

# MERCANTILE IRELAND

VERSUS

## HOME RULE.

BY

A BELFAST MERCHANT.

RICHARD PATTERSON, J.P.

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N attempting to write even a short article on any phase of the Irish Question, I feel I am undertaking an unpopular task, as the British public has, for a long time past, been so over-dosed with Ireland and Irish affairs, that many naturally turn with disgust from the subject, and look out for something more congenial to read; still I venture to hope that, writing as a plain, hard-working business man, without any party rancour or heat, I may not appeal in vain for sympathy and support from the reader in advocating the cause of the Union, which should be, to all true Englishmen, a subject of vital importance, but is, to all loyal Irishmen, a matter on which their liberties and lives depend.

For the information of the reader, I may here state that I am a Whig in politics, and a member of a family which has carried on the same trade in Belfast for upwards of one hundred years, and which, I think, has contributed in some degree to the commercial, moral, and intellectual development of one of the most prosperous towns in the United Kingdom. My own business experience as a Belfast merchant and manufacturer extends over a period of thirty years. I regret being obliged to introduce what may appear to be purely personal matters, but my object in doing so is merely to show that I am a type of thousands of men very similarly situated in various parts of Ireland, who, while taking a warm interest in everything in any way tending to improve and strengthen the many ties binding us in brotherly love to Great Britain, at the same time do not, under ordinary circumstances, much mix themselves up with party politics, and are only too anxious to be allowed to follow their ordinary daily avocations, without all the disturbing influences by which they have been surrounded for several years.

The loss already sustained by Irish merchants, in consequence of political agitation, is incalculable, and there are few firms in the country who have not felt it keenly, through diminished sales and a general feeling of distrust all round, never knowing what was going to happen next. I fear the desire so general amongst traders to be let alone, and attend quietly to business, may be misconstrued by Englishmen into a feeling of indifference; but this is not so. There is no class of Her Majesty's subjects more alive to the advantages to be derived from the maintenance of the Union in its present form than the Irish merchants and manufacturers. This feature of the case has recently been prominently brought before the public by the magnificent meetings held in Dublin on the 29th and 30th of November, when Lord Hartington and Mr. Goschen, in their patriotic and soul-stirring speeches, crushed to atoms all the specious arguments which have latterly been put forward in favour of Home Rule, by those whom honest John Bright very properly designates the "Irish Rebel Party." The effect of these meetings, coming so soon after Mr. Chamberlain's brilliant and successful tour through Ulster, will do much to dissipate the erroneous idea which prevailed in England to such a great extent, that the Loyalists in Ireland consisted only of Landlords, Conservatives, and Orangemen; whereas it has been clearly proved that tens of thousands of Liberal Unionists, representing a large proportion of the wealth and intelligence of the country, are, if possible, even more zealous in their attachment to the British Throne, and the glorious Constitution under which it is our privilege to live.

These meetings have now roused all Unionists to put forth fresh efforts to bring the present chaotic condition of affairs to an end as speedily as possible, and to endeavour to restore peace, prosperity, and happiness throughout the entire length and breadth of the country, to the people of every creed and class. This will not be accomplished by weakly giving in to agitation or outrage, but by administering the laws with firmness and justice, by a sincere and earnest desire to remove all real grievances where they are found to exist, and by cultivating a spirit of mutual forbearance and good-will towards our

countrymen who have been led astray by false hopes, and promises never to be realised.

It has been frequently said that the land question lies at the root of the Irish difficulty, and if it could be settled on a fair and satisfactory basis, the demand for Home Rule and a Dublin Parliament would soon vanish away. This may be so, but I can hardly believe it, as I fear there are too many well-paid professional politicians and agitators making a good thing out of it, to allow it to die so easily; so long as American dollars keep pouring in, there will be plenty of people willing to work for them. However, writing as a merchant, and having nothing to do with land either as tenant or landlord, I feel it would be presumption on my part if I offered my opinion on the land question, and therefore leave it to others who are far more competent to deal with it. At the same time I would express an earnest hope, which is shared by many, that the Government, in their anxiety to treat the tenants liberally and fairly, will not be forgetful of the landlords' interests and the heavy obligations many of them are under in various ways. For some years it has been the fashion, amongst a certain class of people, to decry and denounce the Irish landlords as oppressors of the poor and a curse to the country; in my opinion nothing could be more unjust or ungenerous than such a charge. No doubt there have been some bad landlords, but, fortunately, they are the rare exception and not the rule. I have known many landlords for the last twenty-five years, and have always found them full of kindly sympathy for their tenants in times of trouble and distress, and willing to help them out of their difficulties.

