

The Irish Parliamentary Party in Victorian and Edwardian London

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Writing in 1928 of Lord Morley's biography of his father, Herbert Gladstone observed that while it was 'a comprehensive exposition of his public life' it 'left but little room for the domestic life, which in the matter of time far exceeded the days given by Mr Gladstone to public affairs.'¹ Arguably, the same criticism can be made of many modern political biographies and histories, including those concerning the members of the Irish Parliamentary Party. For, despite the attention historians have given to the party's activities at Westminster and in Ireland, there is little acknowledgement that Irish MPs led lives outside the chamber or beyond the platform. In short, the fact that as well as being Members of Parliament these men also had professional and personal lives is rarely glimpsed.² The reasons for this oversight are several. This aspect of the lives of most MPs was by its very nature private and so largely unpublicised. Moreover, the most obvious source of such information, members' private correspondence, largely no longer exists. However, what is probably most important is the assumption that private lives are of little consequence to public actions. Yet the study of Ireland's most distinguished parliamentarian, Charles Stewart Parnell, serves as a useful corrective to this view. Despite the absence of a Parnellite manuscript collection, scholars have considered in some detail not only Parnell's family background in County Wicklow,³ but his long-standing affair with the wife of one of his party colleagues.

Of course, the private lives of Irish backbench members were never as interesting or historically significant as Parnell's. But on a more modest level their personal lives were seen as having a direct bearing on the performance of their public functions. Separatist and heterodox nationalists criticised Irishmen who attended Westminster not only on political grounds, but also because of the fear that they would become 'anglicised' through association with England.⁴ This had been one of the objections of some Fenians (such as John O'Leary) to the

¹ Herbert Gladstone, *After Thirty Years* (London, 1928), p. xiii. ² This article considers only Irish nationalist MPs. For Unionist members, see Alvin Jackson, *The Ulster Party: Irish Unionists in the House of Commons, 1884-1911* (Oxford, 1989). ³ R.F. Foster, *Charles Stewart Parnell, The Man and His Family* (Brighton, 1976); *Paddy and Mr Punch* (London, 1993), pp. 40-61. ⁴ Patrick Maume, *The Long Gestation: Irish Nationalist Life 1891-1918* (Dublin, 1999), pp. 9-10, 50; Patricia Lavelle, *James O'Mara: A Staunch Sinn Féiner, 1873-1948* (Dublin, 1961), p. 72.

new departure.⁵ Parnell himself (as Arthur Griffith was later at pains to point out) had expressed similar sentiments.⁶ O'Brienites and Irish-American separatists also criticised MPs as 'enervated by association with English Liberals'.⁷ The image of the 'poor savage celt' divesting himself of the most obvious indications of his peasant background in order to 'edge ... his way into some Bayswater drawing-room' was one employed in some contemporary novels.⁸

While not without some currency, before 1916 this view co-existed with the idea (central to the party's self-image) that life and work at Westminster imposed unique financial, social and domestic pressures on Irish parliamentarians. The classic description of the embattled condition of the party at Westminster was produced by the veteran nationalist T.P. O'Connor (1880–1929) in 1929. O'Connor's account of everyday life for the average backbench Irish member in London was essentially a story of self-sacrifice, loneliness and extreme stoicism. 'I must drop a reminiscent tear', he wrote, 'as I think of these humble, uncomplaining, penniless men, some of them middle-aged, who gave all those years of silent and uncomplaining servitude to the cause'. According to O'Connor, Victorian Irish MPs lived ascetic lives in London – residing in cheap lodgings close to the House, spending their waking hours in the Palace, separated from family, ostracised by their British colleagues and too poor to afford any of the entertainments the imperial capital offered.⁹

Clearly, O'Connor's description of the party (written when he was in his late seventies) was deeply sentimental, nostalgic and consciously penned as a posthumous defence of his former colleagues. But how accurate was his account as a description of the experiences of Victorian and Edwardian backbench MPs in London?

II

As with all Members of Parliament, the amount of time Nationalist MPs actually spent 'sitting, acting and voting' in the chamber was only a portion of the total time they spent within the precincts of the House of Commons. Accordingly, by the late nineteenth century the Palace of Westminster had developed a range of facilities for its members which earned it the frequently used sobriquet of 'the best club in London'. Although individual Members of Parliament were entitled to nothing more than a peg for their hats and a locker, the nine acre site included a library of five rooms with space for about 90 MPs

5 John O'Beirne Ranelagh, 'The Irish Republican Brotherhood in the revolutionary period, 1879–1923', in D.G. Boyce (ed.), *The Revolution in Ireland, 1879–1923* (London, 1988), p. 137. 6 *FJ* [*Freeman's Journal*], 13 October 1910, p. 9. 7 *Cork Accent*, 17 February 1910, p. 1; *G-A* [*Gaelic-American*], 1 January 1910, p. 3. 8 George Moore, *Parnell and his Island* (London, 1887), pp. 142–3. 9 T.P. O'Connor, *Memoirs of an Old Parliamentarian* (London, 1929), pp. 61–6.

to work, a newspaper reading room, several smoking rooms, a post office, a terrace (which ran almost the full length of the Palace and which in summer was a 'society resort'), several dining rooms and 'vast kitchens' for the preparation and cooking of meals.

