CHAPTER 1
Isaac Butt and the start of Home Rule, 1870 – 1879

Ireland in the United Kingdom

- In 1800, the Act of Union made Ireland part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (the UK).
- Laws and taxes for Ireland were decided in the Westminster parliament in London:
  - In 1870, men over 21 who owned property worth more than £10 elected the MPs to the House of Commons.
  - 105 MPs were elected in Ireland. England, Scotland and Wales elected 550 MPs.
  - On a population basis, Ireland had more than its fair share of MPs, but British MPs always outnumbered the Irish. That meant that Irish interests always had to take second place to British interests in the Commons.
- In 1870, all MPs, Irish as well as British, belonged to either the Conservative or the Liberal parties.
- The leader of the bigger party became Prime Minister of the UK. He appointed his followers as Ministers to deal with various areas of government.
- The two Ministers for Ireland were the Lord Lieutenant and the Chief Secretary. They were responsible for the Royal Irish Constabulary (police), the civil service, the courts, education, transport, etc.

Nationalists

- People in Ireland who disliked being part of the United Kingdom were called nationalists. They wanted Irish people to control Irish affairs.
- Most nationalists were Catholics. In Ireland they were 75% of the population but in the UK as a whole, they were a small minority.
- Officially the UK was a Protestant state, and Catholics did not think it treated them fairly. They wanted a state where they would be in the majority.
- Nationalists also believed that the Irish economy had suffered from being part of the UK. They thought Irish people would manage it better.

Unionists

- Protestants, who were 25% of the Irish people, were usually Unionist – that is they supported the Act of Union and thought it was good for Ireland to be part of the UK.
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- They felt at home in the UK where Protestantism was the official religion.
- Most Protestants lived in northeast Ulster which was much more prosperous than the rest of Ireland. People there felt they owed their prosperity to the Union with Britain.

The Irish Republican Brotherhood the Fenians

- In 1858, some extreme nationalists set up a secret society called the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). They were usually known as the Fenians, the name of their American branch.
- The Fenians planned to fight for Irish independence. They had close contacts with Irish people in America, who sent them money and arms.
- Catholic bishops in Ireland condemned the Fenians because they were a secret society and supported the use of violence.
- In 1867, the Fenians attempted a rebellion against British rule. It failed completely and many Fenians were imprisoned.
- When Fenians tried to free some of their leaders in England, several people were killed.

Gladstone’s reforms

- Fenian violence shocked William Gladstone, who had just become leader of the Liberal Party. In the 1868 election, he campaigned for ‘justice for Ireland’ and won. In Ireland 60 Liberal MPs were elected.
- Gladstone removed the special privileges of the Protestant Church of Ireland in 1869. This angered many Protestants.
- In 1870, Gladstone’s first Land Act (see page 16) slightly increased the rights of Irish tenant farmers.
- The Land Act annoyed landlords because it gave tenants some rights and annoyed tenants because they did not get as much as they wanted.

Isaac Butt and the idea of Home Rule

- Isaac Butt was a Protestant lawyer who had defended the Fenian leaders at their trials.
- In 1870, he suggested that nationalists work for a local Irish parliament:
  - It would have power to deal with Irish home affairs like transport, health and education.
  - Trade, war and foreign policy would still be dealt with by the London government.
- Butt called this ‘Home Government’, but it soon changed that to the catchier name, ‘Home Rule’.
The start of the Home Government Association

- In May 1870, Butt set up the Home Government Association (HGA). Because of dissatisfaction with Gladstone’s reforms Catholics and Protestants, landlords and tenants all joined it.
- There was also the Home Government Association of Great Britain. Its aim was to persuade British people to back Home Rule for Ireland.
- 1870–1873: The HGA won several by-elections, especially after Gladstone’s 1872 Ballot Act made voting secret. Many landlords and Protestants left at that point.
- In 1873, Butt turned the HGA into the Home Rule League.
- In 1874, Gladstone called a general election. To get re-elected many Irish Liberal MPs left the Liberal Party and joined Butt’s.
- Fifty nine Home Rule MPs were elected. They were a mixed bunch. Only about 15 were real Home Rulers, 40 were ex-Liberals and five were Fenians.

The Fenians reorganise

- Butt also led an Amnesty Campaign to get Fenian prisoners freed. In 1870, Gladstone let most of them go on condition they left the UK.
- One of them was John Devoy. He went to the US and became leader of Clan na Gael. Over the next fifty years he collected a great deal of money for Irish nationalist organisations.
- In Ireland, the Fenians set up a ‘Supreme Council’ to lead the IRB. It hoped to have another rebellion if Britain got involved in a war.
- But some Fenians were not prepared to wait. Joseph Biggar and a number of others backed the Home Rule movement and, in the 1874 election, Biggar and four other Fenians were elected MPs.

