

The Curragh “Incident” – March 1914



The events which culminated in the Curragh “Incident” of March 1914 had their beginnings at the end of the 18th century when by the Act of Union the islands of Great Britain and Ireland were joined administratively. Henceforth one Parliament would serve both countries. Under Secretary Cooke wrote, in 1799, to Mr. Pitt, Prime Minister, “The Union is the only means of preventing Ireland from becoming too great and too powerful.

The Repeal of this Act, otherwise known as Home Rule, became the objective of every Nationalist Party at Westminster. Towards the latter half of the 19th century Mr. Gladstone became the champion of Home Rule. In reference to the Act of Union, in 1886, he said:

"There is no blacker or fouler transaction in the history of man. We used the whole civil government of Ireland as an engine of wholesale corruption. ...we obtained that union against the sense of every class of the community, by wholesale bribery and unblushing intimidation."

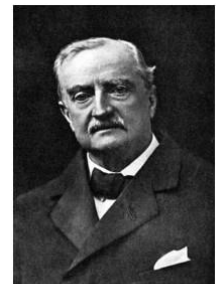


Mr. Herbert Henry Asquith
Prime Minister 1908 - 1916

Gladstone twice sponsored a Home Rule Bill in Parliament and was twice defeated. Home Rule was political dynamite and would have to await a more favorable opportunity for its reintroduction to the Commons.

In 1910 the situation at Westminster favoured the reintroduction of the issue of Home Rule. The December elections of that year saw the return to power of the Liberal Party but with an overall majority of only one seat. (Prime Minister) formed his government and was maintained in power only by the votes of the 84 Irish Nationalists led by **Mr. John Redmond**. The Home Rule Bill became the topic of the day, and it was evident from the start that it would have a stormy passage through Parliament. Whatever the

opposition to Home Rule inside the House of Commons there were those, outside the House, prepared to resist the introduction of the Bill by force of arms. Irish politics have never been simple, so it is well to take a moment to examine the various parties and what they stood for.



John Redmond MP
Irish Nationalist Politician

1. The Liberal Party formed the Government. It was headed by **Mr. Herbert Asquith** who believed that whatever the opposition be to Home Rule outside the House that in the end the will of Parliament would prevail.

2. The Irish Nationalist Party supported the Government. Redmond defined the nationalist position when he said: *Ireland to-day is full of hope and expectation. Beware how you dash that hope to the ground. Rebellion is threatened. Rebellion is justified in high quarters. The rebellion of a portion of the population of four counties, because they disapprove of the act of the imperial parliament before any wrong has been done, and before any oppression has been attempted, would be a crime and a calamity. Rebellion by over three-fourths of a people of a country distracted, tortured and betrayed, deprived of the rights of freemen, and condemned to a barren policy of coercion, would be too horrible a thing to contemplate; and it is because this is so that I rejoice with all my heart to believe and to know that the future of this bill is safe, and that the future of Ireland is assured.*

3. The Conservative Party, headed by Mr. Bonar Law, formed the opposition in parliament. Bonar Law saw in the issue of Home Rule a means of bringing together a Conservative Party divided by dissension.



Edward Carson
Irish Unionist Politician

4. The Irish Unionist, led by **Sir Edward Carson**, whose cry of “Home Rule is Rome Rule,” had set Ulster afire. Speaking on the issue in the Commons, he said, “Ulster looms very large in this controversy because Ulster has a strong right arm ...It will not be my fault if resistance becomes necessary; but, Mr. Speaker, on my conscience, I shall not refuse to join them.”

5. The Ulster Volunteers were the militant arm of the Unionists. A well organized and disciplined force they were estimated to number 100,000 in March, 1914. Carson declared: *"I am told it will be illegal. Of course it will. Drilling is illegal ...the volunteers are illegal and the government know they are illegal, and the government dare not interfere with them don't be afraid of illegalities"*

6. The National Volunteers, formed in 1913, were the Nationalist counterpart of the Ulster Volunteers. They lacked arms, organization and training. Could they be relied upon to assist in enforcing Home Rule on Ulster? Padraic Pearse defined the Nationalist attitude on this point when he said: *"Let accursed be the soul of any Nationalist who would dream of firing a shot or drawing a sword against the Ulster Volunteers in connection with this Bill."*

7. There remained but one further interested party, namely, 'The Troops of the Irish Command,' to whom would fall the task of maintenance of law and order or the enforcement of Government policy. The force consisted of two infantry divisions and two cavalry brigades under the General Officer Commanding Ireland—**Lieut. Gen. Sir Arthur Paget**.

