



3.0 Those who Set the Stage

3.1 Those concerned with Home Rule (for and against)

3.1.4 Carson and the Ulster unionists

Carson and the Ulster unionists contributed to the Rising by returning the threat of violence to Irish public life and showing that such methods were productive. If it were not for developments in Ulster, the Irish Volunteers would probably never have been established: the republican separatists would not have had such an effective para-military force to power the 1916 Rising. Edward Henry Carson (1854-1935) was a Dubliner, born into a professional family at 4 Harcourt Street. Educated at Portarlinton School, Trinity College, Dublin and King's Inns, he practised at the Irish bar. Much of his early work involved representing tenant farmers claiming reductions under Gladstone's 1881 Land Act; his talents were later employed on the side of landlords when, as crown counsel, he prosecuted cases arising from the Plan of Campaign. In 1892 he was appointed solicitor-general for Ireland. He next practised at the bar in England where he was successful in many high-profile cases, such as in his masterly defence of the Marquis of Queensberry in the libel suit brought by Oscar Wilde - his contemporary at Trinity College. In 1900 he became solicitor-general for England, a ministerial office with a knighthood attached.

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In the meantime, Carson had entered politics, becoming a Unionist MP for Trinity College in 1892. He was dedicated to furthering what he saw as the best interests of Ireland, warning British ministers against 'their everlasting attempt to make peace in Ireland by giving sops to one party at the expense of the other'. In February 1910 he became leader of the Irish Unionist MPs at Westminster, then about twenty in number. Apart from a few instances in the south such as Trinity College and South County Dublin, most Unionist constituencies were in Ulster.

Ulster had a substantial unionist element, descendants of English and Scottish settlers, who had arrived mainly in the seventeenth century. Their numbers, approximately 900,000 in 1911 - one fifth of the total Irish population - had enabled them to maintain their ethnic identity, their religion (mainly Presbyterian or Anglican), their cultural traditions, and their loyalty to the British crown - a loyalty which was not, however, unconditional: in the late eighteenth century large numbers took part in the rebellion of the United Irishmen in pursuit of an Irish republic. Mostly middle or working class, they had a flourishing industrial economy, the linen and ship-building industries being particularly strong. Apart from being unionist in sympathy, the Ulster Protestants did not want to be governed by a Home Rule parliament and administration dominated by Catholics, the slogan 'Home Rule is Rome Rule' succinctly expressing their fears. Carson's strategy was to exploit Ulster unionist opposition as a means of preventing Home Rule and maintaining the whole of Ireland within the Union. He believed that if Ulster could not be coerced into accepting Home Rule, the policy would be abandoned. Accordingly, he used the unionist opposition skilfully orchestrated by James Craig to his advantage: he supported the Solemn League and Covenant, he sanctioned the establishment of the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1912 and its arming in 1914, and he was prepared to head an Ulster provisional government designed to take control on the enactment of Home Rule. He used the underlying threat of violence and civil war to force a settlement acceptable to 'Ulster', never being effectively challenged by Asquith's government.

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When it became clear that Home Rule was inevitable, he concentrated on having those counties with substantial unionist populations excluded from its jurisdiction, of necessity abandoning the considerable numbers of unionists in the counties to be included. On the outbreak of war and the temporary shelving of Home Rule, Carson enthusiastically supported the war effort, pledging the Ulster Volunteer Force for service overseas. Following the 1916 Rising, he offered the services of the UVF 'for the maintenance of the King's authority.' In the House of Commons, he pleaded for clemency for the leaders, concluding one of his statements: 'Whatever is done, let it be done not in a moment of temporary excitement, but with due deliberation in regard both to the past and to the future.'

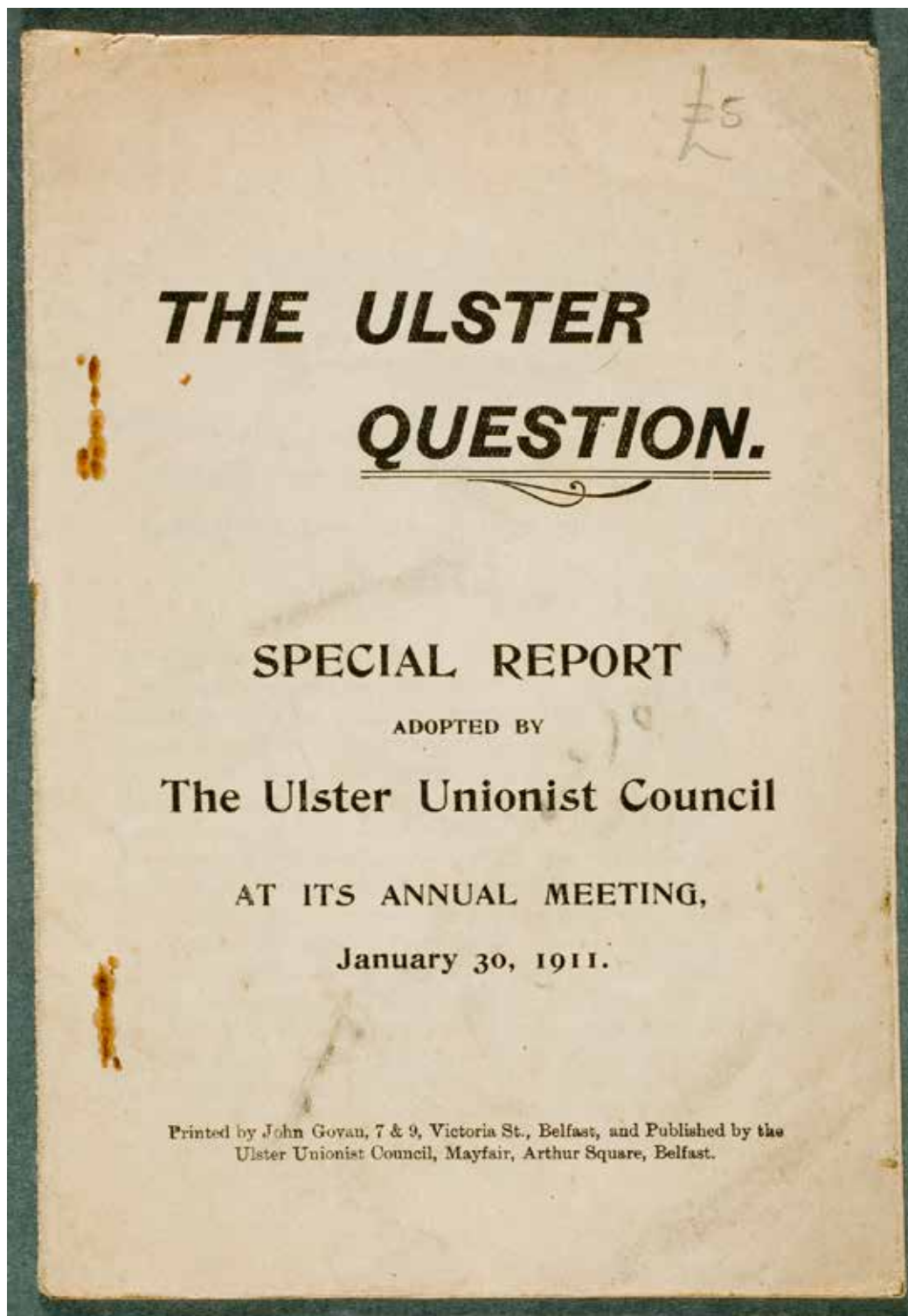
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THE RT. HON. SIR EDWARD CARSON, K.C., M.P.