1874–1879: Butt as leader

- Gladstone lost the 1874 election to the Conservatives. Led by Disraeli, they stayed in power until 1880. They were not interested in reforms for Ireland.
- At Westminster, Butt followed a policy called ‘independent opposition’. That meant he would not support either the Liberals or the Conservatives until one of them agreed to Home Rule.
- He was not an effective leader. He was heavily in debt and often absent from the Commons, so he could not blame other MPs when they were absent too.
- Many Home Rule MPs were still Liberals at heart and did not really believe in Home Rule. Some even voted against the party.
- Butt thought he could persuade British MPs to agree to Home Rule, but when they ignored him he did nothing.
Obstruction

- By 1875, the Fenian MPs had grown impatient with Butt. Led by Joseph Biggar, they began to obstruct the Commons with long speeches and frequent interruptions.
- Butt strongly disapproved of obstruction, but it won the support of the new MP, Charles Stewart Parnell.

Parnell seeks popularity and Fenian support

- Ambitious and able, Parnell wanted to lead the Home Rule Party.
- But he was a Protestant landlord and most Home Rulers were Catholic tenant farmers. To become leader he had to win popularity by supporting popular causes.
- He began by siding with the obstructionists because he knew they were popular in Ireland.
- The Fenians had a network of branches in Ireland, so he tried to please them;
  - In the Commons he defended three Fenians hanged for killing a policeman in Manchester.
  - He worked for the freedom (amnesty) for some Fenian prisoners still in jail. They included Michael Davitt.
- But he also tried to please the Catholic bishops by supporting demands for state aid for Catholic schools.

These tactics paid off:

- In 1878, the Fenian-controlled Home Government Association of Great Britain elected Parnell as leader instead of Butt.
- John Devoy, the leading Irish American Fenian, and Michael Davitt proposed that the Fenians unite with Parnell to work for an independent Ireland. This was called the ‘New Departure’.
- But when Devoy and Davitt suggested it to Parnell, he refused to commit himself. He was afraid the Catholic bishops would condemn him if he made a public alliance with the Fenians.

1879: The death of Isaac Butt

- In 1879, Isaac Butt died suddenly. He had a mixed record;
  - He had suggested the idea of Home Rule and started the Home Rule Party. Under his leadership, it became the biggest Irish party ever.
  - But he failed to control his MPs, set up branches around the country or to win support for Home Rule among British MPs.
- After Butt died, Home Rule MPs chose William Shaw, a cautious banker, as their next leader. They distrusted Parnell because of his links to the Fenians.
Charles Stewart Parnell (1846 – 1891)

- Born into a Protestant landlord family, Parnell was educated in England and elected Home Rule MP for Meath in 1875
- In the Commons he (a) sided with the ‘obstructionists’ (b) pleased the Fenians by campaigning to free prisoners and (c) backed the Catholic bishops’ demand for state aid for their schools
- But he did not have enough votes to become leader when Butt died in 1879
- To win farmers’ backing, Parnell accepted Davitt’s invitation to speak at Westport and become President of Land League in 1879
- In 1880, the election of 40 ‘Parnellite’ MPs made him leader of the Home Rule Party
- In 1880-81, he led the Land League campaign of demonstrations and boycotting and opposed Gladstone’s Coercion Act and second Land Act
- Imprisoned in Kilmainham for provocative speeches, he issued the ‘No Rent Manifesto’. After violence increased he made the Kilmainham Treaty with Gladstone in April 1882
- Phoenix Park murders some days later discredited Fenians and removed his only possible rivals
- He replaced Land League with Irish National League, completely under his control. His Lieutenants built it into strong, disciplined party
- From 1882, he worked mainly in Westminster. In 1885 he co-operated with Conservatives to defeat Gladstone
- He tried to negotiate with leaders of British parties on Home Rule. In the 1885 election, he sided with Conservatives but failed to get balance of power
- Gladstone promised Home Rule but Salisbury came out against it. Parnell formed Liberal Alliance but Gladstone was defeated in 1886 election
- He opposed new land agitation (‘Plan of Campaign’) by his Lieutenants
- Became popular in Britain after ‘The Times’ letters were proved forgeries. Gladstone consulted him on next Home Rule bill in 1889
- Then O’Shea sued for divorce. Gladstone demanded his resignation as price for Home Rule
- Two thirds of MPs wanted him to resign but he refused and split the Party. He campaigned in three by-elections but lost
- Caught pneumonia and died in October 1891.
2.1 The Land League and Parnell's leadership

1877 - 1879: An agricultural crisis

- In the 1870s, three million of the five million people in Ireland were tenant farmers and their families. They rented their farms from 20,000 landlords (see page 15)
- When farmers got good prices for crops and animals, they could pay their rents easily. That happened in most years from 1850 to 1875
- But in 1876, an economic depression began. It cut the prices farmers got. That meant they could no longer afford the rents they paid easily in the good years
- From 1877, farmers all over Ireland faced the threat of eviction. That meant losing their homes and their livelihoods because farming was almost the only way of making a living at that time (see page 15)
- In the west of Ireland, where most farms were very small, there was another threat – famine. Bad weather in 1878/9 destroyed 75% of the potato crop which was the main food of small farmers.