The intense dislike to Home Rule, or anything approaching to it, is not a matter of recent growth in commercial circles in Ireland, but has always been held by all the leading merchants of both political parties, Liberals and Conservatives. It is not necessary to go back many years to prove this, but we may confine our attention to events which have occurred within the last two years, or, in fact, since the Irish question became the one great national topic. Towards the end of 1885 vague rumours began to float about that Mr. Gladstone showed

symptoms of yielding to the advocates of "rapine and plunder," whom he had denounced in such scathing language, and with all his mighty vigour, but a few months previously. His many followers in Ulster and Belfast were indignant that such a slur should, even for a moment, be cast upon the character of a man whom for years they had almost worshipped, and whom they considered the very embodiment of all that was patriotic, noble, and loyal; they refused to believe that there was even a shadow of foundation for the rumour, which, if true, they knew would instantly break up the Liberal party, and bring chaos and confusion to the entire country. Subsequent events proved how woefully their confidence had been misplaced, and now among his old followers here, with very few exceptions, there are to be found "none so poor as do him reverence."

In January, 1886, what had been before only vague rumours began to take tangible form, and for the first time in the history of Belfast a public political meeting was held, at which Liberals and Conservatives were equally represented, the object being "to consider the disastrous results to the commercial interests of Ireland which would ensue, should any measure be carried through the Legislature having in the most remote degree the effect of imperilling the connection between this country and Great Britain." It is not necessary to give in detail the resolutions passed at this meeting, but it may be interesting to summarize the principal points dwelt on by business men, not only at this but at many subsequent meetings held in various parts of the country.

In the first place, we declare our loyalty and devotion to the Queen, and our steadfast attachment to the Constitutional form of Government established in the United Kingdom, under which we now hold such a high position amongst the nations of the world. We deplore and condemn any agitation tending to weaken the ties which render Ireland an integral part of the United Kingdom. We are convinced that the creation of a separate Parliament would have the most disastrous effects on the trade of the country generally, but more particularly in those districts where loyalty is the rule, and not the exception. We regard with the greatest horror and detestation the cowardly

and abominable crimes which have latterly become so frequent, and brought such disgrace on our country, and we are at all times prepared to endorse and back up any judicious efforts the Government may make to restore law and order throughout the land. We believe that thousands have been induced to join the National League who hoped to secure the agricultural and industrial prosperity to which Home Rule promised to conduct them, and the sooner such a delusion is dispelled the better. We know that the final goal aimed at by the Nationalist Party is absolute and complete separation from Great Britain, and we are not to be deceived or hoodwinked by any plausible statements to the contrary. We utterly fail to see or acknowledge that any changes, which may be considered necessary to make in the laws relating to Ireland, could be as well formulated or carried out by a strongly biassed Parliament in Dublin as they would be by an impartial Parliament at Westminster, the latter being principally composed of honest Englishmen and Scotchmen, in whose love of freedom, justice, and fair play we Irish merchants have the most implicit confidence.

The position of Ulster, as compared with the other three provinces in Ireland, has frequently been referred to, and it certainly forms a very remarkable contrast. Naturally, it was the poorest, most sterile, and barren province, but under the Union it has become a great centre of industry and wealth, and the land in it the most highly cultivated and productive. This is entirely owing to the indomitable perseverance, thrift, and loyalty of the people who, without any extraneous aid or special advantages, have made this part of the country into what might be called the Lancashire and Yorkshire of Ireland.

