

Select documents

XXVI 'THE MAN ON A TRICYCLE'; W. H. DUIGNAN
AND IRELAND, 1881-5

The Man on a Tricycle (a person of the name of Dignum [*sic*]) has been careering a little too fast',¹ wrote Captain O'Shea on 19 January 1885. O'Shea does not appear previously to have heard of the tricyclist in question,² whose name he did not even spell correctly. Indeed, the careering tricyclist, William Henry Duignan — to give him his full and correct name — was hardly the sort of person whose acquaintance O'Shea would have considered worth while cultivating.

A few months before O'Shea wrote the words just quoted, Duignan had returned from the second of two tricycle tours in Ireland — the adventures that occasioned O'Shea's quip. On 24 October 1884 he had written Joseph Chamberlain a long letter describing his experiences and impressions,³ Chamberlain's somewhat

¹ Copy, sent to Chamberlain, of O'Shea's letter to Parnell, 19 Jan. 1885 (Joseph Chamberlain papers, for which see n. 3, below; printed above, viii. 246).

² This seems evident from the copy of O'Shea's letter to Parnell, 19 Jan. 1885. I have not found any previous reference to 'Dignum' or 'Duignan' in O'Shea's letters among the Chamberlain papers.

³ Duignan to Chamberlain, 24 Oct. 1884 (printed below). For the date of this letter see below. This and the other letters cited in this article or printed below are among the papers of Joseph Chamberlain, now in the Library of the University of Birmingham. I am indebted to the Librarian of the University for permission to publish them here. The documents that relate to Duignan comprise: (i) Thirteen MS letters from Duignan to Chamberlain, 1874-94. (ii) MS copies of Chamberlain's more important letters to Duignan, 1884-93. (iii) Typewritten copies of twenty-three letters from Chamberlain to Duignan, 1873-94, made from MS originals lent by the late Carl Duignan (son of W. H. Duignan) to Chamberlain's executors. (iv) Twelve MS letters from Chamberlain to Duignan, 1881-94, bought in 1939 from a book-seller. (v) Letters to Duignan from various correspondents bought in the same book-seller's lot. (vi) Letters to Duignan from various correspondents, written in connexion with the 'central board' scheme and forwarded by him to Chamberlain in Feb. 1885. (vii) Chamberlain's correspondence with Morley and O'Shea.

belated reply to which, dated 17 December,⁴ was of some importance, containing, as it did, his first formulation of what came to be known as the Irish ‘central board’ or ‘national council’ scheme.⁵ Duignan’s connexion with this scheme has puzzled more than one writer. Thus Katharine O’Shea — or whoever the literary ghost was who wrote the book published under her name — referred to Chamberlain’s letter of 17 December 1884 as having been ‘addressed to “Mr W. H. Duignan”’, printing the name between inverted commas and giving no explanation of the identity of the person concerned.⁶ Not unnaturally the late Henry Harrison concluded that ‘W. H. Duignan’ was an ‘alias for W. H. O’Shea’.⁷ His mistake was rendered all the more understandable by the coincidence that Duignan and O’Shea had the same initials — indeed the same Christian names.

There is no doubt that Duignan was a real person. Moreover, he deserves to be remembered, not merely on account of his part in the ‘central board’ episode, but also because he was one of the very few men in England in the early eighteen-eighties who took the trouble to travel in Ireland and study conditions there at first hand. The letters that he wrote to Chamberlain recounting what he saw and heard on these journeys have been preserved among the latter’s papers and are still of interest.⁸

William Henry Duignan was born at Walsall in 1824⁹ and was baptized in the parish church of that town on 20 August of the same year.¹⁰ His surname indicates that he was of Irish descent but he appears to have pronounced it ‘Dignan’¹¹ — perhaps O’Shea’s spelling mistake was the result of this deviation from the usual custom. His

⁴ Printed in *The Times*, 6 July 1893, and above, viii. 240-2.

⁵ See ‘Joseph Chamberlain, Parnell and the Irish “central board” scheme, 1884-5’ (above, viii. 324-61).

⁶ Katharine O’Shea (Mrs Charles Stewart Parnell), *Charles Stewart Parnell: his love story and political life*, ii. 202, 278.

⁷ Henry Harrison, *Parnell vindicated*, p. 443. See also pp. 293 n. and 356. Captain Harrison once told me in conversation that this was the only point in *Parnell vindicated* concerning which he was prepared to admit that he had been mistaken.

