmanlike', he asked, 'to perpetuate the memory, and deliberately to accentuate the bitterness, of past differences between the two section of the Irish people?' This was followed by an even more condemnatory missive from 'Non-conformist':

Sir,—the frantic efforts of the Ulster party to promote religious disorder in Liverpool is felt by practically all the respectable citizens as entirely deplorable. Although I have mixed freely with all classes during the week, I have not heard one word of approval, but many expressions of sorrow, that this disgrace should be forced on our city by outsiders, in spite of arrangements made so recently for the maintenance of religious amity.⁴⁴

In any event the concerns of the two correspondents was misplaced. The fervour of the demonstrators was just as keen as it had always been, but those cheering Carson's entrance were animated by an almost solemn determination that would not allow their support for Ulster to be degraded by violence of any kind.

This was only the beginning of a memorable two-day visit for the Ulster leaders, but already they had been feted by crowds larger in numbers than even Belfast could manage. Carson had been gratified by this red carpet treatment; or as his earliest biographer put it 'Liverpool sister of Belfast, rough, big hearted, Protestant, Unionist, gave Carson a great welcome'.⁴⁵ This was more than just hospitality however, it was not even about Liverpool's own parochial turf wars: people were being asked how much the union of the three kingdoms meant to them—a question that was rarely asked. Common opposition to anything is often the most potent method of achieving solidarity. And, as Durkheim's integrationist approach would have it, the 'conscience collective' was often a product of crowd assembly 'where the individuals, being closely united to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments; hence some ceremonies do not differ from regular religious ceremonies, either in their object, the results which they produce, or the processes employed to attain those results'.⁴⁶ Notwithstanding the Protestant overtones of Orange Bands and battle hymns, perhaps we should look beyond that orthodox religiosity to employ the term 'religious' as broadly

⁴⁴ *Daily Post*, 30 Sept. 1912.

⁴⁵ Ian Colvin, *The life of Lord Carson: Volume two* (London, 1934), p. 152.

⁴⁶ E. Durkheim, *The elementary forms of religious life*, trans. Joseph Swain (London, 1915), p. 427.

defined by Durkheim: which he took to mean anything considered *sacred*. What was more sacred to those saturated stalwarts on the Pier Head than the Act of Union?

‘Orderly brigades of working men’

Following a night’s stay in the Adelphi Hotel, the Unionist leaders proceeded once more to Salvidge’s Conservative nerve centre on Dale Street for a luncheon and more speeches. They then spent a relaxing afternoon enjoying the hospitality of the Conservative Club in preparation for the monster rally in Sheil Park that was planned for that evening: one of the biggest political meetings in the history of Britain.

‘LIVERPOOL’S MESSAGE TO ULSTER—DEATH BLOW TO HOME RULE’ roared the *Courier*, and indeed the city’s Tory daily was almost rabid with excitement: ‘An army of resolute marching men! A hundred divisions of Liverpool’s patriotic citizens! A spectacle of enthusiasm unparalleled in the political history of the Mersey port!’, it began, gaining increasing momentum through a whole column of newsprint. Moreover, so the paper claimed, ‘the majority of Liverpool’s population was either in the park or lining the processional route from the park to the Conservative Club’. Even the city’s Labour paper, *The Forward*, thought it had been ‘a great success’.⁴⁷

Those who wished to attend the meeting either took advantage of the specially organised tram services, or met at predestined points throughout the city from which they marched in close order to Sheil Park—much as they had done the previous Sunday morning to the Pier Head. Or as *The Times* put it admiringly ‘the labourers after a hard day’s work in the sunshine at the docks and along the quays hurried to the three mustering points of the demonstration’, and although they realised that it would be gone midnight when they returned home, ‘their hearts were in the business’.⁴⁸ The first contingent of demonstrators arrived at about a quarter to eight, and for the next hour ‘the orderly brigades of working men’ arrived steadily with ‘their bands their banners and Union Jacks, their regalia and their mottoes’. The martial music that accompanied their arrival apparently included

⁴⁷ *Liverpool Forward*, 12 Oct. 1912.

⁴⁸ *The Times*, 1 Oct. 1912.

'The Red, White, and Blue', 'Derry Walls', 'The Boys of the Old Brigade', and 'The Hero of Trafalgar', and these patriotic airs had a predictably stirring effect on the *Courier*, as their correspondent intoned: 'the bands blared out the ardour and the hope of victory' (although it was also noted that they often played 'ragtime melodies'). They were also pleased to note (despite the paper's ambivalent attitude to women's suffrage) that the grandest banner on parade was 'the beautiful white silk emblem' of the West Toxteth Conservative Women's Association, which declared: 'Unionism means Prosperity', and was given pride of place. Furthermore, Liverpool's hinterland's were also well represented: for apart from the 'Unionist regiments' that came from every ward of the city, there were deputations from Birkenhead, Bootle, Wirral, Wallasey, Widnes and St. Helens.⁴⁹

