

The origins of the Ulster Reform Club

A talk given at the club on 4 November 2025 as part of events to celebrate the 140th anniversary of the opening of the club.

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I am very pleased to be here today. I was honored when I was asked by Johnny Andrews to talk about your foundation 140 years ago. I have enjoyed hospitality of the Reform Club on a number of occasions, usually as a guest of Andy and Mary Wells, always a memorable event! This morning I propose to start my talk with a few words about how I first became interested in your history.

Then I shall describe the politics which surrounded the construction of this very important building and club. I will begin with the formation of the Ulster Liberal Society in 1865, deal with electoral politics up to 1880, describe the initial steps in 1880 to establish a new club in Belfast, and go on to recount the club's opening in 1885. Then I shall look at the new political scene in 1885, leading to the first home rule bill of 1886, which presented great challenges to the club and its members.

I must recommend two books. The first is *The Ulster Reform Club, past and present* (2009) edited by William Roulston and George Chambers, and published by the club. It has an excellent historical introduction by Tony Stewart, from 1885 to 1990. The second is my own book, *Ulster politics: the formative years, 1868-86*.(1978).

Many years ago I graduated from Trinity College Dublin with a degree in modern history and politics. Professor Theo Moody, originally from Belfast, accepted me to study for a research degree in the subject of parliamentary politics in Ulster 1868-86. One of my first tasks was to locate original correspondence relating to my work. The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland was a very important source of such documents. I then decided to visit some of the descendants of politicians from this time to see if they had any papers from these days.

My first place of call was Ballywalter Park, home of Henry Mulholland, Lord Dunleath. His ancestor, John Mulholland, had been a conservative candidate in Belfast in the 1868 general election. Owner of York Street Mill, he was probably the richest man in Belfast. But he was defeated by William Johnston of Ballykillbeg. However, he was not deterred by this. In 1873 he bought the Ker estate in Downpatrick, which at this time returned an MP to Westminster. Now the largest landowner in the town, he was duly elected unopposed in 1874 for Downpatrick. Shortly after his election, the *Down Recorder* reported that as a sign of their new proprietor's interest in the welfare of his Downpatrick tenants he had placed at their disposal the service of his 'magnificent red bull, Maximum Gwynne'. He was reelected in 1880 without a contest. In 1885 the Downpatrick seat was

abolished and Mulholland was elevated to the House of Lords as Baron Dunleath.

I drove to Ballywalter Park in my red Triumph Herald. I parked in front of the house. I rang the bell. A butler or man servant came to the door. I explained that I was an historian and conducting research into nineteenth century politics and I would like to speak to Lord Dunleath. He looked at me blankly and said: 'You're a what?'. I replied: 'An historian'. He then asked 'What's that?'. I tried to explain. He asked me to write my name and the word 'historian' on a piece of paper which he brought into Lord Dunleath, who then appeared and was very friendly but, sadly, had no relevant papers.

My next visit was to Florencecourt in Co.Fermanagh, home of the earl of Enniskillen. whose ancestor had been MP for Enniskillen. By appointment I turned up at Florencecourt one morning at 11 am. I rang the bell. A butler came to the door. I said I had come to see Lord Enniskillen. The butler replied fine, his lordship would see me shortly. I stepped up to enter the house, but the butler asked me to stand outside, which I did, and he closed the door. This was during the early days of our 'troubles' so maybe they were suspicious about strangers. I was then invited in to meet Lord Enniskillen and his charming American wife over

coffee, but no papers. Finally, I got lucky with the Ulster Reform Club!.

I visited the club one morning and spoke to the manager. I explained my research and asked if the club had any papers going back to its foundation. He replied that they had none. I was disappointed. Then he asked: 'Anyway, if they did have papers, why should I be allowed to see them?'. My spirits picked up. He asked if my father was a member. I said he wasn't but then added that my father was rector of Knockbreda parish in South Belfast and I was sure he knew members. The manager wondered if my father knew Dean Samuel Crooks of St Anne's cathedral, one of their members, and he suggested that he should speak to him. I returned home and spoke to my father who contacted Dean Crooks. A week later I returned to the club and was brought to an upstairs room where I found all the papers relating to the founding of the club. I was then allowed to study these. Wonderful!!

