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GRATTAN'S PARLIAMENT (1782-1800): MYTH AND REALITY

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By means of parliamentary and paramilitary agitation against commercial and political restrictions imposed on Ireland, the Irish patriotic movement led notably by Henry Grattan was to succeed in obtaining almost complete legislative autonomy in 1782, autonomy through which the Irish Parliament was henceforward commonly dubbed as “Grattan’s Parliament”.

Until at least the partition of Ireland the nationalist vulgate had praised Grattan’s Parliament to the skies, ascribing to it notably the most brilliant economic outcomes that eventually deteriorated as a direct consequence of the passing of the Act of Union in 1800. This close connection established between political freedom and economic prosperity became, throughout the Union era, one of the ideological mainstays on which rested Irish Nationalism, whether constitutional or revolutionary—except for a few heterodox elements including a socialist current as epitomized by James Connolly. In other words, on the political emancipation of Ireland depended, according to many Irish nationalists, the settlement of all economic and social issues. Hence political struggles of whatever form which mainly focussed on the repeal or the reform of the Union so as to establish Irish self-government or independence, and restore a flourishing economy that had pervaded Ireland at the time of Grattan’s Parliament.

However one may wonder whether there were no hagiographic elements in the idealization of Grattan’s Parliament, and to what extent all this came close to being a myth used for ideological purposes. And while tackling the above issues the present article will not fail to explore the ideological nature and development of the Irish patriotic movement from its inception in the mid-eighteenth century to the advent of the Society of United Irishmen in the early 1790s.

Since its establishment in 1297, the Dublin Parliament had had the peculiarity of being essentially made up of landlords subservient to an executive power appointed by London.¹ From the mid-eighteenth century, however, a parliamentary opposition dared to emerge from obscurity under the leadership of Charles Lucas and Henry Flood. A small and socially heterogeneous group of eloquent orators,² these Irish "patriots" of the Protestant faith joined forces so as to achieve the following objectives: strengthening both the legislative power of the Irish House of Commons and the judicial independence vis-à-vis the Royal authorities; reducing both the Irish government spending and the duration of parliament to seven years (instead of renewing it only at the end of a monarch's reign). But it was above all through the emergence of Henry Grattan on the political scene, in 1775, that this embryonic patriotic movement was to grow very rapidly.³

A barrister and patriotic aristocrat, born in 1746, Henry Grattan actually took advantage of the American War of Independence to tailor his cause into a more radical scheme. Indeed, the revolts of the American colonies had led England to withdraw most of her regular troops from Ireland. And in order to protect the Irish coast against a possible French invasion, the British government gave consent, in 1778, to the creation of

¹ During the first half of the eighteenth century, all the members of the Irish Parliament belonged to the established church of Ireland, although the Anglican community then accounted for approximately one third of the Protestant population and for one eleventh of the total population of Ireland. Moreover, only less than one fifth of the membership of the House of Commons was elected by the wealthiest Protestant eligible voters. As for the other seats, they were either owned or controlled by peers or the English government. It was therefore a corrupt and unrepresentative Parliament to say the least. However, it is also important to point out that Ireland, together with England, Iceland and Sicily, was at that time the only country in the world which had had parliamentary institutions since the thirteenth century. See Emil Strauss, *Irish Nationalism and British Democracy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975), 56; David Dickson, "Henry Flood (1732-91) and the Eighteenth Century Irish Patriots", in *Worsted in the Game: Losers in Irish History* ed. Ciaran Brady, 99 (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1989); André Guillaume, *L'Irlande, une ou deux nations ?* (Paris: PUF, 1987), 29; W. E. Vaughan and A.J. Fitzpatrick, eds., *Irish Historical Statistics: Population, 1821-1971* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1978), 2.

² Among the parliamentary "patriots" were lawyers, landed gentry, a small number of aristocrats, including the earl of Charlemont, and a former apothecary, Charles Lucas. See Dickson, 99.