⁸ See n. 3 above.

⁹ Obituary notice in the *Birmingham Daily Post* (hereafter cited as ‘*B.D.P.*’), 28 Mar. 1914.

¹⁰ Register of baptisms, Walsall parish church.

¹¹ I am indebted for this information to Mr E. H. Dance, of Wolverhampton, who was formerly acquainted with the late Carl Duignan, son of William Henry Duignan.

father, Henry Duignan, had been a book-keeper¹² and later clerk to the local board of guardians.¹³ He himself was a solicitor by profession. He was admitted to the rolls in 1846¹⁴ and was in practice in his native town for more than sixty years.¹⁵ He served as mayor of Walsall in 1869,¹⁶ acquired interests in various industrial enterprises in the neighbourhood¹⁷ and for a number of years made his home at Rushall Hall, a country house to the north of the town.¹⁸ He was a member of the Church of England,¹⁹ the father of a family,²⁰ an antiquary of recognized standing²¹ and he had a Gladstonian zest for tree-felling.²²

In the eighteen-seventies Duignan's political sympathies had lain with the 'advanced liberals'.²³ Living, as he did, only a few miles from Birmingham, therefore, he, not surprisingly, came into contact with Chamberlain. Their acquaintance began in 1873, when Duignan, having read a report that Chamberlain might be a candidate for the eastern division of Staffordshire at the next general election, wrote to offer his support.²⁴ A correspondence ensued and lasted for three years.²⁵ Most of it is concerned with purely English matters but one

¹² Register of baptisms, Walsall parish church, 20 Aug. 1824.

¹³ *B. D. P.*, 28 Mar. 1914.

¹⁴ *Law list*, 1847.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1847–1911.

¹⁶ *B. D. P.*, 28 Mar. 1914.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See Duignan's letters to Chamberlain, printed below; also n. 21, below.

¹⁹ He was baptized and buried according to the rites of the church of England (Register of baptisms, Walsall parish church, 20 Aug. 1824, *B. D. P.*, 1 Apr. 1914). In his letters to Chamberlain of 14 and 25 Nov. 1881 (printed below) he quotes the book of common prayer.

²⁰ *B. D. P.*, 1 Apr. 1914.

²¹ He edited *The charter of Wulfram* (1888) and was the author of works on the place-names of Staffordshire (1902), Worcestershire (1905) and Warwickshire (1912) and of a brief *History of Rushall Hall* (1924). He was a fellow of the Societies of Antiquaries of both London and Dublin. (Information kindly supplied by the secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of London.)

²² Duignan to Chamberlain, 8 Nov. 1881 (printed below).

²³ Duignan to Chamberlain, 6 Feb. 1874.

²⁴ This letter has not been preserved, but its import is clear from Chamberlain's reply, 28 June 1873 (copy), quoted in J. L. Garvin, *Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, i. 155.

²⁵ Nine copies of letters from Chamberlain to Duignan written in the period 1873–6 have survived. (See n. 3, above.) Unfortunately, only one letter written in this period by Duignan to Chamberlain has been preserved, that of 6 Feb. 1874.

letter from Duignan makes it clear that he was already a supporter of Irish ‘home rule’.²⁶

In 1876 the correspondence lapsed. In the same year Chamberlain entered the house of commons and in 1880 he became a member of Gladstone’s second cabinet. On 6 November 1881 Duignan again wrote. He expressed his concern at the government’s coercion policy in Ireland, announced his intention of studying the situation on the spot and asked for an introduction to the authorities at Dublin Castle.²⁷ Chamberlain at once sent him a letter of introduction to Forster²⁸ and, armed with this useful document, Duignan proceeded to Dublin. He visited Parnell and the other ‘suspects’ in Kilmainham gaol on 12 November, wrote Chamberlain a moving plea for the better treatment of Dillon,²⁹ and then set out for the west. From Limerick he sent an account of his journey and of his observation of the working of the new land act.³⁰

On Duignan’s return to England Chamberlain invited him to dine and stay the night at ‘Highbury’, his Birmingham home.³¹ On 17 December Duignan arrived and the following day Chamberlain recorded his impressions of his visitor in a letter to John Morley:

I had a long talk with Duignan yesterday and again this morning. It was interesting and he seems to me quite honest and intelligent, but without any particular intuition. He expressed himself as very much pleased with his visit and said that I had considerably ‘modified’ his views. He does not like coercion — (who does except those d . . . d Tories?) but he has no real contribution to make in aid of any other solution.³²

In 1883 and 1884 Duignan made his two tricycle tours, reaching in the course of both of them remote places to which few tourists at that period can have penetrated³³ — no mean feat for a man of his age and one that must have called for courage. He was in Ireland

²⁶ Duignan to Chamberlain, 6 Feb. 1874.

