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**IRISH HOME RULE AND BRITISH IMPERIALISM:  
A VIEW THROUGH THE PRISM  
OF THE BULGARIAN QUESTION (1876-1886)**

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In January 1878, a journalist from the *Freeman's Journal*, a nationalist Irish daily, was trying to explain the significance of the imminent Russian victory over the Turks as far as 'Turkey in Europe' – understand Ottoman territories in the Balkans – was concerned. He wrote: 'the first point in the Russian terms of peace [was] that 'autonomy', or to use a more familiar synonym, 'Home Rule' is to be granted to Bulgaria'.<sup>1</sup> This statement was published right in the middle of the Russo-Turkish War, at the origin of which laid the Russian desire to wrangle independence from Sultan Abdul Hamid II for Balkan Ottoman territories which had been rebelling against their suzerain since 1875, i.e. Bulgaria, but also Bosnia, Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro.<sup>2</sup> Rather than focusing on what preoccupied most of Europe – that was whether other European nations would enter the war alongside the Ottoman Empire, whose 'territorial integrity' they had sworn to maintain in 1856, especially against Russia<sup>3</sup> –, the journalist from the *Freeman's*

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<sup>1</sup> 'The most important even bearing on the...', *Freeman's Journal*, 28 January, 1878, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed history of the 1875-1878 Eastern crisis, see: Richard MILLMAN, *Britain and the Eastern Question, 1875-1878*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979. For a larger perspective of 'the Eastern Question' – which is the name given to the interference of European powers in the destiny of the Ottoman Empire between the 1774 Russo-Turkish war and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne which dismembered it –, consult for instance: M. S. ANDERSON, *The Eastern Question, 1774-1923*, St Martin's Press, London, Melbourne & Toronto, 1966; and Alexander L. MACFIE, *The Eastern Question, 1774-1923*, Longman, London & New York, (1989) 1996.

<sup>3</sup> The Treaty of Paris of 1856 ended the Crimean war, which had opposed Russia to the Sultan and his allies (France, Britain, Prussia, Austria and Sardinia) after Russia had decided in 1853 to step in the Ottoman Empire to protect Ottoman Christians – a right it claimed it had according to the 1774 Kutchuk Kainardji. Russia was defeated, but to avoid a new European conflagration and the subsequent upheaval of the 1815 European order, it was decided by the Concert of Europe (which included all European powers quoted above) to maintain the independence and territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire (article 7 of the treaty of Paris). In exchange, the Sultan was to apply the reforms he had promised in favour of greater equality between Muslim and non-Muslim subjects. When in March 1877, Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire in order to help Christians in the Balkans who had fallen victims to Ottoman irregulars and who, Russia thought, European diplomacy was letting down, the Concert of Europe blamed Russia for starting another Crimean war. Fighting first stopped in March 1878 when a bilateral treaty (involving only the two belligerents) was concluded. The San Stefano Treaty suggested the creation of an independent province of Bulgaria and was highly favourable to Russia, which was trying to extend its Pan Slavist sphere to the Balkans. But other European powers said the treaty was illegal, since it had also been decided by the 1856 Treaty of Paris that the Eastern Question needed to be settled by the Concert of Europe as a whole, that is by involving all European

*Journal* shifted the attention of his readers to the likely outcome of that war for Ottoman Bulgaria, that is autonomy. For that, he invited his readers to picture the probable future of the Ottoman province thanks to a parallel with the domestic scene of the Irish contemporary struggle for some as yet undefined autonomy, Irish Home Rule. The contemporaneous development of Bulgarian and Irish nationalisms in the late nineteenth century could not fail to trigger criss-cross parallels, with Bulgarian nationalists turning towards liberty-loving Britain/Britannia<sup>4</sup> and Irish Home Rulers, both looking to Ottoman Bulgaria (for its enviable future) and to Westminster (for its potentially instrumental role in the new condition of the latter). Parallels between Bulgaria and Ireland were actually very frequent between the 1876 'Bulgarian atrocities', which corresponded to an episode of violence committed by the Turkish irregular army against Ottoman Bulgarian Christians, and the Tophane Agreement of March 1886, which eventually granted the whole of Bulgaria complete independence from the Ottoman Empire and which almost coincided with the introduction of the first Home Rule Bill to the Westminster Parliament by the Liberal Prime Minister, William E. Gladstone (on 8 April, 1886). However, little attention has been paid to these parallels, especially to those likening the Irish question to the Bulgarian one.<sup>5</sup> This article will thus seek to determine what impact events in faraway Ottoman Bulgaria could have on the British debate about Irish Home Rule over this ten-year period (1876-1886). To do this, the reasons for the rapprochement between the two questions will be probed. This overview will reveal that with time, Irish nationalists grew more and more impatient with the British political party they had previously placed their hopes in, the Liberal party, as it supported Bulgarian autonomy but seemed reluctant to bestow the same privileges on Ireland. Finally, it will be argued that envisaging Irish Home Rule through the Bulgarian lens was also a way of questioning the humanitarian nature of British imperialism.