³ *Ibid.*, 99; Jean Lozes, "Le 18^e siècle irlandais: avance ou recul du patriotisme et de la liberté?", *Etudes Irlandaises*, 15(1) (1990): 136; Jean Guiffan, *La Question d'Irlande* (Bruxelles: Editions Complexe, 1997), 19, 31.

paramilitary groups known as the Volunteers. In a short period of time, the new militia was to prosper among the Protestants of every persuasion and of all social classes, comprising up to around 100,000 members by 1781.⁴ Even the Catholics lent their support to the new organization, although not authorized to bear arms by virtue of the penal laws.⁵

Assigned to preside over the destinies of the opposition “party”, Grattan—along with Flood and Lord Charlemont—then used the threat of armed force as embodied in the Volunteers to compel England to enact a certain number of reforms. From December 1779 to January 1780, the London Parliament, anxious to annihilate any inclination toward rebellion in Ireland, thus removed almost all the hindrances to trade. Afterwards, boosted by these early concessions, the Irish patriotic movement vehemently got into the field of political claims. As in the convention organized by the Volunteers in Dungannon (County Tyrone), in February 1782, where a certain number of resolutions were adopted, among which the following are illustrative of the ideological evolution of the Irish militia:

. . . That a claim of any body of men other than the King, Lords, and Commons of Ireland to make laws to bind this Kingdom, is unconstitutional, illegal, and a grievance.

. . . That the Powers exercised by the Privy Council . . . under pretence of the Law of Poynings, are unconstitutional and a grievance.

. . . That as men and as Irishmen, as Christians, and as Protestants, we rejoice in the relaxation of the Penal Laws against our Roman Catholic fellow subjects, and we conceive the measure to be fraught with the happiest consequences to the union and prosperity of the inhabitants of Ireland.⁶

In addition to the legislative autonomy, the Protestant patriots now declared themselves in favour of a relative emancipation of Catholics, most probably in return for their support felt to be necessary.

Throughout Ireland, all the Volunteer companies followed the example of the Dungannon convention, thus adopting the same resolutions. This crisis situation forced the Irish House of Commons into meeting in extraordinary session, on 16 April 1782; and this, “to consider Irish

⁴ Liz Curtis, *The Cause of Ireland* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1994), 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*; T.A. Jackson, *Ireland Her Own* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991, orig. 1947), 105-107; Lozes, 136.

⁶ Quoted in Jackson, 109-110; James Carty, *Ireland: from the Flight of the Earls to Grattan's Parliament (1607-1782)* (Dublin: C.J. Fallon Ltd, 1965), 170.

grievances.”⁷ And unanimously did the Irish representatives sanction the Declaration of the Rights of Ireland, as drawn up by Grattan. A declaration which defined the fundamental liberties of the Irish Parliament and subjects vis-à-vis London, in the ideological wake of the Dungannon resolutions embraced by the Volunteers.⁸ Strongly weakened by their routed armies in America, the British authorities preferred to avoid any new conflict and, consequently, took, in May 1782, the measures that were a priori dictated by common sense: the repeal of the Declaratory Act and the amendment of the Poyning's Law.⁹ Thus came into being what was commonly called “Grattan's Parliament”, theoretically liberated from English control.¹⁰

A Grattan's Parliament eulogized to such an extent that, once abolished in 1800, following the failure of the 1798 Rebellion orchestrated by the United Irishmen, a nostalgic spirit in relation to it was henceforward to pervade ideologically most Irish nationalist circles, whether constitutionalist or revolutionary, at least during the Union period. Such a phenomenon was essentially the result of the economic prosperity experienced by Ireland in the late eighteenth century, and attributed to the legislative autonomy as enjoyed in the era of Grattan's Parliament. Hence the numerous laudatory speeches, statements and articles released in this connection. One significant example, among many others, comes from the official organ of Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin—also called Sinn Féin—which, on 16 December 1911, could read on that issue as follows:

Grattan's Parliament was able to revive and stimulate Irish trade and commerce to a degree of prosperity which it had not enjoyed for centuries,

⁷ Quoted in Jackson, 110.

⁸ It was also during his speech that Grattan is said to have uttered words that were to prevail in the annals of Irish history: “Spirit of Swift, spirit of Molyneux, your genius has prevailed; Ireland is now a nation”. However, Robert Mahony points out that these words were not delivered in 1782 but first appeared in an edition of Grattan's speeches, published after his demise in 1820. See Robert Mahony, “Jonathan Swift as the ‘Patriot Dean’”, *History Ireland* (1995): 25.

⁹ The 1720 Declaratory Act declared the right of the London Parliament to legislate for Ireland, whereas the 1495 Poyning's Law provided that the king's Privy Council must give previous assent to the introduction of any specific legislation in the Irish Parliament. But while, in accordance with the 1782 reform, the Privy Council could no longer legislate for Ireland or amend Irish laws, the monarch could still use his veto. See D. George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1995), 113; Jackson, 111–112.