²⁷ Duignan to Chamberlain, 6 Nov. 1881 (printed below).

²⁸ Chamberlain to Duignan, 7 Nov. 1881; Duignan to Chamberlain, 4 July 1893 (printed in *The Times*, 6 July 1893).

²⁹ Duignan to Chamberlain, 14 Nov. 1881 (printed below).

³⁰ Duignan to Chamberlain, 25 Nov. 1881 (printed below).

³¹ Chamberlain to Duignan, 3 and 6 Dec. 1881.

³² Chamberlain to Morley, 18 Dec. 1881 (copy).

³³ Duignan to Chamberlain, 24 Oct. 1884 (printed below).

again on the eve of the 1885 general election and wrote to Chamberlain, forecasting, incorrectly as it proved, that Parnell would throw the Irish vote in Great Britain on the liberal side.³⁴ In the following year he supported Gladstone on the issue of home rule³⁵ and he continued to pay frequent visits to Ireland,³⁶ but he no longer reported his impressions to Chamberlain. On 3 July 1893, however, an argument arose in the house of commons concerning the 'central board' episode.³⁷ Duignan wrote to confirm the version of the story given by Chamberlain, who published his letter in *The Times*.³⁸ By now Duignan was not the enthusiastic liberal that he once had been. He was critical of the provisions of the second home rule bill³⁹ and in 1894, after publishing an expression of general disapproval of party policy,⁴⁰ he resigned from his local liberal association.⁴¹ He died at the home of his later years, Gorway House, Rushall, on 27 March 1914, in his ninetieth year.⁴²

It is not, of course, intended to suggest that Duignan ever exercised any appreciable influence on the politics of his age. He was never on really intimate terms with Chamberlain⁴³ and he does not appear to have known any other leading English politician.⁴⁴ Although he was acquainted with several leading Irish nationalists, their surviving letters to him do not convey the impression that they attached great

³⁴ Duignan to Chamberlain, 19 Nov. 1885 (printed below).

³⁵ Duignan to Chamberlain, 4 July 1893 (printed in *The Times*, 6 July 1893); see also below.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ 4 *Hansard* [14], 721-4 (1893).

³⁸ Duignan to Chamberlain, 4 July 1893 (printed in *The Times*, 6 July 1893).

³⁹ Duignan to Walsall liberal association, printed in *B. D. P.*, 7 Dec. 1893.

⁴⁰ Duignan to Walsall liberal association, printed in *B. D. P.*, 6 Nov 1894.

⁴¹ J. T. Renshaw (secretary, Walsall liberal association) to Duignan, 6 Nov 1894.

⁴² *B. D. P.*, 28 Mar. 1914.

⁴³ Chamberlain's letters to Duignan were mostly somewhat distant in tone. The relationship between the two men was discussed in Duignan's letter to Chamberlain of 4 July and that of Chamberlain to Duignan of 5 July, printed in *The Times*, 6 July 1893.

⁴⁴ At least, so far as I can ascertain. There are no letters from any leading English politician, other than Chamberlain, among Duignan's papers, listed in n. 3, above.

importance to his views.⁴⁵ His reaction to Chamberlain's 'central board' overture revealed no profound understanding of Irish aspirations.⁴⁶ His forecast of Parnell's course of action at the 1885 general election was wide of the mark.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, he was a brave and energetic man who sincerely desired to learn the truth and to remedy injustice.

Of the thirteen letters from Duignan to Chamberlain that survive, six, all written in the period 1881-5 and all concerned with Irish matters, are printed below. They are holographs with the exception of that of 24 October 1884, which has, however, additions in Duignan's own handwriting, and that of 19 November 1885. All are printed as in the originals except that the use of capitals has been standardised and abbreviations expanded according to the practice of this journal.