To us who live in Ulster, the maintenance of the Union means the continuance of our prosperity and the assurance of the future. We gratefully acknowledge the efforts of the Imperial Parliament to confer on us the benefits of remedial legislation, and consider we are perfectly safe in leaving any remaining grievances in the hands of our friends at Westminster. We have for generations lived peacefully and happily under the Union, and have the most perfect confidence that under it and our free Constitution we shall continue to live in the same

condition, protected by the strong arm of justice, and in the full enjoyment of complete liberty, both civil and religious. We feel our close and friendly relations with the rich sister island have been a source of the greatest advantage to us, giving us the command of capital and credit so necessary for the development of our industrial undertakings. Englishmen and Scotchmen have not hesitated to come over and settle among us, taking advantage of the cheaper labour they were able to obtain here; in doing so they have rendered most valuable services to this country, while, at the same time, they have enriched themselves. They have established shipyards, employing thousands of hands, and turning out vessels second to none in the world; they have built mills, and factories, and warehouses, giving employment to vast numbers of people, who would otherwise have had to choose between emigration, on the one hand, or semi-starvation at home on the other. We have always been able to borrow money for large works connected with our public corporations, on as reasonable terms as it can be had in any of the other provincial towns in the United Kingdom, which is a source of the greatest advantage to the entire community. Banking in Ireland has, as a rule, been managed with such care and prudence that it has been generally very profitable, while, at the same time, great facilities have been given for obtaining the credit necessary for the development of every kind of legitimate business. But I have no hesitation in saying that the birth of a Dublin Parliament will be the death of credit in Ireland; that not merely will English capital cease to come over, but what is here will be withdrawn as soon as possible. Further, every Irish capitalist will contract his ventures year by year, so that, in the absence of confidence in the present and hope for the future, there will be no circulation of money, and, therefore, a continuous course of lessening and lessening of wages, until the whole province becomes pauperized, and the once prosperous Ulster is changed into a poverty-stricken wilderness, with her shipyards and mills and factories silent as the grave.

These are not merely the individual views held by the writer, but are those expressed again and again by all the leading men in the country, including bankers, merchants, and manufacturers.



The effect of a collapse in trade, and an exodus of capital and manufacturers out of the country, must necessarily have a most injurious influence on farming interests, as the consumers of produce of all kinds will be so reduced in numbers that the supply of market commodities will be greater than the demand, and consequently prices will fall so low that they will be utterly unremunerative. Then the value of all sorts of Irish securities would undoubtedly be most seriously affected, bringing ruinous loss and consequent suffering into many a home which had previously been prosperous and contented. In proof of this we have only to study the lists of Irish securities during the year 1886, and we find that, immediately after the introduction of the Irish Bills, many of the best and safest investments fell from ten to twenty per cent. in their market price, the total depreciation in value being estimated at about a million sterling. When, however, these Bills were rejected and the people regained confidence, when they saw the majority of the entire nation was against the proposed changes, then the price of these securities rose, and most of them stood again at their original figure. I believe one simple fact such as I have given will carry more weight with it, as showing the real feeling in the country against Home Rule, than a thousand absurd sentimental grievances, such as a gentleman declining to wear the garments provided for him by the Government of the country, because, forsooth, the shade of colour did not please his too fastidious taste; or another gentleman barricading himself up in an old house, and allowing his people to lower him down from an upper window to receive an address and a purse of sovereigns from an admiring crowd below! I cannot think for a moment that Englishmen will be influenced in the slightest degree by such ridiculous theatrical displays, or lose sight of the real question at issue. Besides this, our friends in England and Scotland should not forget that Ireland has for many years been one of their best customers, paying them annually large sums of money; but if the earning power of Ireland should be seriously crippled, from the reasons already given, then our purchasing powers will be reduced proportionately. When, in addition to this, we take into account the hostile tariffs, which we have

every reason to believe would be imposed by a Dublin Parliament, then we see plainly that Ireland could no longer be the happy hunting-ground it has so long been for English and Scotch commercial travellers.

