A Victorian atheist encounters Roman-Catholic Ireland

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As of the year 1880, no newspaper reader in either Great Britain or Ireland would have been unfamiliar with the name of Charles Bradlaugh (1833–91), that notorious advocate of atheism, republicanism, and birth control. Born in metropolitan London in 1833 and baptized a member of the Church of England, he had quarreled as a youth with the parish vicar and had been expelled from his religious duties, his job, and his family. While earning a living as a solicitor's clerk, Bradlaugh during the 1850s became a charismatic free-thought speaker and pamphleteer who soon graduated from the open-air soapbox to lecture halls to which he could attract as many as 4,000 listeners. Under the pseudonym 'Iconoclast', he declaimed on topics such as 'The existence of God' and debated Anglican clerics and Roman Catholic priests.

In the course of his life, Bradlaugh was called many names: free-thinker, infidel, secularist, materialist, atheist. He never hesitated to employ the word 'atheist', which, in accordance with its Greek origin, he defined as 'without God.' He did not deny there was 'a God', declared Bradlaugh in 1859, 'because to deny that which was unknown was as absurd as to affirm it. As an atheist he denied the God of the Bible, of the Koran, of the Vedas.' He dismissed the 'agnosticism' professed by Thomas Henry Huxley, George Eliot, and Leslie Stephen as 'a mere society form of Atheism'.

In the course of the 1860s, Bradlaugh became the editor of a weekly periodical, the National Reformer, and the president of the National Secular Society, a free-thought organization that by 1880 could claim some 6,000 members in more than 60 branches. In its organization, rituals, and activities, admittedly, the giant London branch of the society resembled a nonconformist chapel.

Bradlaugh was not merely an atheist, however. He was also a republican, a highly controversial appellation in the United Kingdom of Queen Victoria. Bradlaugh sympathized with movements to transform the German, Italian, Spanish, and French monarchies into republics, and he was a great admirer of the post-Civil War United States – which he visited on three occasions. Although an undercurrent of republicanism could be found in England as well as Ireland throughout the nineteenth century, \(^3\) in England it reached its apex in 1870–1 in the context of the reclusiveness of the widowed Queen Victoria and the foundation of the Third Republic in France. Bradlaugh helped organize a network of English republican clubs, and he denounced the dynasty that had reigned since 1714 as ‘remarkable neither for virtue, intelligence, decision of character, nor devotion to national interests’, and as a pivot of social class privilege. \(^4\) Bradlaugh’s vitriolic *Impeachment of the House of Brunswick* (1871) became a best-seller. \(^5\) The movement ebbed, but the transformation of Britain into a republic with the abdication or the death of Queen Victoria remained Bradlaugh’s long-term goal.

The most notorious of the movements that Bradlaugh championed was Neo-Malthusianism, the belief that the most significant long-term solution to the poverty of the labouring classes was to limit the size of their families. As Bradlaugh wrote in 1876, ‘we think it more moral to prevent the conception of children, than, after they are born, to murder them with want of food, air, and clothing’. \(^6\) In 1876, in collaboration with his new associate, the dynamic Annie Besant, he deliberately republished a forty-year old pamphlet by an American physician, *The fruits of philosophy; or the private companion of young married couples*. The result was one of the most dramatic trials of the century. Bradlaugh and Besant were heard, found guilty of obscenity, and saved from prison only by a legal technicality. The astonishing furor that the case aroused can be explained by the conviction of Bradlaugh’s critics that teaching methods of contraception would destroy rather than cement the marriage bond. It would promote pre-marital indulgence, encourage adultery, and endorse prostitution. The trial made Bradlaugh more than ever a symbol of public notoriety. \(^7\) No wonder that in 1880 Queen Victoria could write that it was ‘not only his known atheism but […] his other horrible principles which make him a disgrace’. \(^8\)

Now what did this notorious Victorian have to do with Ireland? The answer is: a great deal, if only because by 1868 Bradlaugh had set himself an additional

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7 The fullest account may be found in Roger Manvell, *The trial of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh* (New York: Horizon, 1976).

goal – as an adherent of the most radical wing of the Liberal Party, to represent the borough of Northampton as a Member of Parliament. Like other advanced Liberals of his day, he often expressed strong sympathies for the subject nationalities of Europe, such as Italians and Hungarians rebelling against Austrian rule and Poles rebelling against Russian rule. Unlike a great many fellow Englishmen, however, he fully recognized the reality of the spirit of nationality in mid-nineteenth-century Ireland. As he remarked in 1873, ‘I am one of those who can see no difference between Poland and Ireland, between Hungary and Erin’s green land […] I confess that I cannot believe that […] that which is patriotism in Warsaw becomes treason in Dublin streets.’