Paget is important to the story that follows as his personality was one of the causes of the Curragh Mutiny. He had seen service in Ashanti, Burma, The Sudan and South Africa and was aged 63 years at this time. He was considered "too out of date, too casual, and intellectually too shallow . . . He could be genial and amusing, and was a great ladies man, but his old-fashioned pomposity was a standing joke. He talked as if he were thinking aloud, and his rambling and often highly coloured language betrayed the romantic and even melodramatic current of his thoughts, besides a deeply rooted egotism." When he died in 1928 his obituary notice in The Times included the following:



General Arthur Paget
Commander-in-Chief, Ireland

Had he only devoted to Military Study a fraction of the time which he gave to the observation of trees and shrubs he might have ranked as a learned soldier.

Paget's official residence at this time was in the Royal Hospital at Kilmainham, a short distance from the administrative headquarters of his command at Parkgate, Dublin.

An imaginary line joining Sligo and Wexford divided Paget's command in two. One infantry division and one cavalry brigade were located north and south of this line. As the subsequent happenings primarily concerned the units north of this line it is necessary to consider their composition and deployment.

The **5th Infantry Division** consisted of three Infantry Brigades each of four battalions:

1. Brigadier General Cuthbert's **13th Infantry Brigade** was located in Dublin.
2. Brigadier General Rolt's **14th Infantry Brigade** was located at the Curragh.
3. Brigadier General Gleichen's **15th Infantry Brigade** was located in Ulster.



5th Infantry Division

All battalions of the **5th Infantry Division** were English. For example, the 14th Brigade at the Curragh consisted of:

2nd Battalion, Manchester Regiment, occupied Keane Barracks, now Pearse Barracks.

2nd Battalion, Suffolk Regiment, occupied Gough Barracks, now MacDonagh Barracks.

1st Battalion, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, occupied Beresford Barracks, now Ceannt Barracks.

1st Battalion, East Surrey Regiment, occupied Wellington Barracks, Griffith College Dublin.



East Surrey Regiment

Brigadier General Headlam commanded the division's artillery with his headquarters at **Newbridge** where the **27th Brigade RFA** was also located. The **15th Brigade RFA** was located at **Kildare** and the **28th Brigade RFA** was located in **Dundalk**.

The General Officer Commanding 5th Infantry Division was **Major General Sir Charles Fergusson**, aged 49 years at this time.



Major Gen. Charles Fergusson
GOC 5th Infantry Division

Fergusson had served with Kitchener in the Sudan, and by all accounts he was a very strict and professional soldier. He had taken over command of the 5th Infantry Division in 1913 and lived at this time some two miles south of the Curragh Camp, at Ballyfair House. "He was a big dour Scotsman, always cool and not easily provoked," was how one acquaintance described him.

The **3rd Cavalry Brigade**, although located in the area of the 5th Infantry Division, was not part of that division but came directly under the command of the General Officer Commanding Ireland. Brigadier General Hubert Gough had commanded the since 1911. Gough was 43 years old, and wrote afterwards of himself, "I am Irish by blood and upbringing though I was born in London." He came from a famous fighting family. His father, uncle, and brother were all recipients of the Victoria Cross and he felt he had a personal mission to add to this list. "Tough, fiery, energetic, a skilled and passionate horseman," Fergusson wrote, "he possessed in every sense, and perhaps rather too much, 'the cavalry spirit' - "We ladies of the hunting field could always expect Gough to arrive along when we were halted at a fence. 'What's the trouble, ladies?' Gough would say, that fence is easy.' He would then standoff, take a flyer at it, and usually end up on the broad of his back."



Brigadier Gen Hubert Gough
GOC 3rd Cavalry Brigade

During the South African war Gough was the first officer of Buller's relieving force to enter Ladysmith. However, he got there by disregarding orders. Ryan records that on the day in question Gough, when some few miles from Ladysmith, was ordered 'to retire at once.' Gough refused to obey orders and continued on into Ladysmith.

Gough lived, at this time, at Brownstown House, just one mile south of the Curragh. His Brigade was comprised of the following units:

4th Hussars, located at Stewart Barracks, Curragh, now Connolly Barracks.

16th Lancers located at Ponsonby Barracks, Curragh, now Plunkett Barracks.

5th Royal Irish Lancers, located at Marlborough Barracks, Dublin, now McKee Barracks.

