

Craig, James

by Alvin Jackson

Craig, James (1871–1940), 1st Viscount Craigavon, first prime minister of Northern Ireland, was born 8 January 1871 at Sydenham, Co. Down, seventh among the eight children of James Craig of Tyrella and Craigavon, Co. Down, and Eleanor Gilmore Craig (née Browne). He was educated locally and at Merchiston School, Edinburgh (1882–7).

Early career In April 1892 he established a stockbroking company, Craigs & Co., and was later one of the founding members of the Belfast stock exchange. Here he learned the meticulous business habits that distinguished, if not his later political career, than at least his work against the third home rule bill in 1912–14. Craig was a careful but unenthusiastic broker who happily forsook his business in March 1900, when the opportunity arose to fight in South Africa: he applied for, and was awarded, a commission in the 3rd Royal Irish Rifles. He was captured by the Boers at Lindley, where he was also injured; he was later able to rejoin the British forces and obtained the appointment of deputy assistant director of the imperial military railways. He was finally invalided home in June 1901. His time in South Africa had been relatively brief, but none the less decisive. He had acquired a military and logistical training that would later stand him in good stead. He had acquired injuries that would plague him throughout his life. He had, as St John Ervine (qv) affirmed in a suggestive anecdote, willingly flexed the law in his pursuit of suspected Boer spies. And, as Ervine further emphasised, Craig acquired in South Africa an understanding and appreciation of the empire: a theoretical political concept had been converted into a thrilling reality.

Ulster Unionist, 1903–14 If South Africa supplied Craig with a basic political education, then his finishing school was to be found in the muddy byways of rural Ulster, during the electoral struggle in 1903 between the Ulster unionists and T. W. Russell (qv). Russell, a junior minister in the third Salisbury administration, had broken with the unionists in 1900 over the issue of compulsory purchase; an advocate of compulsion, Russell was intellectually and politically aggressive, and he carried his fight with conservative unionism into a series of angry by-election struggles. Here Craig tested the strategic skills and political insights that he had honed in South Africa: he assisted his brother, Charles Curtis Craig, in the contest for Antrim South (February 1903); and he conducted his own fight against Russellism in Fermanagh North (March 1903), where he lost to Edward Mitchell. At the general election of 1906 he was able to unseat the Russellite member for Down East, James Wood; and he held the constituency until the boundary changes of 1918, when he moved to Down Mid. He remained here until July 1921. The campaign against Russell revealed Craig's essential political style: unflappability, a ponderous but accessible wit, and a genial cussedness. The campaign, and

indeed the wider circumstances of Ulster unionism in the early and mid Edwardian period, left Craig with a pronounced fear of internal unionist schism. In this sense, Russellism helped to form the highly defensive unionism – the embattled and carefully patrolled movement – which dominated the Northern Ireland state under Craig's leadership.

Craig's apparent stolidity concealed a considerable level of political ambition, and some degree of dexterity both as a networker and as a tactician. Craig had inherited a fortune of some £100,000 on the death of his father (1900): his marriage (March 1905) to Cecil Mary Nowell Dering Tupper, daughter of the assistant comptroller of the royal household, gave him an *entrée* into fashionable circles. He had thus both social access and the means to make something of his connections. He had strong links within the Ulster protestant professional and commercial elite as well as within the Orange order. He had thus both high-political and local networks. He was never a dazzling public performer; and his personal style was emphatically uncharismatic. He was never likely (at least in the short term) to clamber up the parliamentary greasy pole; but on the other hand, he was well equipped for the political long haul. His shrewdness – still less his obstinacy – ought not to be underestimated. When Walter Long (qv), the leader of the Irish unionists, formally retired (1910), Craig, though popular and well connected in the house of commons and in Ireland, had not yet established a commanding position over his contemporaries. The evidence is somewhat uncertain, but it is probable that Craig engineered the nomination of Edward Carson (qv) as Irish unionist leader. It is possible that, given the number of young turks contending for prominence within late Edwardian Ulster unionism, the selection of Carson as leader was a compromise solution, which averted any damaging rivalry. Whatever the politics of Carson's election, a bond between him and Craig was speedily formed; and it was through this that Craig achieved the wider prominence that had as yet eluded him.