(Leader of the Irish Unionist Parliamentary Party).

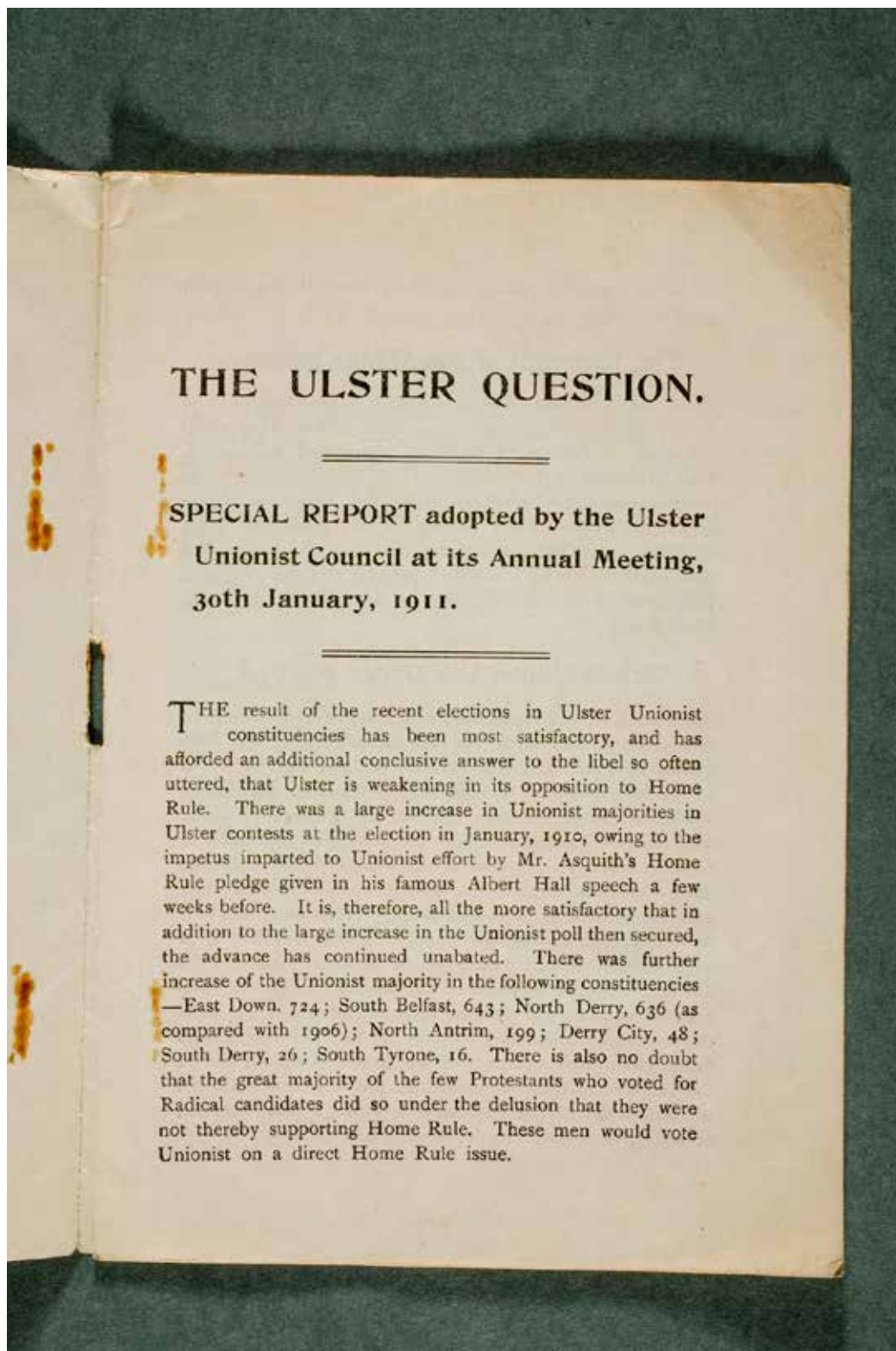
Sir Edward Carson MP, leader of the Irish Unionist Parliamentary Party.
(Ulster's Covenant. The Great Resolve, 1912).