The combined forces of Unionism and Orangeism had obviously merged to create a stunning aspect, both in scale and colour; indeed the *Mercury* remarked that the two organisations appeared to have 'coalesced in such a way to distribute as evenly as possible the spectacular benefit of the regalia of the followers of King William'.⁵⁰ The aesthetic created by Orange men and women on parade was unrivalled as an expression of proletarian belief; their disciplined marching, their gaudy banners, and their martial music were very attractive and effective, symbolising both power and gravity. Indeed, the genius of the lodgemen was their ability 'to mix carnival with military dignity'.⁵¹ The city's Tory leaders recognised their value, and the Orange Order's representatives loomed large on the Union Jack draped platform. Liverpool's Grand Master John Holden had worked closely with Salvidge in organising the demonstration—and of course they contributed most of the music.⁵² This importance was a reflection of their role as a vital component of the city's Conservative superstructure, but they embodied ideas above and beyond politics, and even sectarianism. One historian has shown us that the Home Rule question allowed the Orangemen to portray themselves as guardians of both the constitution and the empire, because they believed that they 'held some kind of moral high ground by intertwining, almost imperceptibly, vague notions of civil

⁴⁹ *Courier*, 1 Oct. 1912.

⁵⁰ *Mercury*, 6 Oct. 1912.

⁵¹ Donald M. MacRaild, *Irish migrants in modern Britain, 1750–1922* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 119.

⁵² *Courier*, 16 Sept., 1912.

and religious liberty, anti-Catholicism, bible Christianity, loyalty to Crown and Constitution, and political Toryism'.⁵³

It was an enormous crowd. *The Daily Post* thought the numbers involved to be at least 150,000, and they would not have been surprised if the figure had exceeded 200,000—although they admitted that there were estimates of attendance as high as 250,000 and as low as 25,000! They also made much of the symbols displayed by the marchers, some more unorthodox than others: 'Flags, bannerettes, torches, swords, five pointed emblems, flags, caps, handkerchiefs, and occasionally babies were waved overhead amid cries intended to denote fealty to the Unionist leaders, and to the anti-Home Rule cause'.⁵⁴ To occupy the crowds as they waited patiently for Carson's arrival a fireworks display was laid on to vie with the music on offer; and the *Courier* mentioned that George Wise's arrival engendered lively scenes as rockets were fired in his honour amid shouts of 'God Bless Pastor Wise'.⁵⁵ This was then followed by the procession of 'a miniature representation of William of Orange on a diminutive pony attended by child courtiers', which, the *Mercury* thought, although creating a little diversion, could 'not prevent the time passing wearily till the arrival of the Ulster leaders'.⁵⁶

The VIP's—Carson, Smith, Salvidge, Beresford, Londonderry and Viscount Templeton (another Irish landowner)—arrived at Sheil Park just before nine o'clock, and their entrance precipitated more cheering and the singing of 'Rule Britannia' and the national anthem. Although Wise had been welcomed with pyrotechnics, the organisers reserved their heaviest ordnance for the appearance of Carson on the platform: the sight of whom was the cue for the unfurling of a massive Union Flag which was itself lit by the massive electric arc lamps that had been strung across the park, providing illumination on what must have been a pretty dark October evening; indeed *The Times* remarked that the multitude was so far spreading 'that their outer ranks were lost in the darkness'.⁵⁷ The welcome afforded Carson was, for a politician at any rate, unusual to say the least—and this drew the somewhat acerbic comment from the

⁵³ Donald M. MacRaild, 'Principle, party and protest': The language of Victorian Orangeism in the north of England', in Shearer West, ed., *The Victorians and race* (Aldershot, 1996), p. 140.

⁵⁴ *Daily Post*, 1 Oct. 1912.

⁵⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Oct. 1912.

⁵⁶ *Mercury*, 6 Oct. 1912.

⁵⁷ *The Times*, 1 Oct. 1912.

Mercury that 'It was a reception not unworthy of Royalty', and, 'no greater heartiness could have been expected if the rightful monarch of these realms had been the object of their tribute'.⁵⁸ This is an interesting point: for all this ceremonial feting of Carson represented more than just homage to one man (although a member of the crowd had even shouted out 'King Edward the Eighth of Ulster'), because this Irishman encapsulated a raft of ideas that defined loyalism, namely: Protestantism, Empire and the Tory party.⁵⁹ Thus the apotheosis of Sir Edward Carson on the streets of Liverpool can be seen as having the same function as a royal coronation, in other words 'a series of ritual affirmations of moral values'.⁶⁰

Salvidge as chair of the meeting formally welcomed Carson and his colleagues by declaring that 'the vast mass of Lancashire people gave the lie to the assertion that [Ulster was] . . . out upon a bluffing expedition' and that if the Nationalists of the south of Ireland wanted to take Belfast they would 'have the men of Liverpool to reckon with'. Carson then rose to speak but was interrupted by a rendition of 'Auld Lang Syne', and he waited patiently for the singing to die down before he began his peroration. His first words were 'Well done Liverpool', at which someone in the crowd shouted, 'Well done Lancashire'. It was a long speech (the *Courier's* transcript of which is littered with regular interpolations of 'cheers', and 'loud cheers') and Carson used the opportunity to launch a snarling assault upon the Liberal government who had told Ulster that 'you really should fall into line with other Irishmen in the South and West', at which Ulster had replied that they had different attitudes to religion and loyalty. But their pleas had been dismissed by the supposedly treacherous government, or as Carson put it, they had said 'damn your ideas of religion and damn your ideas of loyalty out you go'. Sir Edward took heart from the support that Liverpool had showed to his countrymen, and maintained that 'if there is a row I'd like to be in it with the Belfast men, and I'd like to have you with them. And I will (loud cheers)'. After a brief speech from Lord Londonderry, F. E. Smith (in whose constituency the demonstration

⁵⁸ *Mercury*, 5 Oct. 1912.