Carson and Craig together dominated the unionist campaign against the third home rule bill. It is sometimes remarked that Craig acted as impresario to Carson's star turn; it might equally be suggested that Craig acted as high priest to Carson's deity. Either way, it was Craig who stage-managed his leader's public appearances in Ulster, beginning with an impressive rally at Craigavon (September 1911) and peaking (arguably) with the demonstrations preceding and accompanying Ulster day (28 September 1912). Craig's home at Strandtown, on the south-eastern outskirts of Belfast, served as a kind of protective shrine for Carson: here Craig might interpret his leader's oracular views, or induct devotees into the great man's presence. Here some of the most solemn ceremonial rites of unionism were performed (such as the introduction of Carson to his Ulster following, or the launch of the Solemn League and Covenant). Craig supplied Carson with the local knowledge and insights that he lacked; he seems to have been a more committed hardliner than his leader in so far as he had military experience (which Carson had not), was actively involved in the Larne gun-running of April 1914 (he helped to land weapons in Donaghadee), and does not appear among the ranks of those who (like Carson

and Lord Londonderry (qv)) periodically counselled restraint. Indeed, from an early stage in the development of the constitutional crisis (at least as early as April 1911, when he was writing to Fred Crawford (qv), the chief gun-runner) Craig was directly involved with the importation of weapons. Carson had charisma; but Craig had a populist flair. Craig helped to create the context within which Carson enjoyed a form of apotheosis: Craig's fertile imagination brought forth the Covenant as well as the Boyne banner, a tattered silk flag that had once fluttered beside King William III (qv), and which was now carried before King Carson. Craig helped to create the means by which Ulster unionism, that most fissile of movements, sustained a unity and discipline in the face of grinding pressures. Craig, rooted in eastern Ulster, helped to popularise the advocacy of six-county exclusion among northern unionists. Craig, much more than Carson, may thus be seen as an architect of the partition settlement that evolved between 1912 and 1920.

War and partition, 1914–20 With the outbreak of European war in August 1914, Craig threw himself into the creation and development of the 36th (Ulster) Division: he held the office of assistant adjutant and quartermaster-general in the new unit. But the division went to the front without Craig: in the spring of 1915 he fell seriously ill, and by April 1916 he felt compelled to resign his commission. Craig returned to the safer battlefields of Belfast and Westminster, fighting for the acceptance of permanent six-county exclusion during the Lloyd George diplomatic offensive of the early summer of 1916. With the creation of the second wartime coalition in December 1916, he was given junior office as treasurer of the household; he acted thereby as one of the government whips, a task for which, with his combination of affability, tenacity, and menace, he was particularly well equipped. With Carson, he resigned from the government in January 1918, although it seems that he was more reluctant than his leader to forgo the fruits of office. He had, however, been awarded a baronetcy in the new year's honours of 1918.

Craig returned to office in January 1919 as parliamentary secretary to the ministry of pensions (an appointment that owed much to his popularity with Edward Goulting, a close associate of Bonar Law and of Beaverbrook, and one of the Svengalis of conservative politics in this era). He was translated in April 1920 to the admiralty, where he was financial secretary, still a relatively junior appointment but one made more significant by the prolonged illness at this time of the first lord of the admiralty, Walter Long. There were three particularly important features of this, Craig's swansong within British ministerial politics. First, Carson returned to the lawcourts in 1919, and thereby freed Craig from both his support and his protection; this period marks the beginning of a noticeable drift in their relationship. Second, Craig, unlike his leader and patron, was a success in his executive roles; and in this era of relatively large and often uncharismatic governments – an era when, given the divisions within conservatism, a number of 'second eleven' figures attained prominence – it might have been expected that Craig would have flourished further. Third, Craig was well placed to direct the evolving strategies of the coalition with regard to Ireland – and all the more emphatically, given that his ministerial chief,

Long, headed the cabinet committee responsible for devising a government of Ireland bill. Craig was a significant influence behind the committee's decision to draft a measure based on a six-county partition scheme. As in June 1916, so in March 1920 Craig was a prominent advocate of the six-county formula before the Ulster unionist council.

Premier of Northern Ireland, 1921–25 The invitation was offered at first to Carson; but it was Craig who in January 1921 accepted nomination for the premiership of the new Northern Ireland. Craig defined the emergent state: he had persuaded the elders of Ulster unionism to accept the government of Ireland bill (a by no means foregone conclusion); he fought for the creation of a new police reserve (the Ulster Special Constabulary, drawn largely from a reactivated Ulster Volunteer Force) to protect its frontiers; and with the civil servant Ernest Clark (qv) he oversaw the creation of the seven ministries that together formed the government of the territory. The first Northern Ireland parliament was elected in May 1921, and was opened by George V in June; it was therefore launched on the eve of the somewhat uneasy truce between the IRA and the forces of the British crown. But Northern Ireland was born into trouble; and it fell to Craig to fend off the political challenges arising from the Anglo–Irish treaty negotiations and the military challenge supplied by the IRA through 1921 and into 1922.

