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Character Study of John Redmond Leader of the Irish Party

(By Louis J. McQuillan in "To-day")

The leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party and of the Irish People is not a publicist. In the Press he is very seldom referred to in any other relation but that of politics; whereas, with regard to most public men, we are constantly regaled with personal fit-bits as to their private life, their views on art and literature, their predilections and their hobbies. Only on very special occasions does John Redmond give a newspaper interview, and then it is invariably on some point of Irish policy. Yet there is a very human personality behind that of Redmond, the politician, upon which Mr. Louis J. McQuillan, at one time Secretary to the Irish Leader, throws a clear light.

Those English people—and there are many of them—who regard the Irish Celt as a wild and unsettled creature, and, as such, unfit to look after his own affairs, would be inclined to modify their views, at least, as to one particular Celt, if they encountered John Redmond, or even studied his career. He is about as wild as a Parliamentary Statute and as unbalanced as Big Ben. Before surveying his record as a politician, it may be well to indicate what manner of man this is who has led the Irish Parliamentary Party, and been the mouthpiece of the Irish race, at home and abroad, for the past sixteen years, with such strong suavity.

An Amiable Hawk.
It is a great fallacy to say that the camera never lies. This is only the illusion of photographers. The camera, especially in the case of leading men and women, nearly always lies. Mr. John Redmond's true appearance has never been revealed in any photograph I have ever seen of him; and the public, which has to judge of celebrities mainly at second hand, are not at all familiar with the Irish Leader's appearance. He makes a better subject for caricature, but the cartoonist almost always depicts him as a sharp-beaked bird of prey, instead of which he resembles an amiable hawk.

The living Redmond is a man of middle height, and inclined to rotundity; but escapes the reproach of the skill of his tailor. He is one of the most carefully-dressed men in the House of Commons, though he never affects any extreme smartness. He is always irreproachably neat. His coats are never crumpled, and his trousers have no creases except the orthodox ones. He is a consistent wearer of button-holes, and when violets are in he had, he wears no other bloom. He has small hands and feet. His figure is very erect, and well thrown back from the shoulders. In gait he is very light and jaunty. The nose is prominent and curved, just eluding the Semitic mouth full-lipped but firm, the upper lip shaded by a short, wiry grey moustache. He has the clear complexion of the out-of-doors man in spite of this thirty-five years' experience of the somewhat jaded air of Westminster. His eyes are very full-orbed and prominent, with a good deal of white showing. The pupils are at once keen and placid.

Imperialist and Orator.

The brogue is not so perceptible in his voice as it is in that of his political protagonist, Sir Edward Carson, and the voice itself is somewhat hoarse. It is, however, very resonant and compelling. His favourite attitude is with head well thrown back and hands firmly grasping the lapels of his frock-coat. He is one of the few orators in the House, and a master of the grand manner. The matter of his speeches consists of large, simple phrases, of which every word tells. Unlike Mr. Dillon, he is never carried away by any personal factor in debate. Through many stormy years he has seen the House surging to tempests great and little, and he has schooled himself to serenity. When he is impassioned, it is with the well-graced passion of the great actor. He has never lost himself with a phrase, or sacrificed a principle for an epigram. On one occasion only have I known him to speak on impulse, and it was an impulsion of genius—his famous declaration in the House, when he offered all his great influence, without condition, in aid of England and her Empire. The Irish leader has always been a strong Imperialist, and with great reason too, for men of his race occupy leading positions in every Parliament in the Colonies.

Mr. Redmond is a great House of Commons man. He has described it as an assembly "where sooner or later every man finds his proper level, where mediocrity will never permanently succeed, and where ability will never permanently fail." He himself was once a clerk at the table of the House.

He takes advantage, however, of any respite from politics to go to his country seat, Aughavannagh, at Aughrim, Co. Wicklow. He is a very keen short and a skillful fisherman, and takes a practical interest in farming. His favourite companion in the country, as in the House of Commons, is the Irish Chief Whip, Mr. Pat O'Brien, who has an admiration amounting to worship, of his leader—"The Chairman," as he always calls him. The Irish leader, though a connoisseur of literature and the stage, has been compelled by the exigencies of his position to devote most of his reading to Blue Books and Reports of Special Commissions. He has no eccentricities, but has one marked hobby—is not vainly that inspires this taste, as most of the cartoons he has collected are of a distinctly unflattering description; but the saving Celtic quality of humour enable him to survey these with a smiling face.