CHRISTOPHER HOWARD

⁴⁵ J. E. Kenny to Duignan, 22 Oct. 1884; T. D. Sullivan to Duignan, 26 Dec. 1884 and 1 Feb. 1891; T. M. Healy to Duignan, 11 Jan. 1885 (copy; printed above, viii. 243-5) and 12 and 14 July 1893. The first letter from Sullivan and all three from Healy relate to the 'central board' scheme.

⁴⁶ See above, viii. 333, 338.

⁴⁷ See Duignan to Chamberlain, 19 Nov. 1885 (printed below).

1. *W. H. Duignan to Joseph Chamberlain, 6 Nov. 1881*

Rushall Hall¹
near Walsall
6 November 1881

My dear Sir,

My mind is much troubled concerning Ireland and I cannot bring it to believe that the policy of the government is the true or right policy. It gives me no concern to differ from 'Her Majesty's Government' but to disagree with you and Mr Bright is, to me, a serious business to be attended to and disposed of, so I have resolved to go to Ireland and study the subject on the spot and I want you to be good enough, if you see no objection, to give me an introductory card to Mr Forster or Mr Herbert Gladstone.² I am armed for the 'patriotic' but desire to see also from the 'official' side.

¹ See n. 21, above.

² Herbert Gladstone was a junior lord of the treasury, attached to the Irish office. He was in Ireland in the autumn of 1881. (Viscount Gladstone, *After thirty years*, 1928, pp. 267-72.)

Whilst I am trespassing upon you I venture to increase the offence by asking you to be kind to A. M. Sullivan³ if you have the opportunity. I am

Yours faithfully
W. H. Duignan

The Rt. Honble. J. Chamberlain

2. *W. H. Duignan to Joseph Chamberlain, 8 Nov. 1881*

Walsall
8 November 1881

My dear Sir,

I am very much obliged for your prompt and kind attention. I will really try to see things as you do, but coercion is not the only thing that troubles me. Home rule or local government is denied to Ireland, all discussion about it refused, *even you* treat the question as 'separation'. What the imperious Bismarck accords to the 22⁴ (I think) German states, averaging less than 2½ millions, the English liberals refuse in violent language to 5 millions of admittedly oppressed people separated from them by sea by race and by religion. If home rule is right and good for Germany, for Switzerland, for Sweden and Norway, for Austria and Hungary, for the United States, for Australia, Tasmania and Canada why is it not right and good for Ireland [?]⁵ But excuse all this, and haste, and my shaky hand (I have been timber falling [*sic*] since daylight). Perhaps I may be, yes surely I shall be, wiser when I come back and as you kindly help me to be wiser I will *not* be so ungrateful as to bother you with my new knowledge.

With many thanks I remain
Yours faithfully
W. H. Duignan

The Rt. Honble. J. Chamberlain, M.P.

3. *W. H. Duignan to Joseph Chamberlain, 14 Nov. 1881*

Morrisson's Hotel
Dublin
14 November 1881

My dear Sir

You will think perhaps that I am hasty in availing myself of your kind permission to communicate impressions to you but I have already formed one strong opinion which humanity calls upon me to express.

³ When A. M. Sullivan died in 1884 Duignan helped J. E. Kenny to raise a fund for his widow and children. (Kenny to Duignan, 22 Oct. 1884; Duignan to Chamberlain, 27 and 29 Oct. 1884.)

⁴ Twenty-five, including Prussia but not including Alsace-Lorraine.

⁵ Question mark omitted.

I went to Kilmainham on Saturday⁸ and saw Parnell, Kenny and Dillon.⁷ I never spoke to Dillon before but his appearance deeply affected me. He is *in* consumption and to keep him in Kilmainham for a winter means the sacrifice of his life. I am no judge of Irish prisons but if Kilmainham is a fair specimen of them, I shall henceforth pray very heartily for 'all prisoners and captives'⁸ — especially Irish. But what I want to say to you just now is that Dillon is on the way to death and that keeping him confined, especially where he is, is simply hastening his end. It needs no doctor to see this for it is written in his eyes and on his face. Until I saw him I knew nothing of his family but struck by his consumptive air I have made enquiries and learn that his family share his delicacy. His brother William was obliged to give up a good business here for the climate of Colorado, his sister died of consumption last year, another sister shared the same fate some time ago, several relatives also and, my informant thinks, his mother.

I have not seen Mr Forster yet but am told he is expected at the Castle to-day.

I am, my dear Sir
Yours faithfully
W H. Duignan

The Rt. Honble. J. Chamberlain, M.P.