He showed considerable physical courage as well as a measure of political adventurousness at this time: he met de Valera (qv) on 5 May 1921 in a tense but unproductive session orchestrated by the British government's intermediary, Alfred ('Andy') Cope (qv). He fought off the siren charms of Lloyd George in November 1921, when the British prime minister was seeking to include Northern Ireland within the framework of an all-Ireland polity: Craig, however, judged the treaty exclusively from the northern perspective; and, while angry over the boundary commission proposal, was much less concerned than Carson by its wider terms (indeed, Carson's speech in the lords during the treaty debate 'greatly embarrassed' his former lieutenant). In early 1922 he sought to defuse the IRA campaign within Northern Ireland by negotiating with Michael Collins (qv). The first of their meetings, which took place in London on 24 January 1922, brought hopes for a lasting reconciliation: Craig was unexpectedly 'impressed' with Collins, and later joked that the proposed new parliament building for Northern Ireland might, if not needed, be used as a 'lunatic asylum'. A tentative deal was struck on the issue of the boundary commission and the southern boycott of Belfast business; Collins proposed the joint meeting of the two Irish parliaments, while Craig countered with the much less ambitious (but still startling) suggestion that the two governments might occasionally meet in joint session. But the auguries were misleading, and at a later meeting (2 February) Collins came to the table with hefty demands for the acquisition of northern territory. The breakdown of this session was followed by an intensification of IRA and loyalist violence, which after weeks of struggle gave no side a clear political or military advantage, and thus brought Craig and Collins back into negotiations. The result of this diplomacy was the Craig–Collins pact of 29

March 1922, which in ten clauses outlined a strategy for peace and reconciliation, and speedily collapsed in a welter of political recrimination and civil and military violence. A form of peace eventually came to Northern Ireland, but only because of the severe policing strategies of the unionist government, and because Collins and the provisional government in Dublin were now distracted by the challenge of republican dissent within their own borders.

The most important remaining statutory challenge to Craig's Northern Ireland arose from the provision made within the Anglo-Irish treaty for a boundary commission. Craig's handling of the commission negotiations in 1924–5 illustrates his tactical finesse as well as his relationship with the broader unionist movement. His stand was tough-minded but not without scope for movement: in February 1924, when the prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald, suggested (as part of the wider Labour initiative over the commission) that the British government's powers in Northern Ireland be temporarily ceded to the joint administration of the Belfast and Dublin authorities, Craig was sympathetic. When the Labour government moved to form the commission, Craig refused to cooperate; but he was prepared to support the notion that Carson might be appointed by MacDonald as the northern representative. Craig's hesitant agreement was, however, countermanded by his ministerial partners in Belfast; as Lord Balcarres observed (September 1924), 'Craig would like to be more forthcoming than his colleagues will permit'. In the event, the commission operated within a very tightly defined brief, and collapsed in late 1925; Craig's ingenuity was therefore not seriously tested. It had doubtless been useful for him to be seen in London as a moderating force within Ulster unionism; but there are some grounds for viewing his actions in 1924–5 as being more than tactical pirouetting.

Consolidating the state, 1925–1940 The collapse of the IRA challenge in 1922, and fixing of the boundaries of the northern state in 1925, might well have given Craig and the Ulster unionists an opportunity to seek reconciliation with northern nationalists; the survival until 1932 of the relatively friendly Cumann na nGaedheal administration would have eased any overtures of this kind. These did not occur. The security apparatus laid down during the military crisis of the period 1920–22 survived into the 1930s and beyond with only some amendments: the Ulster Special Constabulary was scaled down in 1925, but was sustained; while the special powers act of 1922, ostensibly a temporary measure, not only survived but was given permanence. Both the USC and the special powers act weighed heavily on the northern minority. The abolition of proportional representation in local government elections (1922) and later in parliamentary contests (1929) affected minority representation and morale; the implementation of the Leech commission's proposed boundary changes overturned nationalist control in several local government authorities, and gave rise to accusations of gerrymandering. Employment opportunities in the state sector (and not only the state sector) shrank; Craig asked critics to 'remember that in the south they boasted of a catholic state. All I boast of is that we are a protestant parliament and a protestant state'.

Had Craig shown a greater magnanimity towards his nationalist compatriots, he might well have consolidated his regime and his state more effectively than by more militant strategies; on the other hand, there are no grounds for believing that an Ulster unionist campaign of 'killing home rule by kindness' might have been any more successful than the earlier British unionist ventures. Had Craig shown a greater magnanimity, he might well have alleviated the economic and political sufferings of his catholic compatriots; but, given the parlous condition of the northern economy in the interwar period, it is hard to imagine how real economic suffering might have been eliminated from any section of the community. A magnanimous Craig could have created a Northern Ireland characterised by a greater egalitarianism and greater social justice; but these were not, and never had been, central to his political vision. A magnanimous Craig would, by definition, have risen above the bloody tensions of the home rule and revolutionary era: but an ascent such as this, difficult to imagine in any circumstances, could scarcely have been undertaken by a populist tory rooted in Orangeism and in military and political turmoil. Craig's political achievement was not, and was not intended to be, aerodynamically sound.