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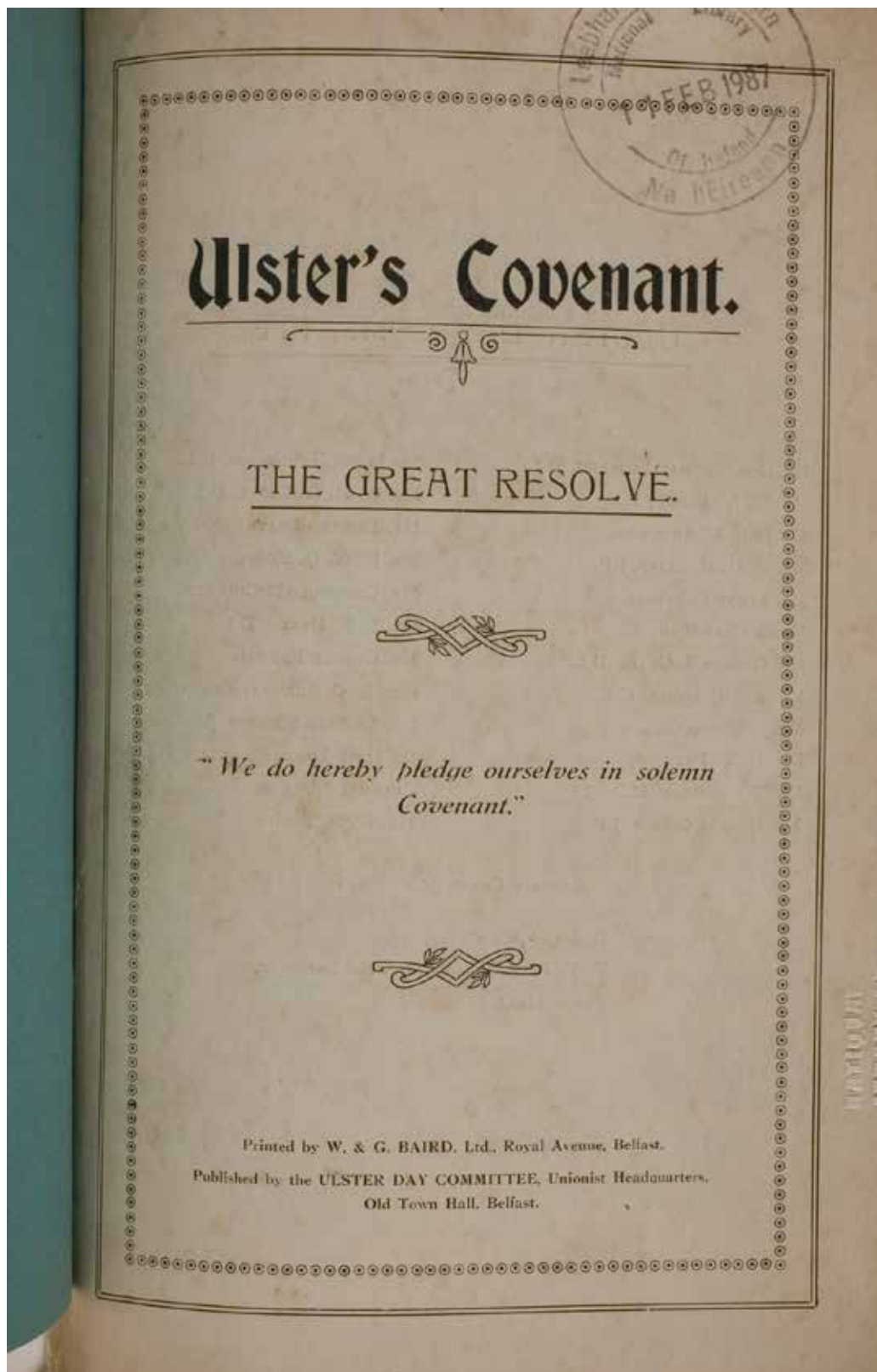
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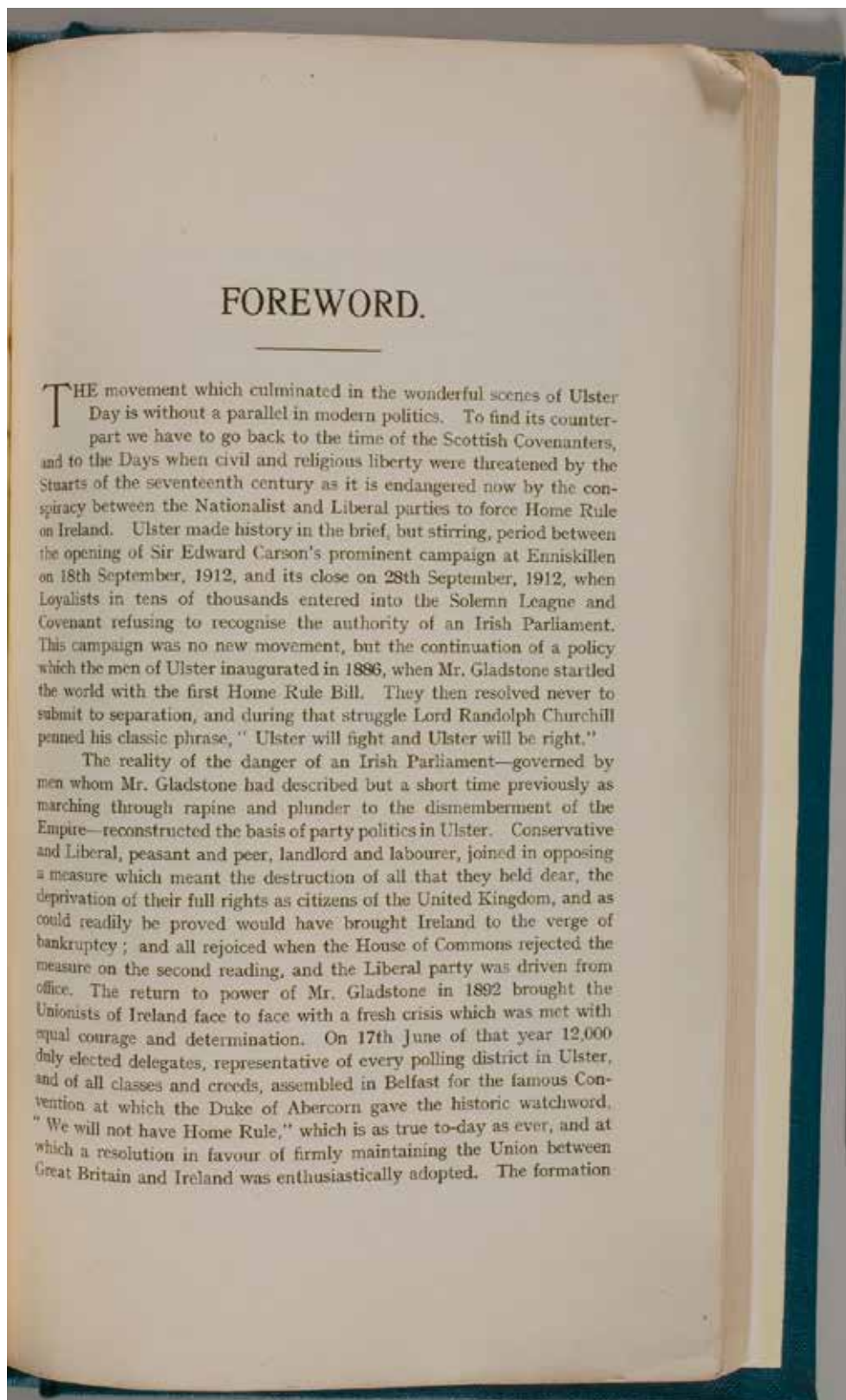
Beck's Linen Factory, Belfast; in contrast to the rest of Ireland which was industrially under-developed, Ulster had a flourishing economy as evidenced by such great factories. The