Bradlaugh differed from fellow English radicals in another respect. For almost three years – between the ages of seventeen and twenty – he had actually lived in Ireland as a British soldier, as a private stationed near Cork. It was in Ireland that he learned how to fence and how to ride. It was in Ireland also that he developed a keen sense of sympathy for the often grim life led by Irish peasants. On one occasion, persuaded that the law was on the side of the local tenants, he pulled down a gate by which a landlord had blocked a traditional right-of-way. On another occasion, he and his fellow soldiers were compelled to enforce a legal order to evict a peasant family and destroy the cottage in which the family lived. The wife pleaded eloquently that her ailing husband be left to die in peace in the house, but Bradlaugh’s captain felt compelled to obey orders. The house was pulled down, the husband died, and three days later the maddened widow, clutching a dead baby, appeared at the barrack gates. It was an episode that Bradlaugh never forgot. Indeed, as a Member of Parliament, he was to recount it to the House of Commons thirty-five years later. In his eyes, such incidents justified a deep Irish sense of grievance against landlords and arbitrary laws.

In the year 1867, Fenian leaders in London, two of whom had consulted Bradlaugh, had boldly proclaimed the establishment of an Irish Republic with the words: ‘We have suffered centuries of outrage, enforced poverty, and bitter misery.’ Bradlaugh strongly sympathized with the Fenian demand for ‘absolute liberty of conscience and the complete separation of Church and State’ in their

projected Irish republic, but recent scholars have rightly noted that Bradlaugh opposed an armed rebellion at that time because he felt certain that it would cost thousands of lives and fail all the same. The Fenian rebellion of 1867 was indeed readily suppressed by a combination of bad weather and government spies and soldiers.\textsuperscript{13}

Anglo-Irish relations were embittered anew by that insurrection and by its aftermath which included both the execution of the ‘Manchester martyrs’ and the explosion at Clerkenwell prison in which twelve died and 120 were injured. Bradlaugh had pleaded against the executions but felt compelled to condemn the explosion as ‘this fearfully mad crime’,\textsuperscript{14} one that might well plunge the British and the Irish ‘into a fratricidal struggle’.\textsuperscript{15} Yet early in 1868 he lectured in Dublin, and the Reform League of Ireland thanked him for ‘his truly philanthropic and patriotic exertions and sentiments on behalf of poor Ireland’.\textsuperscript{16}

The Fenian insurrection inspired William Ewart Gladstone, on being named Liberal prime minister, to proclaim a ‘mission to pacify Ireland’ that in 1869 and 1870 led to the disestablishment of the Protestant Church of Ireland and to a land reform act. Eventually it would also inspire Gladstone’s conversion to ‘Home Rule’, to the conviction that Ireland should once again possess its own legislature. Charles Bradlaugh had become a convert to home rule thirteen years earlier – at the very time that Isaac Butt first led a party of Irish home rule MPs in the House of Commons. If the states of New York and Massachusetts could have their own legislatures in the American union, if Hungary could have its own parliament in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then why could not Ireland have its own parliament in the United Kingdom? So argued Bradlaugh from 1873 on.\textsuperscript{17}

In the course of the later 1870s the economic situation in Ireland deteriorated because of bad harvests and of American agricultural competition. Beginning in 1879, the militant Irish Land League campaigned against tenant evictions in an at times violent manner, while Charles Stewart Parnell began to coordinate ‘the land war’ with the work of the Irish home rule party at Westminster. In 1880 he took over its leadership.

The state of the British economy and Irish unrest contributed that year to the triumphant return, after six years of Conservative rule, of William Ewart Gladstone and the Liberal Party. The most remarkable of the newly-elected members that helped make up the Liberal majority was Charles Bradlaugh. He decided to add icing to his victory cake by claiming to ‘affirm’ rather than to ‘swear’ the required parliamentary oath of allegiance – thereby confirming for freethinkers in parliament an option, a badge of respectability, that he had ear-

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., i, pp 254–55; Sinnott, ‘Bradlaugh’, pp 12–13. Fergus D’Arcy argues persuasively that the Fenian leaders must have sought Bradlaugh’s skills not as a draftsman of their proclamation but as a potential English ally. See D’Arcy, ‘Bradlaugh and the Irish question’, pp 234–5.