4. *W. H. Duignan to Joseph Chamberlain, 25 Nov. 1881*

Limerick
25 November 1881

My dear Sir

I see under the head of 'private correspondence' in yesterday's *Birmingham Daily Post* that it is said a cabinet council will be held on Monday to consider Irish affairs — and I am aware there is a great cry in certain quarters for more coercion. I therefore think I may venture to communicate to you some impressions which I have formed during my visit to this country. I have made the best use of my time and turned aside for nothing and being armed with good introductions have found everywhere a smooth path. My route has been from Dublin as far as Ballina and thence by Galway taking various intermediate places and I have associated with 'all sorts and conditions of men'⁹ I have certainly been surprised to learn the extent to which hostility to the government prevails in the districts I travelled and the freedom with which it is expressed. Setting aside landowners, county and resident magistrates, military people, the constabulary, official persons and the connexions and dependants of those classes I have met with no government supporters. There are plenty who condemn the policy of Mr

¹² Nov. 1881.

⁷ For the condition of Dillon and the other 'suspects' in Kilmainham see *Freeman's Journal*, 29 Nov. 1881

⁸ *Book of Common Prayer*: the litany.

⁹ *Ibid*: collect or prayer for all conditions of men.

Parnell and his associates, whilst they equally condemn their imprisonment. Hatred and distrust of the Irish Executive everywhere prevail and nowhere have I heard those feelings more strongly expressed than in wealthy and intellectual circles. Strange to say I have heard nothing but good of Mr Forster. All credit him with the noblest and purest intentions and regret what they term his inability to cast off the nightmare of Dublin Castle and to cut through the official cancer that eats into the country and poisons its life. If, they say, he would only break through his tory, or, even worse his whig surroundings and trust the people there is nothing they would not do for him.

The county magistrates here have great power and influence and of course are mostly landowners and I am assured the great majority are tories of a breed almost extinct in England. The constabulary are not 'peace officers' but semi-military persons with an offensive air and bearing and one could only wonder if they were popular. Besides I am sure their discipline must be lax for I see them drinking everywhere. Yesterday I travelled with 7 at 6 in the morning and they began the day with pipes and a bottle of whiskey.¹⁰

Municipal life here is very limited there being only I think 10 corporate towns in the country.

These are perhaps minor matters or may seem so but people do not like being governed by their political opponents and, if they are, they naturally become disaffected.

As to the land courts, the people were at first very suspicious, but the decisions at Ballina¹¹ gave confidence in that commission, which I thought a very competent one — I went over the farms sometimes after them, sometimes with them and was impressed with their courtesy patience fairness and ability. The tenants were not always satisfied but never appeared to doubt the integrity of the commissioners. If all the commissions are as good, the land act will be a blessing to the country. The Limerick commission has not been so satisfactory to the tenants, and I hear much grumbling.¹² I have no doubt from what I have seen that rents here have, from various causes, sometimes the cupidity of landlords sometimes the competition of tenants, gone too high and must come down. If the sub-commissions fix a fair rent (and I do not doubt they will) the Land League is powerless to prevent tenants going in. The poorest peasant in Mayo is sharp enough after his own interest and he has always the priest to advise him. Those useful gentlemen are diligent attendants at the land court and have minds of their own apart from Mr Parnell. My visit to Mayo has I assure you greatly increased my respect for the P.P.

I thought to trouble you only about coercion and find myself wandering into divers subjects and I dare say you are long ago weary of me if you have read so far. Well I don't believe that coercion has

¹⁰ Cf. Duignan to Chamberlain, 24 Oct. 1884 (printed below).

¹¹ For a report of the decisions of the western sub-commission, sitting at Ballina, see *Freeman's Journal*, 22 and 23 Nov. 1881.

¹² For a report of the southern sub-commission, sitting at Limerick, see *Freeman's Journal*, 21–24 Nov. 1881.

done any good and I do believe that Parnell in Kilmainham is a more powerful man than Parnell free. The people are nowhere frightened, they are only exasperated. Coercion certainly makes them more cautious in their conduct but none the less dangerous and it seems to me to band various opinions more firmly together against — the government. The government can coerce a nation and (it is well to realize the fact) the great majority of the Irish people are opposed to the government and will be so long as coercion prevails. I am certain too that the government have to face home rule. There is an universal demand for it, to a greater or less extent, and there will be no peace here without it. I thought there was a party for separation but I have not met with an individual who has not denounced it as strongly as you did at Liverpool.¹³

Finally (at the risk of being thought impertinent or mad) I would if I were master of the situation release all political suspects and trust the people. They are a magnificent race if treated kindly but I think a very dangerous and unprofitable one to rule with iron. You may double the police and the troops and crowd the jails and proclaim martial law and shoot a few. Order may reign in Warsaw but the people will be unsubdued and in the meantime what becomes of the liberal party? It will vanish. It will have been doing, as it is now doing to some extent, tory work here, and it will reap its just reward.