A combination of close attendance, poverty and a prohibition on pairing (at least in the 1880s and after 1900) meant that many Irish nationalist MPs spent considerable time in the precincts of the Palace, and had frequent opportunities to use its facilities. Indeed, as Michael McCarthy, the Unionist pamphleteer and former parliamentary lobbyist, put it, '[they] literally squatted at St Stephen's, coming down early and never leaving until the attendants shouted "Who goes home."' ¹⁰ Boredom would have been a constant problem, and Irish MPs discovered different ways to occupy themselves. ¹¹ According to T.P. O'Connor some Irish MPs smoked and played cards in the Irish whips' room. ¹² By 1914 William Field (MP 1892-1918) had a 'usual place in the shady corner of the Library' which he habitually occupied. ¹³ Alfred Webb (1890-95) also spent much of his time in the library and also remembered pleasant afternoons with Irish colleagues on the terrace, ¹⁴ as did J.P. Boland (1900-18). ¹⁵ Stephen Gwynn (1906-18) fondly recalled conversations with 'Long John' O'Connor (1885-1918) over bottles of House of Commons' claret. ¹⁶ Others, by contrast, engaged in more intellectual pursuits. Arthur Lynch (1909-18) read some of the 'extraordinary' books from the library. ¹⁷ Tom O'Donnell (1900-18) gave Irish lessons to several of his colleagues, ¹⁸ William Lundon (1900-9) discussed Celtic literature with Lloyd George, ¹⁹ while Justin McCarthy (1879-1900) recalled conversations with John Dillon (1880-1918) on their mutual passion for Herodotus. ²⁰ In turn, others had fond memories of their conversations with McCarthy. Indeed, for Michael Bodkin (1892-95), his company at dinner time was 'a delightful oasis in the dreary desert of the parliamentary day.' ²¹

¹⁰ M.J.F. McCarthy, *The Irish Revolution* (London, 1912), p. 460. ¹¹ Michael Bodkin, *Recollections of an Irish Judge: Press, Bar and Parliament* (London, 1914), pp. 194, 203. This seems to have been a particular problem during the passage of the third Home Rule Bill in 1912, see John Dillon's speech reported in *FJ*, 19 May 1913, p. 7. ¹² O'Connor, *Memoirs*, p. 63. According to the Liberal MP, Sir Alfred Pease, the Irish members particularly favoured 'a dismal underground smoking-room' - probably a reference to the whips' room, Sir Alfred Pease, *Elections and Reflections* (London, 1932), p. 250. ¹³ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 5th series, vol. 61, col. 477 (17 April 1914). ¹⁴ Alfred Webb, *The Autobiography of a Quaker Nationalist*, ed. Marie-Louise Legg (Cork, 1999), pp. 56-7. ¹⁵ J.P. Boland, *Irishman's Day: A Day in the Life of an Irish MP* (London, 1944), pp. 99-100. ¹⁶ Stephen Gwynn, "'Long John' - A Parliamentary Memoir', in *Memories of Enjoyment* (Tralee, 1946), p. 84. ¹⁷ Arthur Lynch, *My Life Story* (London, 1924), p. 262. ¹⁸ J.A. Gaughan, *A Political Odyssey: Thomas O'Donnell* (Dublin, 1983), p. 32. ¹⁹ *FJ*, 19 May 1913, p. 8. ²⁰ Justin McCarthy, *Reminiscences* (2 vols, London, 1899), II, 379. ²¹ Bodkin, *Recollections*, p. 241.

Bodkin dined in Parliament not only for the stimulating company, but also because poverty forced him to.²² The practice of Irish MPs taking meals in the House because of their impecuniosity long pre-dated the 1880s.²³ It also continued after Parnell; writing at the beginning of the twentieth century Sir Henry Lucy observed in his diary 'As for tomorrow, the House adjourns at six o'clock, and no one, not even an Irish Member, stays for dinner.'²⁴ Although such comments were occasionally the cause of tension,²⁵ in truth (as one parliamentary commentator observed), 'for quality and quantity combined, [the House of Commons' shilling dinner] can hardly, I think, be got for the money anywhere else in this country.'²⁶

III

The surviving evidence suggests that the political distinctions of the chamber were reflected elsewhere in the House. Irish nationalist members of all periods, for instance, seem to have habitually sat together during mealtimes.²⁷ However, Irish MPs were far more 'clubbable' than this might at first suggest. For as William O'Brien (1883–1918) put it:

Man by man, the House of Commons is full of bonhomie. Its judgments of men are often wrong, but they are never wrong by reason of any undue regard for the length of a man's purse or the number of his quarterings ... [it is only] when the hearty, tolerant (once in a way stupid) Englishmen of the smoking room or terrace flock in at the division-bell ... [that they] speak, as it were, *ex cathedra*, in the name of England, ruler of the waves ...²⁸

Beyond the chamber friendships and acquaintances could and did develop between members from different parties, and for many members the smoking room was where the informality of the House was at its most evident. Indeed, one nationalist MP of the 1890s (who neither smoked nor drank while in