⁵⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Oct. 1912. Pageantry is an important element in the public life of England; see for example, D. Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London, 2000); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the nation* (London, 1996).

⁶⁰ Edward Shills & Michael Young, 'The meaning of the Coronation', *Sociological Review*, 1 (1953), p. 67.

was held) mounted the podium. He then proceeded to make one of his most extraordinary claims: for it seems that otherwise sensible men had actually considered the practicality of sending armed Liverpolitans across the Irish sea to defend Protestant Ulster. Smith calmly informed his audience that he had been speaking to three large Liverpool shipowners that day, and that they had said to him that 'if, and when, it comes to a fight between Ulster and the Irish Nationalists, we will undertake to give you three ships that will take over to help Ulster in her hour of need 10,000 young men of Liverpool'. This was greeted by wild applause, at which 'F. E.' seized the opportunity and asked 'If the cattle maimers are marching on Belfast and you can get the ships to take you there will you come to us?' At which there were loud cries of 'Yes' and 'what about Charlie Beresford for Admiral?'⁶¹ Beresford then got to his feet, which caused the crowd to spontaneously sing a few verses of 'Boys of the Bulldog Breed' before he could begin. Eventually, that particularly ancient mariner said that the nation had been told by the Liberals that the English were apathetic to Home Rule—but if that were the case 'then he had never seen so many apathetic people in his life'.⁶²

To conclude the meeting, Sir Charles Petrie then moved the following resolution, which was in many ways Liverpool's own Ulster Covenant: 'This meeting of Liverpool citizens; representing all ranks of the Unionist party solemnly pledges itself to unite with Ulster in resisting Home Rule'.⁶³ This was augmented by the resolve of nation's Orangemen, who through the Grand Master of England, William Watson Rutherford (Tory MP for West Derby), informed the congregation that 'he had a mandate from the whole of the Orange Lodges in England to say they would stand by Ulster in her time of trial'.⁶⁴ The resolution was carried enthusiastically, and immediately afterwards the more distinguished occupants of the platform, which numbered roughly fifty persons (including a deputation of Orangemen from Barrow-in-Furness), re-entered

⁶¹ *Courier*, 1 Oct. 1912. Some Nationalists in the South of Ireland had taken to punishing Unionist farmers by maiming their livestock.

⁶² *Daily Post*, 1 Oct. 1912.

⁶³ Petrie, a former Lord Mayor of Liverpool, became closely involved with Oswald Mosley in the 1930s and was a principal benefactor of the British Union of Fascists: Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley to the National Front* (London, 1998), p. 108.

⁶⁴ *Mercury*, 6 Oct. 1912.

their waiting carriages ('four smartly equipped brakes pulled by nicely matched bays') whilst the various lodges formed up behind them in processional order for the march past the saluting base at the Conservative Club.⁶⁵ The high profile involvement of the Orange Order was crucial to interpreting the events of September 1912, in that we must not see this as simply a demonstration in support of the Tory party.⁶⁶ Despite successfully utilising their support, the Conservatives could not control the Orangemen, and the lodges would have protested in some form or another over Home Rule whether it was official Unionist policy or not.⁶⁷

As the torch-lit procession wove its way through the streets of the city they were cheered by the many thousands of people who had lined the streets and filled the windows of shops and houses with their eager faces. The *Courier* thought that 'the torch light tattoo was a thrilling tableau in the great loyalist drama', a drama whose chorus was provided by the marchers who sang popular songs of the day including 'Hi Hi Mr McKay', and 'Dare to be a Daniel' (a song adopted by George Wise's bible class who then corrupted it to 'Dare to be a Wiseite').⁶⁸ Despite the length of time that the marchers were out on the street there was only one acrimonious incident of any note. It seems that a group of about a hundred Nationalists from the Scotland Road 'mostly women' had gathered at the Wellington Monument on Lime Street, and when the processions went past they became 'overcome by the excitement of the occasion, behaved rather foolishly. They answered the hurrahs of the demonstrators by calling for cheers for Home Rule and by singing "God Save Ireland"'. Having been largely ignored by their loyalist counterparts some of the younger women decided to make a metaphorical stand for Catholic Ireland, as they 'took part in a sort of challenging dance in

⁶⁵ Barrow was a hub of Orangeism in the north of England at that time: D. M. MacRaild, *Culture, conflict, and migration: The Irish in Victorian Cumbria* (Liverpool, 1998), esp. pp. 137–64.

⁶⁶ The crucial role of Orangemen at Sheil Park, and the massive numbers involved, questions somewhat Neal's claim that the crowds of up to 80,000 that Liverpool witnessed in 1876 'constitute the biggest Orange turnout in English history': Neal, *Sectarian violence*, p. 184.

⁶⁷ I am grateful to Don MacRaild for this point, from his forthcoming book on the Orange Order.

