



3.0 Those who Set the Stage

3.1 Those concerned with Home Rule (for and against)

3.1.1 Prime Minister Asquith and the British government

Asquith and his government indirectly contributed to the 1916 Rising by failing to confront the Ulster unionists. As a result they delivered a form of Home Rule that provided for the exclusion of part of Ulster, an unsatisfactory settlement for most nationalists. Herbert Henry Asquith (1852-1928) was born in Yorkshire of middle-class Congregationalist parents, both associated with the woollen trade. Educated at the City of London School, he later claimed the experience made him 'to all intents and purposes a Londoner'. He won a classical scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, where he became president of the Oxford Union. Having built up a moderately successful practice as a barrister, in 1886 he was elected as the Liberal MP for East Fife.

Asquith served as Home Secretary in the Liberal governments of the period 1892-5. In 1893 he shared Gladstone's frustration at having the second Home Rule bill passed by the House of Commons only to have it vetoed by the House of Lords. He next held office as Chancellor of the Exchequer in Campbell-Bannerman's government (1905-8), in which capacity he introduced the first provisions for old age pensions. Succeeding Campbell-Bannerman as Prime Minister, he held the office for the period April 1908 to December 1916.

Intent on maintaining Ireland within the Union and relying on Redmond's Irish Parliamentary Party for a majority over the Conservatives and the

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Ulster Unionists, Asquith pledged to deliver Home Rule. First, he addressed the obstacle of the lords' veto, his Parliament Act (1911) abolishing the right of the House of Lords to permanently obstruct legislation. With regard to Home Rule, however, he appears to have underestimated the opposition of the Ulster Unionists who were strongly supported by the Conservatives. Moreover, he failed to take decisive action to curb the resistance; for instance, he took no action against the mutinous army officers, and refused to have those responsible for the Larne gun-running charged as recommended by the Viceroy in Ireland, Lord Wimborne. While he eventually succeeded in delivering Home Rule (Government of Ireland Act, 1914), it was an unsatisfactory settlement from the perspective of nationalists, as it would probably involve the partition of the country and the exclusion of an unspecified number of Ulster counties.

Home Rule was suspended for the duration of the world war which the United Kingdom had entered on 4 August 1914, Asquith responding to great public pressure but warning that there was likely to be 'a protracted struggle'. The majority of constitutional Irish nationalists supported the war, with Redmond pledging Irish support; in September Asquith joined Redmond at a recruiting meeting in the Mansion House in Dublin.

It is claimed that on hearing the news of the 1916 Rising, the ever-imperturbable Asquith merely said 'Well, that's something', and went off to bed. He took decisive action, however, immediately arranging for martial law, the despatch of troops, and the appointment of General Maxwell. He made the cardinal error, however, of allowing Maxwell, who was not familiar with the political situation in Ireland, to execute as many as fifteen of those thought to be the leaders. He himself did not visit Dublin until 12 May, almost three weeks after the outbreak. He stopped any further executions, but by then the public at large had become alienated beyond recall. His policy of maintaining Ireland within the Union had received a major set-back: forces had been set in train which were to prove unstoppable.

