

Forster, William Edward

by Richard Hawkins

Forster, William Edward (1818–86), MP and chief secretary for Ireland, was born 11 July 1818 at Bradpole, near Bridport, Dorset, England, the only child of William Forster (1784–1854), a Society of Friends minister, originally from Tottenham, Middlesex, and his wife Anna (1784–1855), daughter of Thomas Fowell Buxton, of Earl's Colne, Essex. After four years (1831–5) of formal education in quaker schools at Bristol and Tottenham, Forster began to learn, from the basic levels of weaving and sorting wool, the trade on which his later life was built – first in a Norwich factory and later (1838) in a mill at Darlington, Co. Durham. After twelve hours work a day, he studied mathematics. His father wished him to take a clerkship in a London bank; Forster wanted to take active part in suppressing the African slave trade. In the end he moved (1841) to Bradford, Yorkshire, and began (1842), on borrowed capital, a lifelong partnership as a worsted manufacturer, in which he combined business success with concern for the welfare of employees. 'What a bother this forced worship of Mammon is!', he wrote cheerfully as a young man (Reid, *Forster*, i, 129); but financial security allowed him later to enter politics, in which he had shown great interest even as a schoolboy.

During the great famine he made two tours (1846, 1847) of the west of Ireland in conjunction with his father, to distribute relief funds collected by Friends in England and to observe and report on conditions. Another associate was his friend and fellow quaker James Hack Tuke (qv). In Kerry he visited Daniel O'Connell (qv). He returned to Ireland in 1849, observing the aftermath of the famine, and meeting Thomas Carlyle and Charles Gavan Duffy (qv). His concern for such issues as parliamentary reform, education, the condition of the working class, and negro slavery, led him into active politics. Twice proposed as a radical candidate for the Leeds constituency (1857), he stood again (1859) as a Liberal, but was defeated by a small majority. In the same year he threw himself vigorously into the Volunteer movement (precursor of the Territorial Army). At a by-election in February 1861 he was elected Liberal MP for Bradford, a seat he held for the rest of his life.

By 1880 Forster had a confirmed reputation for hard work, integrity, and public spirit, and might, indeed, have succeeded Gladstone as Liberal leader in 1875 had he not stood aside, for the sake of unity, in favour of Lord Hartington (qv). The combination of lifelong liberal convictions with independent judgment, however, occasionally brought him under fire not only from opponents but from the wings of his own party. During the American civil war he was a constant supporter of the union and opposed British intervention. In his first ministerial post, he was colonial under-secretary (1865–6) during the controversial suppression of revolt in Jamaica. In 1868 he was appointed to the privy council and made vice-president of the council. Having been a founder member (1849) of the Leeds education committee, and a member of

the schools inquiry commission (1864), he appropriately took on responsibility for education policy, and introduced in 1870 the legislation that established a national, non-denominational elementary school system in England. He was made a member of the cabinet, and oversaw the passage of the Ballot Act (1872) establishing secret voting in elections to parliament. His later condemnation of tory policy in eastern Europe was solidly based on extensive contacts and weeks of personal investigation in the Balkans. In his inaugural address as rector of Aberdeen University (24 November 1876) he defined the two absolute necessities for a politician as 'the quick perception of right and wrong, and the desire to do right', and the aim of politics as 'the fulfilment by our country of her duty' (Reid, ii, 160). With such principles and the memory of his own experiences during the famine, Forster returned to Ireland on 3 May 1880 as chief secretary (appointed 30 April).

He took office amid protracted agrarian crisis and distress, political agitation, and growing crime and disorder. None of these could be speedily remedied; and a strong body of opinion within the cabinet was, like Forster, opposed to repression. (The sobriquet 'Buckshot', by which he became known, derived from the previous administration's decision that the RIC should use buckshot in riots, to avoid accidental death from stray rounds of ball.) On 10 May 1880 he advised against renewing the 1875 peace preservation act; and in mid June he introduced a bill (based on one proposed by John O'Connor Power (qv), MP) to discourage 'unreasonable' evictions for a limited period by obliging landlords to compensate tenants. Its rejection by the house of lords in August left a lasting scar on Forster, and on a similar occasion a month later he denounced the upper house for irresponsibility. By this time, a commission under the 6th earl of Bessborough (qv) was examining the working of the 1870 land act with a view to further legislation; the crisis, however, was rapidly worsening, and during the autumn Forster – denounced by conservatives for acting against property and class, but not against crime – took a course that led to his being denounced as a coercionist. The cabinet in general favoured action (within the ordinary law as far as possible) against the Land League – a line that ended in the abortive 'state trials' of C. S. Parnell (qv) and other leaders for criminal conspiracy. Forster (and a few cabinet colleagues) became reluctantly convinced that the forces of law and the state could overcome those of violence and intimidation only by suspending habeas corpus, and detaining without trial persons suspected of crime. On 30 December the cabinet agreed to his proposals, which were given priority over other legislation.