Our story begins in 1865. At this stage at Westminster elections each of the 9 Ulster counties returned 2 M.P.s and each of the 10 boroughs returned 1 M.P., except for Belfast which returned 2 M.P.s. The franchise was very restricted, including only males of course, and limited in the counties to those with rateable property of at least £12 and in the boroughs to those with property at 'over £4'. This meant that in the counties the vote was

restricted to some 18 per cent of the adult male population, mainly tenant farmers. In the boroughs some 25 per cent had the vote. Throughout Ulster, politics were dominated by the leading landed families. At the 1865 general election most constituencies returned unopposed landlord M.P.s who were Church of Ireland, and conservative, that is 'upholders of the status quo in church and state'.

After the general election, however, a meeting in Belfast led to the formation of the Ulster Liberal Society. These Liberals sought various church and land reforms and aimed to challenge the gentry. The society's membership included a wide range of manufacturing, business and professional people. The majority were Presbyterian. But there were some members of the Church of Ireland, such as the solicitor C.H. Brett. There were also some Catholics, such as Bernard Hughes, the well-known Belfast bakery owner, and a member of the Whyte family from Loughbrickland, Co. Down (ancestor of the distinguished political scientist, John Whyte).

The next general election occurred in 1868. Only one of the Ulster counties witnessed a contest, reflecting how the existing social and political structure of the countryside, with its dominant conservative landed gentry, went unchallenged. There was much greater political activity in the boroughs where 3 liberals won

seats. In Belfast the two winners were the Liberal William McClure, a local merchant, and independent conservative William Johnston, who defeated the conservatives Sir Charles Lanyon and John Mulholland. My great-grandfather David Walker voted for Lanyon and Johnston, as revealed in a published list of all the electors and their votes, which I have brought along here today. Check to see how your ancestor voted in 1868!

. By the next general election in 1874 a number of things had happened. In 1872 the secret ballot act provided secrecy for voters. In 1871 the Home Government Association was formed in Dublin under the leadership of Isaac Butt to promote home rule. In 1870 Gladstone's first land act was passed, but its failings led to this led to great dissatisfaction in the countryside. At the 1874 general election in Ulster, the home rule issue featured little but the land issue was of great interest. All the counties were contested. Two home rulers won seats in Co Cavan while liberals won 5 county seats and 1 urban seat. Before turning to the 1880 general election I think that I should mention the Co. Down by election of April 1878 when Viscount Castlereagh faced Liberal W.D. Andrews of Comber, whose descendant Johnny is here today. Castlereagh won, after spending £14,000, the largest sum spent on an election, 1869-86.

The land question continued to impact on the political scene. Bad harvests in 1878 and 1879 led to a rising wave of tenant unrest, led by tenant associations. throughout Ulster and the rest of Ireland. At the 1880 general election, every Ulster constituency was contested. Afterwards, one observer noted that ‘the Protestants as well as the Roman Catholics do not want an Orangeman or even a Fenian if he is a gentleman or a landlord’. Demand for agrarian reform was the main issue of the day. The outcome of these contests revealed marked changes in the political representation of Ulster. Home rule candidates stood only in Co. Cavan where they won 2 seats. But there were now 9 Liberal M.P.s (8 for county seats) compared with 6 in 1874.

The 8 Liberals elected for the counties comprised merchants, queen’s counsels and a Presbyterian minister. All were Protestant including 5 Presbyterians. In these victories the Liberals benefited from the support of most of the Catholic electors and also many, sometimes over half, of the Presbyterian electors. Some Catholics may have backed the liberals because there was no home rule alternative, but it is evident that others gave them their wholehearted support, as in Cos Tyrone and Derry. This general election elsewhere in the UK resulted in a Liberal victory and the return of a Liberal government under William Gladstone and an important land act in 1881.

In the aftermath of the general election, there were calls in local Liberal circles to grow party organization, which led to a gathering of Liberals in Belfast on 7 May 1880. At subsequent private meetings, as revealed in early club papers, which I had the good fortune to see, members discussed the idea of forming a centre for Liberals in Belfast. The secretary of the Manchester Liberal Association, B.L. Green, was invited to speak to them about the subject. On 28 May 1880. Green urged the formation of a club similar to the Manchester Reform Club, from which he claimed all the Manchester Liberal organisations had sprung. Such a centre, he believed, would ‘bring together the men of position and influence in the province’.