Belfast is a striking example of what industry and loyalty can accomplish, and forms a wonderful contrast to many towns in the South and West of Ireland, where indolence and disloyalty are chronic complaints; many of us naturally take a great pride in our native town, which now occupies a high place in the list of the most important towns in the United Kingdom. During the last fifty years the population has risen from about 70,000 to about 240,000, and for many years past new houses have been built in numbers varying from 1,000 to 1,500 per annum. It is now acknowledged as the commercial capital of Ireland, and is so full of life and energy that all strangers visiting it for the first time are greatly impressed by the fine appearance of the town, and the good business habits of its people. When I say that all the leading men in the town, and the vast majority of the intelligent working men, although differing with each other in ordinary politics, are united as one man in their determination to resist to the uttermost any attempt to bring them under the rule of a Dublin Parliament, I think we have some right to claim support and sympathy from our friends across the Channel, and I am sure we shall not appeal in vain.

When Mr. Gladstone introduced his Irish Bills in April, 1886, the people in Belfast got into a state of the greatest excitement: the Nationalist Party, who are in a large minority, thinking they were at last going to be successful in obtaining that for which they had so long pined and plotted; while the entire Unionist Party, Liberals and Conservatives, at once threw aside party differences for the time being, and determined to stand shoulder to shoulder in defence of their common country. United meetings were held all over the province, and many of us who had never before stood on political platforms, felt it was our duty to come forward, and do all that lay in our power to defeat a measure which we conscientiously believed would, if carried, deprive us of our homes, our liberties, and our citizenship in the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, this excitement, coming

into a community where party spirit at all times runs high, resulted in the deplorable riots which disgraced our town for several months. It is not my intention to say who was to blame locally for the commencement and continuance of these events, which resulted in the loss of about forty lives, numbers of people being maimed for life, and great sorrow and suffering brought into many homes; but if Mr. Gladstone could have seen the dreadful sights I saw in the streets and in the hospital, when in discharge of my duties, I think even he would hesitate before he would again press such sweeping measures on an unwilling community. One thing these unfortunate events clearly proved, and that is that there exists in Ulster a powerful and determined body of men, who will never be coerced into accepting a form of government which would virtually make them the slaves of the Nationalist party. We therefore refuse, as we have a perfect right to do, to allow ourselves to be cast off from being subjects of the United Kingdom; and yet the proposal was not to cast us off freely and absolutely, but to hand us over to a new Power, which our former rulers will help to compel us to obey! The Province of Ulster will, if need be, look after its own interests and protect itself, as it is quite capable of doing; but we are strenuously opposed to its exclusion from any scheme relating to Ireland, as we feel it would be a most selfish action on our part if, because of the strength of our position, we basely deserted our fellow-countrymen who are scattered all over the country, and who are as staunch Unionists as we are. The recent meetings in Dublin gave a true insight into the numbers, position, and intelligence of the Unionists outside Ulster; such a magnificent demonstration was never before held in the Irish capital, and it has opened the eyes of the nation as to the class of people forming the numerical minority in Ireland. Far too much stress has been allowed to be laid on what is called the majority of the Irish people; we deny the right of any three millions of Her Majesty's subjects to call themselves a majority, when they are not 10 per cent. of the entire population of the United Kingdom. The majority of the entire nation is the only majority we can recognise, and that Mr. Gladstone has not got, and never will get, as clearly indicated by recent

events. Three millions of people residing in Lancashire and Yorkshire might just as well ask for a local Parliament in one of their large towns, but their demand would not be likely to receive favourable consideration of the nation. It may be argued that the cases are not parallel, and that we are bound to look back into Irish history. This is perfectly right, and forms one of our strongest arguments in favour of the maintenance of the Union; for the more we study history, the more we are convinced that Ireland could never be a nation, as it contains within itself such opposing elements and such inflammable materials; that its affairs must be controlled by some such impartial assembly as the Imperial Parliament sitting at Westminster. I firmly believe that if Ireland had the management of its own affairs, almost every one who remained in the country, and had any stake in it, would be ruined, and before the expiration of three years England would be compelled to take forcible possession of it.