economic disparity was one of the reasons why many Ulster people opposed Home Rule. (Lawrence R2414).

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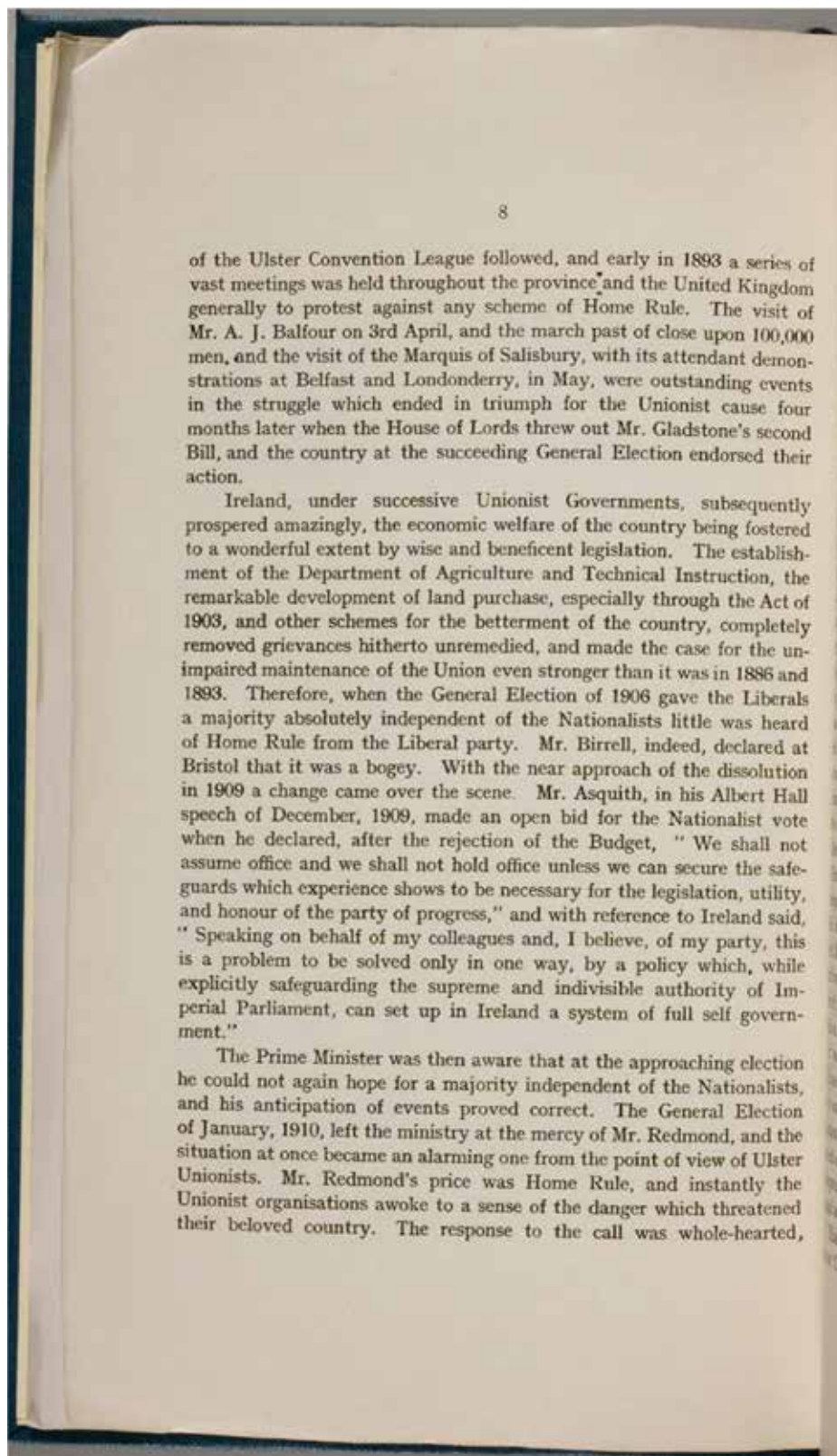
The text of a major speech by Carson, 27 Sept. 1912, the eve of the signing of Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant. (Ulster's Covenant. The Great Resolve, 1912).

