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INTRODUCTION

E.J. SAUNDERSON PAPERS

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E.J. Saunderson Papers (T2996, MIC281)

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Summary

The E.J. Saunderson papers comprise c.950 documents and 12 scrapbooks, 1866-1910, relating to the political and sporting career of the Rt Hon. Colonel Edward James Saunderson (1837-1906) of Castle Saunderson, Belturbet, Co. Cavan, MP for Co. Cavan, 1865-1874, and for North Armagh, 1885-1906, first leader of the Irish Unionist Party in the House of Commons.



Saunderson's background and power-base

The Saunderson family and estate were established in Co. Cavan in the Cromwellian and Restoration period, and the family's parliamentary tradition in the 18th century through alliance with more powerful county interests (Saunderson's grandfather, MP for Co. Cavan in the Irish Parliament, opposed the Union in 1799-1800).

Politically, E.J. Saunderson began as an upholder of the family's conservative Whig tradition. As MP for Co. Cavan, 1865-1874, he criticised the Orange Order and cultivated Catholic support (though his outspoken Evangelicalism contributed to his defeat by a Home Ruler in 1874). Subsequently, he returned to prominence as a leader in the Ulster Tory rally against 'anarchy' and Home Rule in the early 1880s, and became MP for North Armagh and leader of a cross-class Irish Unionist alliance semi-independent of the official Tory leadership (anticipating the modern style of Unionist politics). He achieved parliamentary and platform prominence as an opponent of Home Rule between Gladstone's two Bills, but thereafter dwindled into a stubborn and ineffective defender of landlord interests, almost entirely marginalised by ill-health and amateurism before his death in 1906.

He was part of a network of powerful and solvent landlords stretching across South Ulster from Fermanagh to Down, who provided the nucleus of the initial Ulster Unionist resistance. His decline mirrored the decline of landlord dominance within Unionism and the supercession of an amateurish and Westminster-centred politics (submerged by the Home Rule crises, but reappearing in the 1890s) by a more professionally organised, populist, violent and Ulster-centred Unionism dominated by the Belfast business community. Ulster Unionist identity first crystallised in the borderlands rather than in its present East Ulster heartland. Saunderson also inhabited the borderlands between the world of the Namierite independent country gentleman and modern mass politics, between Southern and Ulster Unionism.



A political anachronism

Fluent and engaging, enjoying at one time a command over the House of Commons which was acknowledged by members as diverse as Lord Randolph Churchill and Justin McCarthy, Saunderson was nonetheless a political anachronism. He was a landowner (enjoying a rent roll of c.£6000 a year) within a party increasingly impatient of its landlord activists, happiest politicking within the dinner party circuit, at a time when the focus of political negotiation was moving beyond the mansions of Park Lane.

In his cultivated 'Irishness', he reflected English preconceptions of late Victorian Ireland. He was boisterous and hard-hitting and he exploited a highly visual humour, only equalled in vividness by that of Tim Healy. As a virtual 'exile of Erin', Saunderson stressed his own Irish identity and offered audiences a caricature of Ireland and the Irish which owed much to Charles Lever. Saunderson was loyalism's 'great communicator'. Both within parliament and at by-elections, he was in demand as a Unionist spokesman. British audiences were deceived by his subtle portrayal of their prejudices. They accepted him as a backwoods Irishman, smiling benignly at his wit and brogue (Saunderson, like Carson, tenaciously resisted anglicisation). They were touched by his loyalty to Britain and her Queen-Empress. He was a living refutation of Gladstone – an Irishman who unreservedly embraced the British connection.

