Brodrick, William St John Fremantle

by Patrick Maume

Brodrick, William St John Fremantle (1856–1942), 1st earl of Midleton, politician, was born 14 December 1856 in London, eldest of eleven children of William Brodrick (later 8th Viscount Midleton) and his wife Augusta Mary, third daughter of Sir Thomas Francis Fremantle, 1st Baron Cottesloe. One of his siblings was Albinia Brodrick (qv).

Education and career as an MP Until 1863 (when Brodrick's grandfather inherited the Midleton title collaterally) it was not clear that Brodrick would eventually inherit the title and estates, which passed to his father in 1870. Brodrick's parents had 'a large family and a small income' (Brodrick, Records and reactions 1856–1939); his father's legal and parliamentary career was severely hindered by hereditary semi-blindness and deafness, exacerbated by an accident in young manhood. Although his father encouraged Brodrick to envisage a career of public service, he emphasised that this would demand hard work and require financial independence. In 1883 his father owned 6,475 acres in Co. Cork (including the town of Midleton) worth £6,018 a year; the principal part of his (and subsequently his son's) fortune derived from Ireland. Much of the estate had been lost through a lawsuit in 1839, and title and estate had passed collaterally through several elderly and neglectful proprietors. There was also a small estate in Surrey. Brodrick's uncle G. C. Brodrick was warden of Merton College, Oxford, and a cousin, Charles Scott, was headmaster of Westminster School.

Educated at a private school in Brighton, at Eton (1869–75), and at Balliol College, Oxford (1875–8), Brodrick graduated with a BA in modern history (1878) and was president of the Oxford Union. From 1870 he paid annual visits to Midleton with his father, who was trying to manage the estate more efficiently. This experience of the difficulties of Irish landownership proved useful in the debates of the 1880–85 parliament, where Brodrick became recognised as a knowledgeable landlord spokesman not wholly unsympathetic to the tenants' plight.

In 1879 Brodrick became a leader writer for a London newspaper (probably The Times) and worked for Sir John Pender, a pioneer in the cable communication industry and founder of the firm that became Cable and Wireless. Brodrick developed a long-standing connection with the firm, and returned to it after leaving the cabinet in 1905. This employment established his financial independence, counteracting the effects on his income of an early marriage, his entry into parliament (MPs were then unpaid) when a Surrey seat unexpectedly became available in 1880, and the reduction in the proceeds from the Irish estate owing to the land agitations of the 1880s. At several points during the 1880s Brodrick considered abandoning politics altogether to work full time in the City of London. His
position as a self-consciously hard-working professional contrasted with the leisured lives of many of his aristocratic political colleagues and reinforced in him a sense of superiority not always justified by events.

Brodrick sat as conservative MP for West Surrey in 1880–85 and for Guildford from 1886 to 1906. His criticism of Gladstone's Irish policy saw him rewarded with the post of financial secretary to the war office (1886–92). While on the opposition benches his discovery of the army's shortage of ammunition led to the motion that brought down Rosebery's liberal government in 1895. Back in government, Brodrick served as under-secretary for war (1895–8) and was sworn of the privy council in 1897. Later he became under-secretary of state for foreign affairs (1898–1900) and secretary of state for war (1900–03), during which time he oversaw military mobilisation for the South African war, introduced necessary administrative reforms, and established the committee of imperial defence (1902). However, policy disputes meant that Broderick was unable to carry through his preferred reform schemes, though he retained enough influence to frustrate the course of action preferred by his successor, H. O. Arnold-Forster; it was left to the liberal minister R. B. Haldane to overhaul the British army.

As secretary of state for India (1903–5) Brodrick's insistence on the recall to the India council of the Irish under-secretary, Sir Antony MacDonnell (qv), seconded temporarily to Ireland, caused considerable difficulties for the chief secretary for Ireland, George Wyndham (qv). Despite a long-standing friendship with the viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, Brodrick became the spokesman for the cabinet's discontent over Curzon's India policy. When a dispute between Lord Kitchener (qv), commander-in-chief of the Indian army, and Curzon led to the viceroy's resignation, Curzon broke off their friendship, seeing Brodrick as a plodding mediocrity and himself (like George Wyndham) as a genius sacrificed to the petty jealousies of Arthur Balfour (qv) and a cabinet of hangers-on. In several retrospective defences Brodrick claimed that through overwork and arrogance Curzon had forgotten his responsibility to the cabinet and behaved as though he were an independent autocrat.