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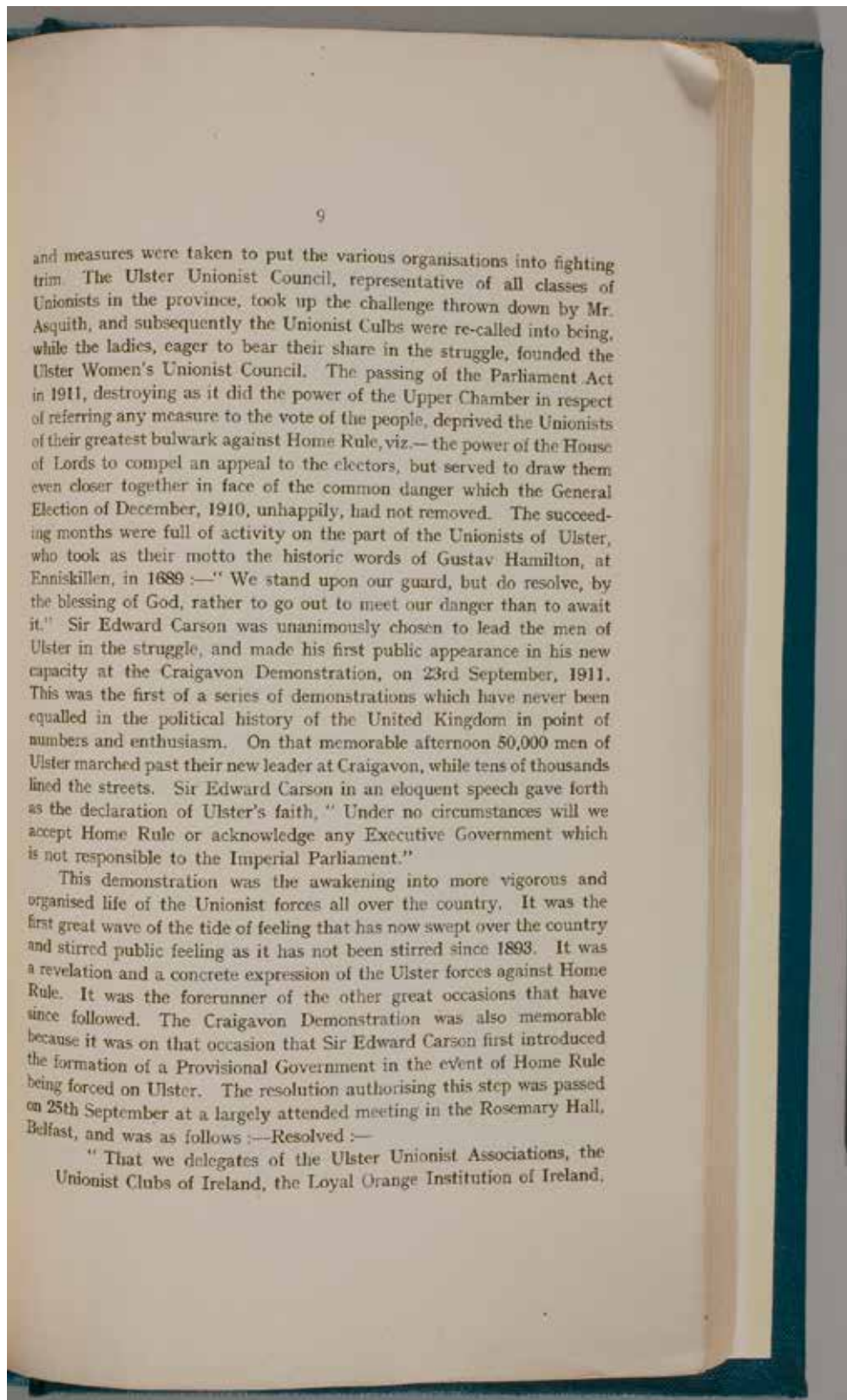
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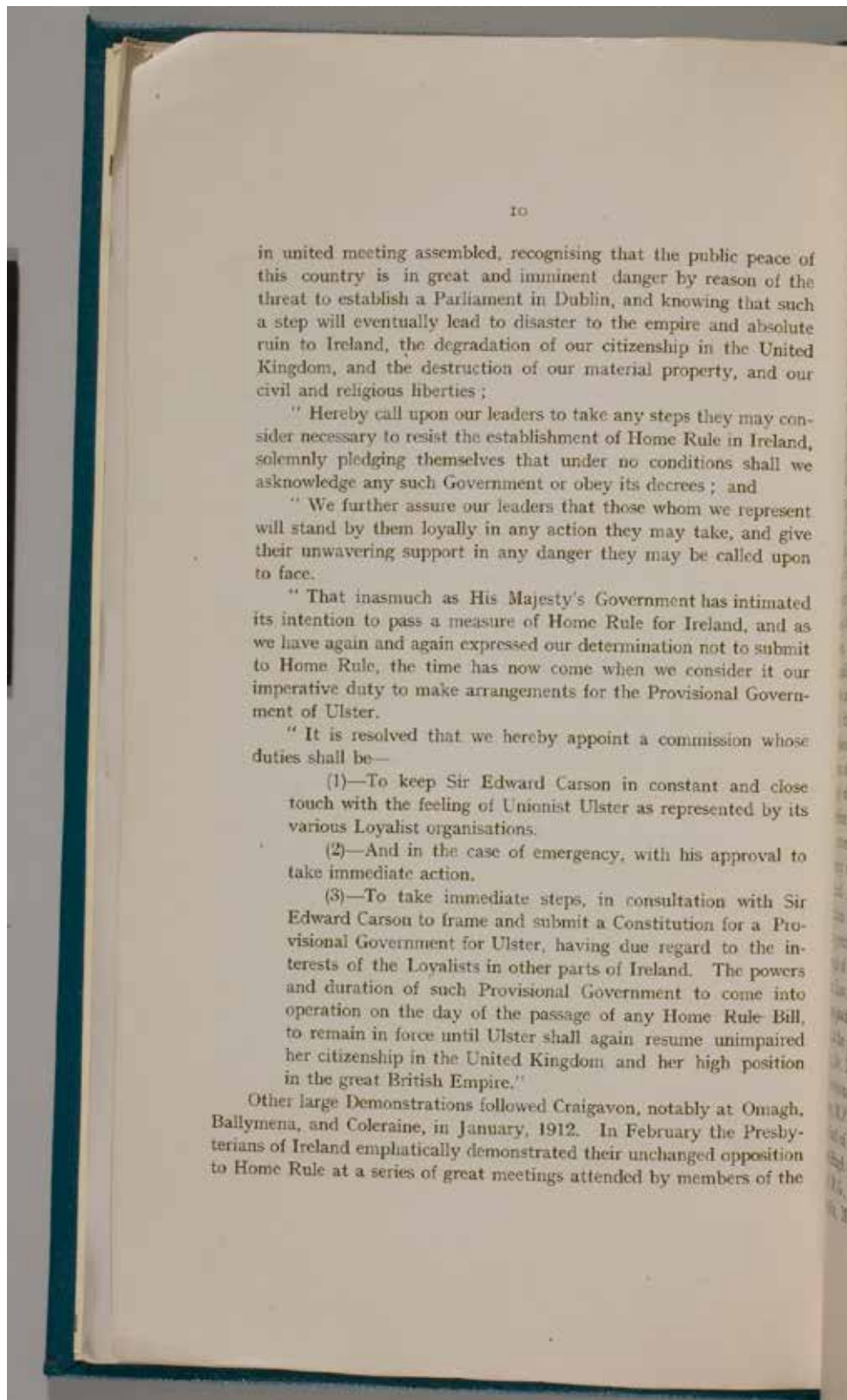