²² Bodkin, *Recollections*, p. 188. ²³ Charles Dickens, 'A parliamentary sketch', in Michael Slater (ed.) *Dickens' Journalism* (London, 1994), p. 158. The author is obliged to Mr A.J. Heesom for this reference. ²⁴ Sir Henry Lucy, *The Balfourian Parliament, 1901–05* (London, 1906), p. 484. ²⁵ *Hansard*, 4th series, vol. 102, col. 575 (6 February 1902). ²⁶ Charles King, *The Asquith Parliament* (London, 1910), p. 88. Also see Robert Farquharson, *The House of Commons from Within* (London, 1912), p. 155. This high opinion was not shared by all, see, for instance, the comments of the *Freeman's* parliamentary correspondent, *FJ*, 21 February 1912, p. 7. ²⁷ Sir Richard Temple, *The House of Commons* (London, 1899), p. 44. This custom was maintained into the new century, as evidenced by the picture of 'The Irish Round Table at the House of Commons', 'in the seats reserved for them by courtesy', *Illustrated London News*, 30 October 1909, p. 615. ²⁸ William O'Brien, 'London revisited', *Contemporary Review*, 69 (June 1896), 808–9.

Parliament because of his poverty) found what he described as the 'social freemasonry' of the smoking-room extremely congenial.²⁹

Of course, such personal friendships and acquaintances were made between individuals and did not necessarily affect the standing of Irish backbenchers *per se*. It is clear, however, that attitudes (barring those of Tory backwoodsmen) towards nationalist members did change between 1885 and 1914. Men who were apparently regarded with curiosity, not to say hostility, in the 1880s, came to be seen (sometimes even affectionately) as part of its political furniture. In part this followed the decline of obstruction and the advent of the Liberal alliance. But within the House of Commons itself, perceptions of Irish members seem to have been principally influenced by their growing reputation for humour.

Historically, Parliament had laughed at, rather than with, Irish members. E.M. Whitty wrote in 1853 that the House was grateful to 'Celtic Gentlemen' for the amusement they provided, '[they] are as silly, as broguey, as useless, as quarrelsome, and as contemptible as ever they were'.³⁰ Though perhaps less disdainful, later generations of British parliamentarians also had entertainment at the expense of Irish members. In particular 'bulls' (mistakes or unintentionally humorous mixed metaphors) were synonymous with nationalist MPs.³¹ According to Shane Leslie, 'There was always a new Irish story passing through the lobbies'.³² However, in later years Irish members seem also to have won a reputation for their wit and humour.³³ As the former lobby correspondent, Sir Alexander Mackintosh, wrote, '[after 1918] Irish Nationalists were missed by old British colleagues. Life was seldom dull while they were in force at Westminster, with their vivacity and humour. Personally they were not unpopular'.³⁴

Michael Bodkin put Parliament's appreciation of humour down to the fact that 'all [other] forms of entertainment are rigorously excluded from the precincts of Westminster'.³⁵ Chess was the exception to this rule, and, interestingly, was played by several nationalist members to a high standard. Colonel John Nolan (1872-1906), for instance, had a reputation while in Parliament as the best player in the House of Commons; James O'Mara (1900-7) won an inter-parliamentary

²⁹ Bodkin, *Recollections*, pp. 202-3. ³⁰ E.M. Whitty, *History of the Session 1852-3: a Parliamentary Retrospect* (London, 1853), pp. 127-8. ³¹ E.M. Thomas (ed.), *Fifty Years of Fleet Street being the Life and Recollections of Sir John R. Robinson* (London 1904), p. 47. See also Spencer Leigh Hughes, *Press, Platform and Parliament* (London, 1918), p. 161; Sir Henry Lucy, *Lords and Commoners* (London, 1921), p. 90. ³² Shane Leslie, *The Film of Memory* (London, 1938), p. 369. ³³ See, for instance, the story of Joseph Ronayne in Michael MacDonagh, *Irish Life and Character* (London, 1905), p. 279; *The Pageant of Parliament* (2 vols, London, 1921), vol. 1, 127. This story forms the basis for a similar episode in Arthur Lynch, *O'Rourke the Great: A Novel* (London, 1921), pp. 87-90. ³⁴ Sir Alexander Mackintosh, *Echoes of Big Ben: a Journalist's Parliamentary Diary (1881-1940)* (London, 1946), p. 85. Others expressed similar sentiments at the disappearance of the Irish Party, see Harry Furniss, *Some Victorian Men* (London, 1924), p. 111; A.S.T. Griffith-Boscawen, *Memories* (London, 1925), p. 263; Lucy, *Lords and Commoners*, p. 113. ³⁵ Bodkin, *Recollections*, p. 205.

chess tournament as MP for South Kilkenny, and John Howard Parnell (1895–1900) was a member of the Commons' Chess Circle and was on the team that played a match via cable against the American House of Representatives.³⁶ In 1914 David Sheehy (1885–1918) was numbered among 'a distinguished little band which forgathers in one of the smoking rooms to play chess.'³⁷

Sportsmen in the House of Commons also fielded a cricket team against sides from English public schools, such as nearby Westminster. Several Irish members followed or enjoyed cricket; indeed, J.P. Boland had captained the Christ Church XI when at Oxford and been invited to play for the University. However, he did not play for Parliament because as a party whip there was 'always the risk of vital divisions before 6.30 p.m. when the match, if played on a parliamentary day, might be expected to end'.³⁸ Lack of time may also account for why so few nationalist MPs participated in the annual parliamentary golf tournament, although Vincent Kennedy (1904–18) did play in 1907.³⁹ However, if golf and cricket proved inconvenient, other parliamentary occasions were not so problematic. For instance, in May 1911 the Parliamentary Aerial Defence Committee organised a flying demonstration at Hendon at which numerous Irish MPs attended; among those who flew in the aircraft were two nationalist members.⁴⁰