I think I shall work my way up to Dublin and study Ulster. Perhaps my views may get modified there, and I sincerely hope they may, for it is painful to me to differ as at present I do with the policy of my party, and with its old and rising leader [*sic*].

I am my dear Sir,
Truly yours
W. H. Duignan

The Rt. Honble. J. Chamberlain M.P.

5. *W. H. Duignan to Joseph Chamberlain, 24 Oct. 1884*¹⁴

Walsall
October 1884

My dear Sir,

If you should regard this letter as an intrusion your brother Alfred [*sic*]¹⁵ has promised to procure me absolution.

It is a long time since we discussed Irish politics, and since then I have made them a specialty, gathering materials from every source, and making two more visits to the country. I thought the most instructive

¹³ 25 Oct. 1881.

¹⁴ This letter is dated simply 'October 1884'. But in another letter to Chamberlain, dated 27 Oct. 1884, Duignan refers to 'my letter of Friday' The Friday preceding 27 Oct. 1884 was Oct. 24.

¹⁵ Evidently a slip for 'Arthur', the name which appears in the first draft of this letter. Arthur Chamberlain was the third of the six Chamberlain brothers, of whom Joseph Chamberlain was the eldest. None of the brothers was called Alfred. I am indebted for this information to Lady Longford, grand-daughter of Arthur Chamberlain.

mode of progress was to travel by road so that I might meet the people freely and converse with them in their own homes; I therefore decided to take my tricycle, and last year I rode from Dublin through Wexford, Wicklow, Waterford, Dungarvan, Youghal, Cork, Bantry, Killarney, Tralee, Limerick, Tipperary, and so to Dublin, spending over three weeks on the way. This year I took a little more time, and landing at Greenore travelled through County Down to Belfast and on the coast road through the counties of Antrim, Londonderry, and Donegal to Ballyshannon and thence through Enniskillen, Cavan, Kells, and Navan to Dublin. On both these journeys I took with me numerous introductions through which I found friends in almost every town. I devoted myself entirely to political observation, and that I might freely pursue my own course travelled alone. I will not of course occupy your time with details but only with the conclusions I have come to.

As a rule the people are fairly well off, and I saw no evidence of destitution, except what one always expects to find in large towns, where the poorest class congregate. In the country, including the moors and mountains of Donegal, though the standard of comfort is very low, there is no want to be seen; the people are clad and housed to their own minds, and their food, though very simple, is wholesome and I think abundant; the children are well fed and healthy; schools are plentiful and to be found even on desolate moors, and I was impressed with the general intelligence and capacity of the teachers. As to the condition of the people it must be noted that I travelled in September when potatoes milk and butter are abundant. Many families I thought well fed and supplied, might suffer during the winter, and the labourers' means seem so limited that I think some of them must be occasionally pinched. Charity however is an Irish virtue, and the workhouses are large and very handsome; I frequently mistook them for Convents on account of their architectural merit.

My mode of travel drove me a good deal into the cottages of the peasants both for food and shelter, and I passed many instructive hours in them, and as I took an interest in geological and archaeological pursuits I was frequently accompanied in long walks by the good natured people, and I may here say that a more courteous people I never travelled amongst.

There is a general air of improvement all over the country; new houses; new roofs or new out-houses are common, but there is little draining going on. As a rule the farmers are content and hopeful, and one hears landlords frequently well spoken of, especially among the tenants of the earl of Meath, Lord Brabazon, the marquis of Conyngham and the earl of Leitrim. It is, however, obvious that the small farmers on the moors and hill sides are liable to great reverses, and that occasionally from the nature of the soil and climate, the very subsistence of the farmers must be dependent upon seasons, and that every now and then not only severe suffering, but absolute ruin must ensue. Nothing but an improvement of the soil and climate, by draining, planting and good farming, and prudence, can guard against this contingency, even if rents were abolished.

