

The Irish Secretary on Home Rule

An Interview With Rt. Hon. Augustine Birrell, K.C., M.P.

By HUGH S. EAYRS

IN an old-world office, up some old-world stairs, in an old-world building, on an old-world street in London, sits a man who in some respects is as old-world as his surroundings. His name is Augustine Birrell, who has the thankless job of guiding the destinies of that "most distressful country," over the way, a day's boat journey from England. He has had the job since 1907, and in the light of events, past and current, he has made a conspicuous success of it. But if and when Home Rule for Ireland goes through, and John Redmond wings his rhetorical arrows at William O'Brien and Tim Healy, I don't think Mr. Birrell will be there to calm the troubled waters, in his own inimitable, birrelous way.

Augustine Birrell has crowded much into his sixty-four years. He was the son of a Baptist minister, and was born near Liverpool. Educated primarily at Amersham Hall School, he went up to Cambridge and graduated from Trinity Hall, of which he has for many years been a fellow. Like more than half of his colleagues in the Cabinet, he is a lawyer. In 1875 he commenced to plead, and some years later, took silk. He was a Bencher of the Inner Temple. For some years he was the Quain Professor of Law in the University of London.

But it was in literature, and not in legal lore, that his fame early went abroad throughout the land. He looks a litterateur. When I entered his office in Old Queen Street, where he is usually to be found when Dublin is half-way quiet, I wondered if William Makepeace Thackeray had really departed this life in 1863, or whether he had outlived the allotted span, and looking but comfortably middle-aged, had agreed, for a consideration of twenty-five thousand dollars a year, to be Irish Secretary in H. M. Government. For Mr. Birrell is the image of Thackeray, and saving the modernized clothes he wore—and they weren't so very modern after all—he might pass for the brilliant author of "James's Diary." He has the same broad forehead, and square-cut jaw; the same merry twinkle, and lurking smile, as if he would say, "Things may be very bad, but I refuse to be perturbed. You cannot for a moment shake my faith in human nature. Things might be a great deal worse than they are." If he were an American, he might be addicted to punctuating the recital of whatever difficulties beset him by the meaningful, if remarkable, colloquialism, "I should worry."

To complete the resemblance to Pendennis, Mr. Birrell wears glasses. He is one of the few people who look well in them. Not twenty pairs of glasses could repress that kindly twinkle. Like truth—it will out.

Like Pendennis, too, he is a great writer. Perhaps it is not too much to say that there is no greater English essayist alive to-day than Augustine Birrell. His "Obiter Dicta," in two volumes, is a classic, while "William Hazlitt" is recognized as a superb piece of writing. For the rest, "Life of Charlotte Brontë," "In the Name of the Bodeleian," "Men, Women and Books," and "Collected Essays," any one of which would be enough to perpetuate any man's memory, are amongst his contributions to the literature of his time.

MR. BIRRELL was for two years President of the Board of Education. Some people shook their heads when he left the Education Office for the Irish Office. I think Mr. Birrell shook his own. "Why," said a young lady, who had met him for the first time, "why did they make you Irish Secretary, Mr. Birrell?"

"As a punishment for my political sins, I expect," was his reply.

I remember him, on one occasion, when he was speaking at Bristol. The Government had gone to the country, and Mr. Birrell, who, since 1906, has represented Bristol North, was speaking to his constituents. A few days before, the Suffragettes had, in their usual forcible manner, tried to convert him, with the result that they left him lame.

"I am sorry, gentlemen," said he, "that for once I cannot stand on my own feet before you." Then he went on to speak from his arm-chair.

It is this continual and unconquerable flow of good humour that has made him so popular a figure, both in the Commons and the country. There is no one who is at once so revered and beloved, as well as by his political foes as by his own party than Augustine Birrell. He is one of the most entertaining speakers in the House. When he is speaking the word goes through the corridors, into the smoking-rooms and the committee-rooms, "Birrell is up!" and the members troop in to listen to some new birreling. In style he is much like Hon. Geo. E. Foster, save that he never leaves the sting behind. Master alike of argument and epigram, he is at once convincing, educative and amusing—putting them in that order. Mr. Churchill and he have much in common, as far as speaking goes. They both know how to "get home," but Mr. Birrell's shafts

are a good deal more polished, and certainly never leave a bad taste.

WHEN I entered the room in great Queen Street, he was signing some important looking documents. He looked very unconcerned, despite the fact that a week or two before some heckler at Bristol—with the heckler's usual sense of humour—had thrown a dead cat at him. And it wasn't many days, since a deputation of Larkinites had waited on him at Bristol, and quite oblivious of the facts that he was a cabinet minister and a K.C.,



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pointed out to him, in a way that admitted no doubt of their conviction, that sauce for the goose being sauce for the gander, Sir Edward Carson should have been gaoled, too. The deputation, in common with many other people, forgot that Jim Larkin had cooked his goose, while Sir Edward had not. Larkin actually incited to violence; Carson said he was going to—but he didn't. Mr. Birrell, lawyer, wanted that understood.