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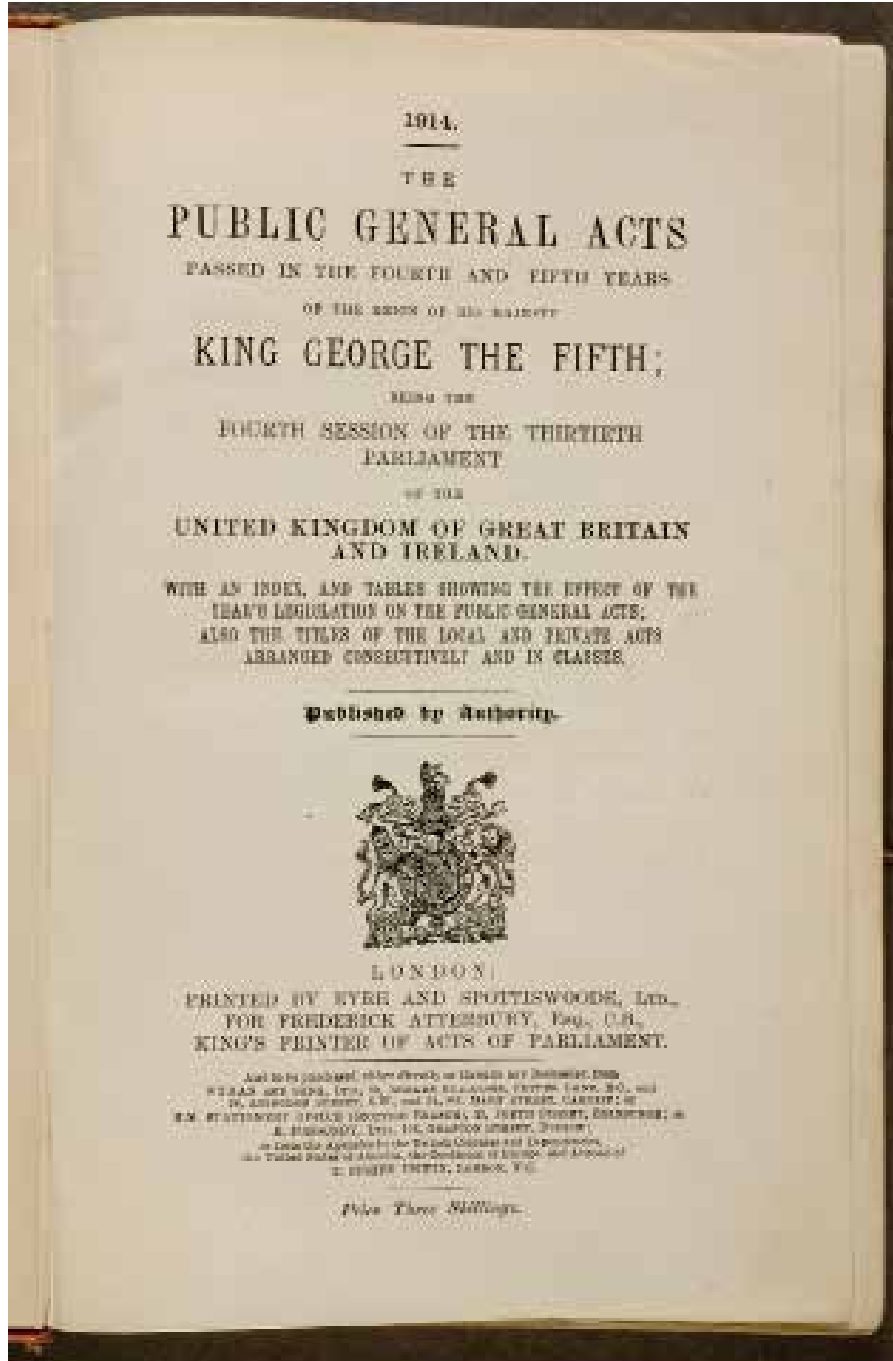
Asquith arriving at Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) on 12 May to assess the situation following the Rising at first hand. He is flanked by a staff officer and his secretary Mr Bonham Carter, who was also his son-in-law. (Illustrated London News, 20 May 1916).

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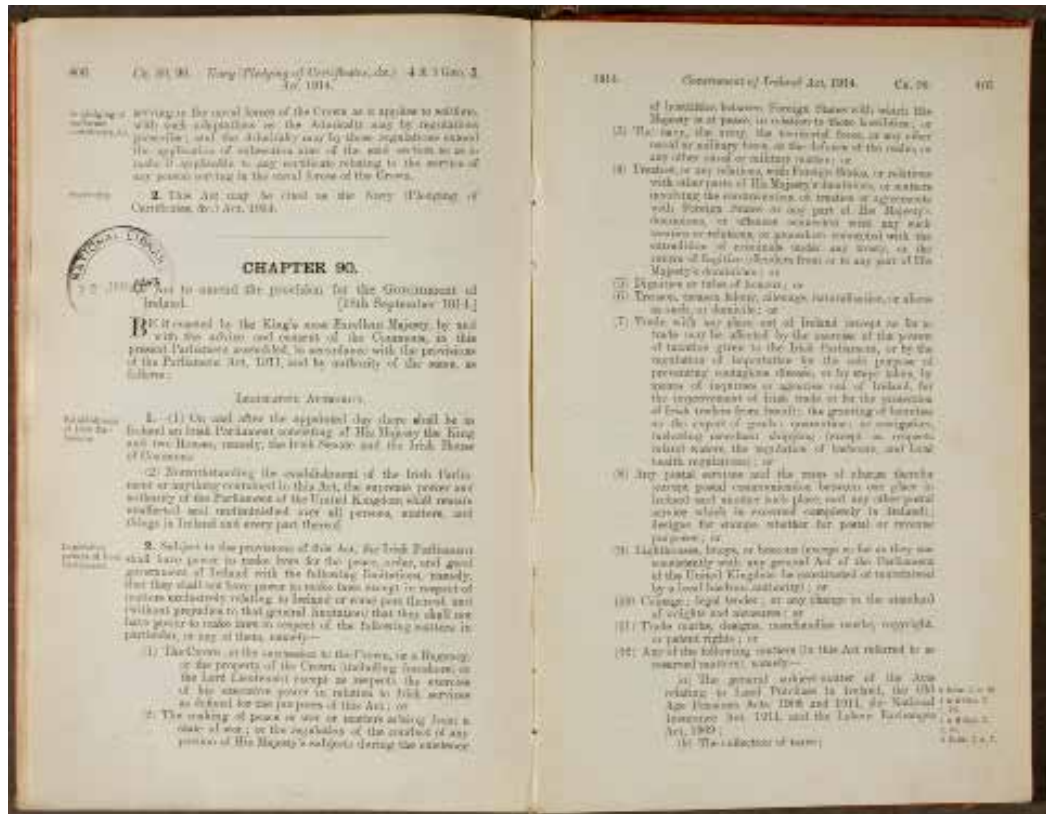
Asquith and Redmond shared the platform at an exultant meeting of Home Rule nationalists in the Theatre Royal, Dublin on 19 July 1912. Asquith stated 'I have come here to Dublin to assure the people of Ireland of the resolute determination of the British government, the British House of Commons and the British people to bring your great cause to a speedy and triumphant issue'. (Ms 36, 124).