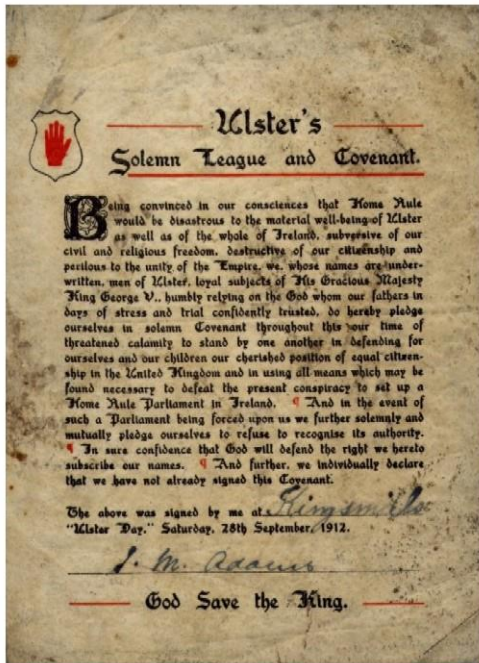


Attached to the 3rd Cavalry Brigade were **D and E Batteries, Royal Horse Artillery**, stationed at Newbridge.

These were the major units located north of the Sligo-Wexford line. There were, of course, a number of depots and stores in various parts of Ireland apart from these.



"C" Squadron - 4th (Queen's Own) Hussars - Curragh 1914



The **Home Rule Bill** was introduced into the Commons and was passed in January, 1913. The House of Lords rejected the bill. However, because of new limitations placed on the House of Lords, they could not delay its coming into operation beyond 1914. Opposition to Home Rule mounted in the interim. The Ulster Unionist Council delegated its powers to a Provisional Government which, it was announced, would be set up in Belfast as soon as the Home Rule Bill became law.

Asquith sought vainly for a compromise. "We will not close the Avenue—however unpromising for the moment entrance upon it may appear—which directly or indirectly may hold out the hope of leading to concord and to settlement."

Redmond reached the limit of compromise when he agreed to "County option with a time limit of six years" but reminded the Government that if these terms were rejected then it was their duty to employ all the resources at its command to suppress any movement that might arise to overawe Parliament or subvert the law by menace of force."

Carson replied to this offer, in the House, on Monday, March 9th. "We do not want sentence of death with a stay of execution for six years."

Early in March, also, Intelligence reports reaching London suggested that 'evil-disposed persons' were plotting to raid stores of arms and ammunition in Ireland, particular reference being made to Armagh, Omagh, Enniskillen and Carrickfergus. As a result, Asquith set up a special committee to deal with the matter. It was comprised of the Marquis of Crewe; Birrell, Chief Secretary for Ireland; Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, and Seely, Secretary for War.



RT. HON. WINSTON S. CHURCHILL M.P. FIRST LORD OF THE ADMIRALTY

On Saturday, 14th March, Churchill, a great believer in Home Rule, delivered a speech at Bradford which caused a sensation throughout England. He declared that there were "worse things than bloodshed even on an extended scale," described the Ulster Provisional Government as "a self-elected body, composed of persons who, to put it plainly, are engaged in a treasonable conspiracy." Was the parliamentary system to break down in the face of this challenge? He ended with these words, "I can only say to you, 'Let us go forward together and put these matters to the proof'."

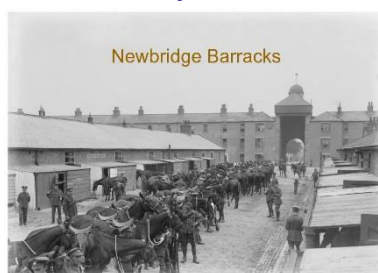
On this day, also, Paget received instructions from the War Office instructing him to take special precautions for safeguarding depots and stores, special reference being made to Armagh, Omagh, Carrickfergus and Enniskillen.



John Seely MP
Secretary for War

On Monday, 16th March, Seely wired Paget asking what steps had been taken by him regarding security. Paget replied on the 17th to state that he was satisfied with the strength of the garrison at Enniskillen, was about to increase the garrison at Carrickfergus, and was taking steps to remove arms and ammunition from Armagh and Omagh. He was reluctant to move troops into Ulster lest it precipitate a crisis.

Paget, as requested, crossed to England that evening and reported to the War Office on Wednesday, 18th March. No written record was kept of the discussions which took place at the War Office but reconstruction is possible in the light of subsequent happenings. Those present included Asquith, the members of the special committee, earlier referred to, Paget, Field-Marshal Sir John French, Chief of the Imperial General Staff; Sir Spencer Ewart, Adjutant General, and Major General Sir Nevil Macready.



Newbridge Barracks



From the instructions transmitted by Paget to his Headquarters in Dublin it appears that the following decisions were made:

1. A Battalion of the 14th Infantry Brigade would be moved to Newry and Dundalk.
2. Carrickfergus would be reinforced by troops from Dublin.
3. Enniskillen, Omagh, and Armagh would be reinforced by troops from Mullingar.
4. The Dorsets Battalion, located in Belfast, would be moved to Holywood, lest they be blockaded in their city garrison.