Saunderson's value to Irish Unionism was thus contingent on his British appeal. So long as the battle for the Union was played out within British constituencies - as in 1886, 1892 and 1895 – Saunderson's position within his party was assured. When other issues diverted the attention of British voters, Saunderson found that he was no longer in the demand he had been when a protagonist of the Home Rule Bill drama. The death of Home Rule not only decimated his British audience, it also freed Irish protestantism from the restraints of political cohesion. Throughout the late 1890s sectional interests – Presbyterians, farmers, and Belfast working-men - began to agitate for greater, and more efficient, parliamentary representation. By 1900, having speculated in, and lost, an English political career, Saunderson returned to find a wholly alien Ulster political landscape. His paternalism, which had seemed an adequate response to the enlarged electorate of 1885, was now revealed as ineffective – without an accompanying threat from Nationalism. Ulster voters no longer accepted the prolonged absence of their parliamentary representative; and the voters whose 'loyalty' Saunderson had once eulogised, now returned independent Presbyterians and populists (T.L. Corbett and Tom Sloan), and radical Unionists like T.W. Russell, Edward Mitchell and James Wood.

Saunderson offered no initiative to recover his Party's fortunes. On public platforms he reiterated old platitudes, questioning the Unionism of his political opponents, and patronising protestant workers and farmers with his goodwill. He responded to a militant protestant democracy by donning the Orange sash. Ulster young-bloods came to mock his incapacity; and two - William Moore and C.C. Craig – effectively challenged his leadership by taking over the campaign against T.W. Russell and independently inspiring an overhaul of the Party machine. Thus, long before his death, Saunderson's leadership had been revealed as outmoded and inadequate.

Respected for his past achievements in 1885 and 1893 and his personal integrity, he came to be regarded as a political fossil and figure-head. When he died, in 1906, the conventional pieties were observed - a 'tombstone' biography by Reginald Lucas was published in 1907 and a statue erected in Portadown, North Armagh, in 1909, but Saunderson was largely forgotten, superseded by Edward Carson as an object of veneration.



The significance of the E.J. Sanderson papers

The re-discovery of Sanderson's papers by A.B. Cooke in c.1970 and their subsequent copying by PRONI have made possible a better-informed and more balanced appraisal of the political man, properly positioned within his political and temporal context. This found expression in Dr Alvin Jackson's 'Colonel Edward Sanderson: Land and Loyalty in Victorian Ireland' (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995). Many of the foregoing comments have been taken from Dr Jackson's work or from a review of Colonel Edward Sanderson by Patrick Maume.

In Dr Jackson's view, the Sanderson papers are the single most important record of an Irish Unionist politician's activity in the 1880s and 1890s, and one of PRONI's most significant holdings. They fully document the origins and development of an Irish Unionist parliamentary party, offering a unique insight into its political preoccupations, its relations with other parties, and its disciplinary procedures. The Unionist Irish, Dr Jackson points out, have left merely the scantiest record in print of their activity; a number of lawyer-MPs (John Ross and J.A. Rentoul, for example) contributed to the autobiographical boom of the 1920s, but provide only a slight portrait of their parliamentary colleagues among more detailed comments on their own court-room achievements. As far as the manuscript sources are concerned, Carson's letters for the 1890s (PRONI, D1507) have survived imperfectly. In any case, at this time Carson was consolidating his legal practice in preference to his parliamentary career. The papers of Sir William Ellison-Macartney (PRONI, D3649), Sanderson's lieutenant, are patchy in chronological scope, and of uneven quality. Those of William Moore (D1066) contain virtually no political correspondence. Only the William Johnston diaries in PRONI (D880) rival the Sanderson archive as a sustained, contemporary account of a 'loyalist' politician's career; but Johnston was an allusive writer, whose diary entries frequently frustrate as much as they inform, and a highly erratic individual who had won the affectionate condescension of colleagues, but who exercised little or no political influence.