### **Beyond mutual sympathy, a common hope for political autonomy**

In early June 1876, rumours of 'Bulgarian atrocities' reached Europe that the Turkish irregular army had suppressed an insurrection in the Ottoman province of Bulgaria with unabashed cruelty, killing men, women and children without distinction, burning houses and leaving the region of Philippopolis completely

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powers in any treaty with the Sultan. For the text of the 1856 treaty, see the following *Blue Book*: 1856 [2072] *Treaty of Peace: General Treaty between Great Britain, Austria, France, Prussia, Russia, Sardinia, and Turkey, for the Re-Establishment of Peace. With three conventions annexed thereto. Signed at Paris, March 30, 1856*, pp. 1-18.

<sup>4</sup> James Thompson's 'Rule, Britannia' was well-known outside Britain, so were the values it attributed to Britain. This was particularly striking for Ottoman Christians in the 1870s who looked to Britain, and more particularly to Gladstone, as their saviour. See especially: Roumen GENOV, 'The Diplomatic History of the Eastern Question Crisis, Britain and the Bulgarians, 1875-1876', 2005; online at the *New Bulgarian University*, <<http://www.nbu.bg/PUBLIC/IMAGES/File/departamenti/istoriq/4.pdf>> (consulted on 1 May, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> See: Richard T. SHANNON, *Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation 1876*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, Ltd., London, 1963, pp. 274-81; and Eugenio F. BIAGINI, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism, 1876-1906*, CUP, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 317-31.

desolate.<sup>6</sup> This area being fairly inaccessible, it was quite difficult for European diplomats in Ottoman Bulgaria to know precisely what had happened. By the end of the month, rumours had swelled so much in Britain that they became omnipresent in the main British newspapers (especially *The Daily News* and *The Times*) and triggered questions in Parliament to the Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, by Liberals such as William Forster or the Duke of Argyll, who inquired about their veracity.<sup>7</sup> Disraeli's flippant attitude in parliamentary debates about these events which he considered gross exaggeration, not to say pure fiction, angered Liberals, but completely failed to rein in a nationwide wave of sympathy for Ottoman Christians... so much so that in August 1876, William T. Stead, then a young journalist for the Darlington daily *The Northern Echo*, could rejoice that 'England [was] being roused at last'.<sup>8</sup> Thanks to the orchestration of the indignation by elite Liberal opinion-makers (like the historian Edward A. Freeman), Liberal-Radical lobbies (such as the Committee of Eastern Affairs, later to be integrated in the Eastern Question Association) and fervent non-conformists (for instance, Stead),<sup>9</sup> Britain became the locus of a pro-Bulgarian mass agitation that now manifested itself in innumerable mass gatherings around the nation, in deputations and numerous petitions to the Foreign Office in order to denounce 'Turkish abominations', but also Disraeli's unashamedly pro-Ottoman stance. The publication of *Bulgarian Horrors*<sup>10</sup> by Disraeli's arch-rival, former Liberal Premier William E. Gladstone, on 6 September of that year marked the high point of this groundswell of indignation.

Ireland was far from being impermeable to Eastern events, even if reactions there were at first more discreet than in Great Britain. The ten petitions that Ireland contributed out of the almost five hundred petitions received by the Foreign Office between 1 September and 27 December, 1876, are very few indeed. And yet, they are extremely telling of the complexity of Irish standpoints on Bulgarian events, since these are constantly correlated with their senders' positions on Ireland's

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<sup>6</sup> *The Spectator* and *the Northern Echo* were the first press organs to reveal these rumours in Britain. See respectively: SHANNON, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-9; and 'Disturbances in Bulgaria', *The Northern Echo*, 3 June, 1876, p. 3. These articles were thus giving ground to earlier rumours propagated by the on-spot correspondents of *The Daily News* and *the Times* (respectively Edwin Pears and Antonio Gallenga) in two articles published in May 1876: 'The Panic at Constantinople', *The Daily News*, 18 May, 1876, p. 6; and 'The Crisis in Turkey', *The Times*, 26 May, 1876, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> For Forster's and Argyll's interventions in the debates of 26 June, 1876, see respectively in the *Hansard* (vol. 230): HC, § 424-5; and HL, § 395-400.