There is a great variety of race both in the south and north; the Scotch element greatly prevails in Down, Antrim, and Londonderry; but Donegal is almost purely Irish. I expected to find there an aboriginal inferior race, but a finer one physically and intellectually I never saw; there is nothing it is not capable of being made into.

The country houses are occupied mostly by caretakers, and it is only in the neighbourhood of the towns that you find any resident gentry. Those I met with, including their agents, seemed to feel themselves vanquished in the struggle, and to have the most intense hatred against Mr Gladstone, whom I heard called in public coffee-rooms 'an impostor', 'a robber', and 'such a liar'. An Irish Orangeman cannot argue, he is full of passion and prejudice, and having been so long under Protestant ascendancy, he cannot realize the principle of political equality. To make discussion agreeable, or even possible, I found it necessary always to yield or change the subject.

As to the aspirations of the people I can only express an approximate opinion, but I believe that in the South of Ireland if you took a vote of the people, 9 men out of 10 would be nationalist, and in the north, I think I might venture to say that 3 out of 4 would be nationalist. The liberal party, if you exclude Belfast, is extinct; an individual here and there pins his faith in Mr Gladstone and calls himself a liberal, but I could see no trace of liberal organization. The people are either nationalist or orange, and there is this remarkable difference; here (in England) the educated young men have a tendency to be tory; in Ireland the educated young men are mostly nationalists, and, from some reason or other, higher education is more prevalent among the Irish, than among the English middle class; no observer can doubt that the intellect and brain of the country are penetrated by national sentiments. Confidence in Parnell is unbounded, and the nationalists appear to surrender their judgement to his as blindly as the liberal party in England surrender theirs to Mr Gladstone.

By the by, there are some excellent observations on great men in a pamphlet which I venture to send you entitled a 'Disciple of Plato',¹⁶ in which I have marked some paragraphs worth your reading. Mr Gladstone I suppose is a great man, and hence perhaps the mistakes he has made in Ireland and in Egypt. Mr Parnell is hardly a great man, but he is a wary and politic one, and I fancy will take few false steps; besides, he is patient, and knows how to suffer.

I met with very few people who denounced Lord Spencer, Mr Trevelyan,¹⁷ or even Mr Forster in the style of some of the Irish papers; on the contrary there seemed to be a general feeling that all three were full of good intentions, but that they were misled and smothered by the official influence in Dublin Castle. For my part, I know that there are good men and patriots in Dublin Castle, but it is difficult to over-estimate the distrust and dislike the great majority of the Irish people hold of the permanent officials there.

¹⁶ Not preserved.

¹⁷ Chief secretary, 1882-4.

There is a great desire for representative county government; the present system of government by grand jury is universally condemned, and this is almost as great a question among the farmers as home rule.

The majority of the Roman Catholic priests are active nationalists and the sympathies of those who are not active are believed to be national, and what is rather surprising they subordinate their religion to national sentiment. I was frequently told by them that they would infinitely prefer a protestant nationalist to a Roman Catholic liberal like Mr Charles Russell.¹⁸ By the way I met him three or four times in Donegal, and I rather think he was prospecting the County, but the general opinion was that he stood no chance; not being advanced enough for the catholics, and being a catholic he could not hope to obtain the presbyterian vote.

There is a remarkable absence of the American element in Ireland; when I was there in 1881 American Irish were plentiful, and I met them in hotels, on steamers, and in little hamlets on the moors. Last year and this year they had apparently vanished, but I saw in Dublin this year a number of sturdy fellows from Scotland and all parts of England who had come to the Convention there, and who seemed to me to have plenty of intelligence and go and determination in them.

The general aspect of the country is perfectly tranquil; nobody seems to live in fear, and I travelled alone after dusk and frequently by moonlight without any idea of molestation; on the contrary the civility, courtesy, and hospitality one meets with everywhere is surprising. I was expressing my sense of it once to a man at Dungarvan last year and he said: 'Ah! sir, we hate the government so much we have nothing but love left for Englishmen and all strangers'.