\textsuperscript{17} Quoted in Champion of liberty, pp 245–6.
lier helped extend to freethinkers in law court proceedings. By a vote of nine to eight, however, a select committee denied him that option. Bradlaugh thereupon publicly announced that, although the words of the oath ‘are to me sounds conveying no clear and definite meaning’, he would speak them in the spirit of the affirmation that had been denied him and thereby comply ‘with the forms of the House’. Bradlaugh’s subsequent attempt to take the required oath was met by a storm of protest, however, and a second select committee, by a vote of eleven to ten, foreclosed the option of the oath also. Eventually Gladstone persuaded the House to give Bradlaugh the opportunity to affirm after all, subject only ‘to any liability by statute’.  

Bradlaugh did therefore serve as a Member of Parliament between July 1880 and March 1881 — that dramatic autumn and winter during which the Irish land war reached fever pitch. Although he questioned the Irish home rule policy of unlimited parliamentary obstruction, Bradlaugh proved to be one of but eight Liberals willing to support the Irish in opposing a new coercion act that suspended the right of habeas corpus in Ireland. 19 The Roman Catholic Tablet took note of Bradlaugh’s ‘ostentatious defence of Irish interests in Parliament’. 20 Bradlaugh’s brief parliamentary career ended when a court found his claim to affirm invalid and vacated his seat. Despite numerous legal and legislative maneuvers, despite two reelections for his Northampton seat, despite fiery speeches and militant protest movements, Bradlaugh was to be kept out of the House of Commons throughout the remainder of the 1880–85 parliament.

What is of primary interest here is the manner in which Bradlaugh’s long struggle to enter Parliament intersected the multi-faceted ‘Irish Question’. Many home rule party members were well acquainted with members of the radical wing of the Liberal Party and with Bradlaugh in particular as fellow advocates of causes such as land reform. Parnell and Bradlaugh were indeed fellow vice-presidents of the Democratic League of Great Britain and Ireland. 21 When Parnell spoke briefly on behalf of Bradlaugh’s admission in May 1880, he conceded, however, that he could recall no time when ‘he was less confident in the belief that the mass of the Irish people were behind him […] Catholic members for Ireland had felt very strongly on this question — very strongly indeed’. 22

So they had felt, and so they were to feel — during the next five years. Parnell’s stand was immediately criticized by a Catholic priest in the leading Dublin paper. We Irish, he declared,

may be hot-headed and impulsive, but we […] have no sympathy with Atheism, blasphemy, and the fruits of a foul philosophy. We recognize no

freedom of opinion there [...] For my part, I should rather see the foreign rule of England, bad as it is, replaced by the iron despotism of Russia, and Ireland turned into a waste like Siberia, than look for freedom through a political alliance with Bradlaugh and his 100,000 Atheists.23

In 1881 the Irish home rule party voted henceforth to oppose every legislative step that might admit Bradlaugh to Parliament. That policy proved most influential in May 1883, when Gladstone made one of the most eloquent speeches of his life in favour of the so-called Affirmation Bill – as a measure to advance the cause of religion, of religious liberty, and of the right of the electors of Northampton to have their votes respected. The measure went down to defeat by a margin of 292 to 289. Most of its opponents were Conservatives, but home rulers dominated the final days of the debate, when James Charlie McCoan assured the House that ‘[a]ll Ireland, from Cape Clear to the Giant’s Causeway is against it.’24

‘Bradlaugh Bowled Out by the Irish Vote,’ boasted United Ireland, the most radical of the nationalist weeklies,25 and London’s chief Liberal paper, the Daily News, agreed. The fiery young home rule MP, T.P. O’Connor, had no doubt that ‘it was the Irish vote which was the real, the influential, the potent factor in the whole struggle.’26 Tactical political considerations may well have played a role in that vote, but so did a very genuine concern with both religion and respectability. When discussing the nineteenth century, it is easy to speak of ‘Roman Catholic Ireland’. Yet it is useful to keep in mind that until the general election of 1880 a majority of Ireland’s 105 representatives in the Westminster Parliament had always been Protestants and that the nationalist tradition represented by the Young Irelanders of 1848, the Irish Republican Brotherhood of the 1860s, and Isaac Butt’s home rule party during the 1870s had been either secular or, at the very least, ecumenical, in religious affiliation. According to the Religious Census of 1881, Roman Catholics numbered 76 per cent of the Irish population. For the very first time, they also made up a majority, 53 per cent (56 out of 105) of all Irish MPs. Only four of the Parnellite MPs in the 1880–5 Parliament were non-Catholic; Parnell himself was one of those four.27