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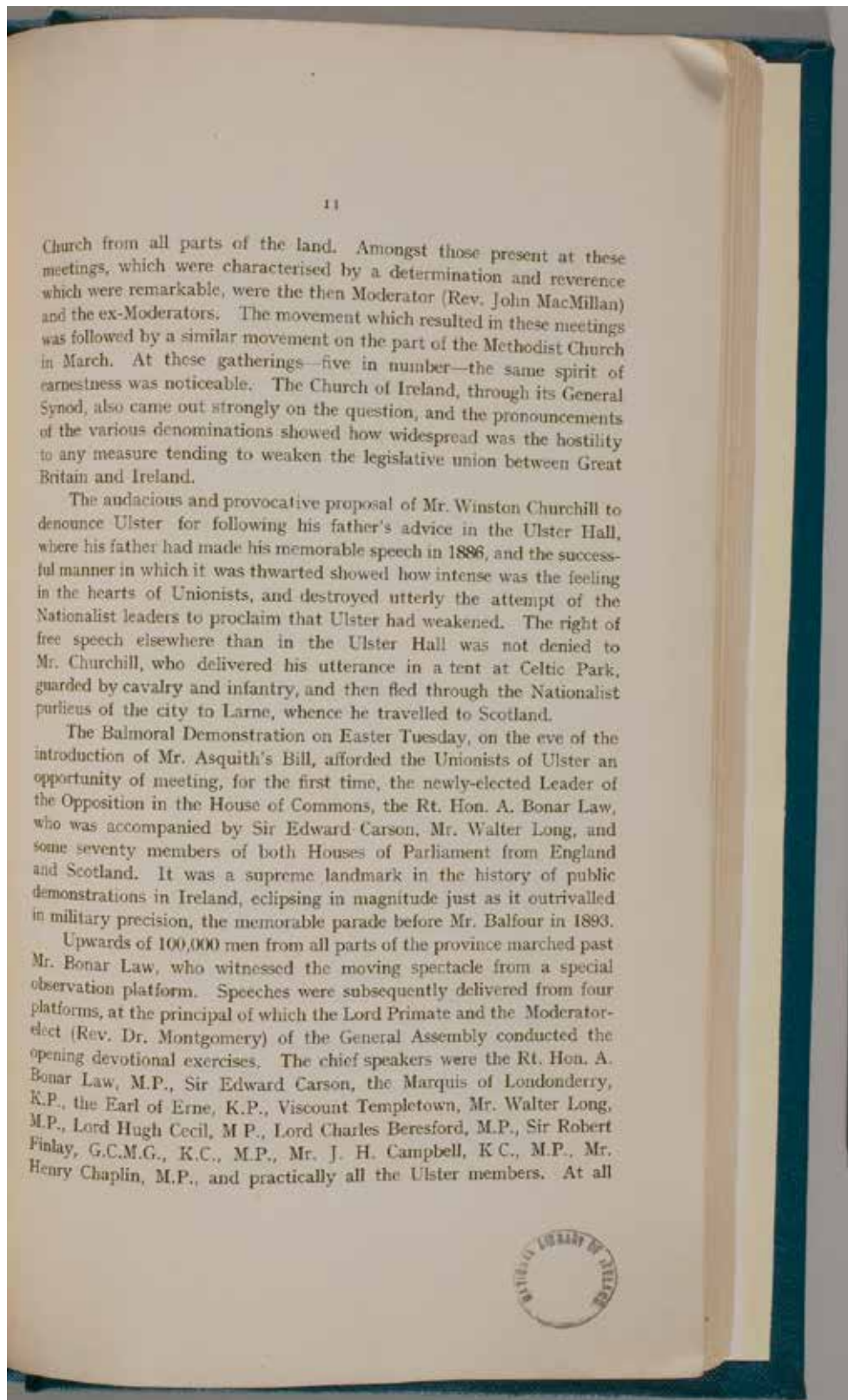
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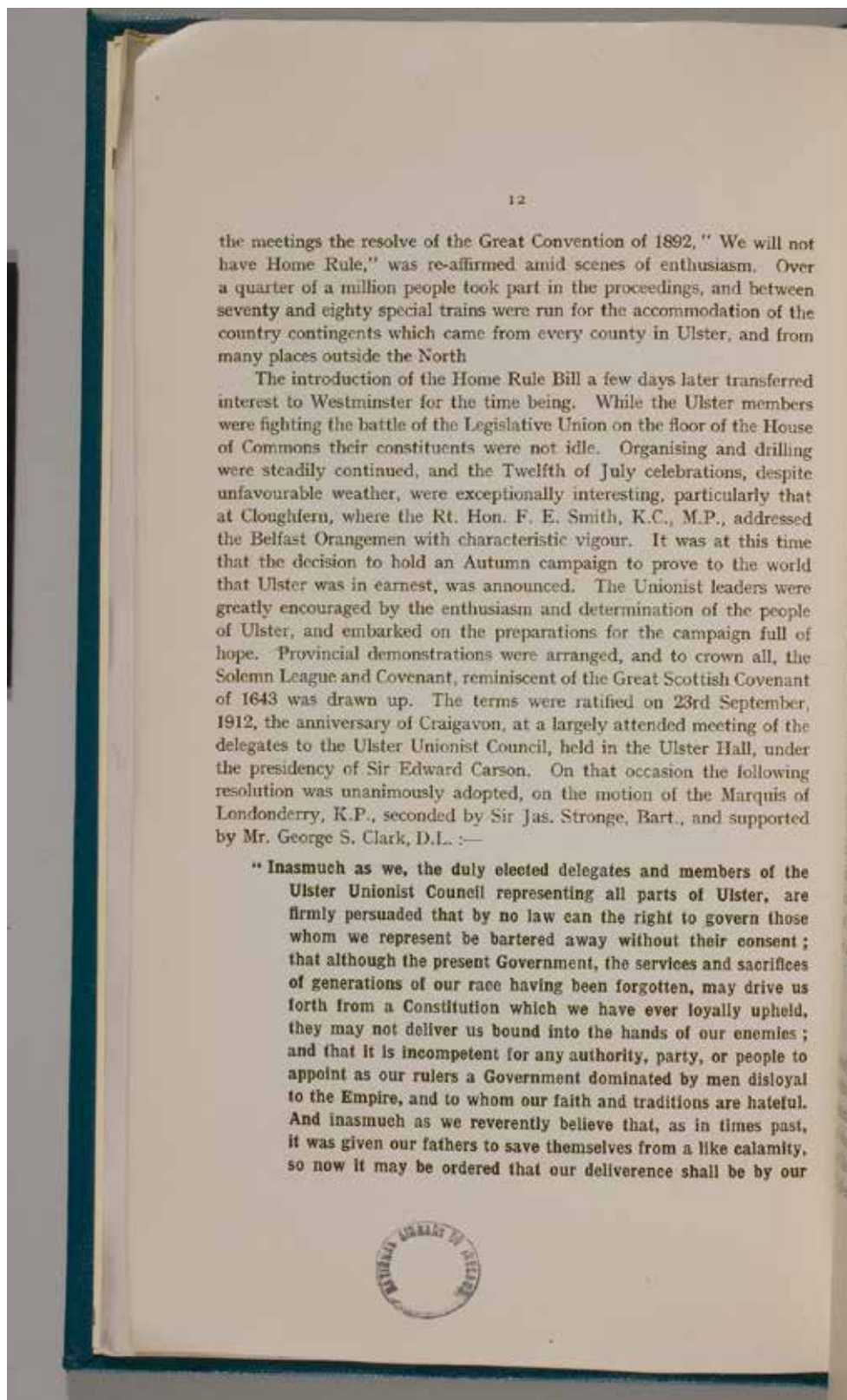
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