Redmond began his career at the General Election of 1880, being Parnell's successful nominee for the constituency of New Ross, immediately after Parnell had succeeded Isaac Butt in the leadership of the Irish Party. Just after the declaration of the poll by the High Sheriff, the latest member of the Party received a wire from Parnell from Westminster, urging him not to lose an hour crossing to England. Redmond started at once, travelling all night. On the way he received another wire, saying that the House was still sitting. He drove straight from the station to the House of Commons tired and travel-stained, but eager for the fray. On his arrival at Westminster, the House had been sitting for forty hours. The floor was littered with papers.

An Impression of Parnell

There were a few dishevelled and weary Irish members on one side, and about a hundred infuriated Englishmen on the other, some of them in evening dress, and wearing as he humorously puts it, what were once the white shirts of the night before last. His impression of his leader must be given in his own exact words:

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Mr. Parnell was on his legs, with pale cheeks and drawn face, his hands clenched behind his back, facing without flinching a continuous roar of interruption. I stood there at the Bar, with my rough travelling coat still upon me, gazing alternately with indignation and admiration at the amazing scene enacted before me. Here, then, was the great Parliament of England! Of intelligent debate there was none. It was one unbroken scene of turbulence and disorder. The few Irishmen remained quiet—too amused, perhaps, or too exhausted to retaliate. It was the Englishmen—the members of the first assembly of gentlemen in Europe as they love to style it—who howled and roared and almost foamed at the mouth with rage, at the calm and pale-faced young man who stood patiently facing them and endeavouring from time to time to make himself heard.

This is an impression of Mr. Redmond's youth; and the House has changed, in some respects for better, and in many for worse, since that first dramatic coup d'oeil of his; but his view of his great leader and predecessor remains unchanged. In the Irish camp there are no longer wars of Farnellites and anti-Parnellites. The terms are almost forgotten now. John Redmond himself is the last of the Farnellites; and by the policy of Parnell—qualified in temper, but not in principle, by the circumstances of the changing times—he is to-day, as his followers claim for him, "leader of the Irish race at home and abroad," so far, at least, as Irish Nationalist Constitutionalism is concerned.

Immediately after John Redmond was introduced to the Speaker he made his maiden speech, and was forthwith suspended. This is the history, not of a movement, but a man; and I will not go into the history of Redmond's service in the Irish Party under Parnell. Suffice it to say that he followed the fortunes of his leader through thick and thin. In November, 1890, when, as a result of the O'Shea divorce case, Parnell lost the leadership of the Party, Redmond was the most strenuous of his supporters, and left Committee Room No. 15 with his leader and those of the members who stood by him. In the autumn of the following year Parnell died. Redmond carried on the Parnellite tradition, with a much-reduced following, as he had only eight supporters in the House.

Ten Years in the Wilderness

John Redmond and his small band of stalwarts spent ten years in the wilderness; but in 1900 he was unanimously called to the leadership of the Irish Party. Mr. Justin McCarthy having proven too mildly tolerant for the job, and Mr. John Dillon too violently emotional.

Under Mr. Redmond's direction the Irish Nationalists have done great things for their country. The evicted tenants have been restored to the land, a peasant proprietorship has been established, Ireland has been endowed with a Roman Catholic University, the tide of emigration has been checked, the country has risen from poverty to something like prosperity. Two years ago the supreme objective of the Irish Parliamentary Party was ostensibly achieved by the placing of the Home Rule Act on the Statute Book. Home Rulers claim that all these concessions are the result of constant circumstantial evidence to justify their statement.

One thing can be said without reserve, and that is that the wise and far-seeing statesmanship of John Redmond has materially given Ireland and her place among the small nations desirous of freedom in their own land and the domains of others. It would not be too much to say of him that he is the most sagacious and far-seeing leader that Ireland has had since the days of Henry Grattan.

When the history of the war comes to be written on the grand scale by men sufficiently remote from it to see the immensity of its actions and its consequences, Redmond will be recognized as a great Imperial statesman. In the days to come Englishmen of all shades of political feeling will remember with gratitude the Nationalist leader's great declaration in the hour of England's supremest danger—in the darkest hour before the war.

If the events of the last few months have unaccountably darkened the Irish horizon, the fault does not lie at the Irish leader's door. It is merely that a noble declaration has come to an ignoble issue by causes alien to it, and by want of magnanimity in statesmanship that would have corresponded with Mr. Redmond's own.

Ireland's Gain the Empire's Loss

It is not the least aggravating feature of the old problem of the small and troubled country of Ireland that the concentration of the whole energies of John Redmond's life on it has deprived England and her Empire of the full benefit of one of the finest brains in her Parliament House—the full energies of a great Imperialist, on friendly terms with practically every statesman in the Colonies.

In Ireland, too, John Redmond is under partial eclipse through the failure of the Coalition to meet their Irish obligations. But time at last makes all things even; and this great leader will come to his own on the annals of both countries and in the judgment book of posterity.

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