



3.0 Those who Set the Stage

To understand the 1916 Rising and the motivation and points of view of the participants it is necessary to study the political, social, cultural and intellectual background. Most of the personalities reviewed in this section did not take part in the Rising - many of them were absolutely opposed - but all contributed directly or indirectly.

Since the time of Parnell constitutional nationalists aimed at securing Home Rule, that is, a limited measure of self-government to be exercised through a parliament in Dublin. Following the general elections of 1910, the nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party led by John Redmond held the balance of power in the House of Commons, a position which enabled them to force Asquith's Liberal government to address the issue of Home Rule for Ireland. The House of Lords was implacably opposed, but their power of veto over legislation was drastically curbed by the Parliament Act (1911).

Faced with the prospect of Home Rule and an Irish parliament in which they would be outnumbered by Catholic nationalists, the Protestant Ulster unionists, led by Sir Edward Carson and James Craig, reacted strongly. In September 1912, over 200,000 men signed the Solemn League and Covenant pledging resistance to Home Rule. The following January, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was established, a quota of 100,000 signatories of the Covenant soon being enrolled. In effect, the unionists established a private army to oppose the enactment or implementation of Home Rule - drilling was allowed provided it was authorised by two magistrates.

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When the government attempted to take action, fifty-eight senior army officers at army headquarters at the Curragh, Co. Kildare threatened to resign rather than curb the UVF. The UVF proceeded to import arms, in some cases openly, as at Larne, Co. Antrim in April 1914. A provisional government was planned to ensure that the status of the Ulster counties remained unchanged.

In November 1913, nationalists reacted to the situation in Ulster by also establishing an armed force, the Irish Volunteers, with Eoin MacNeill as chief-of-staff. A women's auxiliary force, Cumann na mBan was also established. Fearing that the actions of the Irish Volunteers would hinder the progress of the Home Rule bill, Redmond secured a degree of control over the organisation in June 1914 by having the Irish Parliamentary Party well represented on its provisional committee. Later that month the Irish Volunteers acquired relatively small consignments of German rifles and ammunition in landings at Howth, Co. Dublin, Kilcoole, Co Wicklow and Berehaven, Co. Cork.

When the Home Rule bill was eventually enacted (the Government of Ireland Act, 1914), supplementary legislation provided for the exclusion of an unspecified number of Ulster counties for an unspecified period - in effect providing for the partitioning of the country. By now, however, the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland was involved in the world war, and the legislation was suspended for the duration. Redmond supported the war and offered the Irish Volunteers as a national defence force, an offer rejected by the government. Undeterred, he encouraged the Volunteers to join the British army. The organisation then split: the vast majority, totalling 170,000 and thereafter known as the National Volunteers, sided with Redmond; the remaining 10,000 continued as the Irish Volunteers under the leadership of Eoin MacNeill. It was mainly members of the Irish Volunteers who were involved in the 1916 Rising.