Anecdotal as this evidence largely is, it nonetheless suggests that the old party refrain 'in Parliament, but not of it',⁴¹ was by 1914 to a considerable extent no longer true (if, indeed, it had ever been quite so absolute). Although formally the party continued to exempt itself from symbolic occasions such as the opening of Parliament,⁴² many members of the Edwardian party do not appear to have remained aloof from the domestic life of the House of Commons and, whatever their rhetoric, it seems that working in an alien assembly was not as inhospitable as was sometimes claimed.⁴³

IV

As a demonstration of their ideological commitment and in response to the hostility shown by some British MPs, during the 1880s Irish MPs subscribed to a 'self-denying ordinance' which led them to boycott London society.⁴⁴ William O'Brien fondly recalled socialising with his colleagues, who were 'as merry as

36 *FJ*, 1 February 1912, p. 9; Lavelle, *James O'Mara*, p. 37; *II [Irish Independent]*, 28 November 1910, p. 4; L.A. Atherley-Jones, *Looking Back. Reminiscences of a Political Career* (London, 1925), p. 50. 37 *London Opinion*, 7 March 1914, p. 419. 38 Boland, *Irishman's Day*, p. 24. 39 *The Times*, 7 April 1909, p. 16. 40 *II*, 13 May 1911, p. 4. 41 McCarthy, *Irish Revolution*, p. 460. 42 *FJ*, 15 February 1912, p. 7. 43 This had limits. For instance, in July 1912 many British members attended a garden party hosted by the king at Windsor, for which the Commons allowed itself a half-holiday. None of the Irish party attended, *FJ*, 19 July 1912, p. 6. 44 Stephen Gwynn, *John Redmond's Last Years* (London, 1919), p. 13.

campaigners in their mess tent'.⁴⁵ T.P. O'Connor, by contrast, had memories of dreary evenings spent talking about nothing but politics.⁴⁶ J.F.X. O'Brien (1885–1905) recalled that Parnell did not approve of 'social intercourse' within the party.⁴⁷ After 1900, a better feeling seems to have existed within the party and there were more social occasions organised for Irish MPs.⁴⁸

Beyond the immediate company of their parliamentary colleagues, Irish MPs also associated themselves with the wider London–Irish community through the large number of clubs and societies founded by earlier generations of Irish immigrants.⁴⁹ Of course, Irish MPs tended to be most involved in political organisations,⁵⁰ but they also actively participated in the meetings of Irish literary and sporting groups. For instance, Irish MPs joined the Southwark Irish Literary Club in the 1880s and the Irish Literary Society in the 1900s.⁵¹ In the 1890s numerous Irish members attended Gaelic games as spectators, while in the new century Boland was a moving force in the annual Aonach of the London Gaelic League.⁵² In 1914, 12 Irish members played in a tournament against the London Irish Golfing Society.⁵³ Seventeen Irish MPs were members of the Irish Club in London; Tom Condon said of it in 1913, 'The institution, to those of them who were merely birds of passage in London, was more than a club – it was a home.'⁵⁴

But while Irish members continued to be involved at various levels with the Irish community in London, in later years many Irish MPs (though by no means all) seem to have accepted the hospitality of politically sympathetic British hosts.⁵⁵ In 1893, for example, an open-air production of *The Tempest* at Pope's Villa in Twickenham was hosted by the Radical Henry Labouchere; among the numerous guests were Sir William Harcourt (then chancellor of the exchequer), John Redmond (1881–1918), Dr Kenny (1885–96) and John Dillon (1880–1918).⁵⁶ Edwardian Irish members continued to be invited to social gatherings hosted by members from both sides of the House.⁵⁷ Gentlemen's clubs were another environment wherein nationalist MPs mixed with their British colleagues, among whom club membership was widespread.⁵⁸ With a handful of exceptions, the great majority of Irish MPs who joined a club did so after

45 O'Brien, 'London revisited', p. 810. 46 O'Connor, *Memoirs*, p. 65. 47 J.F.X. O'Brien, unpublished autobiography, O'Brien Papers [OBP], National Library of Ireland, Ms 13,429. 48 Boland, *Irishman's Day*, p. 20. 49 Jonathan Schneer, *London 1900: the Imperial Metropolis* (New Haven and London, 1999), p. 172. 50 For instance, John O'Connor was president of the Irish Parliamentary Branch of the London UIL. This branch regularly hosted guest lecturers, among them Irish MPs. 51 M.F. Ryan, *Fenian Memories* (Dublin, 1945), pp. 157–8. 52 *Ibid.*; Boland, *Irishman's Day*, p. 44. 53 *II*, 6 May 1914, p. 4. 54 *FJ*, 18 March 1913, p. 6. 55 Gwynn, *Redmond's Last Years*, p. 13. 56 W.S. Blunt, *My Diaries: Being a Personal Narrative of Events, 1888–1914* (2 vols, London, 1919), vol. 1, 137. 57 Gaughan, *Odyssey*, p. 32. John O'Connor, for instance, often went to stay at Walmer, the residence of Robert Reid, *Daily Telegraph*, 29 October 1928, p. 15. 58 Anthon Taddei, *London Clubs in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1999), p. 15.