<sup>8</sup> 'England and the Bulgarian Atrocities', *The Northern Echo*, 11 August, 1876, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Originally, the Bulgarian agitation had been presented as a wholly spontaneous movement with no political backing. This hypothesis is central in the works of Richard W. SETON-WATSON (*Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question: A Study in Diplomacy and Party Politics*, Macmillan & Co, Ltd, London, 1935, p. 72-3), Richard T. SHANNON (*Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation 1876, op. cit.*, p. 13-4) and Ann P. SAAB (*Reluctant Icon: Gladstone, Bulgaria and the Working Classes, 1856-1878*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts & London, 1991, p. 2). However, it has recently been shattered by Rebecca GILL in her doctoral thesis: 'Calculating Compassion in War: The 'New Humanitarian' Ethos in Britain (1870-1918)', PhD, University of Manchester, 2005, p. 10 and pp. 66-7.

<sup>10</sup> William E. GLADSTONE, *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*, John Murray, London, 1876.

relationship to 'mother England'. Three irreconcilable positions can be delineated. The first one is that of Irish Orange Lodges, which concurred with their English counterparts in their support to the Disraeli government arguing that the Bulgarian agitation in Britain was a political manipulation of British opinion by the Liberal party and was thus a partisan attempt 'to impede [the government's efforts] in protecting the interests of England'.<sup>11</sup> The Irish Catholic clergy also distanced itself from the pro-Bulgarian agitation as it followed the Pope's line and questioned the truth of these acts of violence against Eastern Christians, whose religious practices Rome considered as dissident.<sup>12</sup> The third position that surfaced in the petitions was the sympathy expressed by thousands of Irish people during 'Bulgarian atrocities' meetings organised in September 1876 in Irish cities like Belfast, Ballymoney or Antrim, and even by the Irish community in London.

What, then, could be the roots of such sympathy? Undoubtedly, Irish people who took part in the 'Bulgarian atrocities' meetings denounced the 'Bulgarian Horrors' which Gladstone had condemned in his eponymous pamphlet. Irish people responded positively to the appeal to the public conscience launched by the former Premier, without however necessarily sharing Gladstone's view that the Conservative government had to pay, in the next General Election, the full price of their mismanagement of the Eastern crisis and their disrespect of the 1856 Treaty of Paris, which required from signatories – Britain included – that they maintain the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire while making sure the reforms promised by the Sultan were applied. Indeed, both the president of the Home Rule Confederation, the moderate Isaac Butt, and the Liberal-Radical MP for Newcastle, Joseph Cowen, were fervent Home Rule supporters but sided with the Conservative government when it came to taking positions on the attitude of the Disraeli government in this Eastern matter.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, Irish people were not simply echoing the 'dreadful excitement and indignation' Queen Victoria, herself horrified by confirmations of 'Bulgarian atrocities', also saw spreading 'in England, or indeed in Great Britain'.<sup>14</sup> Irish participants in indignation meetings were also attempting a political move with a more local dimension: Irish nationalists indeed felt that their lot was not so dissimilar to that of Bulgarian Christians and to that of Balkan Ottoman Christians more generally speaking. Ireland and Ottoman provinces in the Balkans were countries with a dominant agrarian character. They were also dependent on a larger political structure, the British Empire in the first case and the Ottoman

<sup>11</sup> Petition sent to the Foreign Office by the Grand Protestant Association, Loyal Orangemen of England, Oldham District, on 4 November 1876, in Foreign Office Papers, National Archives, Kew, London, FO 78/2556, f. 162.

<sup>12</sup> This position was also a way of showing Gladstone the Irish clergy had not forgiven the former Liberal Premier for his attack against papal infallibility in his *Vatican Decrees in their Bearing on Civil Allegiance: A Political Expostulation* (John Murray, London, 1874). For more detail, see: Franck H. O'DONNELL, 'Letter to the Editor: Mr. O'Donnell, M.P. and the Eastern Debate', *Freeman's Journal*, 13 August, 1878, p. 3; and John P. ROSSI, 'Catholic Opinion on the Eastern Question, 1876-1878', *Church History*, vol. LI (1982), pp. 54-70.

<sup>13</sup> See: BIAGINI, *op. cit.*, p. 40; and ROSSI, *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in the entry of 10 August, 1876 in Queen Victoria's diary, in George E. BUCKLE, *The Letters of Queen Victoria, 2nd Series, A Selection from Her Majesty's Correspondence and Journal between the Years 1862-1878, vol. II: 1870-1878*, John Murray, London, 1926, p. 475.