Major Gen. Nevil Macready

5. General Macready would go to Belfast to take over as military governor when he considered it necessary. Despite the fact that all these measures were to take place with all secrecy the leader of the opposition in Parliament, Mr. Bonar Law, was kept fully informed of the happening at the war office by Major General Henry Wilson, Director of Military Operations.

The conference resumed on Thursday, March 19th, but without Asquith who had an audience with the King.

Paget expressed anxiety on three points:

1. He still felt that the movement of troops into Ulster would excite a disturbance which might take the form of active resistance. On this point he was overruled. He was reminded that as Commander-in-Chief, Ireland, he had 'full discretionary powers to deploy his forces as he saw fit to meet any contingency. Seely told him, "You can have as many more men as necessary, when you find they are necessary, even to the last man.

2. Paget's second anxiety concerned the transportation of troops to Ulster. What if the employees of the Great Northern Railway refused to move them? To obviate such a possibility Churchill promised Royal Navy support.

3. The last of Paget's anxieties related to the possible behavior of his officers and was discussed on Thursday afternoon between Paget, French and Seely. Seely laid down the following principles for his guidance.

(a) That officers ordered to act in support of the civil power should not be permitted to resign their commissions but must, if they refused to obey orders, be dismissed from the Army.

(b) That indulgence might be shown, in cases where it was asked for, to officers who were domiciled in Ulster.

On all these matters Paget received no written orders. He returned to Dublin that night, but not before he wired instructions for his Unit Commanders to meet him on Friday at his headquarters at Parkgate.



The Cabinet members, who attended the conference at the War Office, hurried to the Commons to attend a most important session. Mr. Bonar Law had tabled a vote of censure on the Government and in concluding his address he stated:

What about the army? If it is only a question of disorder, the army will and ought to obey, but only if it is a question of civil war, the soldiers are citizens like the rest of the people. The army will be divided, and that force be destroyed on which we depend for our national safety.

The vote of éensure was rejected by 345 votes to 252.

At 0930 hours on Friday, March 20th, seven officers assembled in Paget's office at Parkgate, Dublin. They were Fergusson, Rolt, Cuthbert, Gough and three officers of the General Staff. Paget forbade the taking of notes early in the conference. There are three accounts available of the happenings. Paget himself wrote the shortest account for the King five days after the event.



Gough made notes immediately after the conference but did not assemble them until much later. Ferguson's narrative is the fullest and was written seven days after the event.

When the officers were seated, Paget strode in, according to Gough, looking 'stern and pompous and smoking a cigar.' What thought were running through Paget's mind at this time we shall never know. He may have been carried away by the visions of a vast armada of warships off the coast of Scotland or a vast army under his control, all deduced from Seely's guarantee of support. By all accounts, Paget became very excited and rambled on about 'the whole place being ablaze by to-morrow.' 'He did not say one word about law and order' says Gough, 'and our duty to maintain it when necessary.' Paget had apparently forgotten that all he had been told to do was to move two Battalions and one company of infantry.

Paget then went on to outline the conditions pertaining to officers as laid down by Seely in London the previous day. This was later to become known as 'The Ultimatum.' Brigadiers were to go at once and place the alternatives before their officers and notify him forthwith of the outcome. The meeting adjourned. Fergusson, Rolt, Cuthbert and Gough were all agitated. 'Come along,' said Fergusson, 'let us talk over this. The Army must hold together.' Cough declared bluntly that he would not go. The party broke up.

Fergusson was required to remain in Dublin to attend an afternoon conference and availed of the opportunity to put 'the ultimatum' on paper and send it by his aide-de-camp to the Curragh to be placed before the combat support and combat service support elements of his division. This document is of prime importance for it is the earliest written document of what Paget had said. Fergusson has reproduced the document in full in his book. It stated in part:

In view of the possibility of active operations in Ulster, the War Office has authorised the following communication to officers:

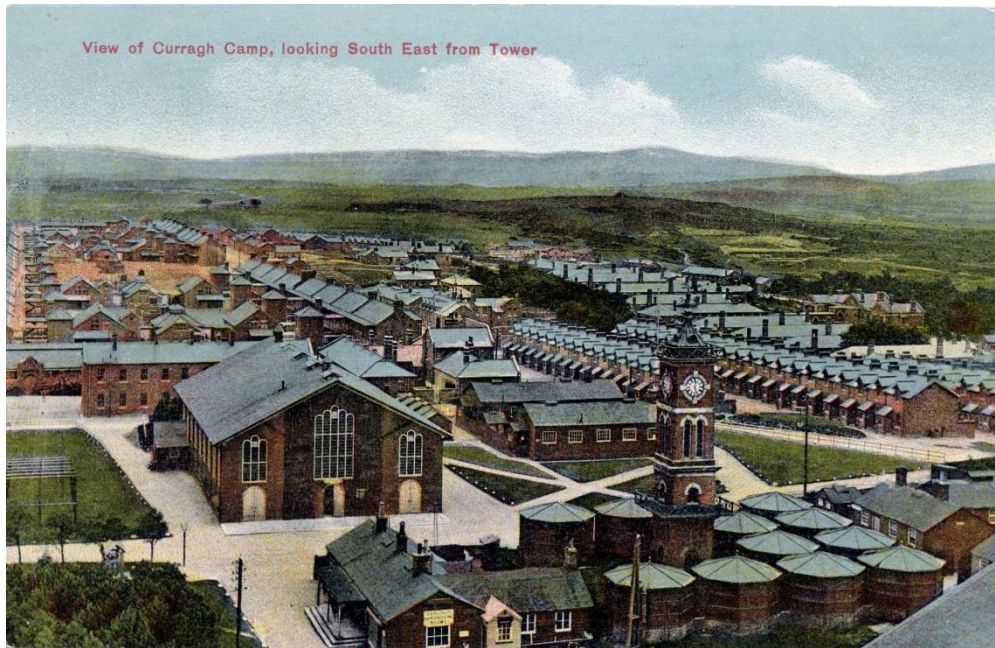
1. Officers whose homes are actually in the province of Ulster who wish to do so may apply for permission to be absent from duty during the period of operations, and will be allowed to disappear" from Ireland. Such officers will, subsequently, be reinstated, and will suffer no loss in their career.

2. Any other officer who from conscientious or other motives is not prepared to carry out his duty as ordered, should say so at once. Such officers will at once be dismissed from the service.

Cough walked the short distance from Parkgate to Marlborough Barracks and placed the ultimatum before the assembled officers of the 5th Royal Irish Lancers. All were prepared to accept dismissal in preference to the possibility of taking part in active operations in Ulster.



Rolt arrived by motor car in the Curragh at 11.30 a.m. and outlined the ultimatum to his battalion commanders. The Colonels dispersed and each summoned his officers to their mess and put the ultimatum before them. One officer wrote later “everyone objects to going and nine out of ten refuse under any conditions to go.



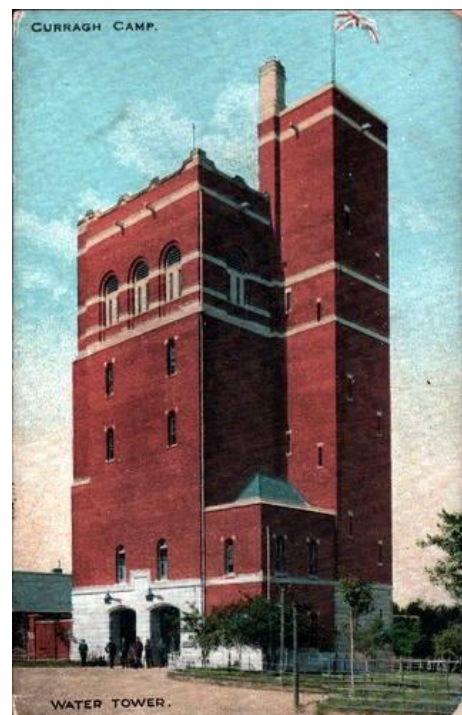
A subaltern, in Dublin, wrote his father:

Can you imagine a subaltern of 22-26 making up his mind in an hour as to whether he should shoot down Loyalists in Ulster or try to start a civil job without a bob? . . . Imagine anything more criminal than making us decide a matter which might affect our whole careers, without giving us time to think or get advice from anyone.

Cough did not reach the Curragh until about 3.30 p.m. and immediately ordered all officers of the 16th Lancers, 4th Hussars, and Royal Horse Artillery to meet at the Officers' Mess, Ponsonby Barracks. Cough laid the ultimatum before the assembled officers, each must decide for himself. However, he did tell them that he had chosen the option of dismissal. He requested decisions at 5.30 p.m. and at that time all, except two, opted for dismissal.

The first indication to reach London that all was not well in the Irish Command was a telegram from Paget to the War Office at 7 p.m. Word also broke on Fleet Street about this time. Unaware of these happenings in the military world some cabinet members were, at this time, assuring the people of the Government's resolve. Mr. John Burns, President of the Local Government Board, in an address in the National Liberal Club, said:

Home Rule is a question mainly for Ireland itself. Three-fourths of the people there have demanded it persistently for years, and we have no right to listen to the demand for more concessions or yield to clamor.