⁶⁸ Those more offensive lyrics were: 'Dare to be a Wiseite!/Dare to Stand alone/Dare to be a Protestant/And to Hell with the Pope of Rome': Bohstedt, 'More than one working class', p. 182.

the middle of the roadway waving their hats and shawls wildly at the passing crowd'. This eccentric behaviour, although becoming 'dangerous' at one point, merely obliged the local constabulary to drive these Irish women down William Brown Street before the main body of marchers could confront them, thus averting a potentially explosive incident.⁶⁹

Interestingly, women played a significant part in the proceedings on both sides. For although the sober members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians could decide to remain aloof, their womenfolk were not as easily placated, and formed the vanguard of what little Nationalist opposition there was. The Unionist women were it seems just as difficult to restrain. According to the *Birkenhead News* there were large numbers of Orangewomen travelling on the Mersey ferry that night, and, as they superciliously put it 'the behaviour of some of these women was anything but calculated to add to the dignity of womanhood'.⁷⁰ It seems that a perfectly innocent young man had also been waiting to board the ferry that night; however, this unfortunate bystander happened to be wearing a tie with a 'neat and unobtrusive shamrock design', and this had evinced the ire of the Orange ladies as he was made 'the subject of many unflattering comments by [those] fair observers'.⁷¹ This is not to say that all the women involved were as badly behaved, far from it, but it appears that they were often the most enthusiastic. *The Times* noted that the 'number of women wearing Orange regalia who accompanied their menfolk was remarkable. In Ulster itself no women joined the procession'.⁷² *The Post*, in describing the scenes at the Conservative Club when Carson's carriage arrived remarked that 'generally speaking the women demonstrated more vociferously than the men'.⁷³ By 1912 a Liverpool Women's Unionist Federation had been inaugurated which mirrored the Ulster Women's Unionist Council. Indeed, the Assistant Honorary Treasurer of the latter, a Mrs Mercier Clements, was invited over from Ulster by those Liverpool ladies to address their members in St George's Hall. The meeting was quickly sold out, and the *Courier* saw fit to mention in

⁶⁹ *Daily Post*, 1 Oct. 1912.

⁷⁰ Interestingly, Liverpool's female lodges increased from 3 in 1881 to 43 in 1915 (Loyal Orange Lodge annual reports). I am grateful to Dr Don MacRaild for making these data available.

⁷¹ *Birkenhead News*, 2 Oct. 1912.

⁷² *The Times*, 1 Oct. 1912.

⁷³ *Daily Post*, 1 Oct. 1912.

reporting the proceedings that 'My word on it! The women know how to applaud!'⁷⁴ Thus it seems that despite their voteless state, there were a remarkable number of women involved in Unionist politics or indeed the Orange Order, and although many people in this period saw Ireland as the keystone of imperial unity, it is probable that many women recognised that the Empire's first line of defence ran through the home.⁷⁵

When Carson's carriage reached the club at eleven o'clock the scene was one of high excitement. The building had been festooned with Union Jacks, and atop its parapets, surmounted by a sparkling crown, were the mottoes 'We Stand By Ulster', and 'We Will Not Have Home Rule'. The *Courier* in a burst of grandiloquence described the theatre of the occasion in a way that only they could:

One could hear the rumbling tributes of salutation from multitudes who could only participate in the welcome from a distance. Amid such inspiring surroundings the fearless commander of the Ulster forces and his courageous brother officers witnessed the march past of brigades far more numerous than the valiant hosts who vanquished Britain's foes on the field of Waterloo.

It was estimated that over forty, predominantly Orange, bands took part in the march past, including a pipe band from Edinburgh who carried a placard that read 'Midlothian For Ulster'. The procession went past the platform at a 'swinging pace', upon which next to Carson stood F. E. Smith who was described as 'the brilliant cavalier of militant Unionism' and Salvidge as 'the Field-Marshal of Liverpool's Conservative Workingmen—the political warriors of the city'. Of this holy trinity none was more impressed than the lantern-jawed Dubliner still unused to such displays of loyalism—even in Ireland. 'You have lit the torch of Empire', Carson remarked to the *Courier's* reporter, who replied 'Yes, and by Heaven it shall never be extinguished by the hands of traitors'.

When the last section of the demonstrators had reached the Conservative Club, they closed in around the balcony and demanded a few parting words from their heroes, indeed the

⁷⁴ *Courier*, 19, 20 Mar. 1912.

⁷⁵ The importance of women and motherhood in the quest for 'national efficiency', an Edwardian obsession, has been discussed in A Davin, 'Imperialism and motherhood', *History Workshop*, 5 (1978).

clamour was such that according to the *Courier* 'a battery of artillery could not have silenced [it]. It went through the street like volleys, and did not subside until the leaders emerged'. Salvidge, who presided, as always, said that they would wish Sir Edward 'God-speed', and Carson replied that he was going to send the following message to his comrades in Belfast 'Liverpool will see us through, and on no account would they have Home Rule'.⁷⁶ The singing of the National Anthem brought the demonstration to a close, eight minutes before midnight.

An ultimatum or a whine?