Empire in the second, with which relations were often tense, not only for political reasons, but also for religious ones which coincided with social divisions. Historian Neval Berber has convincingly argued that Irish Protestant landlords occupied the same social function as Muslim *beys* and *agas* in Ottoman Balkans and that the counterparts of Irish Catholic peasants were the Christian *rayahs*.<sup>15</sup> The comparison between Ireland and Ottoman provinces in the Balkans was vividly taken up by Gladstone himself when he spoke at the 'National Conference' organised by the Eastern Question Association whose aim was to 'watch events in the East, giv[e] expression to public opinion, and spread useful information'.<sup>16</sup> Although he took great caution in specifying that he was 'not comparing the degree [of similarity between 'the Orangeman in Ireland' and the Turk], but (...) the thing',<sup>17</sup> he was publicly acknowledging the validity of this analogy which had been gathering momentum since 1875, when the two provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina rebelled against the Sultan, thus infusing the whole area with the widespread spirit of Slavic struggle against the Ottoman rule.<sup>18</sup>

The feeling that Ireland could be a British Bulgaria gained ground with Irish nationalists who saw the Bulgarian agitation in Britain as the ideal opportunity to remind Britain's Imperial Parliament of their own struggle. The adoption of the Landlord and Tenant Act in 1870 and the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland the following year (after the 1869 Church of Ireland Act) were attempts by Gladstone's first government to reconcile Irish Catholics with London and limit the spread of revolutionary Fenianism – which advocated the revolutionary repeal of the 1800 Act of Union – in favour of Irish parliamentarianism. In the 1868 electoral campaign, Gladstone's endorsement of 'Justice for Ireland', a slogan uttered in 1836 in Parliament by the Irish nationalist secessionist Daniel O'Connell, had given Irish Catholics hope and consequently Irish claims for some parliamentary autonomy (Home Rule) developed.<sup>19</sup> It is, then, no surprise that what is probably the most famous line of Gladstone's *Bulgarian Horrors* published in early September 1876 – 'let the Turks now carry away their abuses in the only possible manner, namely by carrying off themselves'<sup>20</sup> – spurred Irish Home Rulers' enthusiasm. With Gladstone's seemingly unconditional support for Ottoman withdrawal from Bulgaria and Bulgarian independence, a similar future (the repeal of the Union with Britain), or at least some autonomy (self-

<sup>15</sup> Neval BERBER, 'The Irish Paradigm in the 19th Century British Discourse on Bosnia-Herzegovina', in Steven G. ELLIS & Lud'a KLUSÁKOVÁ (eds.), *Imagining Frontiers, Contesting Identities*, Edizioni Plusi, Pisa, 2007, p. 321.

<sup>16</sup> EASTERN QUESTION ASSOCIATION, *Report of Proceedings of the National Conference at St. James's Hall, London, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1876*, James Clarke & Co., London, [1876], preface.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>18</sup> It was not the first rebellion against Ottoman rule, but this one, which was also triggered by the collection of taxes, was more widespread and had distinctive nationalist grounds, thus requiring the intervention of Turkish regulars and irregulars. For further information, consult: Carter Vaugh FINDLEY, 'The Tanzimat', in Resat KASABA (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Turkey, vol. IV: Turkey in the Modern World*, CUP, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 17-27.

<sup>19</sup> On the emergence of Irish Home Rule, see: D. G. BOYCE, *The Irish Question and British Politics, 1868-1986*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, (1988) 1993, pp. 18-28; and Alan O' DAY, *Irish Home Rule, 1867-1921*, MUP, Manchester, 1998, pp. 22-57.

<sup>20</sup> GLADSTONE, *Bulgarian Horrors*, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-2.

government), for Ireland now seemed at hand. It is precisely this hope that animated the indignation meeting called for by the Home Rule Confederation in October 1876.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, it was conceived as the acme of months of activism with the mushrooming of Home Rule meetings across Ireland, while England had been solely preoccupied with the Bulgarian agitation.

Just as many Radicals placed hope with the Liberal Party again after Gladstone's advocacy of Christian moralism in politics, be it foreign or domestic, at the time of the Bulgarian agitation, so Irish nationalists cherished the dream that the Grand Old Man would now propose a Home Rule Bill. But the ten years that separated the Bulgarian atrocities and the introduction of such a bill in Parliament by Gladstone in April 1886 rather betray Irish nationalists' impatience with a Liberal Party that always seemed more prone to accept Bulgarian rather than Irish Home Rule.

### **Irish nationalists' impatience with the Liberal Party's support for Bulgarian Home Rule**

After the failure of European diplomacy at the conference of Constantinople which led to Russia's entry into war against the Ottomans in March 1877 in order to support the nationalist claims of insurgent Ottoman provinces in the Balkans, Britain was more preoccupied with the perspective of a new Crimean war than with the conditions of Balkan autonomy, let alone those of Ireland.