The apparently sudden conversion of Mr. Gladstone to Home Rule was not only a source of the greatest sorrow and disappointment, but was also surrounded by the greatest mystery to his many admirers in Ireland. There seems to have been something almost prophetic in what Lord Macaulay wrote of him in the year 1839, when he first of all described him as "the rising hope of those stern and unbending Tories," and then went on to say, "It would not be at all strange if Mr. Gladstone were one of the most unpopular men in England." . . . "Whatever Mr. Gladstone sees is refracted and distorted by a false medium of passions and prejudices." . . . "He has one most fatal gift as a speculator, a vast command of a kind of language, grave and majestic, but of vague and uncertain import." Nearly fifty years have passed since these words were written, and yet how true they are to-day.

It is not my intention in this article to go into any details as to the development of the country by public works, railways, manufactures, or cottage industries, but merely to show that on purely mercantile grounds nearly every business man of good position in Ireland is strenuously opposed to anything in the form of Home Rule, or a Dublin Parliament. Whatever measure

of local self-government may be considered necessary for Great Britain we shall gladly accept for Ireland, but we do not want more. I have also refrained from going into the National and Imperial aspect of the case, leaving that in far more able hands, in the persons of our Liberal Unionist champions, Lord Hartington, Mr. Goschen, and Mr. Chamberlain, who so recently visited our shores. I would now conclude, in the final words uttered by the Duke of Argyll, in his speech given at the banquet following the Liberal Unionist conference held in London on 8th December: "God save Ireland, to continue, as she has been for many years, an integral part of that United Kingdom, which gives to all her citizens perfect freedom and liberty of action."

A BELFAST MERCHANT.

(RICHARD PATTERSON.)

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SHORTLY AFTER THE PUBLICATION OF THE FOREGOING, THE FOLLOWING LETTER APPEARED IN THE "ECONOMIST":—

MERCANTILE IRELAND *VERSUS* HOME RULE.

*To the Editor of the "Economist."*

SIR,—An article in the current number of the *National Review* on the above subject, from the pen of "A Belfast Merchant," who describes himself as a Whig in politics, has attracted a good deal of attention on both sides of the Channel.

The purport of the article is to show how strongly, and practically unanimously, the better mercantile classes in Ireland are opposed to Home Rule, as propounded by Mr. Gladstone and his Nationalist allies in and out of Parliament.

The Liberal Unionists of all classes here, as in England, regard Lord Hartington, Mr. Goschen, and Mr. Chamberlain as their leaders; while those among them who are connected with banking, manufacturing, or mercantile interests, look specially to Mr. Goschen and Mr. Chamberlain, both of whom have lately visited the country.

They all regard the *Economist* as the journal which, more than any other, appeals to the sense of the best of the financial and mercantile classes in England, and they are much gratified

at the intelligent appreciation which it has evinced all along of the gravity of the position for the similar classes in Ireland. They feel strongly the importance of endeavouring to convince this influential class—the bankers and merchants of the City of London—of the fallacies of the Home Rule craze.

These considerations embolden me to request your insertion of this letter, for the article in the *National Review* contained no tabulated figures or statistics, as such are generally considered rather out of place in a magazine article. I therefore wish to put a few incontrovertible facts and figures before your readers, in order to show that there is nothing in the existing laws or system of government—which are the same all over Ireland—to interfere with mercantile, manufacturing, and financial prosperity, if only the people were industrious and thrifty. To illustrate my meaning I propose to compare Belfast of former periods with the Belfast of 1887, to show the progress of the town itself in size and population, and also in regard to its banking and shipping, which everyone must admit are three accurate and reliable tests.