Although Carson's arrival on the *Patriotic* had been reported in most of the national dailies, it seems the Sheil Park demonstration generated relatively little Fleet Street comment. *The Times* was quite generous in its reportage, noting that the crowds had 'far exceeded in numbers even the largest of the Ulster demonstrations', while the *Daily Mail*, albeit in a small article, commented that the gathering had numbered some 120,000 persons, and that twenty-six branches of the LWMCA and over one hundred and eighty lodges of the Orange Order were involved in the march past.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, Salvidge had been unimpressed with its minor treatment in the London press. In his biography it was claimed that he had wanted the demonstration to stir the nation, and had written to Lord Northcliffe to complain about Liverpool's lack of column inches, to which the famous press baron had tersely replied 'I consider your complaint entirely justified. The London staff did not realise the importance of the occasion. The omission will be overtaken. The person responsible has been dealt with'.⁷⁸

The *Manchester Guardian*, however, did comment at length, but being both staunchly Liberal and representing Liverpool's traditional Lancashire rival, it had extra reason to sneer at events on Merseyside. It mocked everything: the grass of Sheil Park 'with all its bare patches' looked like a 'tired drawing room carpet'; the procession 'twisted like a serpent across the grass'; 'Rule Britannia' played on the concertina was 'not so much an ultimatum as a

⁷⁶ *Courier*, 1 Oct. 1912.

⁷⁷ *The Times*, 1 Oct. 1912; *Daily Mail*, 1 Oct. 1912.

⁷⁸ Stanley Salvidge, *Salvidge of Liverpool: Behind the political scene, 1890-1928* (London, 1934), p. 123.

whine'; they even chuckled at the depiction of Disraeli on a LWMCA banner 'with a sensational rendering of [his] frontal curl'. They had never seen so many police officers (a point that was significantly ignored by the Liverpool press): 'a great constabulary army of horse and foot who were present to keep the theological disputants of Liverpool within due bounds'. They were also quick to recognise the naked sectarianism of those gathered in the park that night, as they claimed that the old battle cry of 'Derry walls. No Surrender', was often heard from the crowd 'which has often inspired the smashing of Catholic windows and looting of shops in Liverpool'. The *Guardian* made what was perhaps the most important point about Liverpool's opposition to Home Rule:

Just as in Belfast there is a Unionist predominance in absolute variance with the overwhelming political opinion of the country as a whole, so in Liverpool the Orange party which figured so heavily in last night's proceedings stands for a local ascendancy that does not stand in accord with the general sentiments of the kingdom.⁷⁹

This was a point that the *Belfast Weekly News* failed to recognise. It found reassurance in Liverpool's response to the prospect of Home Rule—'the offer of ships and 10,000 men will never be forgotten by the Irish loyalists'—and thought that the demonstrations had 'proved beyond doubt what I have always contended—that England is sound to the core. She is awakening from her apathy, and throwing in her lot with the Loyalists of Ireland'. This was a deeply flawed argument. The *Weekly News* even quoted Gladstone's famous remark that "'what this county thinks today, England thinks tomorrow'"—and the words used to tickle Lancastrian vanity—embody a serious political fact'.⁸⁰ That was correct, but it was misleading to see Liverpool's Unionist fervour as proxy for the rest of the county, let alone the kingdom. Indeed, one author has stressed that Lancashire's swing to the Liberals after 1906 had been crucial in keeping the Tories out of government. This was, he claims, due, if not to the rise of class awareness *per se*, then certainly a result of the demise of community politics. Liverpool was different though, or as he puts it 'the fossilised politics of Merseyside still rested upon antagonism between . . . the Irish and the Orangemen,

⁷⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Oct. 1912.

⁸⁰ *Belfast Weekly News*, 3 Oct. 1912.

between Catholics and Protestants. But elsewhere those groupings had become noticeably less important'.⁸¹

This does Liverpool an injustice. Sheil Park 1912 was a manifestation of popular inclusive politics, though this kind of politics was unpalatable to many, it had certainly involved people in the political process on a scale not seen since the great radical demonstrations of the early nineteenth century.⁸² Nevertheless, this was an issue bigger than party politics: people were genuinely concerned about the disintegration of the union and what they perceived, however wrongly, to be the encroachment of the Catholic Church into British affairs. This had had echoes of the enormous meetings that had been held to protest against the re-establishment of the Catholic hierarchy in 1851, but which, despite their size and fervour had engendered relatively little violence.⁸³ This concern that there be no violence reflected the seriousness of what was at issue—this was not a sectarian border skirmish, but a fundamental matter of political principle. Although the Catholic press remained unconvinced; indeed, where the Tory dailies saw principled protest the *Catholic Times* perceived only 'a Carsonite theatrical performance', and attacked F. E. Smith's belligerent oratory: 'he would probably feel faint if circumstances made it imperative for him to take part in a serious scuffle'.⁸⁴

The most ferocious indictment of Carson's visit to Liverpool came from the *Catholic Herald*, who described the demonstrations somewhat extravagantly as 'a campaign of the most virulent religious bigotry the world has ever known', and 'hymn singing and declarations of undying love for civil and religious liberty were skilfully used to so influence the basest passions of ignorant and unthinking mobs'. So much for Tory claims that they had protested with

⁸¹ P. F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 272.

⁸² Although the enormous Chartist demonstrations that occurred throughout Britain in the 1830s were never replicated in Liverpool: a Chartist meeting held in the city in 1839 could only muster a crowd estimated at somewhere between 8–15,000, see Kevin Moore, "'This Whig and Tory Ridden Town": Popular politics in Liverpool in the Chartist era', in Belchem, *Popular politics*, p. 39.