¹⁰ Boyce, 112–113; Jackson, 110; Carty, 163–167; Curtis, 5; Lozes, 137; J.G. Simms, *Colonial Nationalism, 1698–1776* (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1976), 74–76.

because Grattan's Parliament was the sole fiscal authority in Ireland Grattan's Parliament found Ireland a sheep-farm and a cattle-ranch, importing the bread it ate, and in a few years it transformed Ireland into a tillage country, feeding on its own corn and exporting the surplus. Foster's Corn Laws founded on the system of bounties worked the transformation Grattan's Parliament in five years turned Ireland into a large exporter of manufactured goods under the Irish flag in a home-owned mercantile marine. This was possible because Grattan's Parliament controlled the Customs. In the less than 20 years existence Grattan's Parliament converted Ireland from a pasturage to tillage, revived her greatness as a manufacturing nation, made her fisheries amongst the richest in the world, equipped herself with a mercantile marine and secured recognition in every part of Europe for the mercantile flag of Ireland.¹¹

But while the Irish economy indisputably experienced a relatively long period of expansion in the latter part of the eighteenth century, to what extent did this prosperity really originate with the establishment an autonomous parliament in Dublin? In this respect, some analyses reveal that the economic prosperity of the time would be actually due not to Irish legislators, supposedly free from hindrance, but to the interaction of external factors. Thus, as regards the linen industry, it clearly appears that the end of the American War of Independence constituted the real driving force behind its expansion period between 1783 and 1795. Indeed, all through the conflict, Ulster's linen industry had greatly suffered from the lack of trade regulation. Once the sovereignty of the American colonies was recognized in 1783, the Belfast and Newry textile merchants, independently of the Dublin Parliament, gave a new impetus to the linen production, notably by ignoring the restrictions imposed by the Irish government.¹²

As the key element of the country's economic fabric, agriculture was not spared from this phenomenon either. So, was attributed to the miraculous effects of the Foster's Corn Law of 1784—designed to favour corn exports through subsidies—the transformation of Ireland, in Sinn Féin's words, “into a tillage country, feeding on its own corn and exporting the surplus.”¹³ Whereas, in fact, Ireland had initiated an agrarian transformation process long before the enactment of the Forter's Law: that is in the 1760s when, not having sufficient resources anymore to meet her population's food needs, England had had no choice but to import a high

¹¹ *Sinn Féin*, December 16, 1911.

¹² J.J. Lee, “Grattan's Parliament”, in *The Irish Parliamentary Tradition*, ed. Brian Farrell, 152 (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973).

¹³ *Sinn Féin*, December 16, 1911.

proportion of her cereals. In other words, the Irish legislation was merely continuing a process begun about two decades earlier.¹⁴

Against the official hagiography, James Connolly was one of the few theoreticians who did not ascribe a political dimension to the economic performance of the late eighteenth century. Far from exerting a profound influence over the Irish economy, according to Connolly, Grattan's Parliament would have therefore wrongfully occupied a place of honour in Irish collective memory, in lieu of the real architect of the economic growth, that is the Industrial Revolution, as he writes in his 1910 *Labour in Irish History*:

. . . we must emphatically deny that such prosperity was in any but an infinitesimal degree produced by Parliament The sudden advance of trade in the period in question was almost solely due to the introduction of mechanical power, and the consequent cheapening of manufactured goods. It was the era of the Industrial Revolution when the domestic industries we had inherited from the Middle Ages were finally replaced by the factory system of modern times.¹⁵

However, paradoxically, the latter historical analysis was to find little support from Connolly's own followers. While some of them described it as erroneous in regard to the Marxist orthodoxy, they above all criticized him for turning away from the nationalist propaganda, which warranted the struggle for the Repeal or the federal overhaul of the Anglo-Irish Union, notably by imputing to the latter the end of a period of wealth and prosperity resulting from the various measures enacted by the autonomous Irish parliament—the end of Irish prosperity which had actually happened before the passing of the Act of Union.¹⁶

As a result, that the 1782 events had been referred to as a national revolution—notably by such a Marxist historian as T. A. Jackson—is hardly surprising.¹⁷ But does this mean that, at that time, a wave of emancipation and democratisation had well and truly swept through Ireland? In the light of the facts, one is entitled to doubt it. Indeed, during the course of its existence, Grattan's Parliament was above all characterized by its refusal to change the existing order and established

¹⁴ Lee, 152–153; Brendan Clifford, *The Economics of Partition* (Belfast: Athol Books, 1992), 51–52.