Gladstone's intervention on 'Ireland and Irish representation' in Birmingham on 1 June, 1877 is particularly interesting in this context.<sup>22</sup> It was uttered outside the first meeting of the National Liberal Federation,<sup>23</sup> whose aim was to coordinate local Liberal associations with the next elections in mind and was thus highly publicised. Gladstone's assertion then that 'the principle [Britain] was endeavouring to apply in the East' – that is that 'justice regulates the relation of Government and governed' – was 'the principle [they] had endeavoured to apply in the Far West'<sup>24</sup> – meaning Ireland – definitely set the tone. Without rejecting in principle the acceptability of Home Rule for Ireland, Gladstone remained

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<sup>21</sup> The Home Rule Confederation (or League) had developed out of the much smaller Home Government Association in November 1873. See: John RANELAGH, *A Short History of Ireland*, CUP, Cambridge, (1983) 1999, p. 133. The object of the meeting was to 'issue an appeal to the Irish people in London to attend the meeting in their thousands to show their sympathy with those who are struggling for 'home rule' in Bulgaria, Herzegovina, Bosnia, and other places now under Turkish rule. See: 'The Turkish Atrocities in Bulgaria', *The Daily News*, 25 September, 1876, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> For Gladstone's relationship to Ireland in 1876-7, see in particular: Richard T. SHANNON, *Gladstone: Heroic Minister, 1865-1898*, Penguin, London, 1999, pp. 208-13.

<sup>23</sup> The National Liberal Federation, or the 'caucus' as it became known, directly derived from the Eastern Question Association, which had been created by Liberals in December 1876 'for the purpose of watching events in the East, giving expression to public opinion, and spreading useful information' (Letter of 30 November, 1876, Howell Papers, Bishopsgate Institute, London, Howell Ephemera 50/1). It was to provide the Liberal Party with a similar structure to the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations, so that Liberal local sections could be federated at the national level.

<sup>24</sup> 'Mr. Gladstone at Birmingham: The Great Meeting in Bingley Hall', *The Times*, 2 June, 1877, p. 12. The following quote is also excerpted from this article.

convinced that his Irish legislation had 'laid the foundations of a national content', which now required the Irish nationalists' share of efforts.

This could not fail to enrage the radical section of the Home Rule Confederation, which to make itself heard had decided to reject the conciliatory attitude of its president, Isaac Butt, and opt for obstruction. In April 1877, Frank Hugh O'Donnell, the vice-president of the Home Rule Confederation, had already warned the Liberal party in a letter to the editor of *The Times* that unless it was ready to accept the help of the Irish nationalist MPs and commit itself to giving Ireland Home Rule, it was doomed to 'bear no part in the government of the British Empire'.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, a similar warning was issued by an eccentric figure in Parliament, former jurist Edward Vaughan Hyde Kenealy, who declared:

*Liberals were anxious to give Home Rule, in the liberality of their hearts, to disaffected Servia and insurrectionary Bosnia; but to our own Irish people, who were perfectly loyal, those wandering statesmen persistently and almost violently refused it.*<sup>26</sup>

Gladstone was all the more aware of Irish nationalists' impatience with his party that his close friend and Bulgarian agitator, the English Catholic convert Ambrose March Philipps de Lisle, had let him know as early as 1876 that 'repealers and Nationalists there cast the whole blame [of the 'Bulgarian atrocities'] upon English support [of the Sultan]'.<sup>27</sup> De Lisle thus suggested that for Irish nationalist secessionists, the responsibility of what came to be known as 'the Turkish abominations' ultimately remained with the British Empire – something which, to them, clearly shattered the commonplace identification of Queen Victoria's Empire with Tacitus's correlated concepts of *imperium et libertas*.<sup>28</sup> Gladstone's rising concern led him to tour Ireland – or rather the Irish Pale – for three weeks in the autumn of 1877. On his return, he wrote to the Earl of Granville, the then leader of the Liberal party, how his visit had convinced him of the 'concessions' which 'might beneficially be made to the Irish in the matter of self-government'.<sup>29</sup> These 'concessions' were eventually taken up in his Midlothian campaign in 1879-1880, which was however mostly devoted to foreign policy (especially Eastern events and the Zulu and Afghan wars Britain was engaged in).

But these promises were still too evasive and arrived too late for Charles Stewart Parnell, a Radical Protestant Anglican landowner and yet a Home Ruler, who had succeeded Butt to the chairmanship of the Home Rule Confederation in September 1877. The steps leading to the creation of an 'autonomous and tributary

<sup>25</sup> F. Hugh O'DONNELL, 'Letter to the Editor: The Salford Election', *The Times*, 23 April, 1877, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> *Hansard*, HC Debates, 13 April, 1877, Kenealy, § 1133-4.