Thomas McKinnon, Secretary of State for Scotland, also voiced this resolve when he said, “We will carry Home Rule by agreement if we possibly can, but without it if we must.”

Fergusson returned to the Curragh at 9 p.m. and went directly to his home. He did not learn of the serious situation within his division until the following morning when he met Headlam and Rolt at his headquarters and they made him aware of it. Fergusson was not prepared to leave his officers, least of all the young ones, to face a perplexing problem by themselves. “It is,” he used to say, “the duty of leaders to lead.”

Fergusson ordered the Manchesters and Suffolks to parade to the gymnasium at the Curragh where he addressed them. Then he journeyed to Kildare, Newbridge and Dublin and in each place he addressed the assembled units. The contents of his address was the same in each place—the need for discipline, loyalty to King and Government. One officer of the East Surrey Battalion wrote later:

He reminded us that although we must naturally hold private political views, officially we should not be on the side of any one political party. It was our duty to obey orders, to go wherever we were sent and to comply with instructions of any political party that happened to be in power. There was no sloppy sentiment, it was good stuff straight from the shoulder and just what we wanted.

So ended the mutiny as far as the 5th Division was concerned. Matters were far from satisfactory in the 3rd Cavalry Brigade. Word arrived from the War Office on Saturday directing Cough and the Officers Commanding the 3rd Cavalry Brigade to report to London. Paget determined to put an end to any misunderstanding by travelling to the Curragh and speaking to the cavalry officers.



Paget's address turned out to be a most bizarre episode. The old war horse rambled on in his usual manner and told the assembled officers "that he was their friend and that they should trust him. He had no intention of urging war on Ulster and to prove it he would divulge some of his plans. To such an extent was he prepared to avoid fighting that he had given orders that if any battalion met with opposition in its march it was to turn around and go back to barracks. And if fighting took place against Ulster forces he would order all his men to lie down and not return the fire and he and his generals would advance alone and parley with the men of Ulster. As far as the Cavalry were concerned, he would put them on a flank, and if they met opposition and cleared it he would be pleased, but if they took no active part he would be content.

Paget concluded his address and, prior to departing for Dublin, told his audience to make their decision and convey it to Fergusson. On his return to the Curragh, Fergusson learned of the decision of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade to the effect that only the officers of the 4th Hussars and Royal Horse Artillery had relented. Cough, Lieutenant Colonel MacEwen, O.C. 16th Lancers, and Lieutenant Colonel Parker, O.C. 5th Royal Irish Lancers, were instructed to report to the War Office in London forthwith.

In London the week-end of the 21st-22nd March was one of considerable political activity and intrigue. The whole question had now become a national issue with the press on one side calling the events "a sinister plot to coerce Ulster" and the Government pleading that only the maintenance of law and order was involved.

The *Daily Chronicle* reported:

Daily Chronicle

For the first time in modern English history a military cabal seeks to dictate to Government the Bills it should carry or not carry into law. We are confronted with a desperate rally of reactionaries to defeat the democratic movement and repeal the Parliamentary Act. This move by a few aristocratic officers is the last throw in the game.

The *Daily Express* announced in black type that "the Home Rule Bill is Dead," and *The Daily News* queried, "It is a question whether we govern ourselves or are governed by General Cough. Speaking on the Irish Question, at meeting held at Huddersfield on March 2 1st, Mr. Lloyd George said:

We are confronted with the greatest issue raised in this country since the days of the Stuarts. Representative government in this land is at stake. In those days our forefathers had to face a claim of the Divine Right of Kings to do what they pleased. Today it is the Divine Right of the aristocracy to do what its pleases .

We are not fighting about Ulster. We are not fighting about Home Rule. We are fighting for all that is essential to civil liberty in this land.

All the forces of “the establishment” were brought to bear on the Government, at this time, with such success that when Gough reported to the War Office, on March 23rd, they were seeking a way out of the impasse. Cough, made aware of the Government’s predicament by Wilson, was interviewed by French, Ewart and Seely. He was told that there had been a misunderstanding and was requested to accept reinstatement. This Gough was prepared to agree to, provided the Army Council would furnish certain assurances in writing. The Cabinet approved a letter acknowledging a misunderstanding, but pointing out that it was the duty of soldiers to support the civil power in the maintenance of law and order. Cough was instructed to return later in the day to collect the document. He consulted Wilson who pointed out a difficulty that might yet arise, namely, that in the event of Home Rule becoming Law could not the Army be called upon to enforce it on Ulster under the expression of maintaining law and order. Gough sought clarification on this point in a letter which he dispatched to Ewart at the War Office. However, this letter did not reach Ewart until the Cabinet had approved the initial document and adjourned. Seely felt licensed to tamper with the Cabinet paper, for he added two paragraphs:

His Majesty’s Government must retain their right to use all the forces of the Crown in Ireland, or elsewhere, to maintain law and order and to support the civil power in the ordinary execution of its duty. But they have no miention whatever of taking advantage of this right to crush political opposition to the policy or principles of the Home Rule Bill.

