

Clark, Sir Ernest

by Patrick Maume

Clark, Sir Ernest (1864–1951), civil servant, was born 13 April 1864, youngest child among three sons and two daughters of Samuel Henry Clark, state schoolmaster, and Anne Clark (née Seaver). The family lived at 64 St James's Place, Plumstead, Kent, England. As a teenager Clark underwent an evangelical religious conversion and for a period was an active spare-time evangelist; though his religious fervour later waned, its residual influence was discernible in such matters as his meticulous, conscientious work-ethic. He was a consummate meritocrat and in old age declared that Victorian England had provided great opportunities to talented and ambitious high-achievers.

Educated privately, Clark entered the civil service in 1881 after coming fourth out of c.600 candidates in the entrance examination. After two years in the national debt office (combined with further study at King's College, London) Clark joined the inland revenue in 1883 as an assistant-surveyor of taxes. He studied at the Middle Temple 1890–94 in connection with his work for the inland revenue's legal branch, and was called to the bar on 6 June 1894. By 1904–5 (when he had risen to deputy chief inspector of taxes as assistant secretary to the board of inland revenue) Clark went on temporary assignment to the Cape Colony government to establish an income tax system and witnessed at first hand the establishment of South African federation; he saw this as the first time he was asked to advise a new system with only 'a table, a chair, and an act of parliament' (Northern Ireland being the second; Follis, 22). Clark achieved recognition as a leading taxation expert and was sent to assist the South African government in this field in 1910–11. During the first world war he was a treasury liaison officer with the War Office and Ministry of Munitions. Clark was appointed assistant secretary of the inland revenue and deputy chief inspector of taxes in 1919. He was secretary of the royal commission on income tax (1919–20) and after its conclusion in March 1920 was knighted on the recommendation of the chairman, Lord Colwyn.

In May 1920, when his superior Sir John Anderson (qv) was appointed Irish under-secretary, Clark told him that he would be willing to serve in Ireland. In September 1920 Anderson contacted Clark, offering him the position of assistant under-secretary for Ireland, located in Belfast; after briefings in Dublin and London (including a meeting with James Craig (qv) and other unionist activists, whose descriptions of the violence experienced in Northern Ireland seemed incomprehensible to Clark until he arrived there) he proceeded to Belfast to commence the process of administrative partition. His appointment was officially announced on 15 September.

Clark's arrival was initially regarded with some ambivalence by the Ulster unionists, who would have preferred the appointment of an Ulster-based chief secretary who would not be responsible to Dublin Castle; they had even entertained hopes that Charles Craig, James Craig's brother, might be made parliamentary under-secretary. They also feared that Anderson and the Dublin Castle apparatus had as their primary concern the appeasement of nationalism, or even possessed nationalist sympathies themselves. In fact, the Anderson group were principally concerned with securing an overall settlement; if this required the appeasement of Ulster unionists to prevent their particularist demands from blocking a wider deal with Sinn Féin, they were happy to comply. Despite being wholly unfamiliar with Irish affairs Clark, a strong conservative, rapidly identified with the Ulster unionist perspective; St John Ervine (qv), a friend and neighbour in Devon in later life, claimed that he 'came with preconceived ideas about the Irish situation but . . . it did not take him long to change his mind . . . he came away with a deep and unshakeable respect for Ulster and its people' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 27 August 1951). His actions, however, were not to be seen as shaped exclusively by this personal commitment; he remained responsible to Anderson and reported to him regularly.

Clark's first major task was the establishment and regularisation of the Ulster Special Constabulary, largely on the basis of the existing UVF structures and the incorporation of local vigilante groups already springing up under leaders such as Basil Brooke (qv) in Fermanagh (whom Clark considered 'an eminently level-headed, active and moderate man': Follis, 122). This was accompanied by attempts (largely unsuccessful) to negotiate the return to work of catholic workers expelled from the shipyards and other places during the riots beginning in July. Clark hoped that the establishment of the Ulster Special Constabulary (USC) would provide the unionists with psychological as well as physical security, and prevent such grassroots loyalist violence in the future. His oversight of the USC extended to such matters as the drafting of application forms and the design and supply of uniforms. (Clark later wrote of his pride in the SC as 'one's own children. . . after all, I was primarily responsible for the early stages' (quoted in Barton, *Brookeborough*, 35) – though he was naively disappointed at their failure to attract significant numbers of catholics).

By early December Clark turned his attention to creating the structures of administrative partition. He worked with a staff of fifteen (later increased to twenty), mostly drawn from the board of inland revenue and the chief secretary's office. Clark himself worked sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. On 7 February 1921 he forwarded his first detailed scheme for the organisation of the NI civil service to Craig, followed by detailed staff-charts and costings for individual departments from 18 February. Clark initially favoured limiting the number of government departments to five (on the grounds that a larger number would cause excessive expense and produce a disproportionate number of ministers within the NI parliament); in the event seven were created, as it was felt that a smaller number might cause conflicts of interest within ministries. The final scheme (influenced by Adam Duffin as well

as Clark) was agreed on 25 May; the speed with which Clark worked advanced the creation of the NI parliament and government, and thereby strengthened the position of the Ulster unionists in the fluid political conditions of 1921–2.