The Irish Unionist Alliance and Anti-Partition League Defeated at the general election of 1906, Brodrick succeeded to his father's title in 1907, and became an alderman of London county council (1907–13) and leader of the Irish unionist peers in 1908. In 1909 he succeeded Lord Barrymore (Arthur Smith Barry (qv)) as chairman of the Irish Unionist Alliance (IUA). His leadership rapidly spread discontent among southern unionists, who saw him as a metropolitan figure out of touch with Irish affairs and primarily concerned with his own position in relation to the Conservative Party leadership. Midleton did not regard himself as an Irishman and always maintained a condescending and patronising attitude towards the Irish – including his own followers – though his reminiscences emphasise his hard work for the IUA, which included frequent visits to Ireland. He came to rely on a small group of capable associates.
During the first world war Midleton served on many committees, including the committee for apportionment of manpower between munitions and combatant service and a committee for regulating new government departments. Travel to Ireland now brought an added risk from German submarines in the Irish Sea (he was nearly the victim of a torpedo in 1918). Shortly before the Easter rising Midleton led a southern unionist delegation to Augustine Birrell (qv) to demand action on the deteriorating security situation. Birrell dismissed their fears, as an indignant Midleton testified to the subsequent rebellion commission. After the rising Midleton's lobbying among cabinet allies helped to wreck Lloyd George's plans for an immediate settlement based on partition-based home rule.

Against the backdrop of war, the 1916 rising, and the acceptance of partition by the Ulster unionists, Midleton was reluctantly persuaded, under the threat of resignation by George Stewart (qv) and Andrew Jameson (qv), to accept the ‘new departure’, a southern unionist policy which accepted the principle of dominion home rule in order to prevent the triumph of separatism. At the Irish Convention (1917–18) Brodrick and the southern unionist delegates put forward a scheme for modified dominion home rule and thereby won the support of a section of the nationalist delegates led by John Redmond (qv); however, this was opposed not only by the Ulster unionists but by a large section of the nationalist delegates, led by Joseph Devlin (qv), the catholic bishops, and William Martin Murphy (qv), who insisted that only full dominion home rule with complete fiscal autonomy was acceptable. In April 1918 Brodrick was offered the lord lieutenancy of Ireland but declined, believing the government's dual policy of home rule and conscription, which he would be expected to carry out, was unworkable and that the cabinet would not allow him a free hand to determine and execute Irish policy.

The failure of the convention split the IUA; a grassroots revolt by the hardliners of the southern unionist committee led to the departure of Midleton and his patrician allies to form the Irish Unionist Anti-Partition League (usually referred to as the Anti-Partition League or APL) in June 1919. Although numerically small, the APL was important for its contacts within the British political establishment (the more numerous rump of the IUA had few articulate spokesmen and lacked Westminster contacts outside the diehard fringe of the Conservative Party). As the Irish political situation worsened Midleton deviated from APL policy by advocating coercion. The earl of Arran claimed that Midleton was motivated by careerism and would pursue the anti-partition policy only ‘if it met with the approval of . . . his English unionist colleagues’.

Midleton concentrated his efforts on incorporating safeguards for the southern minority into the ill-fated Government of Ireland Bill; he and several APL colleagues were nominated to the short-lived senate of southern Ireland established under the act. Turning his attention to peace efforts, Midleton met Barry Egan (qv), a Cork businessman and Sinn Féin activist, on 16 June 1921, and in 1921–2 corresponded and met regularly with the duplicitous Major Andrew Belton (qv). The opening of
the Northern Ireland parliament saw Brodrick's cousin, Lord Bandon, kidnapped by the IRA. (A nephew, Grenville Peak, had been killed in combat by the IRA earlier in the year while serving with the 9th lancers.) At the same time Éamon de Valera (qv) issued an invitation to Midleton and other unionist leaders, including the Northern Ireland prime minister Sir James Craig (qv), ‘as representatives of the Irish political minority’ to meet in Dublin to discuss his prospective reply to Lloyd George’s request for a peace conference. While the Ulster unionists predictably ignored his proposal that they accept subordination to the dáil government, between 4 and 8 July Midleton and his APL colleagues met the leaders of Sinn Féin and brokered a truce which Midleton took to London to secure the consent of Lloyd George.

The Anglo–Irish treaty Characteristically overestimating the residual political influence of southern unionism, Midleton failed to press for southern unionist representation in the treaty negotiations, believing that the British government would resume their oft-repeated demands that the minority safeguards in the Government of Ireland Act should be incorporated into the treaty. Despite several meetings with Lloyd George and Arthur Griffith (qv) from November 1921, Brodrick and the southern unionists failed to secure binding commitments from either side; he refused a request to second the ratification of the treaty in the house of lords.