To this document Seely, French, and Ewart appended their initials and it was handed to Cough when he rcturned to the War Office. Cough retired and consulted with Wilson, Parker, MaeEwen, and his brother. They were worried about the term “crush political opposition” in the final paragraph of the document. Cough wrote, on a sheet of War Office paper, the following:

I understand in reading of the last paragraph to be that troops under our command will not be called upon to enforce the present Home Rule Bill on Ulster, and that we can so assure our officers.

Cough handed this paper to French who, having studied the paper for some minutes, wrote at the foot of the page:

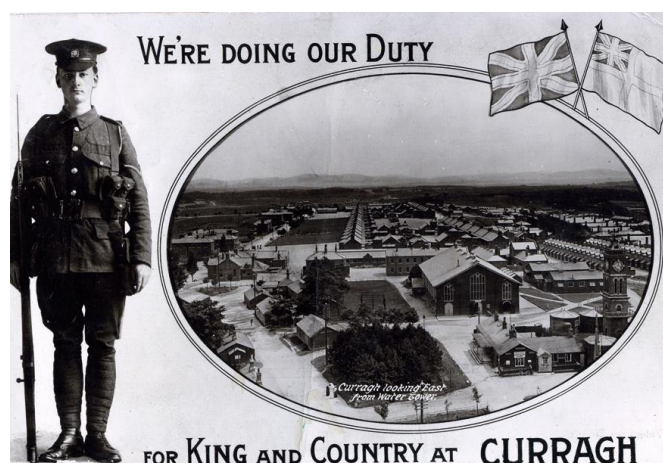
“This is how I read it.”

The documents, later to be known as “the Guarantee,” were returned to Cough who immediately departed for Ireland. So ended the mutiny of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade.

The events already related were to be the subject of many weeks of heated debate and discussion in both press and parliament. The Government rejected “ the guarantee” on the grounds that the parties, who amended the Cabinet document, had no authority to tamper with it, Efforts were even made to recover it from Cough but to no avail. Seely, French and Ewart all resigned because the “guarantee” was repudiated. There were charges of a Government plot to coerce Ulster and that the reports of possible seizure of the arms depots were fabrications. Countercharges of mutiny and subversion of democratic Government followed. Lenin cited the incident as an example of the “determined resistance of the British landlords and capitalists in Ireland to the introduction of Home Rule.”

Cough was hailed as a hero. “The plot has been defeated by the courageous stand made by the officers of the Cavalry Brigade . . . we congratulate General Cough, whose fearless and honourahle conduct has added lustre to the laurels of a great Irish family.”

Fergusson was denounced as “a cur.” Even the King was to take him to task for using his name in addressing the troops on Saturday, March 21. However, he was fixed in his views, for he later wrote, “ if my conscience were as clear about (everything in my life as it is about that incident, I should he very pleased.”



What were the results of the mutiny “? They were both long and short-term, effecting both Ireland and England. The most immediate result was the reading by Asquith, in the Commons on March 28th, of a New Army Order concerning discipline. The opening paragraph read:

No officer or soldier should, in future, be questioned by his superior officer as to the attitude he will adopt in the event of his being required to obey orders dependent on future or hypothetical contingencies.

Did it have any effect on the Army’s ability to fight? The answer was to be found five months later. The 5th Infantry Division and the 3rd Cavalry Brigade were amongst the first British units ordered to France on the outbreak of World War I. At 11.15 am, on Saturday, the 22nd of August, 1914, “E” Battery, Royal Horse Artillery fired the first British shots of World War I. In the ensuing engagement the units which figured so prominently in the events at the Curragh bore the brunt of the German attack and covered the retreat of the British Forces from Mons. They fought with great courage and endurance.

At the higher levels of the Army the adverse effects of the mutiny were felt greater. It left a legacy of suspicion between military and political leaders which lasted throughout the war. This mutual distrust was to hamper operations.

It was in Ireland that the major effects of the mutiny were felt. The Home Rule Bill, passed in the Commons on May 25th, found its way into the Statute Books on September 18th with the proviso that it not come into effect until after the war. Parliament had dodged facing the issue for it knew that it could not depend on the Army to implement a Home Rule Bill for the whole of Ireland.