¹⁵ James Connolly, *Collected Works, Vol.1* (Dublin: New Books Publications, 1987), 56.

¹⁶ Lee, 153–154; Clifford, 51–54.

¹⁷ A national revolution which, in T.A. Jackson's work, answers to the name of "Grattan's Revolution". See Jackson, 100, 110.

values. It could not therefore be regarded as revolutionary—at least if one refers to the concept of revolution understood as a complete rupture with an existing order of whatever nature (whether political, social, economic or moral etc.), “to bring about something altogether new”, to quote Hannah Arendt.¹⁸ Besides, long before Connolly, two other prominent figures in Irish nationalism had also had reservations as for the radical nature of the 1782 constitution. Won over to the idea of establishing an independent Irish state, James Fintan Lalor disparaged, as early as 1848, the supporters of a mere repeal of the Union for, to quote his own words: “Repeal in its vulgar meaning, I look on as utterly impracticable by any mode of action whatever, and the constitution of ’82 as absurd, worthless, and worse than worseless If I am to stake life and fame it must be for something better and greater”¹⁹ But, already in Grattan’s day, Theobald Wolfe Tone had stigmatised with full knowledge of the facts, and not without a hint of irony, the alleged 1782 revolution. In this respect, he wrote in his 1791 pamphlet entitled, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*:

Who of the veteran enemies of the country lost his place or his pension? Who was called forth to station or office from the ranks of opposition? Not one. The power remained in the hands of our enemies, again to be exerted for our ruin, with this difference, that formerly we had our distress, our injuries, and our insults gratis at the hands of England; but now we pay very dearly to receive the same with aggravation, through the hands of Irishmen—yet this we boast of and call a Revolution!²⁰

As Wolfe Tone points out, the legislative autonomy gained in 1782 hardly modified the socio-political structures of the “Ancien Régime”: the parliament remaining corrupt, unrepresentative, and subservient to the political demands of an executive appointed and controlled by the English government.²¹ As for the patriotic opposition, it tended to adopt a moderate posture in the years following its “victory”, henceforward renouncing the use of roundabout means to achieve its objectives. Only Henry Flood vainly strove to persuade the Irish parliament to pass an electoral yet

¹⁸ Hanna Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973, orig. 1963), 21.

¹⁹ L. Fogarty, ed., *James Fintan Lalor: Patriot and Political Essayist (1807-1849)* (Dublin: The Talbot Press Limited, 1918), 56–57.

²⁰ Thomas Bartlett, ed., *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone: Memoirs, Journals, and Political Writings, Compiled and Arranged by William T.W. Tone, 1826* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1998), 281.

²¹ Lee, 150–151; Lozes, 137; Curtis, 5; Clifford, 49–50; Boyce, 113.

moderate reform,²² “presented at the point of the bayonet”²³—an electoral reform which had been drawn up in the Volunteer convention of November 1783. Consequently, considering the conclusive results obtained thanks to the pressure exerted by the paramilitary wing of the patriotic movement, by what considerations was this sudden strategic change motivated? For a better understanding of the parliamentary patriots’ motives, it is necessary first to define the ideological nature of their political designs. Thus, in line with the English Whigs, Grattan and his followers felt it necessary to redress some of the deficiencies of the established order, so as to prevent it from being possibly overthrown: reforming in order not to transform but to conserve, such was in substance their motto, through which they could be described as “enlightened” or liberal conservatives, as opposed to the more reactionary character of Tory conservatism.²⁴ The most compelling proof is their willingness to abolish most of the Penal Laws provided, nevertheless, that the Protestant upper classes should maintain their supremacy over the institutions as a whole.²⁵ And because, under such specific circumstances, patriotism very often goes hand in hand with class interest, the reformist members of Parliament

²² Flood proposed, in substance, to call a general election every three years, to extend the franchise to all ten-pound freeholders of the Protestant faith, to redraw borough boundaries—with a view to eradicating “rotten boroughs”—and to abolish the system of purchase and sale of certain parliamentary seats. See David Dickson, 105; Jackson, 112; Lee, 154.

²³ Quoted in Jackson, 113.

²⁴ In this respect, it must be noted that, contrary to the Whigs, the Tories were traditionally staunch supporters of the reigning monarch against the Parliament, of the established Church of England against the other denominations, and of the House of Lords against the House of Commons.