After discussion it was recommended that they should create a Belfast centre on the lines of the Manchester club to be called the Ulster Reform Club. A special committee was then formed and it drew up a plan to construct a building for the club which would have a membership of around 300, based on a ten guinea entrance fee and an annual subscription of five guineas for Belfast members and three guineas for country members. On 22 October, committee members approached Lord Waveney, president of the Ulster Liberal Society, who agreed with the plan. In early 1881 he issued a circular inviting prominent Liberals to

come forward to join a provisional committee to get the club established.

From a list of those who accepted Waveney's invitation an executive committee was formed. Steps were taken to raise money and commence the construction of a grand club in Royal Avenue. By early 1884 building work had progressed well and a membership list for the club was opened. It was decided that there should be a management committee and also a general committee that would direct the club in political affairs. On 12 June 1884 when members numbered 287, a general meeting was held. Lord Waveney was elected president and John Shaw Brown of Edenderry was elected vice-president. The general committee included many of the most prominent businessmen in the province, such as W.J. Pirrie (a partner and later chairman of Harland and Wolff), Edward Hughes (son of Bernard Hughes), as well as professional men such as Alexander Caruth and C.H. Brett. There was an occasional tenant farmer such as Samuel Black of Antrim.

On New Year's Day, 1885, the club opened for business. Plans for a formal opening were postponed because of difficulties in arranging a time with their chosen speaker, the prominent English Liberal politician, Lord Hartington. Eleven months later in November, the building was formally opened by Hartington at an

impressive ceremony. Afterwards, a large public dinner was held in the Ulster Hall, attended by representatives of local Liberal clubs from different parts of the province.

The press in early 1885 carry glowing reports about the new club house. One declared: 'The club, viewed outwardly, forms a striking feature in the many splendid buildings-one better than the other-that now enable us to rank Royal Avenue among the first thoroughfares of the kingdom'. As regards the interior we read: 'It must be acknowledged that in the carrying out of the details there is evidence of good taste, and in the securing of accommodation and comfort a total indifference to expense'. This report continued: 'The entrance hall, leading staircase and approaches are splendid samples of workmanship; and the dining room as such is probably second to none'. There were ground floor offices which were let out. The cost was more than the estimated £14,000, all raised by subscription before the building was completed.

The architects, appointed after open competition, were Maxwell & Tuke, Manchester, but the construction was supervised by local architect W.H. Lynn, Belfast. Builders were James Henry of the Crumlin Rd, Belfast. The furnishings were by the well-known English firm of Gillow. We read the names of the other main suppliers, some of which will resonate with us today. The

plate and cutlery were from Sharman D. Neill, Donegall Place, crystal and china from Hoggs, carpets from Robertson, Ferguson and Ledlie (the Bank Buildings), and ironmongery, grates and stoves from Riddels, Anne's Street. The table linen was the gift of John Shaw Brown, of Edenderry Mill and a vice-president of the club.

So much for the political context of the origins of the Reform Club. The economic and social context should also be appreciated. By 1851 the population of Belfast numbered just under 100,000 inhabitants, compared to under 20,000 at the beginning of the century. By 1881 it had doubled to just over 200,000 while by 1901 the population stood at nearly 350,000, more numerous than Dublin city. On 5 November 1888 Belfast was officially designated a city. All this growth led to great physical changes to Belfast, with the construction of many new buildings and streets. In a determined effort at town planning the corporation in the early 1880s acquired Hercules Street and its many alleyways which ran off Castle Place. These buildings were cleared and the corporation let off the land for building, subject to rigid controls over heights and elevations.

This, new, very impressive thoroughfare, became Royal Avenue with the Reform Club at its start. Other buildings on the Avenue included the Grand Central Hotel, the head post office

and Belfast Free Library (later Central). The avenue remained remarkably intact until the 1960s. At the same time as this physical change, the population growth included many new merchants, manufacturers and professional people who were keen to avail of the fine facilities of the Reform Club and who quickly boosted its membership. Let me show you some photographic images from this early period.