⁸³ This is discussed in W. L. Ralls, 'The Papal Aggression of 1850: A study of Victorian anti-Catholicism', in G. Parsons, ed., *Religion in Victorian Britain: Vol. IV, Interpretations* (Manchester, 1988); P. Milward, 'The Stockport Riots of 1852: A study of Anti-Catholic and Irish sentiment', in R. Swift & S. Gilley, eds, *The Irish in the Victorian city* (Beckenham, 1985), pp. 207–25.

⁸⁴ *Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion*, 4 Oct. 1912.

dignity, in the *Herald's* opinion Carson was 'a second hand Lord George Gordon'.⁸⁵ They took serious exception to the favourable reportage that these Unionist demonstrations had received in the mainstream press, and instead highlighted what they took to be the worst excesses of sectarian bigotry. A group of little boys, 'just about old enough to be learning their prayers', contended the *Herald*, paraded in mock procession 'chanting obscene ditties about the Pope'. They also alleged that the crowd had enjoyed itself immensely when 'two inebriated gentlemen, who loudly asserted that they came from Belfast and didn't give care a lurid substantive for Pope or Popery, sang "Paddy is a —"'.⁸⁶ But it must be said that these were isolated incidents, and there were actually no reported instances of any violence.

This is unsurprising in many respects, as one historian has noted that the worst instances of sectarian violence 'occurred when the Irish question was in abeyance'.⁸⁷ And although one author has stressed that the widely held belief in the orderliness of Victorian society is a 'gross misconception' he was quick to acknowledge that even when rioting, nineteenth century Britons abstained from serious violence, and remained almost instinctively decorous, and this was still true in 1912.⁸⁸ Furthermore, although the events we have discussed were organised by the Liverpool Tory party, there is some evidence that they cut across party, and even religious lines. A correspondent for the *Birkenhead Advertiser* put this quite well, when he said:

This union of brotherly friendship of Liberal Unionist, Conservative, Constitutional, Protestant, aye, and Catholic men and women, who are pledged as one man and one woman to stand by our fellow loyalists in Ould Ireland . . . in their determined stand against separation from the mother country.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Gordon formed one of 18th century Britain's worst instances of anti-Catholic rioting: George Rude, 'The Gordon Riots: A study of rioters and their victims', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, VI (1956), pp. 93–114.

⁸⁶ *Liverpool Catholic Herald*, 4 Oct. 1912.

⁸⁷ Tom Gallagher, 'A tale of two cities: Communal strife in Glasgow and Liverpool before 1914', in Swift & Gilley, *Irish in the Victorian city*, p. 123.

⁸⁸ Donald C. Richter, *Riotous Victorians* (Athens, Ohio, 1981), p. 163. Indeed in 1866 rioters in Hyde Park were careful to 'avoid the flower beds' (p. 54).

Reading the crowd

To ask whether ten thousand armed men really would sail to Belfast, as F. E. Smith claimed, would be missing the point. Such histrionics were a typically theatrical flourish, and indeed Salvidge's son, who was also his biographer, remarked that 'being before the days of amplifiers, only a fraction of the great crowd heard a word of what was being said', the audience were carried on a wave of emotion, they were not transported by Carson's stentorian oratory, as Salvidge jr went on, 'but the lights, the fervour, the bands the hymns, the cheers served to compensate for any deficiency'.⁹⁰ It is more important therefore that we should examine what such gatherings meant for the communities they represented. For the regimentation of the marchers, and the martial unity of those platoons of English, Irish and Scots demonstrators represented a belief in the strength of the Union, and therefore of the health and strength of Britain, and the Empire. For as one author has stressed 'Ceremony says, "look this is how things should be, this is the proper, ideal pattern of social life"'.⁹¹ And even if those marchers had not thought too deeply about the larger significance of their actions, or even cared that much anyway, the symbolism of parades, music, and flags would have provided psychological satisfaction for those serried ranks of Liverpool Unionists, without which the rhetoric of the platform would have added to relatively little in terms of popular appeal. This in turn therefore would have fortified the city's Orange community which felt obvious discomfort over recent plans for the future of Ireland, for crowd activity such as this can act 'as a means of preserving communal identity or recasting it in the face of external pressure and underlying social change'.⁹²

In attempting to 'read' the crowd we should not concern ourselves with the claims and counterclaims of crowd numbers and crowd behaviour. It is far more useful to examine the larger significance of Sheil Park 1912. Thus in this sense, it can be argued

⁸⁹ *Birkenhead & Cheshire Advertiser & Wallasey Guardian*, 2 Oct. 1912.

⁹⁰ Salvidge, *Salvidge of Liverpool*, p. 123.

⁹¹ John Skorupski, *Symbol and theory: A philosophical study of theories of religion in social anthropology* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 84.

