

Redmond: a leader of eloquence, courage and compromise.

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A review of

Dermot Meleady, *Redmond: The Parnellite*

(Cork: Cork University Press, 2008) ISBN 978-1-85918-423-3, Hardback, xv + 407 pp, £42.

Irish Parliamentary Party leader John Redmond (1856-1918) is one of the losers of Irish history. Although he succeeded in getting home rule for Ireland on the statute books in September 1914, his triumph was short-lived. The legislation was put in cold storage until the end of the First World War by which time the majority of the Irish population demanded a greater degree of independence from Great Britain than a parliament to deal with domestic affairs. In popular memory Redmond is viewed as the man who not only encouraged nationalist Irishmen to join the British forces fighting in the war, but also agreed to the partition of Ireland. Such miscalculations, though understandable at the time, damaged his reputation. Dermot Meleady, however, aims to provide a deeper depiction of Redmond in this, the first of a projected two-volume biography. As such, the book focuses on the lesser known period of Redmond's ultimately controversial political career.

Meleady argues that the controversies surrounding Redmond's final years have eclipsed the prominent position that he occupied in the Edwardian House of Commons where 'he was regarded as one of its two or three best orators, and was spoken of, during the years of post-Gladstonian Liberal disarray, as the real leader of the Opposition, and even as a potential Prime Minister had he decided to abandon the cause of his nation's legislative independence' (p. 1). Meleady succeeds in recalling to life this lesser known Redmond. He begins by placing Redmond in the context of his family's Victorian tradition of political service, his father and great-uncle having

been MPs for Wexford borough. Meleady then takes a detailed chronological look at Redmond's political career in the period between his first election to the House of Commons in 1881 and the Irish Parliamentary Party's reunion in 1900 after the decade-long split between those, like Redmond, who had supported Charles Stewart Parnell's continued party leadership after the O'Shea divorce controversy, and those who had opposed it.

Displaying 'eloquence and courage', Redmond showed promise in his early years as a young MP. In the late 1880s, however, his parliamentary profile decreased due to 'his involvement in the Plan of Campaign and its associated legal work' (p. 198). Though he was no agrarian radical, Redmond embraced the Plan of Campaign from an early stage, seeing it as a tool 'to win rent reductions and avert mass evictions' and 'as a means of keeping the party close to the people' (pp 123-4). Meleady suggests that Redmond's 'remoteness [between 1886 and 1890] from the centre of the party's internal politics ... shielded him from first-hand experience of the irritations – the mysterious disappearances, the failure to endorse fully the Plan of Campaign – which had revealed Parnell's inadequacies as leader' (p. 164). This made it easier for Redmond to remain loyal to Parnell, 'bound to him by the double ties of private friendship and political allegiance' (p. 153). The party split propelled Redmond from 'a comfortable niche...in the second rank of Parnell's retinue, to the leadership of a fragment of that party' after Parnell's death in 1891 (p. 198). During the 1890s Redmond tried 'to build a new coalition around a broad and generous definition of Irish nationality', forging links with both unionists and Fenians (p. 301). A talented orator capable of compromise, Redmond was unanimously elected chairman of the reunited party in 1900. Throughout his career Redmond remained consistent in his

belief that ‘the Irish nation had a sovereign right to use physical force to win and defend its freedom’, but that a situation requiring the use of political violence was unlikely to arise (p. 121).

Though the main focus of the book is on Redmond’s political career, his personal life is discussed where deemed relevant. He met and married his Irish-Australian wife Johanna Dalton in 1883 while he and his brother William were on a tour of Australia to raise funds for the Irish National League. (William later married her niece Eleanor.) The marriage resulted in three children. For Redmond, this trip to a distant corner of the British Empire also influenced his view that Irish autonomy within the Empire was not only the sole ‘form of self-government attainable in the realm of practical politics’, but also ‘a worthwhile goal’ in itself (p. 81). This view would last longer than the marriage, as Johanna died prematurely in December 1889 after giving birth to a stillborn daughter. The tragedy coincided with Captain William O’Shea’s institution of divorce proceedings against his wife Katharine, naming Parnell as co-respondent, thus heralding a decade of political turmoil in Ireland. Devastated by Johanna’s death, Redmond withdrew from public life for about a year before bouncing back to realise his early political potential. A decade later, with the party finally on the verge of reunion, Redmond again found personal happiness when he married Ada Beesley in 1899. Disappointingly, Meleady provides no background information on Beesley.

Throughout this clearly written book, Meleady situates Redmond within the wider context of the vicissitudes of the Irish Parliamentary Party during the years of Parnell’s leadership and of its fragmentation in the decade after his death. The epilogue outlines Redmond’s career during the seventeen years that he spent as

chairman of the party, but rightly asserts that a further volume is required to do the subject justice. Meleady ends the book with a view to the future, noting that the Redmond political tradition continued into the next generation when William Archer Redmond won the by-election for his late father's Waterford seat in 1918. He went on to represent the constituency in Dáil Éireann until his own death in 1932.

Meleady's biography is a welcome addition to the historiography, as John Redmond has been neglected for too long by historians of modern Ireland in favour of 'sexier' figures such as the film-friendly Michael Collins. Recession-beleaguered readers, however, will be sorry that a paperback edition has not appeared though the hardback was first published in 2008. Cork University Press was also unable to confirm a publication date for the proposed second volume of this biography. One can only hope that Meleady is hard at work delving into the latter (and more significant) stage of Redmond's political career.