

The Uncrowned King of Ireland

Charles Stewart Parnell was born on June 27, 1846 in County Wicklow. Parnell was the son of a Protestant landowner. Prior to the separation of the six northern counties, many prominent nationalists were Protestant. (Wolfstone and Yeats are examples.) Parnell was received as a nationalist.

In 1875, Parnell was elected to Parliament from Meath and served there until 1880. In 1880 Parnell was elected to a seat from Cork City, a seat he held until 1891. Parnell's exceptional personal and political qualities as a speaker soon put him in a position of leadership. In 1879 he was appointed the president of the Land League. The goal of the Land League was to end the system of landlordism which had mistreated Irish tenant farmers.

Using parliamentary tactics, agitation, and boycotts,* Parnell and the Land League began to have political success. After some initial resistance from the British, the Land Act of 1881 was passed. This act gave tenants ownership of their land.

Parnell then turned his attention to Home Rule. He put together a bill to give an Irish parliament control over domestic issues, and the British parliament control over foreign affairs. Parnell initially had the support of the Liberal party and Gladstone. Home Rule appeared headed for success.

Two factors derailed Parnell's plan. The first and least damaging was the Kitty O'Shea affair. Parnell was named in Captain O'Shea's divorce from Kitty. Parnell had a long affair with Kitty O'Shea and had three children with her. When this became public in 1889, public opinion began to turn on Parnell and he was forced to resign as head of the Home Rule Party. He and Kitty were married in 1891.

The second factor was that Parnell underestimated the political influence of the Ulster Unionists. Although in the minority in Ireland, this group managed to defeat Home Rule in Parliament. More than 80% of the people in Ireland supported Home Rule, but the government allowed the small minority to dictate on Home Rule. This political situation continued until the Irish war for Independence. The effect of this continues to this day.

Charles Stewart Parnell died on October 6, 1891 without realizing his dream of Irish self-determination. He had for a time been the hope of the Irish. His

successful battle against the landlords and his attempts at Home Rule had given him the support of a vast majority of the Irish people, and they had declared him the Uncrowned King of Ireland.

* The term boycott comes from its first victim, Captain Charles Boycott of Lough Mask House, County Mayo.