The documents signed, the secretary left the room, smiling, and gave me a nod as much as to say, "You'll have an entertaining half hour."

Mr. Birrell shook hands.

"The Canadian Courier, eh? And what can the Canadian Courier want with me?" he said.

"The latest bulletin on the Home Rule question, Mr. Birrell."

The twinkle developed into a smile; the smile into a laugh.

"The latest," said he; "well, there are so many latests, you know. Besides, it wouldn't interest Canada, would it?"

I thought, at first, that this might be, as Artemus Ward would say, "said sarcastic." But it wasn't.

"Wouldn't interest Canada? Why, Mr. Birrell, there are thousands of people in Canada who say they are coming over to fight for Carson if Home Rule goes on the statute book."

Here the twinkle developed again.

"What is the situation, now?" I asked.

"Oh, I hope everything will have a very happy ending," he replied, non-committing.

"Is it likely to? What about Sir Edward Carson and his Ulster volunteers?"

"Well, there is gravity in the situation, of course." And by way of emphasizing the gravity the twinkle became more pronounced, and Pendennis smiled again. I wonder if he smiled at Sir Edward and his soldiers, and his oaths, and his dummy rifles. I really think perhaps he did.

"Things are going to turn out all right," he continued. Then, again, "But there is gravity, you know."

"Oh, well, your usual imperturbability will carry you through," I hazarded.

He spread out his hands deprecatingly. If there is one thing Augustine Birrell is not, it is an egoist.

"You know," he went on, "I take a much more sanguine view of the situation than I did. Just now we are trembling on the verge of great events—"

He paused.

"Such as, for instance, the outcome of the conferences of the Premier and Mr. Bonar Law?" I interpolated.

He nodded. "Yes, and for that reason the less I say just now, the better. But you may say that the outlook is clearer. I am much more sanguine than I was."

HERE the interview ended, so far as Home Rule is concerned. Mr. Birrell thought he had been interrogated enough, so he turned interviewer. He wanted to know about Canada.

"What sort of climate have you? Some people say it is the best in the world; some people quarrel with it. But the people are flocking out to enjoy it, aren't they?"

"Have you ever been in Canada, Mr. Birrell?"

"No. I have some friends there, and I ought to have been over to see them, but I have never got away, yet."

And that was all Mr. Birrell had to say. I wonder if that visit he ought to have paid to Canada would have influenced his opinion about Home Rule? It might, supposing Mr. Bourassa had a talk with him. It might do a lot of good for Birrell and Carson and Asquith to come over here and see the species of autonomy which Canada boasts. Walter Long says the sort of Home Rule that Canada has doesn't cut any ice. But then Walter Long said all sorts of indiscreet things when he was in Canada.

SO far as Augustine Birrell is concerned, Home Rule has got to go through. He hasn't a doubt that it will. He doesn't minimize the possibility of trouble. He is too wise, for he has lived in Ireland, and knows the emotional temperament of her sons. Perhaps there are other difficulties. W. T. Stead said, in 1902, that it was very probable that America might come to the help of Ireland if there were ructions. It looks a wild enough prognostication—but you never know. That's the blessed (?) uncertainty of the Irish.

Then, again, there is Winston. It is well known that he is far from solid for Home Rule. Indeed, it is not too much to state that he has encouraged the resistance of Ulster before to-day. And all this mix-up between the terrible infant and Mr. Lloyd George complicates matters. If Winston switches—and it's just about even betting that he will—he will lend his aid, as an orator and a parliamentarian, to the resistance of Ulster. True, he would have a hot time of it at the hands of his former conferees, but he is used to hot times. That's why he exposed himself to fire in the famous Sydney Street siege. Leastways, it is either that or else a consuming desire to show the world a great I Am. Perhaps, too, that is why his hair is approximating red.

Certainly, Winston would have to be reckoned with, if he left the ministerial benches. Mr. T. P. O'Connor thinks so, and Tay-Pay knows what he is talking about.

BUT Home Rule will be on the statute book before long; for two reasons. First, Asquith and the people behind him are determined, and won't be shaken. Secondly, the people of England are heartily sick of the whole business. When Sir Edward Carson or Mr. Bonar Law or Captain Craig or F. E. Smith, Winston's political twin, breathe out threatenings and slaughter now, the man who reads his morning paper at the breakfast table only smiles. He might have been agitated once, but now—not much! The calm and dignified attitude of the Premier disarms King Carson and his followers in the eye of the man in the street. There is a hundred times more possibility of Home Rule being an accepted fact now than when Gladstone went through fire and water for it. Mr. Birrell will yet see his bill, modified though it may be, converted into an act by King George.

After that, Mr. Birrell will rest. He may be a peer; he may be Prime Minister. In fact he may do all sorts of things. But there is one thing he won't do, and that is, sit in the Parliament on College Green!