

# NOW and THEN

By DENIS GWYNN.

## THE ULSTER COVENANT

IN estimating prospects of a revival of Unionist defiance in Ulster, it is interesting to recall the position in September 1912 when the Ulster Covenant was signed solemnly in the City Hall of Belfast. A vast crowd proceeded from the Ulster Hall, where they attended a religious service, and Carson and his principal supporters were received by the Lord Mayor and the Corporation wearing their robes of office. On a table draped with a Union Jack, Carson was the first signatory to the Covenant. He was followed by Lord Londonderry; and the eight following signatures were all significant. Henry Montgomery, Moderator of the General Assembly, signed next, and then Bishop D'Arcy, Bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore. Next came Dean Griereson of Belfast, and after him the general secretary of the Presbyterian Church. Then came the Vice-President of the Methodist Conference; then the ex-chairman of the Congregational Union; then Lord Castlereagh; and then James Chambers, M.P. Tables were arranged in other parts of the building where signatures could be added and it was claimed that in Ulster alone, the signatories totalled some 218,000 men and 229,000 women. In other places, signatures were also collected, and the grand total approached half a million.

## RELIGIOUS SUPPORT GONE

NUMBERS matter comparatively little in such demonstrations. But it is important to note what influence they represent. It will not be surprising that at least some proportion of Ulster Protestants can still be roused to renew the pledges of the past. But today there is no equivalent of Carson, with his immense personal influence in the English Tory party; and the religious leaders of today have not only lost sympathy with what the Ulster Covenant represented, but are definitely on the side of peace. The newly-elected Bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore is well known as a devoted worker for ecumenism. The present Moderator of the General Assembly has been actively engaged in trying to calm the turmoil of recent months. The principal leaders of the non-conformist churches have joined in appeals for moderate conduct and policies. Mr. Paisley's voice has been almost alone among the representatives of religion, and his provocative speeches have produced a wide reaction against his views. And, although some of the leading members of the landowning class have opposed the efforts of Captain O'Neill and

Major Chichester-Clark to bring about effective reforms, they carry little weight in comparison with the principal landowners of 50 years ago.

## CHURCHILL'S HOT RECEPTION

THERE is even a direct precedent for British troops being sent to Belfast to counteract disturbances in Ulster. When Winston Churchill decided to address a meeting in support of Home Rule in the Ulster Hall in February 1912, the Unionists announced that they would prevent the meeting from being held. They were able to forbid him the use of the Ulster Hall, although it had become municipal property. Churchill, who was then Minister for the Navy, had to drive through hostile crowds to a field, where a large marquee had been erected for him and Redmond and Devlin and the other speakers. Reinforcements were brought into Belfast to protect the Naval Minister and, before long, Churchill himself mobilised warships to stand close to Belfast, to strengthen government control if the expected raids for arms took place on military barracks and depots. But at that time, even the discipline of the armed forces was doubtful and the Curragh mutiny followed. Field Marshal Lord Roberts was giving active support to the Ulster Volunteers.

## CO-OPERATION FOR PEACE

IN Ulster itself, during the Covenant campaign, almost every organised influence in authority supported the Covenant. The religious leaders of almost every denomination, other than Catholic, gave their public and unequivocal encouragement to the Unionist defiance. But today, since the first initiatives towards reform undertaken by Captain O'Neill, there has been open co-operation between the Presbyterians and the Methodists and the Church of Ireland leaders to restore peace and confidence and to hasten the reforms which are agreed to be overdue. No matter what apparent sympathy for Paisleyism may be aroused during the coming week, there can be no prospect of reviving such a combination of forces as supported Carson in his heyday. The urgency of electoral reform and of providing houses and employment impartially in the North is recognised on all sides. No church or party would today join in resisting whatever attempts may be made to mitigate the misery of the Catholic minority. The barricades have proved that, unless some real progress is made towards amending conditions, they're can be no return to security and prosperity.

## NEW OUTLOOK IN ENGLAND

WHILE Mr. Wilson at Westminster now occupies a position resembling that of Asquith as the promoter of Home Rule in 1912, he is not harrassed, as the Liberals then were, by open incitement to revolt by the Unionist Party in England. At that time, it was not only Unionist diehards like the Duke of Abercorn and Lord Londonderry in Ulster, but most of the dukes and titled magnates in Great Britain, who gave their support to Carson's and Bonar Law's campaign. Bonar Law, as leader of the Conservatives since Balfour's retirement, introduced a new recklessness of speech and action into Tory politics. His first flagrant speeches of defiance were delivered at the Duke of Marlborough's mansion in Oxfordshire. The young English Tories, like F. E. Smith, who were chiefly concerned to make their own careers, threw all their energies into arousing an exciting defiance of Parliament. But today, Bonar Law's successor as leader of the Tory opposition is Mr. Edward Heath, a high Anglican with strong Catholic sympathies. There may be bitter conflicts still ahead, but the forces are no longer arrayed overwhelmingly against the Ulster Catholics.

## LABOUR'S OPPORTUNITY

WHEREAS Churchill had to enter Belfast under heavy escort to address a public meeting in 1912, Mr. Callaghan and Mr. Healey, as cabinet ministers, have been invited with full authority to enforce order and security. They have brought in troops under the active command of one of the principal War Office generals. They have insisted that the promised reforms shall be on the statute book of Stormont before the end of the year; and the Labour Government will now possess the power to ensure that the reforms will be effectively carried out. That is obviously the first phase, on which the reconstruction of life in Ulster will depend. It is scarcely credible that British politicians will now desire to be indefinitely involved in the politics of Northern Ireland. Imperial ambitions, and even imperial institutions, have largely vanished after the experience of two world wars. In those days, Carson denounced the threat that British soldiers might be employed against his agitation. He declared that "the day that a British Government sets its soldiers to drive you and me out of the community of the United Kingdom, that day will be the end of the British Empire". But the British Empire has become little more than a memory today.