1886 and were members of the National Liberal Club: 36 in the late 1880s (following the Liberal alliance) and approximately 30 in 1914.⁵⁹ Irish MPs were remembered with affection by English clubmen.⁶⁰

Although only a minority (albeit a substantial one) of nationalist MPs joined London clubs or were prominent in London society, this was a source of criticism from disgruntled nationalists at home who saw it as dangerous fraternisation.⁶¹ Members of the party clearly resented such criticism, but though frequently prepared to allude to their hardships they rarely advanced beyond generalities with regard to the strains of living in London.⁶² And yet practical difficulties there undoubtedly were. Members had not only to feed, clothe and house themselves while living in London, but provide the same for their families if they were married, run businesses in Ireland *in absentia*, and commute between the two islands.

V

Very little is known about how MPs regarded their adopted city. Stephen Gwynn described himself as 'willingly a Londoner; I am as much at home in these streets where I never even think of meeting an acquaintance, as in Dublin where one constantly stops or is stopped by the way for a little conversation'.⁶³ Some were appalled by the poverty of the metropolis,⁶⁴ while others found the incessant rain and the air pollution intolerable.⁶⁵ Moreover, for many Irish members, accustomed to the small, modestly populated towns of provincial Ireland, London must have seemed a 'strange landscape'.⁶⁶ George Moore wrote of how, when his fictional MP, James Daly, walked out of Euston station he was 'dazzled, bewildered, and a little cowed'.⁶⁷ For some, awe was tempered by feelings of ambivalence or even antipathy. J.F.X. O'Brien, who lived in London for many years and brought his children up there, apparently 'hate[d] living in the enemies country and long[ed] to return to Ireland'.⁶⁸ And William O'Brien recalled how 'to me the most delightful prospect in all great London was the Euston railway platform, because it was the way out of it.' Yet, despite this, he also had a sneaking regard for the imperial capital. As he wrote in 1896 'I never saw London in such monstrous health ... No suggestion of a *fin de siècle* here.'⁶⁹

59 Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Parnell and his Party, 1880-1890* (Oxford, 1957), p. 331; II, 19 January 1914, p. 4. 60 Robert Steven, *The National Liberal Club* (London, 1925), p. 20. 61 For instance, see *FJ*, 11 January 1910, p. 9; *G-A*, 15 January 1910, p. 3; 24 September 1910, p. 3. 62 For example, see *FJ*, 8 December 1909, p. 8. 63 Stephen Gwynn, *Experiences of a Literary Man* (London, 1926), p. 11. 64 James Hogan, *Australian in London*, pp. 224-5; *Hansard*, 5th series, vol. 41, col. 139 (15 July 1912); *Connacht Tribune*, 11 December 1909, p. 5. 65 *Longford Leader*, 23 November 1912, p. 4. 66 *FJ*, 6 November 1913, p. 8. 67 Moore, *Parnell*, p. 141. 68 J.F.X. O'Brien to Thomas Sexton, undated, OBP, Ms 13,429. 69 O'Brien, 'London revisited', pp. 808-9, 812.

On a more practical level, the finding of suitable accommodation for Irish members was one of their most important requirements. But while house-hunting was possible for some British members,⁷⁰ many Irish MPs would have been unfamiliar with London and its housing market and would, therefore, have been dependent on house agents or more experienced colleagues. Michael Meagher (1906–18), for instance, wrote to James O'Mara, shortly after the former had been elected in 1907, 'at your convenience look up suitable quarters for me in a quiet corner of the suburbs of the city and in direct communication by train with the House of Commons. You know I am a green man being never in London.'⁷¹ Although a small number of Irish MPs chose to live permanently in London, most only lived there during the session. They lived in a variety of accommodation; some in 'hotels', others in their clubs, but the majority in 'furnished lodgings ... [which they took] by the week, and left them at the termination of the parliamentary session'.⁷²

Although Michael Bodkin held that 'comfortable lodgings can be had at a reasonable cost within measurable distance of the House',⁷³ the weight of anecdotal evidence would seem to contradict this statement. T.P. O'Connor, for example, referred to backbench members as having lived in pairs in cramped lodgings in the 'cheap district of Pimlico'. C.J. O'Donnell, himself an MP between 1906 and 1910, remembered that '[m]ost of them lived in squalor across the river in Lambeth'.⁷⁴ George Moore also depicted his fictional Irish member living in Lambeth,⁷⁵ while in his fictionalised account of the life of an Irish MP, *O'Rourke the Great*, Arthur Lynch wrote of O'Rourke living in 'digs' consisting of 'one bedroom, second floor back, in a dingy lodging-house, of which, however, the grimy entrance was cleaner than his little den'.⁷⁶ But while quite plausible (given their modest incomes), each of these authors may have had an interest in depicting Irish members as poor and miserably domiciled, and more recent research suggests that Irish MPs of all eras lived in different types and conditions of accommodation in various parts of London.⁷⁷