At a time that at most one Roman Catholic could be found among 493 English and Welsh MPs, it is not surprising that Henry Edward Manning, the convert cardinal who headed the hierarchy in England – should come to see the Roman Catholic Irish home rule MPs as part of his personal flock. He had long been frustrated by the tendency of many English people to continue to look on Roman Catholicism as an alien force. Now, with the help of the Irish

MPs, he could oppose Bradlaugh and lead a politically popular but fundamentally conservative campaign to promote public morality in the form of sermons, newspaper articles, correspondence with political leaders, public petition drives, and the lobbying of MPs within the corridors of the house of commons. When the Affirmation Bill was defeated, his weekly mouthpiece, the Tablet, could exult:

[I]t is the Irish members to whom the laurels are due, and English Catholics may well be gratefully mindful that it was Irish voices and Irish votes which chiefly prevented atheism from having a share in English law-giving [...] In whatever else divided, in the face of aggressive atheism Ireland is true to herself, and her members are as one.

When the other English convert Cardinal, John Henry Newman, was asked his opinion, he responded that

[I]t little concerns Religion whether Mr. Bradlaugh swears by no God with the Government, or swears by an Impersonal, or Material, or Abstract and Ideal Something or other, which is all that is secured to us by the Opposition [...] Looking at the [Affirmation] Bill on its merits, I think nothing is lost to Religion by its passing, and nothing gained by its being rejected.

Manning was privately outraged. Did the octogenarian Roman Catholic sage truly have to pour cold water upon the fire of ecumenical national religious revival that Manning had so eagerly kindled?

In the meantime, Parnell was proving so successful in balancing the revolutionaries and the constitutionalists as well as the religionists and the anti-clericals among his supporters that he emerged from the general election of November 1885 with a disciplined body of eighty-six Irish home rule party supporters. Three months later, a party that had allied itself unofficially with the Conservatives on matters such as the Affirmation Bill of 1883 and government subsidies for Roman Catholic elementary schools in England and Ireland, found itself allied anew with the Liberal Party, for Gladstone had become a convert to Irish home rule.

Liberals such as Bradlaugh were faced with a choice. Should they follow the chief political radical of the day, Joseph Chamberlain, in his ‘Liberal Unionist’ opposition to Gladstone’s scheme, or should they align themselves with Gladstone, Liberalism’s ‘Grand Old Man’? Bradlaugh hesitated scarcely at all. Opponents of the measure admittedly insisted that ‘Home Rule means Rome Rule’, and Bradlaugh had once pointed out that ‘the Rome of the Vatican fears every shadow the light of freedom throws across its rule’. Yet at a large meeting in London’s St James’s Hall and in a several masterful orations in the House of Commons, Bradlaugh defended home rule. ‘[T]he true remedy for Ireland,’ he insisted, ‘was for Ireland to redress her own grievances in her own Parliament by Members elected by her own people.’

Liberal division spelled defeat for Gladstone’s first home rule measure by a vote of 343 to 313, and the general election that followed led to six years of Conservative rule. By the time Gladstone received in 1893 a second opportunity to introduce a home rule bill, both Parnell and Bradlaugh were dead. But during the five years left to him before his death in January 1891, Bradlaugh remained the most stalwart champion of Irish causes among British MPs.

In 1888 he also carried through Parliament an affirmation bill. Manning still protested, but in the house of commons, the Irish members ‘now sat silent and acquiescent’. Indeed, by a ratio of 30 to one, they voted in favour of the measure. As one Irish nationalist MP confided to Charles Bradlaugh in the house of commons lobby, ‘Mr Bradlaugh, you have been the best Christian of us all.’

It is appropriate to approach much of human history in a spirit of irony. Such a spirit is peculiarly appropriate when we remember what occurred when a notorious Victorian atheist encountered Roman Catholic Ireland.