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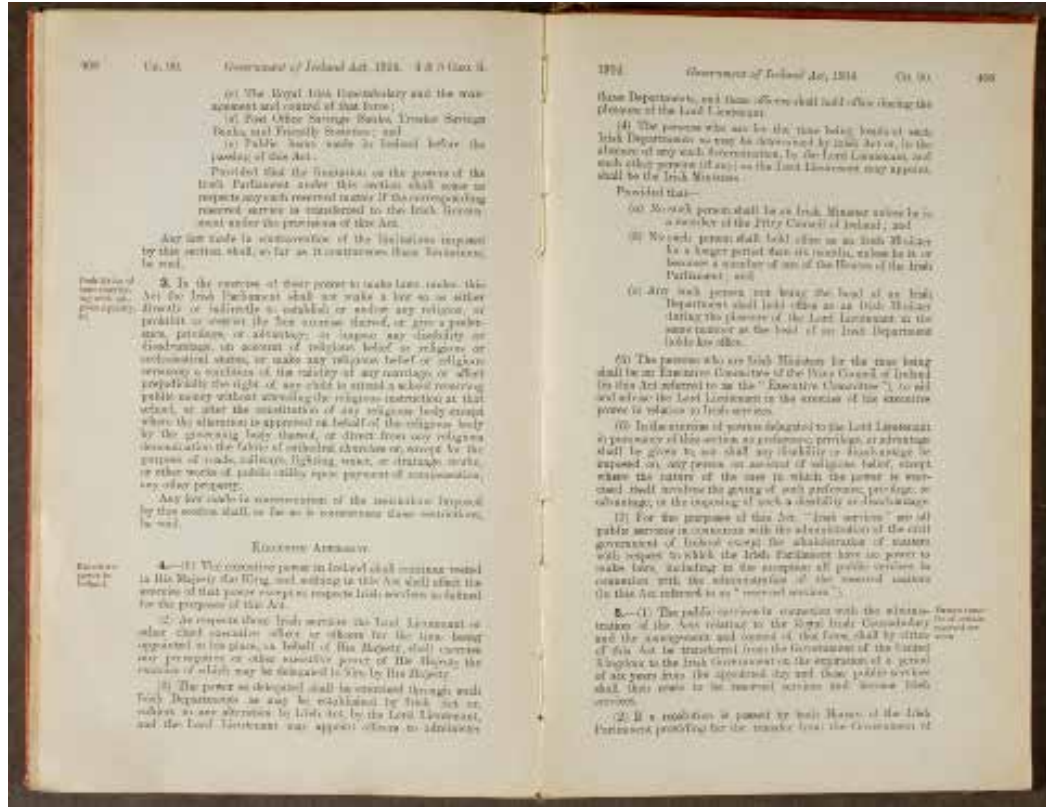
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Throughout the war the British government's main interest in Ireland was in securing the recruitment of as many Irishmen as possible. Conscription was under consideration when the 1916 Rising took place, having already been imposed in Britain. (Proclamations).