In 1782, the last census I can find before the Union, the number of inhabitants in Belfast was 13,105; in 1816, the first I can find after the Union, the number mentioned had increased to 30,720. Its growth since has been as follows:—

Year.	Number of Habitations.	Valuation.	Population.
1841 .....	11,885 .....	— .....	75,308
1851 .....	15,009 .....	— .....	100,301
1861 .....	18,375 .....	£270,930 .....	120,777
1871 .....	27,691 .....	426,454 .....	174,412
1881 .....	— .....	568,139 .....	208,122
1887 .....	Population estimated at about ...		240,000

On 1st January, 1862, the total valuation of the town was ... .. £279,807

On the same date, 1888, the total valuation of the town is ... .. 638,977

Increase in valuation in 26 years ... £359,170

and during this period there were 32,127 new buildings erected in Belfast, a rate of progress unsurpassed by any other town in the three kingdoms.

Turning now to the banks, I may mention that there are three having their head-offices in Belfast, with branches all over the North of Ireland. These are the Northern, the Belfast, and the Ulster Banks, and the following figures show their position now as compared with fifty years ago:—

	Paid-up Capital, Reserve, and Surplus Funds.	Circulation.	Deposit and Credit Accounts.	No. of Branches and Agencies.
In 1837.....	£515,621	£619,118	£972,513	36
In 1887.....	2,182,504	1,562,911	8,182,086	238
Increase ...	£1,166,883	£943,793	£7,209,573	202

The progress shown here is remarkable.

You, sir, recently (24th December) referred to the ship-building trade of the kingdom, and mentioned (p. 1,628) that “the first individual firm in the business in point of production for the year 1887 was that of Harland & Wolff, of Belfast, who constructed during the year seven steamers and one sailing vessel, with a gross tonnage of 31,446 tons.” There are two other firms in the business here who launched during the year eight steamers and two sailing vessels of 10,509 tons; so that the total number of vessels launched at this port in 1887 was eighteen, with a tonnage of 41,955. So recently as thirty-five years ago this was an unknown industry here.

Finally, as to shipping. The following table shows the number and tonnage of vessels clearing from the port of Belfast at decennial periods, commencing fifty years ago, in 1837:—

Year.	Number of Vessels.	Tonnage.
1837 .....	2,724	288,143
1847 .....	4,213	538,525
1857 .....	5,652	796,968
1867 .....	7,817	1,372,326
1877 .....	7,677	1,566,752
1887 .....	7,778	1,657,880

The increase is really considerably more than these figures indicate, as two changes in the system of measurement of vessels, and giving increased allowances for deductions, have been made within the period under notice, namely, in 1855 and 1880.

I submit that the above facts prove that the existing form of government in Ireland is not incompatible with material prosperity.

Some of the converts to Home Rule say that it does not mean separation, but closer union. Do these people forget that one of the leaders of the movement declared that “the agitation would never cease till the last link in the chain that bound Ireland to England was severed”? With proof before them that the existing laws are not prejudicial to prosperity, and with the unwithdrawn avowal of the ultimate aim and object of the Home Rulers before them, I appeal to thinking business men in England and Scotland to pause before proceeding to forcibly dissolve the partnership from which both countries have derived so much benefit.

Your last issue says, “Local government is in the air.” Let the same measure of it be meted out to all three countries alike, and then no one, except the paid professional agitators, whom nothing will satisfy, will have anything to complain of.

I may add that I am a Liberal in politics, and was a supporter of Mr. Gladstone till he deserted his own former professions and political friends and sold himself to the enemy—that party which he himself once described as “marching through blood and rapine to the dismemberment of the empire.”

I am, Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

A RETIRED MERCHANT.

BELFAST, 11th *January*, 1888.

NOTE.—Since the above was written, the Customs returns for the year 1887 have been made public. From these it appears that Belfast is now, as regards its Customs revenue, the third port in the kingdom, ranking after London and Liverpool only. Exclusive of the two latter, the figures for some of the other principal ports are as follow:—

Belfast	...	...	...	...	...	...	£1,675,323
Bristol	...	...	...	...	...	...	1,062,728
Glasgow	...	...	...	...	...	...	1,012,051
Dublin	...	...	...	...	...	...	886,497
Leith	...	...	...	...	...	...	597,796