<sup>27</sup> De Lisle to Gladstone, 16 September 1876, in Edmond Sheridan PURCELL, *Life and Letters of Ambrose Philipps de Lisle*, vol. II, Macmillan & Co., New York, 1900, p. 161.

<sup>28</sup> The reference to Tacitus is especially common with Disraeli who, during his 1879 Guildhall speech, referred to the Roman historian to account for his conception of British imperialism. See: 'Lord Mayor's Day', *The Daily News*, 11 November, 1879, p. 3. Besides, the Primrose League, which was founded in 1883 in honour of the late Lord Beaconsfield – Disraeli died in 1881 –, used Tacitus's phrase of *imperium et libertas* as its motto.

<sup>29</sup> Gladstone to Granville, 2 November 1877, Gladstone Papers, British Library, London, Add. MSS 44171, f. 128-33.

principality<sup>30</sup> of Bulgaria in the Northern part of the former Ottoman province in July 1878 – the Southern part, now named Eastern Rumelia, remained under the Sultan – had already completely embittered Radical nationalists against the Conservative party, whom they reproached with being inconsistent in limiting Ottoman rule in the Balkans, while still pursuing their coercion policy in Ireland.<sup>31</sup> Incomprehension was total with Radical nationalists who resented such a harsh policy whereas Ireland, after three years of bad weather, poor harvests, and falling prices, was now undergoing a new famine. Consequently, the Home Rule movement radicalised itself: Parnell adhered to the idea of a ‘new departure’ proposed in 1878 by John Devoy, head of the Clan na Gael and a Fenian, and seized on the agrarian difficulties to create the Land League in 1879, which, he hoped, would attract massive support to Irish nationalist MPs in Westminster. A violent ‘Land war’ immediately began,<sup>32</sup> during which nationalists recurrently argued that however horrible the lot of Bulgarians (at the hands of Ottomans) or even of Poles (at the hands of Russians), that of their fellow countrymen and women should be dearer to British hearts and that ‘the interests of Ireland [were] above the interests of Bulgaria – that they [were] above the interests of Russia, Turk, Whig, or Tory’.<sup>33</sup>

Gladstone sensed the urgency of the Irish situation when he returned to power in April 1880. A year later, his government adopted more coercion measures to circumscribe the violence of the Land War, while the three core tenets of the Land League – better known as the ‘3 Fs’ (‘fair rent, fixity of tenure, free sale’) – were finally turned into a law. To the great dismay of some government members, Parnell, who had been imprisoned for maintaining a critical stance on this law, was released against his promise to wind the Irish agitation down. The following year, the assassination of the newly appointed Chief for Ireland, Lord Frederick Cavendish, who was also the brother of the Secretary of State for India (the Marquess of Hartington), was a further hurdle in the discussion by the Liberal government of a Home Rule bill. It had indeed always been a divisive issue. Given the more general instability of his Ministry,<sup>34</sup> no consensus could be reached by Gladstone on that burning topic after 1882. Irish nationalists wouldn’t forgive the Liberal leader for his powerlessness and contributed to the downfall of his government in June 1885, just a couple of months after ‘the Gordon affair’.<sup>35</sup> With

<sup>30</sup> It is the wording of the first article of the Treaty of Berlin of 13 July, 1878 and derived from article 6 of the San Stefano Treaty of 3 March 1878. For the text of both treaties, see: Benoît BRUNSWICK, *Le Traité de Berlin, annoté et commenté*, Plon, Paris, 1878, pp. 277-293.

<sup>31</sup> ‘A Dublin Citizen’, ‘Letter to the Editor: Ireland and the Political Situation’, *Freeman’s Journal*, 11 January, 1878, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> On the 1879-1882 Irish Land War, see: Michael Willem DE NIE, *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798-1922*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, pp. 201-66.

<sup>33</sup> ‘The National Conference’, *Freeman’s Journal*, 16 January, 1878, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> After the resignation of Forster over Ireland, the 1882 bombardment of Alexandria (and the subsequent British occupation of Egypt) as well as the rejection of a scheme for the creation of National Councils in England in May 1885 proved other divisive issues which led to the resignation of several Radicals from Gladstone’s Cabinet, in particular John Bright, Joseph Chamberlain and Sir Charles Dilke.