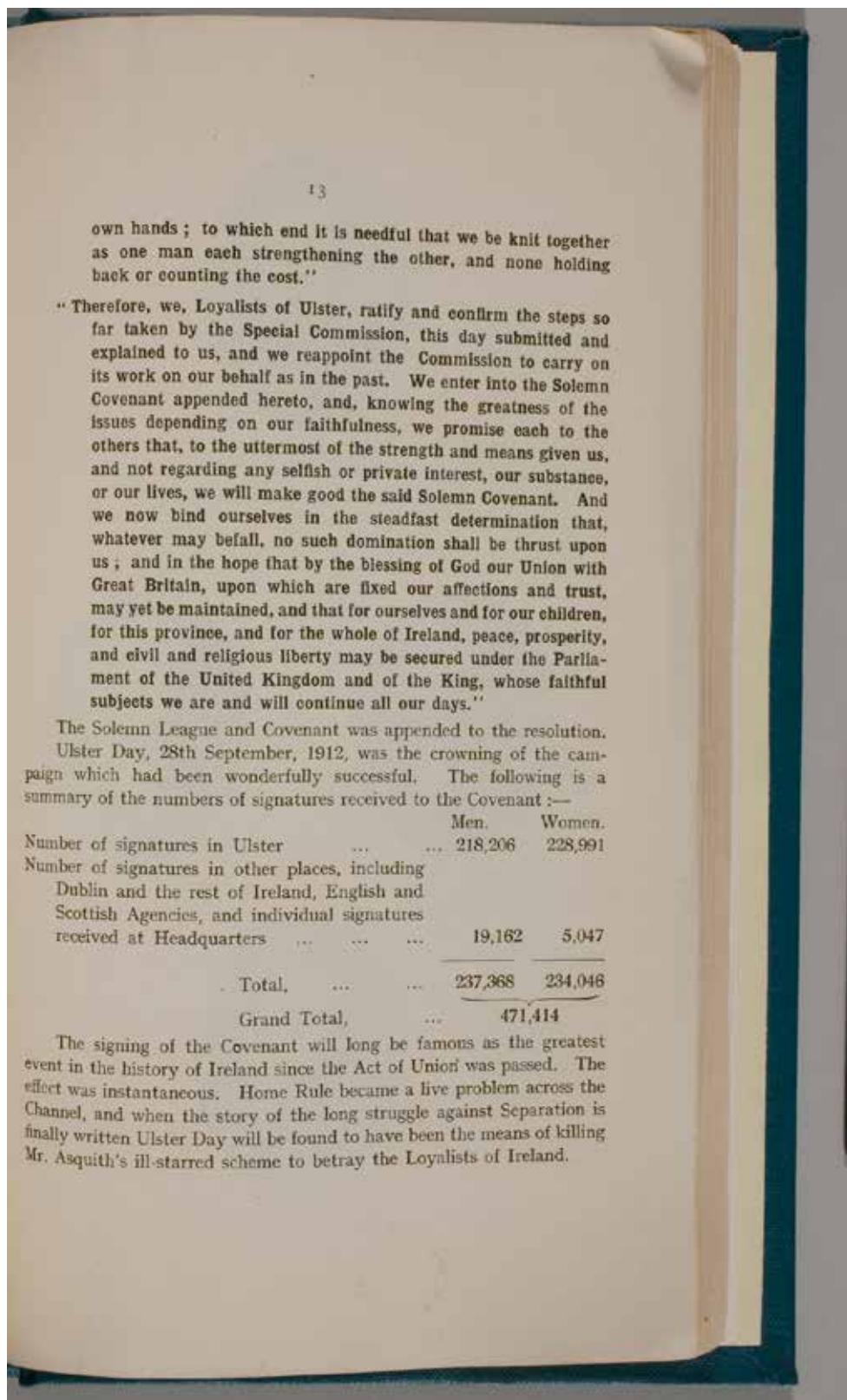
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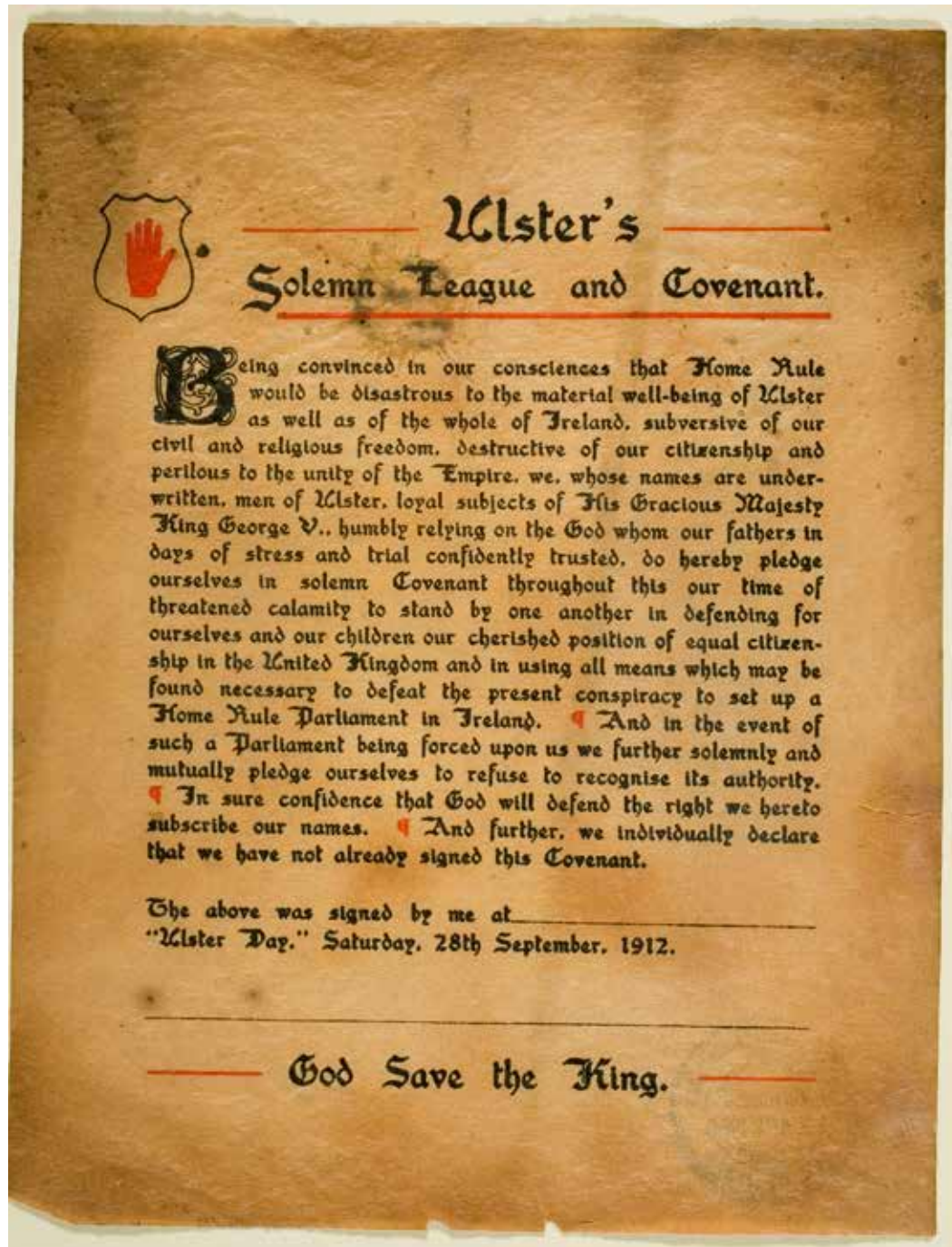
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Carson signing the Covenant, Belfast City Hall, 28 Sept. 1912.

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Certificate issued to signatories of Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant.(Proclamations).