Michael Davitt and the Land League

- After Davitt met Parnell to discuss the New Departure he went to see relatives in Mayo where he found evictions and hunger
- Davitt joined local Fenians in helping farmers to resist eviction
- Wanting to publicise their plight, he invited Parnell to speak at a big meeting in Westport in June 1879
- Parnell saw a chance to win the support of the farmers. He went to Westport and called on farmers to ‘keep a firm grip on your homesteads’ (i.e. resist eviction)
- In October 1879, Davitt set up the Irish National Land League to stop evictions and demand ‘the land of Ireland for the people of Ireland’. As a Fenian, he hoped to use the farmers’ discontent to spark off a Fenian-led rebellion against British rule
- He invited Parnell to be President of the Land League, but most of the other Land League leaders were Fenians
- October 1879 – March 1880: Parnell went to America to collect money to avert famine. When there was no famine, the money was used to fund the Land League campaign.
In March 1880 Disraeli called a general election:
- In Britain, Gladstone won and became Prime Minister again
- In Ireland, the election showed up a split between “Parnellite” Home Rulers and “Whig” Home Rulers who backed Shaw

Parnellites won 40 seats against 20 for the Shawites:
- Parnell was then elected leader of the Home Rule Party
- Soon after most Shawites left to join the Liberal Party.

Gladstone was unaware of how serious the agricultural crisis was in Ireland. He refused to bring in reforms
- Parnell began to campaign in Ireland to force him to do so
- To avoid violence, he urged farmers to ‘boycott’ landlords who evicted tenants, or tenants who took land from which another was evicted.

Gladstone’s response
- Gladstone had to restore order. Parnell and Davitt were arrested but the jury refused to convict them
- He then decided to do two things:
  - Bring in a tough ‘Coercion Act’ giving him power to imprison without trial anyone suspected of encouraging protest. This would remove the Land League leaders
  - Give farmers a generous Land Act with Fair Rent and Fixity of Tenure. He hoped this would win them away from Parnell and the League
- In early 1881, Gladstone brought his Coercion Bill and had Davitt arrested for breaking his parole
- When Home Rule MPs heard this they all protested and were suspended from the Commons
- One suggested to Parnell that they return to Ireland and lead a rebellion. He refused, saying they must see what Gladstone’s Land Bill would do for farmers. (Historians see this as proof that Parnell was a moderate nationalist.)

How Parnell dealt with Gladstone’s second Land Act
- In September 1882, Gladstone’s second Land Act passed. It set up land courts to give ‘fair rents’ to tenants
- As Gladstone hoped, it split Parnell’s followers:
  - Moderates (e.g MPs, the richer farmers and the clergy), liked it
  - Fenians and poorer farmers who could not go to the land courts, rejected it
To avoid showing his real views, Parnell proposed “testing the act”. Richer farmers ignored him and rushed to the Land Courts.

Parnell then made speeches denouncing Gladstone. He responded by having Parnell arrested under the Coercion Act and imprisoned in Kilmainham jail with other Land League leaders.

**October 1881 - April 1882: Parnell in Kilmainham**

- From prison, they issued a ‘no rent manifesto’ urging tenants to refuse to pay rent
- This was illegal so Gladstone banned the Land League
- This suited Parnell, as it was going to break up anyway. But now that he was in prison and being seen as a martyr, he could not be blamed
- During the six months Parnell was in Kilmainham the number of evictions rose and so did the level of violence. By March 1882;
  - Gladstone wanted a deal to restore order
  - Parnell wanted to make peace so that he could be with Katherine O’Shea.

**The ‘Kilmainham Treaty’ and the Phoenix Park Murders**

- This led to the ‘Kilmainham Treaty’ in April 1882;
  - Gladstone freed the suspects, promised to improve the Land Act and end the Coercion Act
  - Parnell promised to try to stop the violence and co-operate with the Liberal Party
- Two days after Parnell was freed, a break-away Fenian faction, the Invincibles, murdered the Chief Secretary and the Under-Secretary in the Phoenix Park
- The murders helped Parnell:
  - The Fenians, the only group who could have opposed him, were discredited
  - Davitt abandoned republicanism and began to work for land nationalisation, an unpopular idea. That removed him from Irish affairs
- Parnell was left as the undisputed leader (the ‘uncrowned king’) of Irish nationalists.

**1882 - 1885: Building a strong disciplined Home Rule Party**

- After this, Parnell concentrated on Home Rule rather than land
- In October 1882, Parnell replaced the Fenian-led Land League with the Irish National League. It was completely under his control
- From 1882 to 1885, he spent much of his time in England, going to the Commons and getting to know British political leaders