²⁵ However, on the issue of the Catholic right to vote, two currents of opinion conflicted. On one side, although they favoured the extension of the franchise to the Protestant middle classes—who formed the backbone of the Volunteers—Flood and his supporters pronounced themselves against the involvement of the Catholics in Irish political life, for such involvement was deemed too threatening to the prerogatives enjoyed by the Anglican community. For Grattan and his followers, by contrast, only the landowners of every persuasion fulfilled the conditions to carry out public affairs activities without triggering drastic political and social upheaval. Finally, the Catholic forty-shilling freeholders were granted the right to vote in 1793 thanks to the Catholic Relief Act passed by the Irish Parliament at the English government’s request. It is therefore the irony of history that the only genuine progressive reform ever adopted by Grattan’s Parliament had its source not in Dublin but in London—not out of altruism but to curb the support of Catholics for the radical presbyterians. See Curtis, 5, 8; Lee, 154–155; Dickson, 106–107).

most probably dreaded seeing someday the Volunteers—although under aristocratic control—get involved in real subversive action, in the struggle against the insidious effects of the new constitution. In order to guard against this eventuality, they therefore opted to serve their cause in the strictly political realm—with the exception of Flood and a tiny number of his followers between 1783 and 1785—; and this as early as the end of 1782. As a result, left without strong leadership, somewhat disorganized and disillusioned, the Volunteers—who essentially came from middle-class backgrounds—²⁶ were to decline rapidly thereafter.²⁷

However, in reaction to the moderating influence of the constitutional reformers on the Irish patriotic movement was formed a fringe group of dissident patriots both in Dublin and the north-east of the country. Known as the Society of United Irishmen from 1791 onwards, they became, throughout Ireland, the apostles of tenets inspired notably by the political thought of the Enlightenment. Yet, originally the new organisation did not wish to overstep the limits of a parliamentary reform. In fact, the only difference with the group led by Grattan rested on the means to be implemented to achieve it. As Jean Lozes puts it:

Grattan wished to use persuasion and the United Irishmen to engender fear, in order to lead the government to consent to a more democratic electoral system, so that the rest of their objectives, whether religious, commercial or political, might be achieved in the second stage (My translation).²⁸

But, the various coercive and repressive measures taken by the Dublin government against the United Irishmen eventually drove the latter to modify their political strategy and goal. Henceforth, they endeavoured to build interdenominational unity in Ireland on a revolutionary basis, with a view to establishing an independent and secular republic.

And it was actually through their willingness to overthrow the imperial order in defiance of the law, “to bring about something altogether new”, that the United Irishmen could be regarded as genuine revolutionaries, as opposed to the legalist and reformist wing of the patriotic movement. Thus

²⁶ The rank and file members of the Volunteers were predominantly comprised of tenant farmers, artisans, traders and merchants. See Nancy J. Curtin, *The United Irishmen: Popular Politics in Ulster and Dublin, 1791-98* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 51; Curtis, 4.

²⁷ Curtis, 5 ; Jackson, 113; Lozes, 137.

²⁸ Lozes, 139. “Grattan souhaitait user de persuasion, les United Irishmen engendrer la crainte, afin d’amener le gouvernement à accepter un système électoral plus démocratique, de sorte que le restant de leurs objectifs, religieux, commerciaux et politiques, puisse se réaliser dans une deuxième étape”.

emerged, in the late eighteenth century, a divide inherent in Irish nationalism and characterized by a constitutional pole and a revolutionary pole, the direct descendants of which are embodied, to a certain extent, in present-day Northern Ireland by the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), on the one hand, and by a republican movement made up of the IRA and Sinn Féin, on the other. Two opposite tendencies, to be sure, as regards the means to be employed so as to reach just as much divergent goals, but which both used, at least all through the Union period, the same propaganda tool based on the myth of a Grattan's Parliament supposed to be the main architect of the wealth of late eighteenth-century Ireland. A myth which therefore largely contributed to justify the subservience of socio-economic issues to strictly political ideology and action, whether moderate or radical, intended to repeal or reform an Act of Union considered as an obstacle to Irish economic prosperity. This explains, to a large extent, that traditional political and ideological cleavages in Ireland since partition have been essentially based on constitutional, political, denominational and cultural antagonisms rather than on socio-economic differences as in the other western European nation-states.

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