Let us return to the political context of these early days. The Ulster Reform Club was formally opened by Lord Hartington on 5 Nov. 1885. Less than a fortnight later parliament was dissolved and a general election called. The circumstances of this general election were radically different from 1880. Changes in electoral law provided new conditions. Thanks to the 1883 corrupt practices, the amount of money a candidate could spend was restricted and new voluntary party organisations were required. An act of 1883 reorganised the constituencies into equal sizes. The Reform Act of 1884 extended the vote to all adult male householders, increasing the number who could vote by 200 percent. Significantly, this enfranchised small farmers and labourers.

While changes in electoral law created new conditions for the 1885 general election, so also did changes in the issues of the day. In 1880 the land question was the main concern, but this was

no longer the case.. The *Witness* paper observed: ‘the great question before Irish, and especially Ulster constituencies in the present electioneering contest is the maintenance of the legislative union between Great Britain and Ireland’. Previously the home rule movement had made only a limited impact on politics in Ulster, but this changed, with the nationalist party, as it was now known, playing a major role. At the same time, there remained strong rivalry between conservative and liberal parties in Ulster.

During 1885 the Ulster conservatives reorganized at both central and local level. The Ulster Constitutional Club, operating from the old music hall in May Street, served as the centre of this activity, led by the club’s secretary and principal party organizer, Edward Shirley Finnigan. He played an important role, especially in north-east Ulster, helping to establish new, broad based conservative associations or committees with responsibility for electoral matters, including selection of candidates. A key feature of many of these organisations was the involvement of representatives of local Orange lodges, which enabled conservatives to reach out to the newly enfranchised small farmers and labourers, many of whom were Orangemen.

By 1885 the original home rule associations had collapsed in Ulster. They had been replaced by branches of the National

League, under the control of Charles Stewart Parnell, also leader of the Irish nationalist parliamentary party. During 1885 National League branches were established throughout the province to act as the organizational framework of the nationalist party. County committees were established and conventions to choose candidates were organized. Catholic clergy were involved in many of the National League branches and had a special position in the county selection conventions, thanks to the intervention of Archbishop Walsh of Dublin. The party only ran candidates in divisions with a catholic majority. This raised the important question of how the catholic/Nationalist minority in the other divisions could record their votes-to either Conservative or Liberal candidates.

For the Liberals the year began well with opening of the Ulster Reform Club on New year's Day 1885. Meetings were held in the club to discuss political developments. The Ulster Liberal Society under the secretaryship of Mathew Wylie continued to be the main centre of Liberal activity. Past Liberal organization had been based in tenant right associations, but with the changes in electoral laws, new divisional bodies had to be formed to deal with the new electorate that contained not only farmers but many labourers. Wylie assisted with the setting up of a number of such bodies, which carried out canvassing and selected candidates.

Nonetheless, the Liberals seem to have been less successful than the other parties in facing these organizational challenges.

At the elections in Ulster, 4 Nationalists and 2 Conservatives were returned unopposed. Otherwise, in 11 divisions Liberals faced Conservatives and in 14 divisions Nationalists faced Conservatives. The outcome was that a total of 16 Conservatives, 17 Nationalists and no Liberals were returned for the province. This Liberal failure is explained in part by poor party reorganization and failure to attract new voters. Also important was party maneuvering which resulted in the catholic/ nationalist vote backing the conservative in a number of divisions with no Nationalist candidate, arising from Parnell's strategy to support the Conservatives at Westminster.

For a time it seemed that this Nationalist vote would back the Liberals. In the Gladstone papers there is a letter from Mrs Katherine O'Shea to Lord Richard Grosvenor, the Liberal chief whip at Westminster, dated 23 Oct. 1885. She reported that her husband, Capt. W.H. Shea, had failed to win renomination for a Co. Clare seat, and with Parnell's backing, she was keen to find him a seat in Ulster. The reason given for this was the usefulness of O'Shea as an intermediary between Parnell and the Liberals. She wrote that if O'Shea was adopted as the Liberal candidate for Mid Armagh, Parnell promised that he will get him the whole of

the catholic vote in Mid Armagh and ‘moreover give his votes for East Down, North Armagh and North Derry to the Liberal candidates. He will also secure the Irish vote in Wolverhampton to Mr Fowler’.