As far as the Nationalists were concerned, the damage was done. With all confidence now lost in parliamentary procedure, it followed that a resorting to arms was unavoidable. On Easter Monday, 1916, under a banner which said, “We serve neither King nor Kaiser, but Ireland “they rose in armed rebellion.

The significant lessons to be learned from the events outlined above pertain to the field of ethics and the behaviour of soldiers in certain situations.



Paget, when at the War Office on March 19, sought guidance as to his actions in certain eventualities. This guidance was furnished to him by way of “the ultimatum.” It was unnecessary, injudicious and improper to place the choice before the officer body. The blame for the effects that followed lay not with those who made the choice but with those who caused it to be offered. To term the results of this folly “a mutiny” is a misnomer. There was no mutiny. In fact, all “orders” given at the time were punctually and implicitly obeyed.

The reactions of Fergusson and Cough to the “ultimatum” provide us with an excellent case study in leadership. The background of both officers was similar royalist, protestant, experienced, and of the same age group, and yet they reacted in quite different ways. Which was correct? It is evident that both cannot be so.

Fergusson wrote later:

Needless to say what my inclinations were. All personal considerations invited me to do what Cough did; and if anything could strengthen those feelings it was the ultimatum” put to me on Friday last.

However, he goes on to say:

We officers have all the responsibility of being able to influence, in a greater or lesser degree, according to rank and position, those serving under us. . . I may be willing to accept dismissal from the service myself, but I am not prepared to draw others into the risk of losing everything because of their loyalty to me.

Logically, if we officers, refuse to fight against our friends, are we prepared to accept the same argument from our men when they are called on to fight their friends in labour disputes, etc?

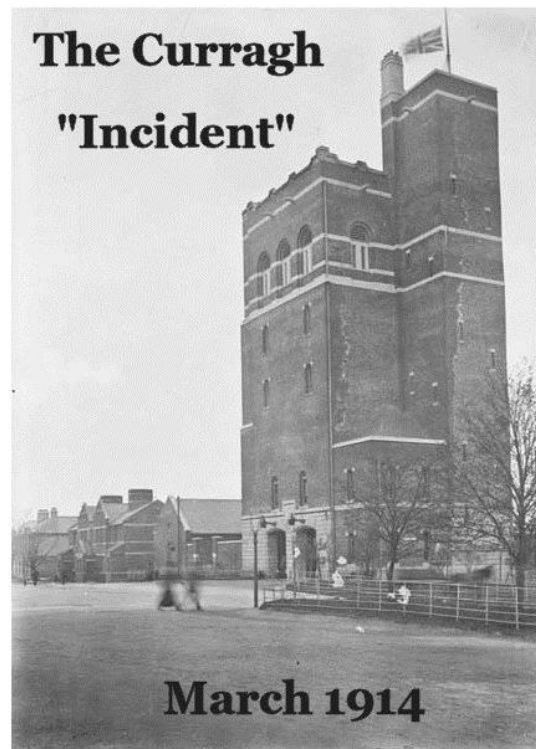
If the Army break up, and discipline is allowed to become dependent on personal considerations, what is there between the country and revolution? . . . Therefore, I will do nothing that will in any way weaken the discipline of the Army, which I hold to be the paramount consideration.

"Democracies always have exhibited concern over their military establishments because military organizations have the ability, as holders of the instruments and science of violence, to short-circuit the democratic process." But how is social control exercised over the armed services? This control may come from without by way of a political watchdog, from the military establishment itself, or by some happy compromise between both extremes. "However, when the balance is on the side of self-imposed control, the military services become a truly professional group."

Fergusson, who suffered in his subsequent career as a result of his actions, emerges from the foregoing incidents as a truly professional soldier. "For experienced military personnel, the difference between the professional and personal moral codes tend to disappear with increased service. The professional code of the military is nurtured by and becomes an essential tool of leadership. Leaders must understand this professional code, adhere to it themselves, and require or lead their follows into acceptance of and adherence to it. Measured against this "yardstick" Fergusson was correct in all he did.

Of Cough, one can understand how he reacted to "the ultimatum" and on technical grounds he could never- be accused of mutiny. Guided entirely by his emotions, he exercised his prerogative when Paget presented the alternatives to him. Of "the Guarantee," which he later sought and obtained in London, his actions are suspect. Asguith summed up the whole question of the "ultimatum" and "guarantee" rather well when he wrote:

In the view of the Cabinet, it was wrong to demand from the officers any assurance as to what their conduct might be in a contingency which might never arise, and it is at least equally wrong for an officer to demand any such assurance from the Government.



The Curragh History