He introduced in January the bill that became in March the Protection of Person and Property Act, 1881. Its companion, a bill to restrict the possession of arms, was introduced and passed within three weeks in March, remaining relatively uncontroversial till it was allowed to expire twenty-five years later. Forster also took a strong interest in, and contributed to, the land bill; he considered the 'three Fs' (fair rent, free sale, and fixity of tenure), together with relief of congestion in the west, essential to any solution, and went in this direction some distance beyond Gladstone. However, Gladstone introduced the land bill, not Forster, who, despite

his sympathy with the act, was not directly associated with its working. By the time it passed (August 1881) he was irrevocably identified with the protection act. Arrests under the act were few at first, but by the end of the summer had extended in scope to include such 'suspects' as Fr Eugene Sheehy (qv) and John Dillon (qv). Less obviously, the act was increasingly used for prevention, rather than its original purpose; and it had clearly not prevented further serious deterioration in crime and public order. In mid June Forster considered leaving office, as 'I can never do now what I might have done in Ireland' (*Arnold-Forster journal*, 178). He was restored to some extent by the passage of the land act and the end of the session. But when Parnell and the league decided not to cooperate with the land act, and the pressure of boycotting intensified, Forster concluded that 'now that we have made the law just, we are called upon to put down lawlessness with a strong hand' (Reid, ii, 347), and that the protection act should be used for the purpose. The cabinet agreed; and the arrests of Parnell and other leaders in mid October, and the subsequent suppression of the league, were generally supported by British public opinion. By late November, however, personal assaults, shootings, and other forms of intimidation had multiplied; and while considering how to deal with these, Forster told Gladstone that 'if we could get the country quiet . . . the best course for Ireland, as well as for myself, would be my replacement by someone not tarred by the coercion brush' (*ibid.*, 368). In mid December, after consultation with Lord Spencer (qv) and Clifford Lloyd (qv), RM, he introduced his boldest administrative experiment, the divisional system – devolved regional control over police, RMs, and troops in disturbed counties.

However, none of the government's measures had a decisive effect in restoring order. In the first week of March 1882 Forster took the unusual step of touring disturbed districts of the west and midlands and speaking directly to the public, most notably at Tulla, Co. Clare, and Tullamore, King's Co. (Offaly). The impact of this personal initiative was short-lived. Several hundred men were still detained under the protection act, which was due to expire in September 1882. Forster, who told the commons (28 March) that further measures would be introduced if necessary, became aware that not all the cabinet supported him in this. He submitted in mid April detailed proposals for new legislation, backed by reports from the special RMs; and it was agreed that Spencer should take over responsibilities in Dublin in place of the existing lord lieutenant, Earl Cowper (qv). By this time, however, the cabinet had been approached by Capt. William O'Shea (qv) on behalf of Parnell, with proposals that seemed to offer a hope of agrarian and political peace, with no need for further coercion. These culminated in the 'Kilmainham treaty', an understanding that coercion would be shelved, that the land act would be extended, and that Parnell and the other leaders, once released, would use their influence in favour of the act and against violence. This swing in policy led to Forster's resignation on 2 May: he considered it unsafe and derogatory to the position of government, and would not take responsibility for the peace of Ireland under such conditions. His personal judgement of Parnell may also have played a part. Suggestions that he was worn out, dispirited by failure, or alienated from his colleagues, or felt that Spencer's

position diminished his own, are in conflict with his readiness to return to Ireland after the murders (6 May) of Lord Frederick Cavendish (qv) and T. H. Burke (qv), the victims of plans originally laid against himself.

His offer was not accepted. Forster had left Ireland on 19 April 1882; he never returned. His speech of 15 May in the commons, giving his view of the 'Kilmainham treaty', divided him from his former colleagues, and effectively barred him from further office. He remained active in public life, and among other causes urged that local government franchise in Ireland should be extended on the same basis as in England. His long interest in colonial affairs – he was a trenchant critic of government actions in South Africa and the Sudan – culminated in his chairmanship of the Imperial Federation League (1884). While health allowed, he continued his favourite pursuits: foreign travel, mountaineering, and whist, of which a friend said: 'he enjoyed the game more than any other man I ever knew . . . but . . . hardly ever got through a rubber quite to his own satisfaction, and still less to that of his partner' (quoted in Reid, ii, 473). He became ill in the summer of 1885 and died on 5 April 1886 at 80 Eccleston Square, his London residence since 1863. After a funeral in Westminster abbey (9 April) he was buried at Burley-in-Wharfedale, Yorkshire, his permanent home since 1852.

He married (1850) Jane Martha Arnold (1821–99), eldest daughter of Dr Thomas Arnold ('Arnold of Rugby'); for marrying an anglican, he was expelled from the Society of Friends. Having no children of their own, the Forsters adopted (1859) two nieces and two nephews who had recently been orphaned; the older girl became Florence Vere O'Brien (qv), and the younger boy, as Hugh Oakley Arnold-Forster (1855–1909), became MP for Belfast West 1892–1906 and secretary of state for war 1903–5. Most of Forster's own papers have not survived, though some family papers are in TCD. The substantial body of his correspondence with Gladstone is in the Gladstone papers in the BL. Statues were erected in Forster Square, Bradford, and on the Victoria embankment, London.

T. Wemyss Reid, *Life of the Right Honourable W. E. Forster* (2 vols, 1888) (portrs) (reprinted with intro. by Valerie E. Chancellor, 1970); Richard Hawkins, 'Gladstone, Forster, and the release of Parnell, 1882–8', *IHS*, xvi (1968–9), 417–46; T. W. Moody, *Davitt and Irish revolution, 1846–82* (1981); T. W. Moody and R. A. J. Hawkins with Margaret Moody (ed.), *Florence Arnold-Forster's Irish journal* (1988); Allen Warren, article in *ODNB* (portr.)