Clark combined high-level planning with the organisation of accommodation and office supplies, the initial transfer of files from Dublin, and the importation of administrative materials from Whitehall to provide models for the new administrators. The creation of a departmental structure and the recruitment of a civil service on Whitehall lines (rather than the ramshackle structure of overlapping and sometimes conflicting boards which characterised the old Dublin Castle) mirrored the reorganisation concurrently undertaken by Anderson's team in Dublin. Clark expected that the new civil service would be mostly staffed by administrators transferred north from Dublin, although he found Dublin Castle reluctant to facilitate this for fear of disrupting its relations with Sinn Féin; these problems were not finally resolved until the Craig–Collins (qv) pact early in 1922. He advised that future recruitment should be by competitive examination.

Clark has been accused of organising a civil service resembling that which might be expected in a one-party state; although he warned James Craig against sectarian policies and initially favoured reserving a proportion of posts for Catholics, Clark quickly realised that if he insisted on this, unionist opposition would make his position untenable. (His attitudes may have been influenced by his membership of the masonic order as well as by his growing sympathy for an Ulster unionist leadership taking responsibility for a province which he believed was trembling on the verge of an abyss.) He also allowed Craig to overrule his proposal (supported by W. B. Spender (qv)) that the comptroller and auditor general should be responsible for auditing local government bodies; Craig thought this might make procedures 'too rigid' (Buckland, 41). As the opening of the Northern Ireland parliament approached, Clark spoke apprehensively of himself as 'John the Baptist' to 'an unknown saviour, who has only one chance in a hundred of bringing peace and goodwill . . . whoever he may be' (Follis, 31).

Basil Brooke described Clark as 'midwife to the new province of Ulster'. His close personal friendship with the 3rd duke of Abercorn (qv) (first governor-general of Northern Ireland) helped to smooth relations between Westminster and the new NI government. As permanent secretary of the NI Ministry of Finance (1921–5) and head of the civil service (a position which he accepted with some reluctance, taking office 22 November 1921 on the formal transfer of services), Clark prepared Northern Ireland's financial case before the Colwyn committee, successfully arguing that before the annual NI imperial contribution was calculated Belfast should be allowed a sum proportionate to that being spent by Whitehall on its domestic services. Once again Clark put in seven-day weeks, working from 7 a.m. until late in the evening, and his meticulous research and preparation helped to secure concessions that were vital to the northern state's financial viability.

In 1925 Clark retired from the civil service and left Northern Ireland, though he retained a lifelong fondness for the province and maintained contact with his successor Wilfrid Spender, who occasionally asked for his advice on policy matters. While in Ulster he was a member of the Union Club, the Ulster Club, and the Royal Ulster Yacht Club. Leaving the civil service for private enterprise, Clark took up directorships with the Underground group of London railways, Martin's Bank, Pacific Steam Navigation Co., and Harland & Wolff (1925–33), and wrote articles on double taxation for *The Times*. He was a member of the British economic mission invited by the government of Australia to examine the Australian economy (1928–9), a member of the joint exchequer board of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (1930–32), and governor of Tasmania (1933–45).

The Tasmanian governorship had been vacant for three years because of lack of funds, and Clark agreed to spend not only part of his salary but a regular sum from his private resources within the island. During his term of office he acted as unofficial financial adviser to the provincial government in its efforts to readjust financial relations with the federal authorities (a clear parallel to his earlier Northern Ireland activities) and was generally seen as successful despite some initial tensions with the vigorous, economically interventionist, catholic Labour provincial premier A. G. Ogilvie (1890–1939). Clark and his wife took an active interest in many philanthropic groups; he held the positions of provincial chief scout and masonic grand master of Tasmania. His appointment was extended because of the second world war, and his morale-raising tours around the island were extremely popular. As well as his knighthood, he was made CBE (1918), KCB (1924), KCMG (1938), and GCMG (1943). In retirement he was a member of Devonshire county council, and Ervine assisted him to keep in touch with Ulster developments. Clark retained considerable physical energy to the end; in his eighties he thought little of making a four-hour round journey to London for a day's business. He died 26 August 1951 at his home in Seaton, Devon; he was cremated and his ashes buried at Hobart.

He married first (13 April 1899) Mary Winkfield (d. 1944), daughter of a London merchant; on 8 January 1947 he married Constance, daughter of A. C. McLennan of Melbourne, Australia. There were no children of either marriage. Clark deposited his papers (including some autobiographical notes) at PRONI, D1022; additional correspondence may be found in the same repository under D1295 (Spender papers). There is another collection of Clark papers at the Morris Miller Library, Hobart, Tasmania.

Bryan A. Follis, *A state under siege: the establishment of Northern Ireland, 1920–1925* (1995) (uses Clark's reminiscences and an unpublished biography by his niece); *Times*, 27 Aug., 10 Sept. 1951; *Northern Whig*, 27 Aug. 1951; *Belfast Newsletter*, 27, 28 Aug. 1951, p. 4 (appreciation by Milne Barbour); *Belfast*

Telegraph, 27 Aug. 1951 p. 4; *WWW*; Patrick Buckland, *The factory of grievances* (1979); Michael Farrell, *Arming the protestants* (1983); John McColgan, *British policy and the Irish administration 1920–22* (1983); Brian Barton, *Brookeborough: the making of a prime minister* (1988); Lawrence McBride, *The greening of Dublin Castle* (1991); Thomas Hennessy, *A history of Northern Ireland 1920–96* (1997); information from the Middle Temple, London; <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au> (Australian Dictionary of Biography online (181), accessed 28 Feb. 2008)

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 100.103.238.216 on Sat Jan 23 01:44:58 UTC 2021 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2021 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.