<sup>35</sup> The occupation of Egypt by Britain had been reluctantly accepted by the Liberal government in 1882 with a view to re-establish stability in Egypt and help the government

the hope of winning the next elections, Gladstone campaigned in favour of a certain degree of autonomy for Ireland, thus taking the opposite view of the leader of the Conservatives, Lord Salisbury, and of Liberal Unionists, who now allied themselves with the latter. Gladstone was re-elected, but his government was again brought down on 8 June, 1886, with 341 votes against his Home Rule Bill – including those of 93 Liberals.

Coincidentally, the introduction and defeat of this first Home Rule Bill took place against the backdrop of a *coup* in Eastern Rumelia which rejected Ottoman rule and united itself with Bulgaria in order to form a 'Big Bulgaria' in September 1885. Europe stood by – although it was a breach of the 1878 Treaty of Berlin which had reaffirmed the 1856 principle of the maintenance of the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire – and the new Bulgaria got its *de jure* independence in the Tophane agreement of March 1886. Such a reopening of the Bulgarian question could not fail to generate renewed parallels between this question and the Irish one, which betrayed vexed reflections about the nature of the British Empire and how it should evolve.

### Home Rule and the fate of the British Empire

One publication in particular, which intervened in 1886 prior to the elections and which directly put the Irish-Bulgarian parallel into such a perspective, retains our interest here. It is *Arguments For and Against Home Rule* by Malcolm MacColl, a High Churchman, close friend of Gladstone and leader of the Bulgarian agitation in Britain. Despite the title, MacColl's pamphlet is an apology for Home Rule, as the later publication title, *Reasons for Home Rule*, confirms.<sup>36</sup>

MacColl first denounces prejudices against Irish people, who, during the Victorian era, were often likened to childish 'Celtic Calibans', who, as such, were unfit to govern themselves. To convince politicians – but in particular Gladstone's rival in the elections, the Marquess of Salisbury, with whom he was also friendly – of the viability of Home Rule for Ireland, he quotes the success of Bulgarian autonomy which had even managed to drive away the doubts of his Liberal friend, William Forster, concerning the ability of Bulgarian Christians to rule themselves. MacColl contends that if such an evolution was possible whereas Bulgarians were considered as racially inferior to Irish inhabitants in Victorian times, all the hopes should be permitted to Irish Home Rule sympathisers.

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of Egypt, nominally still an Ottoman province, fight off Muslim irredentist nationalists led by the Mahdi. After several military disasters, especially Hicks's disaster in November 1882, the Earl of Granville, then Foreign Secretary, suggested that General Charles Gordon be sent to Egypt. In January 1885, after being besieged in Khartoum, Sudan, Gordon died at the hands of the Mahdi. Gordon had left Britain a hero and his death was likened to martyrdom by the Conservative opposition, which accused Gladstone's government of having delayed the rescue mission for too long. On this episode, see: Stewart J. BROWN, 'The Martyr of Khartoum: General Gordon, the Mahdi and Christian Britain', in Gilles TEULIE (ed.), *Religious Writings and War*, Les Carnets du Cerpac N°3, P. U. Montpellier 3, 2006, pp. 247-71.

<sup>36</sup> Malcolm MACCOLL, *Arguments for and Against Home Rule*, Routledge & Sons, London, 1886; and Malcolm MACCOLL, *Reasons for Home Rule*, National Press Agency, Ltd, London, 1886.

MacColl also sets out to dispel Conservative and Liberal-Unionist fears that Irish nationalists necessarily aimed at separation<sup>37</sup> by contrasting the Bulgarian and Irish situations: true to his Islamophobic views,<sup>38</sup> he states that non-Muslims could gain no long-term freedom under Muslim rule and that ‘every concession of freedom’ in that context [had] by force of circumstances [to] tend towards a final and complete emancipation’.<sup>39</sup> To him, this could only apply to Islamic countries, thereby ruling all analogies with Britain as fallacious. MacColl’s reasoning was that Britain, an Anglican – that is Christian – country had a constitution which could be modified to encompass the new reality of Home Rule and so should<sup>40</sup> – something which he deemed impossible under Islamic laws.