Subsequently, these arrangements were accepted by leading Ulster Liberals, T.A. Dickson and Samuel Walker. O’Shea then proceeded to Armagh and met with the Catholic primate and some priests, but they would not touch him as a candidate. Efforts were made to find him a Tyrone seat but they were unsuccessful. With these efforts rebuffed, Parnell gave public directions for how nationalists should vote in divisions with no Nationalist candidates. The main result was to direct the Nationalist vote to the Conservative candidate in a number of Ulster seats, with damaging consequences for the Liberals. A few months later, at a byelection in Galway, Captain O’Shea was foisted by Parnell on the good citizens of Galway as their nationalist M.P..

The general election of Nov-Dec 1885 saw the return of 18 Conservatives and 85 Nationalists for all of Ireland. Overall in the UK, 335 Liberals and 249 Conservatives were elected, a difference of 85, the same number as the 85 Nationalists, which meant that Parnell and his party now held the balance of power. Initially the minority Conservative government under Salisbury

continued in office. The question of the union was now at the forefront of Irish politics. In mid January 1886 the Reform Club rebuffed an invitation from the Constitutional Club to join a joint public meeting to protest against any separation of Ireland from the UK. They continued to express their confidence in Gladstone. At a meeting of some 600 Liberal delegates in the Ulster Hall on 16 March 1886, a resolution declaring their opposition to the establishment of a separate Irish parliament was carried by a large majority. This resolution was then communicated to Gladstone, who on 1 February 1886 had become Prime Minister.

In the end, however, no doubt influenced in part by the strength of the Nationalist party in parliament, Gladstone decided to endorse home rule. On 8 April he introduced a home rule bill for Ireland. This caused great shock not only to Liberals in Ulster but also to an important section within his party led by Lord Hartington. The bill was now debated at length but on 8 June it was defeated by 341 to 311 votes, thanks to the defection of a sizeable number of Liberals. On 25 June a general election was called. Liberals in Ulster responded quickly to Gladstone's actions. On 30 April a large demonstration of Ulster Liberals in the Ulster Hall protested against the home rule bill as 'fraught with danger to the industrial, social and moral welfare of the country'. From this time on, the Liberals opposed to home rule were usually

called Liberal Unionists and the conservatives simply as unionists. It is clear that the vast majority of the Ulster Liberals became Liberal Unionists. A small number did declare themselves supporters of the proposed measure.

With the defeat of the government a general election was called for July 1886. Liberal unionists established their own central organization, first called the Ulster Liberal Unionist Committee, and then after the general election, the Ulster Liberal Unionist Association. In the new political circumstances we find co-operation between Liberal Unionists and Unionists in some areas, involving joint meetings and selection of candidates. At the same time Liberal Unionists were clearly the junior partners. In the end 5 Liberal Unionists and 4 Gladstonian Liberals stood for election. The outcome was that 15 Unionists and 2 Liberal Unionists (TW Russell and Thomas Lea) were elected along with 16 Nationalists. Overall, Gladstone was defeated and a Conservative government was returned to power.

Liberal Unionists would survive in Ulster for a time. In succeeding general elections, 1892-1906, 4 Liberal Unionists were elected. These included West Belfast, held by a Liberal Unionist from 1892 to 1906, when Joe Devlin won the seat. Other seats won were South Londonderry and South Tyrone. These were seats with an equal Unionist/Nationalist balance which Liberal

Unionists won with a Protestant/ Unionist vote and also a small Catholic vote, probably former Liberal voters. Occasionally this Liberal Unionist representation would include a southern member, elected for St Stephen's Green or Dublin University (W.E.H. Lecky). At the 1906 general election only one Liberal Unionist was returned, John Gordon of South Londonderry, although T.W. Russell was returned as an independent Unionist for South Tyrone.

Let me conclude. The years 1880-5 were momentous in the history of Belfast. The construction of Royal Avenue illustrated well the great growth of this dynamic city. The Ulster Reform Club stood at the beginning of the new thoroughfare. Its construction reflected a growing mercantile, industrial and professional class. Alongside this went a demand for political change. The Liberals and then the Liberal Unionists represented a challenge to existing politics. In the end, national politics, in Ireland (Parnell) and in Great Britain (Gladstone) would impact on the local scene. The Club would adapt and survive. Indeed it would go on to survive for another 140 years, to the present. We must be very grateful for the efforts of these pioneers in 1885.