For those MPs who were married, living in London usually entailed protracted separation from their wives and families. However, marriage itself was not the norm within the party. As John Redmond told his colleagues in 1912, 'One of the reproaches that still attaches, I am sorry to say, to our Party, is that the number of bachelors amongst us is too great'.⁷⁸ The reasons for this were several. For those elected in the 1880s, involvement in agrarian radicalism often meant that they led disrupted personal lives. For instance, William O'Brien's

⁷⁰ For instance, see A.T. Bassett, *The Life of the Rt. Hon John Edward Ellis, MP* (London, 1914), p. 61. ⁷¹ Michael Meagher to James O'Mara, 17 February 1906, O'Mara Papers, National Library of Ireland, Ms 21,545 [3]. ⁷² *FJ*, 9 January 1913, p. 7; 11 July 1914, p. 7. ⁷³ Bodkin, *Recollections*, p. 188. ⁷⁴ C.J. O'Donnell, *Outraged Ulster* (London, 1932), p. 26. ⁷⁵ Moore, *Parnell*, p. 142. ⁷⁶ Lynch, *O'Rourke*, p. 95. ⁷⁷ See James McConnell, 'The View from the Backbench: Irish Nationalist MPs and their Work, 1910–1914' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Durham, 2002), p. 262. ⁷⁸ *FJ*, 9 May 1912, p. 7.

'myriad public activities ... his incessant speechmaking, his dodging of the police, his frequent jail terms, all coupled with his duties as editor and Member of Parliament – were not conducive to regulated living',⁷⁹ nor to meeting potential wives (though this lifestyle seems not so much to have prevented marriage, as delayed it).

Although in later decades imprisonment and evasion of the police were no longer so commonplace, marriage for those Irish MPs who entered Parliament as bachelors may still have remained difficult because their dual lives at Westminster and in Ireland, their relative poverty and the anti-social hours they worked may not have made them particularly eligible as husbands. Nonetheless, there was a certain social cachet attached to being an MP,⁸⁰ and some Irish members did successfully court their future wives on the terrace or at dinner in the House.⁸¹ However, such opportunities were not confined to single men. Even for those who were married, the social milieu of the terrace, combined with extended absences from home, could lead to what T.P. O'Connor described as 'temporary scrapes'.⁸² Ironically, O'Connor himself may have had several such 'scrapes'.⁸³ His wife, a socially ambitious American divorcee, did not provide the domestic security O'Connor craved, though in fairness O'Connor was not an attentive husband and she suffered considerably from his long absences. By 1907, she was threatening to divorce O'Connor unless her maintenance was paid. The consequent scandal would, as the leadership knew, have been disastrous and so she was paid for her silence.⁸⁴ This was not the only backbench marital scandal which had to be discretely managed between 1880 and 1918.⁸⁵

VI

Because of prevailing middle class morality, Catholic doctrine and (after 1891) the legacy of the Parnell scandal, divorce was obviously difficult for an Irish nationalist representative. However, marital complications were not the only means by which MPs could embarrass the party. Equally problematical was the attraction (particularly to often impecunious Irish members) of non-executive directorships offered by companies wishing to exploit the status or contacts of

79 Joseph V. O'Brien, *William O'Brien and the Course of Irish Politics, 1881–1918* (Berkeley, 1976), p. ix. 80 Bodkin, *Recollections*, p. 214. 81 Webb, *Autobiography*, p. 56; F.S.L. Lyons, *John Dillon* (London, 1968), p. 253; Bessie O'Connor, *I Myself* (London, 1914), p. 142; Sophie O'Brien, *Golden Memories* (Dublin, 1930), p. 23, Bridget Boland, *At My Mother's Knee* (London, 1978), p. 136. 82 O'Connor, *Memoirs*, p. 65. 83 L.W. Brady, *T.P. O'Connor and the Liverpool Irish* (London, 1983), pp. 157–8. 84 John Redmond to John Dillon, 8 November 1907, Dillon Papers [DP], Trinity College Dublin, Ms 6747/229. 85 See Colonel Jameson to John Dillon, 27 March 1896, DP, Ms 6755/722; FJ, 27 March 1896, p. 5; Redmond memoranda, 3 March, 10 April, 1905, Redmond Papers [RP], National Library of Ireland, Ms 15,214 [3].

an MP.⁸⁶ Some members publicly disdained such offers,⁸⁷ while others decided on balance to put their reputations first. Justin McCarthy, for example, was offered £500 a year to join the board of a company dealing in Irish cattle; he refused because 'everybody here and in Ireland would know – must know – that I had merely sold my name for the money'.⁸⁸ Other members consulted the leadership before proceeding. William Abraham (1885–1915), for instance, wrote to John Dillon in 1897 asking if his involvement with a Brixton music hall company was compatible with his membership of the party.⁸⁹ As a director Abraham was to be paid £250 – no small sum, particularly for Irish members who tended to be poorer than their British counterparts. Although the vast majority of nationalist MPs who held directorships did so quite legitimately, inevitably some MPs were implicated in financial scandals.⁹⁰