Community reconciliation in Northern Ireland in the Craig era was scuppered by the attitudes of the governing elite, by divisions and demoralisation among nationalists, and by the economic condition of the state. Northern Ireland in the inter-war period was, beyond a small and overwhelmingly unionist economic elite, characterised by widespread inter-communal poverty; the economic condition of the state threatened its survival more dangerously than the IRA campaigns of the early 1920s. Here Craig was hampered both by the field on which he had to play (namely the Government of Ireland act), and by his own feeble grasp of the rules of the macroeconomic game. Craig was keen to improve the economic relationship between Belfast and London laid down in the act of 1920; and he pressed for, and won – through the Colwyn committee reports – a better deal for his administration. Equally, he supported the different loans guarantee acts (1922–36) by which the Northern Ireland government sought to bolster the shipbuilding industry; and he supported, too, initiatives to diversify the northern economy, and in particular the New Industries (Development) Acts of 1932 and 1937. He was susceptible, not just to local clamourings, but also to imperial needs: in 1927, despite intensive lobbying from within Northern Ireland, he did not press the British to protect the linen trade, for fear of the political consequences. More notoriously, in 1938, during the negotiations that produced the Anglo–Irish agreement, Craig took personal charge of the Northern Ireland case, and glibly promised his support for the wider deal provided that the Belfast government was adequately compensated (his particular desire that Stormont be bought off with armaments contracts for Belfast astonished those, like Wilfrid Spender (qv), in the know). This was seen by Spender, and by subsequent commentators, as a defining moment in Craig's 'little Ulsterism'; and while it does reflect an intensely limited approach to politics, it also points to Craig's imperial susceptibilities – and also (as with the linen episode) to an irreducible sense of the vulnerability of the northern polity.

In 1938 Neville Chamberlain had successfully appealed to Craig by pointing to the role that a settlement with Dublin might play in the wider imperial diplomatic initiative. In April 1939, with the failure of this initiative and with war looming, Craig and the unionist government sought to make provision for the introduction of conscription into Northern Ireland. Chamberlain again appealed to Craig's broader loyalties in order to avert the possibility of a damaging controversy on the issue. But the limits of Craig's imperial vision were determined when Chamberlain sought, as Lloyd George had earlier done, to undermine the partition settlement in the wider British interest. An attempt in May–June 1940 to trade the unification of Ireland for Dublin's military engagement elicited a telegram from Craig which (even allowing for the constraints of the medium) conveyed a carefully calculated rage. Craig fought off this, and earlier, challenges to his state: he died peacefully, his pipe and a detective story by his side, on 24 November 1940.

Assessment Craig's political outlook had been formed within the commercial and professional classes of eastern Ulster; he had been moulded by his experiences in South Africa and in the campaign against Russellism. His concern for the unity of unionism was, arguably, the underlying thrust of his strategies in 1912–14; it remained a central goal through the years of his premiership. South Africa provided an imperial outlook and helped to make warfare familiar, even perhaps normal; it was thus an important underpinning for his work in fighting home rule and, later, the IRA. But it did not make Craig a proactive imperialist. He had been born into a tightly knit society, where the ties supplied by church, by business, and by the Orange order created a supportive but ultimately exclusive and parochial community. Craig's career hovered between this 'little Ulster' and a wider imperial engagement: he fought for empire in South Africa, but fought for a conservative Ulster unionism in the byways of east Down. He defended his home turf in 1912–14 but served successfully in the government of the empire. He was both master of an Orange lodge and a viscount of the United Kingdom (a creation of 1927). In 1921–5 he fought his corner with tenacity, but he was capable of rising above a merely obstructionist unionism. After 1925 the implicit tension between the sectional leader and the imperial statesman was largely resolved in favour of the former role. Craig emerged as the paterfamilias of unionist Ulster, 'distributing bones' of patronage, and looking after his own.

PRONI, Craig papers (and papers of Lady Craigavon); Ronald McNeill, *Ulster's stand for union* (1922); Hugh Shearman, *Not an inch: a study of Northern Ireland and Lord Craigavon* (1942); St John Ervine, *Craigavon: Ulsterman* (1949); A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Ulster crisis: resistance to home rule, 1912–14* (1967); Patrick Buckland, *The factory of grievances: devolved government in Northern Ireland, 1921–1939* (1979); id., *James Craig, Lord Craigavon* (1980); Alvin Jackson, *The*

Ulster party: Irish unionists in the house of commons, 1884–1911 (1989); Bryan Follis, *A state under siege: the establishment of Northern Ireland, 1920–1925* (1995)

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