After the treaty was signed Griffith did concede some of their demands, and in April and May 1922, after several meetings with the provisional government to discuss the proposed constitution, they received further concessions on the composition of the proposed Free State senate. The concessions obtained by Midleton and his colleagues fell far short of their demands for guaranteed minority representation and vetoes on certain issues; most of them took the form of tacit understandings, which were repudiated in the 1930s by the de Valera government through such measures as the removal of Trinity College representatives from the dáil in 1937 and the abolition of the Free State senate in 1936.

Having overestimated the southern unionists’ place in British concerns, Midleton now characteristically overestimated their political leverage on the Free State government. While they derived some influence from their dominance of Irish business and commercial life, even the limited concessions made to them by the government of William Cosgrave (qv) were denounced by opponents ranging from Timothy Corcoran (qv) to Frank Ryan (qv) and Peadar O'Donnell (qv) as anti-democratic outrages that used minority rights as a pretext to underpin British, ‘masonic’, and/or capitalist influence. Midleton's perceptions gave some countenance to such views; he saw southern unionists as the natural and indispensable rulers of Ireland. On 20 January 1923, contemplating the Irish civil war and his own political extinction, Midleton lamented to his confidant Lord Oranmore and Browne (qv): ‘We have lost, but if we had won we should have governed Ireland and you would have led the Senate.’ (Butler, 558)).
In November 1922, in an attempt to re-establish himself on the right wing of British politics, Midleton sought unsuccessfully to launch a movement within the house of lords to amend the Free State Constitution Bill, so that the powers of the proposed senate could be increased. This action, instigated without consultation with the APL, led to the break-up of the organisation in an atmosphere of muted recrimination. Declining a nomination to the Free State senate Midleton rued his involvement in Irish politics, which, instead of acting as a springboard back into government (as he had hoped), had finished his political ambitions. Even the removal of most of the conservative front bench on the collapse of the Lloyd George coalition and the shortage of talent available to Bonar Law's government in 1922–3 could not win Midleton readmission to the cabinet; it may be relevant that Curzon was one of its leading members.

Thereafter Midleton largely stayed out of Irish affairs, merely concerning himself with issues relating to land purchase in the house of lords (1926–7). He believed land purchase should have been completed as part of the treaty settlement rather than leaving unpurchased landlords at the mercy of the Free State government.

**Last years** In 1932, agitated by the return to power of de Valera, whom he considered an irresponsible fanatic in the mould of Robespierre, Brodrick published *Ireland: dupe or heroine*, a defence of unionist opposition to Gladstonian home rule; it argues that the relative stability of the Irish Free State was made possible by the social and administrative changes brought about by ‘constructive unionism’ in the 1880s and 1890s, that Irish nationalism had damaged the country's long-term interests by pursuing ‘the shadow of power’ rather than ‘the substance of prosperity’, and that the Union could have been preserved but for liberal pusillanimity after 1906. He also published a sketchy memoir, *Records and reactions, 1856–1939* (1939). In both works Midleton constitutes himself Balfour's posthumous apologist, though he regrets that his old chief did not use his cabinet position after 1915 to uphold a firmer Irish policy, attributing this failure to exhaustion.

Hardworking, ambitious, and extremely proud of his political achievement and reputation, Brodrick was considered by many to be somewhat stubborn and difficult to work with. Consistent in his low opinion of the Irish, he held imperialist views that warmly embraced much of the jingoism associated with social Darwinism. He was DL and JP of Surrey, high steward of Kingston upon Thames (1930–42) and a governor of Charterhouse. He was advanced to an earldom in the Irish peerage and a viscountcy in that of the UK in 1920, received an honorary LLD from TCD in 1922, and was one of the last to be conferred with a knighthood of the Illustrious Order of St Patrick (1916) before this honour became restricted to members of the royal family.

In 1880 Brodrick married Hilda Charteris, daughter of Lord Elcho, later 10th earl of Wemyss and March, and sister of Evelyn de Vesci. They had one son and four daughters. Hilda died 1 August 1901 from blood poisoning after an operation for
tonsillitis. In 1903 he married Madeleine Cecilia Carlyle Stanley, elder daughter of Colonel John Constantine Stanley. This second marriage produced two sons, both of whom died in battle at Salerno in 1943. Brodrick died 13 February 1942 at his Surrey residence, Peper Harow, leaving an estate in Ireland valued at £4,176 and an overall estate of £68,590. Brodrick’s papers are in the National Archives, Kew. A full length William Carter portrait of Brodrick is in the county Hall in Kingston upon Thames; a cartoon by ‘Spy’ appeared in _Vanity Fair_ (18 July 1901).

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