Such proposals were sometimes difficult to resist because parliamentary service often made working difficult. Indeed, both privately and publicly, Irish MPs testified to the damage being an MP could have on careers and professional reputations.⁹¹ However, some Irish MPs (particular journalists and barristers) could and did benefit professionally from the prestige and useful connections Parliament provided.⁹² Still, working two jobs was not easy. Stephen Gwynn had thought that 'it would not be difficult to combine my writing work with attendance at the House of Commons. Other people had done it – "T.P." and Justin McCarthy most notably.' But he later realized that '[n]o outsider can guess the strain involved by this double role.'⁹³ T.P. O'Connor himself remembered the difficulty of having to write a leading article to a dead-line of nine o'clock in the morning when 'it was a common if not a usual thing for me to be in the House of Commons till two or three o'clock in the morning'.⁹⁴ Justin McCarthy had similar 'grumbles'.⁹⁵ For some, the pressure was sometimes too much. As James O'Mara, a member of the London Home and Foreign Produce Exchange, wrote to a clerical friend in 1904, 'The doctor is not at all sure that I can stand the strain of a double career, but time will tell.'⁹⁶

For those not of independent means or whose professions did not permit them to work during the session (such as farmers, shopkeepers and even solicitors) there was the parliamentary stipend.⁹⁷ This system of defraying the costs

⁸⁶ MacDonagh, *Parliament*, p. 59; *The Times*, 25 May 1898, p. 3. ⁸⁷ *Kerry People*, 8 January 1910, p. 7. ⁸⁸ Justin McCarthy, *Our Book of Memories: Letters of Justin McCarthy to Mrs Campbell Praed* (London, 1912), p. 215. ⁸⁹ William Abraham to John Dillon, 7 October 1897, DP, Ms 6752/4. ⁹⁰ Maume, *Long Gestation*, p. 34; *The Times*, 30 April 1914, p. 4. ⁹¹ For instance, see Boland, *Mother's Knee*, p. 42; FJ, 5 October 1910, p. 7; W.B. Wells, *John Redmond* (London, 1919), pp. 232–3; James Gibney to John Dillon, 11 April 1896, DP, Ms 6754/507; Michael McCartan to John Dillon, 21 November 1896, *ibid.*, Ms 6756/974. ⁹² Atherley-Jones, *Looking Back*, p. 146. ⁹³ Gwynn, *Literary Man*, p. 251. ⁹⁴ O'Connor, *Memoirs*, p. 258. ⁹⁵ Justin McCarthy, *The Story of an Irishman* (London, 1904), pp. 220–1. ⁹⁶ Lavelle, *O'Mara*, p. 59. ⁹⁷ For the history of the allowance, see O'Brien, *Parnell and his Party*, pp. 265–72; Alan O'Day, *The English Face of Irish Nationalism* (London, 1977), pp. 43–6; F.S.L. Lyons, *The Irish*

incurred by MPs incidental to their 'sitting, acting and voting' at Westminster was much criticised by the party's enemies, while for the party it not only constituted an enormous burden on its finances,⁹⁸ but for some members was simply not enough to live on.⁹⁹ Thus, it might be thought that the Irish Party would have welcomed the payment of MPs by the state introduced in 1911. But for the party, the main issue was not the impecuniosity of individual members, but whether acceptance of state payment compromised its self-denying ordinance of refusing position or patronage from the British government. Under pressure from its Liberal allies (and perhaps backbench discontent) the party leadership eventually discreetly capitulated.

But what difference did payment make to Irish members' quality of life? In fact, despite furnishing the party's critics with yet more ammunition in the years up to 1918, it seems that the receipt of the £400 paid by the state made comparatively little difference because there is evidence to suggest that the money was pooled and that members only took a subsistence allowance.¹ Furthermore, in 1911 the government did not make separate provision for the travelling expenses of members.² This was of particular concern to Irish MPs, for whom commuting between England and Ireland was a way of life. Indeed, so much was this so that it influenced the party's collective persona. As Harry Furniss, the parliamentary illustrator for numerous London newspapers and magazines, wrote when he recalled the introduction of the first Home Rule Bill:

Some of the Irish MPs, so as to secure their seats, wrapped themselves up in their railway rugs and slept on the benches in the House, placing their cards in their places when they awoke the following morning ... a certain Tory wag entered the House when the Irish MPs were asleep – as they frequently are on the train journey backwards and forwards to Holyhead – and awoke them all by calling out: 'Tickets please! All change here for College Green,' and that a certain Member for Ireland, whose imagination had carried him into mid-Channel, was heard to murmur faintly, 'Steward!'³

As frequent commuters, Irish MPs had a great deal of experience of the rail network connecting the two countries and brought many of the problems they experienced to the attention of the government.⁴ This political pressure, com-

Parliamentary Party, 1890–1910 (1951, Westport, CT, 1975), pp. 201–17. For a survey of Irish parliamentary finance in the nineteenth century, see William Gwynn, 'The finances of the Irish nationalist movement', in *Democracy and the Cost of Politics in Great Britain* (London, 1962), pp. 129–46. ⁹⁸ John Redmond to John Dillon, August 1906, DP, Ms 6747/185. ⁹⁹ John Redmond to Eugene Crean, 10 May 1903, DP, Ms 6747/39; Laurence Ginnell to John Redmond, 10 September 1906, RP, Ms 15191 [3]. ¹ *Report from the Select Committee on Members' Expenses*, Parliamentary Papers, 1920 (255) VII, 650. ² *FJ*, 10 October 1912, p. 10. ³ Furniss, *Victorian Men*, p. 111. ⁴ 'M.A.' and J.F. Reid, *Life of William Field* (Dublin, 1918), p. 31.