⁹² Robert J. Holton, 'The crowd in history: Some problems of theory and method', *Social History*, III (1978), p. 222.

that Liverpool's anti-Home rule demonstrations provide evidence of the health of a polity in which concepts of community and sectarian allegiance were still paramount: a political culture that many had assumed to be moribund by the end of the Edwardian period. The strength of the Unionist party in Liverpool lay in their ability to both address their supporters concerns over Ireland, and to offer them the visceral thrill of participation in parades and ceremonies into the bargain. Some would argue that religion, and even locality, as a political determinant was dying before 1914, and some have even contended that the religious aspect of Merseyside's militantly loyal support for the Conservatives has been overblown.⁹³ Therefore it would be wrong to claim that Liverpool's Protestant working class were all unthinking bigots, oblivious, and even hostile, to the march of class politics: far from it. The Liverpoolian working man enjoyed the benefits of a reciprocal dialogue with the city's Tory bosses so that the party became one of cross-class 'social integration', a point that he recognised and rewarded with his support.⁹⁴ Perhaps then we should interpret the vast crowds in Sheil Park as an expression of gratitude for the benefits of Tory civic governance—which were genuinely recognised.

However, this is an inadequate explanation for the astonishing events surrounding Carson's arrival in Liverpool. It is the contention of this work that there were more instinctual reasons behind the mobilisation of the city's Orange community: namely loyalties forged in the rough house traditions of sectarianism that had existed in Liverpool for over a century. Moreover, the importance of Salvidge's Tory machine in September 1912 lay only in their experience as skilled organisers, choreographing enormous crowds to maximise their visual, and emotional potential. Indeed, there is an obvious similarity between the aesthetic appeal of Unionist demonstrations in Liverpool in 1912, and the peculiar attraction of Fascist meetings in the 1930s; and as well as this similarity of appearance, it has also been observed that there was a 'discernible continuity of ideas in the interpretation of the national interest' between the Conservative 'die-hards' of the 1910s and the BUF of

⁹³ The Tory council's ameliorative measures for improving the lot of Liverpool's working classes, has been discussed in Sandra O'Leary, 'Democracy not Sectarianism, Liverpool 1890–1910' (PhD, University of Liverpool, 2002).

⁹⁴ John Belchem, *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool exceptionalism* (Liverpool, 2000), p. 175.

the depression.⁹⁵ Moreover, William Joyce, Lord Haw-Haw, actually thought that Carson was a fascist because of his unbending principles and demagoguery.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, Carson, Salvidge and his LWMCA lieutenants could not have personally inculcated each of those present at the Pier Head or Sheil Park with such an unmistakable affection for the cause of Ulster. Support for the anti-Home Rule campaign was an expression of an ethno-religious identity that although second nature to Liverpool's Orange community, still had to be upheld. A person was not often asked to affirm their ethnicity, but Carson's arrival in the city was just such an instance, a warning to the wavering 'Lundies' almost, that their loyalty would be counted on.⁹⁷ If sectarian warfare in the city had been rooted in the structures of community politics then so was attendance at Sheil Park, but the somewhat surprising absence of violence leaves us with another inflexion of sectarianism: that of a peaceful, if grimly determined, articulation of community.

Epilogue

Even though it was eight years till the partition of Ireland, the demonstrations in Liverpool, for all their bluster, may have persuaded many in government that when the seemingly inevitable decision had to be made about the future of Ireland, some concession would have to be made to placate Ulster. This is important, for without the determination of the Unionists of Ulster and Liverpool, Northern Ireland may never have come into being: this hard-line approach to Home Rule was hardly official Conservative policy, as many in the party questioned the wisdom of granting unequivocal support to Ulster's increasingly bellicose campaign.⁹⁸ This vacillation was not for the ubiquitous F. E.

⁹⁵ The idea that Liverpool Toryism was a precursor of British Fascism has been noted by, among others, Norman Stone, *Europe transformed* (Glasgow, 1983), p. 127; Thurlow, *British Fascism*, p. 6.

⁹⁶ I am grateful to Professor Colin Holmes for this information, which comes from his biography of Joyce which is in preparation.

⁹⁷ A 'Lundy' was, and still is, an insulting epithet given to wavering Protestants, after the military governor of 17th century Derry, Robert Lundy, who had urged surrender to the besieging Catholics. This point is discussed in Dudley Edwards, *The faithful tribe*, p. 196.

⁹⁸ Richard Murphy, 'Faction in the Conservative Party and the Home Rule Crisis, 1912-1914', *History*, 71 (1986), pp. 222-34.

Smith though; he believed that the meetings in Belfast and Liverpool had been so remarkable because of the explicit threat that they posed the government. 'They transcended ordinary political meetings', Smith wrote, 'because behind them loomed something sterner than politics'.⁹⁹ The fact that Ulster had such obvious support on the mainland provided the anti-Home Rulers with a much needed tonic, and Carson voiced the appreciation of Ulster in a letter to Salvidge, which was later published in the *Courier*. After conveying fulsome thanks to all those clubs and organisations that had made the demonstrations such a success, Carson professed that:

The demonstration was, I think, unique even in the annals of Lancashire, and it has given great encouragement and satisfaction to those whose passionate longing is not to be cast out. You yourself have so often proved a true and untiring friend to our cause, and I could not find words to thank you.¹⁰⁰