MacColl sees another argument for granting Ireland Home Rule when he writes:

*Surely no Government since the world began, not even that of the Ottoman Turks, displayed such exquisite ingenuity in the art of ruining, not the national prosperity only, but much more, the moral character of a subject people as the British Gvt [sic.] displayed in bygone days in its dealings with Ireland.*<sup>41</sup>

MacColl pleads for a reconsideration of the British-Irish relationship because British rule in Ireland was at odds with the benevolent image of ‘Rule, Britannia’ and was rather a long, painful and complex story of conquest of Ireland, whose success had mostly rested on a long-term policy of coercion. MacColl is pointing out the blot on British honour in a way which is quite reminiscent of Gladstone’s condemnation of the Turks’ behaviour in *Bulgarian Horrors*. And yet, although Gladstone persistently constantly claimed that the ultimate goal of Britain for her colonies would be ‘administrative emancipation’,<sup>42</sup> that ‘no conquest [could] be legitimate unless it [was] marked by the introduction of superior laws, institutions, or manners among the conquered’ and that ‘the very least that could be expected was that conquerors should be able to learn civilization from the conquered’,<sup>43</sup> he always fell short of considering British rule in Ireland as a permanent conquest. MacColl thus seemed definitely more radical than Gladstone on the necessity of

<sup>37</sup> See for example : LIBERAL UNIONIST ASSOCIATION, *The Case for the Union*, N° 210: ‘Do the Irish Nationalists Aim at Separation.?’ , 1886; and NATIONAL UNION OF CONSERVATIVE AND CONSTITUTIONAL ASSOCIATIONS, ‘The Union of Hearts’, NU 54, 1892.

<sup>38</sup> See for instance: Malcolm MACCOLL, ‘Letter to the Editor: Indian Moslems and Armenia’, *The Standard*, 31 December, 1894, p. 2. For the controversy MacColl’s anti-Turkish crusade launched, see: Stéphanie PREVOST, « La Question d’Orient dans la culture politique britannique : réception et influences (1875-1898) », Doctoral thesis, University of Tours, 2010, pp. 445-7

<sup>39</sup> MACCOLL, *Arguments for and Against Home Rule*, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>40</sup> MacColl’s argument was denounced by the famous British jurist and constitutional theorist, Albert Venn Dicey, in his *England’s Case Against Home Rule*, in which he argued that such modifications would necessarily be ‘the first stage towards a dissolution of the United Kingdom into separate States, and hence towards the breaking-up of the British Empire’. See: Albert V. DICEY, *England’s Case Against Home Rule*, John Murray, London, 1887, p. 189.

<sup>41</sup> MACCOLL, *Arguments for and Against Home Rule*, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>42</sup> William E. GLADSTONE, ‘England’s Mission’, *The Nineteenth Century*, vol. IV, September 1878, p. 570.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in SHANNON, *Gladstone: Heroic Minister*, op. cit., pp. 208-9.

Irish Home Rule, thereby voicing out loud what Irish nationalists had been claiming for over a century: namely that British rule in Ireland was the story of a conquest and that this situation was endangering the British Empire itself. This view was taken up by the Irish Parliamentary Party, which had been founded by Parnell in 1882, as it more and more frequently referred to Home Rule as a longed-for and immediately-needed safety valve for the British Empire. To try and convince British politicians of the accuracy of their argument, Irish nationalists quoted the development of Home Rule movements in India (as early as 1878) and in Scotland (from 1886),<sup>44</sup> which directly derived from the Irish initiative and which, if not satisfied, could make their federalist rhetoric evolve into a separatist one. Quite ironically, this met the views of two Liberal Unionists, William E. Forster and Joseph Chamberlain, who, from 1885, developed the Imperial Federation project<sup>45</sup> which precisely sought to preserve the union between Great Britain and its colonies, especially the Dominions which already enjoyed self-government. And yet such proximity between the IPP and Liberal Unionists failed to demarginalise the claims for Irish Home Rule, which only came to fruition in 1920 through the Government of Ireland Act which eventually granted a partitioned Ireland self-government.

## Conclusion

*In fine*, the parallel developments of the Irish and Bulgarian questions between 1876 and 1886, two vexed nationalist issues, enabled Irish Home Rule sympathisers to use Britain's widespread Bulgarian agitation and later involvement at the level of the Concert of Europe in favour of Bulgarian autonomy to give greater resonance to their own nationalist claims. By criticizing Britain's incoherence in taking up differentiated positions on Bulgarian and Irish autonomy – thereby implying that the British Empire was no better than that of the Sultan –, Irish nationalists tried to bring home the fact that (Irish) Home Rule was the only civilised solution for a seemingly enlightened empire that, in the years to come, would have to move towards greater federalism to ensure its survival.

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<sup>44</sup> For the creation of both movements, see respectively: Franck H. O'DONNELL, 'Letter to the Editor: Mr. O' Donnell, M.P. and the Eastern Debate', *Freeman's Journal*, 13 August, 1878, p. 3; and British Home Rule Association minutes, Kenyon Papers, Norfolk Record Office, Norfolk, MC 623/50, 776 x 8, Letter by Waddie to Kenyon of 3 May, 1886.

<sup>45</sup> William E. FORSTER, 'Imperial Federation', *The Nineteenth Century*, vol. XVII, February 1885, pp. 552-6.

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