bined with improvements in transportation, meant that by 1914 the London-Dublin journey took only nine hours.⁵ Still for many it was physically demanding: a boat train from Euston to Holyhead, from there by ferry to Kingstown, and from Kingstown onwards to their destination. In fact, so demanding was the journey considered that to it was attributed the early deaths of numerous Irish MPs.⁶ As the *Freeman's Journal* observed, when James O'Connor (1892-1910) died in March 1910, 'it can be said that in nearly all of [such instances] ... the sad event [was] hastened by the strain of travelling to and attending at Westminster'.⁷

Of course, not all of such deaths should be attributed to the exigencies of parliamentary life; age (by 1910 an average of 50 for the party) was also an important consideration. F.S.L. Lyons considered this age low enough for the party to be an active one, but in terms of health and general fitness, it was certainly old enough for many members to have been suffering from the normal complaints associated with middle age.⁸ However, while age was undoubtedly an influence on the health and well-being of Irish members, the life-style imposed on MPs by close attendance at Westminster was also a factor. The Palace of Westminster itself was reputed to be permeated with 'poisonous dust, probably charged with influenza germs'.⁹ A more serious problem was the late nights and the fatigue this caused.¹⁰ The long hours endured by parliamentarians, and the boredom which they endured, were sometimes relieved by the availability of subsidised tobacco and alcohol.¹¹ In fact, T.P. O'Connor wrote of how the Commons as a social environment could sometimes have deleterious effects on both individuals and whole parties,¹² and perhaps out of concern for this, Keir Hardie, during his leadership of the Independent Labour Party, 'laid down the rule that no MP should touch drink during Parliamentary hours'.¹³

While the claims of Edwardian nationalists that the lives of those members who died in parliamentary harness had been hastened by their selfless service were exaggerated, it seems clear that the health of a not insubstantial number of MPs was impaired, if often only temporarily, as a result of parliamentary service. John Redmond, for instance, was often exhausted at the end of the parliamentary session.¹⁴ As he wrote to John Dillon in August 1906 from Ireland, 'We have had variable weather here, but have been out shooting every day and I feel

5 D.B. McNeill, *Irish Passenger Steamship Services* (2 vols, Newton Abbott, 1971), vol. 1, 13-14, 24-6. 6 *FJ*, 7 December 1909, p. 9. 7 *Ibid.*, 14 March 1910, p. 7. Also see the obituaries of P.J. Power and P.A. Meehan, *ibid.*, 9 January 1913, p. 7; 12 May 1913, p. 6. 8 Lyons, *Parliamentary Party*, p. 158. 9 Barnett Cocks, *Mid-Victorian Masterpiece* (London, 1977), p. 110. 10 Arthur Lynch, *My Life Story* (London, 1924), p. 248; A. Rainy, *The Life of Adam Rolland Rainy* (Glasgow, 1915), p. 357. 11 King, *Asquith Parliament*, pp. 86-7, 91. 12 O'Connor, *Memoirs*, p. 63. 13 Fenner Brockway, *Inside the Left: Thirty Years of Platform, Press, Prison and Parliament* (London, 1942), pp. 221-2. 14 John Redmond to John Dillon, 21 March 1905, DP, Ms 6747/133; John Redmond to John Dillon, 31 July 1906, *ibid.*, Ms 6747/180.

quite recovered from London – the last month which nearly knocked me over.¹⁵ J.G.S. MacNeill (1887–1918) found that with the ‘abruptness of the change from my tranquil life in Dublin to the strenuousness of party warfare in the House of Commons, my health gave way’, and the biographer of Edward Blake (1892–1907) has written that ‘There is no doubt that, from the material viewpoint, his Irish career was a losing battle, for his health was seriously impaired by overwork.’¹⁶

VII

The evidence considered here suggests that if the standard of living of Irish MPs after 1900 was better than that of their late Victorian predecessors, living in London and working at Westminster continued to pose significant financial problems for many Edwardian members.¹⁷ Granted, it seems clear that Irish members were much more socially and culturally integrated within the House of Commons than in 1880, while beyond Westminster the substantial number of Irish MPs who were associated with the National Liberal Club illustrates the close political and social links between the Irish and Liberal parties. However, the image of these years which is most vivid is not the MP using the House of Commons ‘as a kind of step ladder for climbing into the drawing rooms of London’,¹⁸ but of the often bored backbencher in his lodging-house ‘looking at the four walls’ or ‘wandering aimlessly around the House striving to kill time’.¹⁹ Such experiences should be acknowledged without immediately being juxtaposed with those of the men of 1916.

¹⁵ John Redmond to John Dillon, 17 August 1906, *ibid.*, Ms 6747/183; *FJ*, 2 December 1912, p. 6. ¹⁶ J.G.S. MacNeill, *What I have Seen and Heard* (London, 1925), p. 259; M.A. Banks, *Edward Blake: Irish Nationalist* (Toronto, 1957), p. 343. ¹⁷ Jackson, *The Ulster Party*, pp. 92–3. ¹⁸ *Hansard*, 4th series, vol. 116, col. 688 (20 December 1902). ¹⁹ *Longford Leader*, 23 November 1912, p. 4.