Every traveller in Ireland must think the country enormously over-policed, barracks everywhere with 6, 8, or 10 policemen, where every man in the place would agree that only one was wanted. They are a fine body of men. It is singular that in a country where everybody salutes they never do, and a traveller might form an impression from their bearing that they were a haughty and somewhat insolent body — perhaps they have orders not to salute, for when I talked to them I found unvarying civility and even kindness and hospitality. Their discipline must be very good for I could never prevail upon one to accept a gratuity, though I frequently availed myself of their services. They are very chary about talking politics; nevertheless it is certain there are nationalists among them. I heard an inspector in a northern county say in the presence of several people that the landlords were the only dangerous class in his district. Either I judged them harshly in 1881 — or they may have much improved. Then I thought their bearing aggressive and hostile to the people — it is certainly not so now.¹⁹

¹⁸ Later Lord Russell of Killowen. At this time he was liberal M.P. for Dundalk, a small borough that was due for disfranchisement, and he had to find another seat. In 1885 he was returned for Hackney (south).

¹⁹ Cf. Duignan's letter of 25 Nov. 1881 (above). The last two sentences of this paragraph have been inserted in Duignan's own hand-writing.

The minds of men are much sobered since 1881, and I observed an improvement even upon last year. You do not hear the same passionate and sometimes violent sentiments, there is an evident belief amongst them that they are playing a winning game, and that violence would be injurious. This is certainly the view taken by the leaders of the people, and outrage of any kind is universally condemned and deplored, though it is not judged as we should judge it — they give to the offender the same credit as they give to the government — good intentions.

As to business matters, people seem more contented and better off than with us; the farmers paying less rents and being better off have more money to lay out with the traders, and as to the gentlemen the tradesmen say they never were of much use to them, and the loss of their custom is trifling as compared with the increased custom of the farmers.

There appears to be no tendency to confidence in any English statesman or party, but distrust is commonly expressed, and the universal policy appears to be to fight for their own hands without regard for anybody else's. This is not only the policy of the leaders but is freely expressed by all classes of their supporters. You appear to be the best thought of of any member of the cabinet, both by the people and their leaders; and I heard your courtesy to Irish members extolled by several of them.

The spread of temperance among all classes of the people is obvious especially in the country, and the small towns where the influence of the clergy and of temperance advocates is most felt. I was told that great numbers of the clergy of all denominations are now total abstainers. The grocers' shops throughout the country I found always well supplied with non-intoxicating drinks for which I was informed there was an increasing demand.

These are the only matters which occur to me as likely to interest you.

I am, My dear Sir,
Yours faithfully,
W. H. Duignan

[P.S.] I do not think the people stand in any fear of the coercion acts for they are exceedingly outspoken. I visited many ex-suspects. All I came in contact with were respectable traders or farmers in good esteem among their neighbours.

Pray do not trouble yourself to reply to this or even acknowledge it. I know you must have much to do.²⁰

To The Right Honourable
Joseph Chamberlain M.P.

²⁰ The post-script is in Duignan's own hand-writing.

6. *W. H. Duignan to Joseph Chamberlain, 19 Nov. 1885*

Walsall

19 November 1885

My dear Sir,

I have just returned from Ireland. I find that Parnell's demands for a parliament with power to levy customs duties is disapproved of by the majority of his associates, and is universally considered as no part of the nationalist creed.

Mr Parnell will carry all his four members for Dublin, in three divisions by very large majorities; in fact he will carry everything in the country, except a few places in the north.

I shall congratulate any government that gives home rule to Ireland; they will wash their hands of a great deal of trouble and responsibility. It is fortunate that coercion is dead, or there would be a storm, for without the co-operation of the nationalists and the priests it would be impossible to maintain order.

In consequence of a deficient harvest in certain poor districts, and of low prices everywhere, the farmers are distressed and discontented, and are partly unable, and partly unwilling to pay existing rents without a reduction, which the already impoverished landlords can ill afford to make. Many of the landlords are broken or despairing [*sic*], and are closing or reducing their establishments. I met a good number of them, worthy men enough in their way but poor creatures.

Parnell's present intention is to direct the Irish in England to vote for the liberals. I thought before I went he was going on the other side, and that he was wrong from an Irish point of view. He will not give orders before Monday. I hope nothing will occur in the meantime to alter his views. Please do not mention this to *anybody* or I might get into trouble.

The Irish are very angry with you for the comparison of numbers and force you made at Warrington.²¹ It touched their national pride, the extent of which Anglo-Saxons can hardly estimate.

Please do not trouble yourself to reply to this, you have plenty to think of just now — and believe me.

My dear Sir,
Yours faithfully,
W. H. Duignan

The Right Hon. J. Chamberlain M.P.

²¹ 8 Sept. 1885.