Sanderson, on the other hand, was in contact with some of the outstanding personalities of his time. His wit provided an entrée to the political dining circuit, and his sporting interests a ready bond with distinguished fellow-enthusiasts. He conformed to the Thomas Arnold stereotype of Christian manliness: an unflagging evangelical, he was a keen pugilist in his youth, later transferring his energies to yachting. Yachting was the Lough Erne gentry's substitute for or equivalent of fox-hunting, and was a political as well as social bond between Sanderson and his neighbour, the Earl of Erne. Sanderson's sporting zeal, and also his humour, brought him to the periphery of the Prince of Wales's Marlborough House set and into the heart of the no less elevated social forum provided by the leading Tory hostesses of the day. Yachting brought Sanderson into contact with Kaiser Wilhelm II; politics won him the acquaintanceship of Lord Randolph Churchill; jingoism took him to South Africa and into the orbit of Cecil Rhodes. While William Johnston languished in lodgings on the Vauxhall Bridge Road, Sanderson was lionised by society.

Yet Sanderson did not merely preserve the correspondence of the famous, or of his intimates: the archive is not a narrowly high-political record; nor does it offer a limited social perspective. By echoing the rhetoric of popular intolerance, Sanderson

achieved wide fame in Unionist Ireland and within the English Tory democracy. Rank-and-file English supporters wrote expressing their admiration; one enclosed five shillings for a loyalist fighting fund. Irishmen, incoherent with enthusiasm (or indignation) wrote to him, too, some threatening him, some requesting permission to use his name in the title of a new Orange lodge or band. Thus, the archive contains valuable expressions of grass-roots political opinion; and, though these are surpassed in scope and quantity by the ILPU archive (D989) and by local solicitors' papers held by PRONI (for example, those of Joshua Peel, Falls & Hanna, Carleton, Atkinson & Sloan – D889, D1390 and D1252 respectively), there is no comparable record of popular reaction to an important loyalist leader.



Saunderson the caricaturist



*E.J. Saunderson depicting
William E. Gladstone*

One unusual feature of the papers is that they include sketches and water-colours produced by Saunderson himself. Some of these were reproduced in the Reginald Lucas volume of 1907, and Margot Asquith also included a Saunderson caricature in her Autobiography of 1920. PRONI has reproduced one, featuring Gladstone donning the British Crown, as a postcard, and another in its published calendar of The Ashbourne Papers, 1869-1913 (HMSO, Belfast, 1974).



Correspondence and other papers

The other, more conventional, components of the archive are: an extended run of letters, 1866-1903, from Saunderson to his wife and youngest son (to whom the archive passed) in which, apart from personal matters, he discusses election meetings and speeches, and refers to his dealings with the Parnellites in the House of Commons, the Reform Bill of 1867, the Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869, the Irish Land Bill of 1870, his visit to South Africa in 1897, his contacts with the great Tory hostesses of London and his views on the leading political figures of the day; letters to Saunderson from many of these figures, 1886-1902, including the Marquess of Hartington (later 8th Duke of Devonshire), the 6th Marquess of Londonderry, the 3rd Marquess of Salisbury, the 5th Earl of Cadogan, Arthur James Balfour, and Austen and Joseph Chamberlain, concerning Home Rule, etc (and constituting in aggregate a unique record of the relationship between a late 19th century 'loyalist' and his nominal British leaders); letters and resolutions sent to Saunderson, as Grand Master of Scotland and County Grand Master of Belfast, about the Orange Order, 1887-1907, which include a letter from Rudyard Kipling declining a request to write an 'Orange Song', 1895; letters of condolence to Mrs Saunderson on the death of her husband, 1907; and letters received by Reginald Lucas in connection with his biography of Saunderson, 1907.

There are also letters from the Hon. Somerset Ward to his brother-in-law, Capt. Arthur Hill, giving a first-hand account of the land war on Hill's Gweedore estate in Co. Donegal, 1881.

As well as correspondence, the archive includes: a notebook containing fragmentary journals kept by Saunderson, mainly of visits abroad, 1867-1872; a diary relating to his South African tour, 1897, and notes for two speeches delivered there; typed reminiscences of Saunderson by James Delap of Monellan, Co. Donegal, c.1907; and scrapbooks, mainly of newspaper cuttings, about Saunderson's political career, 1866-1910.