These sentiments had been echoed by the Liverpool Constitutional Association, who, in their first meeting after Carson's visit, welcomed Salvidge with a burst of 'For he's a jolly good fellow'. He reciprocated by saying that his own efforts 'would have been of no avail if he had not been supported by the most resolute and self sacrificing body of men that it was ever any man's lot to lead', and singled out the 'officers and members of the Liverpool and Bootle Province of the Orange Order' as well as their friends from Birkenhead, Widnes, and St Helens, for particular praise.¹⁰¹ It seems that Salvidge was held in equally high regard across the Irish Sea. The *Belfast Weekly News* carried a large portrait of the Alderman peering out over his bristling waxed moustache in their paper that week, and described him as 'one of the staunchest Unionists in the County Palatinate', proving that 'the loyalists of Ireland do not stand unsupported'.¹⁰²

There would be more meetings in Liverpool before 1914, but none would be as spectacular as that assembled in Sheil Park. Indeed it seems that by 1913 Salvidge had undergone an astonishing *volte face* with regard to demonstrations in support of Protestant Ulster. In September that year the Ulster Defence League asked the Alderman for the support of the LWMCA when organising a

⁹⁹ John Campbell, *F. E. Smith, First Earl of Birkenhead* (London, 1981), p. 331.

¹⁰⁰ *Courier*, 10 Oct. 1912.

¹⁰¹ *Courier*, 8 Oct. 1912.

¹⁰² *Belfast Weekly News*, 10 Oct. 1912.

demonstration in Liverpool Town Hall, at which the notorious hard-liner Lord Willoughby de Broke had consented to speak.¹⁰³ Salvidge immediately wrote to Lord Derby to inform him that he had taken it upon himself to suggest that the meeting not be held, and, astonishingly considering the events of 1912, he declared that: 'whilst we were prepared to help Ulster in every way, and if the worst came to the worst we would do our part, still we were opposed to meetings and speeches being delivered which *would only stir up sectarian differences in this city*'. Some would call this hypocrisy, even chutzpah, but Salvidge may well have been concerned that without his own leadership, matters could soon degenerate into communal strife. Or as he put it quite sensibly, but with a hint of menace:

If they were really in earnest and wished to get volunteers to go to Ulster in case of a row this ought to be done in a quiet and solid manner and not by stirring up the mob whose only view of helping Ulster would be to have riots and disturbances in Liverpool with the Nationalist community.¹⁰⁴

It is possible that Salvidge was becoming aware of the Liverpool Nationalist community's growing ire—at both the government's own hesitation over Ireland and the Unionists' persistent rabble-rousing over the question—and was therefore concerned that further high profile meetings in the city could trigger violence. The febrile atmosphere that was pervading both the province of Ulster, and the upper echelons of the Tory party, at that time, had obviously started to percolate through to Liverpool. So much so, that it prompted Salvidge to pick up his pen again to write another brief but fascinating note to Lord Derby:

I sincerely trust some peaceful settlement will be arrived at re. Ulster [*sic*], if not I am afraid the position in Liverpool and surrounding constituencies would be serious, in fact it might easily turn out to be a second Ulster.¹⁰⁵

In fact, the Liberal Chief Secretary for Ireland at that time, Liverpool-born Augustine Birrell, had been informed by King George V himself that an anonymous 'man of importance' had

¹⁰³ So notorious that an advert for his own 'British League' asked for men 'trained in bearing arms': see Gregory D. Phillips, 'Lord Willoughby de Broke: Radicalism and Conservatism', in J. A. Thompson & Arthur Mejia, eds, *Edwardian Conservatism: Five studies in adaptation* (London, 1988), p. 81.

¹⁰⁴ Salvidge to Earl of Derby, 8 Sept. 1913, Liv. RO 920 DER(17) 33/SAL 1913, my italics.

¹⁰⁵ Salvidge to Earl of Derby, 6 Dec. 1913, Liv. RO 920 DER(17) 33/SAL 1913.

reported to His Majesty 'that in addition to 100,000 poor Irish who have long made my native city of Liverpool joyful there were another 100,000 Orangemen, all well-to-do citizens, who on the passage of the Home Rule Bill would desert their homes, and flock to Belfast to fight all and sundry'.¹⁰⁶

It has often been said that were it not for the serendipitous intervention of war in August 1914, matters in Ulster may well have been forced to an unfortunate conclusion. We will never know what would have happened in Ulster, or indeed Liverpool, had not four years of conflict diverted attention from the complexities of Ireland. Nevertheless, there is enough evidence to suggest that, had the government been forced to coerce Ulster into accepting a Dublin parliament (a remote possibility to say the least), that there were men from both religious communities in Liverpool who were actually prepared to cross the Irish Sea and fight. This stood in stark contrast to the nation at large whose disinterest had forced organisations like the British League for the Support of Ulster and the Defence of the Union to concede that attempts to recruit members 'foundered upon the reluctance of many Britons to depart from long cherished [i.e. non-violent] patterns of political behaviour'.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless the citizens of the great port on the Mersey remained exceptional, and it is perhaps fitting to leave the last word to the consistently pugnacious *Liverpool Courier*: 'Does the Premier suppose that Liverpool would stand idle while her brothers were being shot down? Does he suppose that he can close our ports and search our ships?'¹⁰⁸

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¹⁰⁶ Leon O'Broin, *The Chief Secretary: Augustine Birrell in Ireland* (London, 1969), p. 65.

¹⁰⁷ William S. Rodner, 'Leagues, covenantors, moderates: British support for Ulster, 1913-1914', *Eire-Ireland*, 17 (1982), p. 82.

¹⁰⁸ *Courier*, 9 June 1913.