



Public Record Office  
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# **INTRODUCTION**

# **SPENDER PAPERS**

# **AND DIARIES**

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# Spender Papers and Diaries (D715, D1295, MIC559)

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## **Background**

Sir Wilfrid Spender was the Head of the Civil Service of Northern Ireland from 1926 to 1944, From 1913 onwards he was intimately connected with the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Government of Northern Ireland. Born on 6 October 1876, Spender belonged to a family distinguished in journalism and politics. His father, Edward Spender, was the founder of the 'Western Morning News' and wrote its daily London letter until 1878, when, with his two eldest sons, he was drowned in Whitesand Bay in Cornwall. Breaking with family tradition, Wilfred Spender chose to make the Army his career, and after being educated at Winchester College he went through the staff college at Camberley, joined the Devon Artillery in 1897 and was soon afterwards transferred to the Royal Artillery. Most of his service was with a mountain battery on the North West frontier of India. In 1911, however, he became the youngest officer on the General Staff, marked for accelerated promotion, and secretary to a sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence, concerned with home defence. While helping to draw up the plans for the defence of the United Kingdom his attention was drawn to the strategic importance of Ireland. R.B. Haldane, Secretary of State for War, had directed that on mobilization, the fourth and sixth regular divisions were to be earmarked for Ireland, leaving only four divisions for the expeditionary force to France. The defence of Great Britain itself was to be left to the Militia and the new Territorial Army.

Astonished and worried by this state of affairs, Spender began to take an active interest in the Home Rule question, financing Crichton Milne of the Conservative Central Office in getting up a petition to the King, and signing the Covenant in England in 1912. He decided to go forward as a candidate for Parliament and applied to the War Office to be allowed to retire from the Army. This request was refused and as the result of his actions, he was sent back to regimental duty in India, and told that he could never again hold a staff appointment. He returned to England in 1913 and was sent for by the new Secretary of State for War, Colonel Seely, who informed him coldly that he had committed a very grave military offence by signing the Covenant while still one of His Majesty's Servants. At the same meeting he was offered an appointment as a General Staff Officer to Sir Douglas Haig at Aldershot, provided he would cancel his signature on the Covenant. Spender would not agree to the proposal and he was relieved of his staff appointment.

On 25 April 1913, Spender was told that the Army Council had decided to allow him to resign but fearing that resignation might imply a slur on his name, he asked leave to be permitted to retire, giving up his pension if necessary. Finally, on 7 August 1913, the War Office gave way and allowed him to resign with pension. The truth was that Seely was alarmed lest many other officers might imitate him. Spender's case was followed with avid attention by the Press and was discussed throughout the country - the air was thick with rumours of the resignations of officers who intended to fight for Ulster if Home Rule passed. It has been suggested that Sir Edward Carson may have tampered with the loyalty of Army officers in the interests of Ulster, and certainly his correspondence with Spender in the archive is of considerable interest in this regard (see D1295), eg, on 11 December 1912, Carson wrote to Spender; 'I felt very grateful indeed to know that there were men like yourself

who were prepared to make sacrifices for the cause to which I am devoting so much time, and I am in hope that there may be many, if it comes to the worst, who will adopt a similar course. I think, however, that isolated action at the present moment would probably not have the same effect as the concentrated action of several would have later on.'

As soon as Spender left the Army, Carson invited him to Ulster and offered him a place on the Headquarters Staff of the Ulster Volunteer Force under the command of General Sir George Richardson. He had just married Lillian Dean and they came to Belfast from their honeymoon, unaware that it was to be their home for many years to come. Besides being a member of the policy-making Central Authority, Spender was appointed secretary to the three committees concerned with supplies, equipment and transport. The efficiency of the Volunteer Force in later months reflected his Staff experience and his complete dedication to the work, which often kept him in his office for sixteen or seventeen hours a day. In particular, he played a prominent role in the proceedings of the arms equipment committee and moves to improve the Ulster Volunteer Force arms situation. He impressed upon General Richardson and leading Ulster Unionist, James Craig that unless drastic steps were taken promptly Carson's pledge to his followers that they would be armed could not be honoured. As a result, he was asked to devise a scheme and Larne was chosen as the most suitable harbour for landing arms. On 27 April 1914, Larne was closed off by the Ulster Volunteer Force and a massive quantity of arms was successfully unloaded off the ship 'Mountjoy' and dispatched to various parts of the province. The only hitch was with some of the crew of a supporting ship, the 'Innismurray', who were Nationalists and would not co-operate with the others but they were soon replaced by a volunteer crew of more reliable politics.

In July 1914, Spender was called up for military service and, after a short time on the staff of the Eastern Coast Defences, he became a General Staff Officer with the Ulster Division, with which he served until August 1916 when he was transferred to General Headquarters and promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. At the end of the First World War he was selected by Lord Haig to become Officers' Friend at the Ministry of Pensions and he served on Lord Haig's Committee of Five which founded the British Legion. In 1921, when the Government of Northern Ireland was established, he was invited by Lord Craigavon to return to Ulster to assist in the administration of the Ulster Volunteer Force. He was appointed the first Secretary to the Northern Ireland Cabinet and was sent for two months to the Cabinet Secretariat in London to 'pick up from Colonel Hankey (Secretary to the Imperial Cabinet) there... the reins of office, as it were, as regards the connections of the Cabinet with the various ministers.' It was a difficult role and period for Spender as Craig's Cabinet struggled for survival against the threats of terrorism and communal violence, as well as coping with the administrative problems inherent in establishing a new state. However, he survived these turbulent times and in 1926 was appointed Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Finance and Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. He became Sir Wilfrid Spender in 1929, retired in 1944 and died in 1960.



## The Papers

That constituent of the archive under the reference D1295 comprises c.700 documents, c.1900-1960, and falls into three groups. Firstly, there are papers relating to Spender's retirement from the Army in 1913 when he was compelled to do so for his action in signing the Ulster Covenant. Secondly, there is material pertaining to his activities between 1914 and 1919, as an administrator in the Ulster Volunteer Force during the period of the organised gun-running at Larne, Co. Antrim, and relating to his resumed military career after August 1914, initially with the 36th (Ulster) Division in the 1st World War and later as Staff Officer at GHQ. Thirdly, there are papers relating to his career in Northern Ireland from 1921 to 1944, comprising almost entirely of letters and memoranda. Notable correspondents include Lord Craigavon, Lord Carson and General Gough with incidental letters from a very wide range of public figures.



## Papers relating to the Ulster Volunteer Force

Of particular interest are the papers in 1914 dealing with the organisation of the Ulster Volunteer Force and, after the outbreak of the War, with the incorporation of the Ulster Volunteer Force into the British Army. To the War Office the Ulster Volunteer Force had the enormous advantage of being partly trained, consequently Lord Kitchener asked Sir Edward Carson to provide a unit for the British Army from the Ulster Volunteer Force. Carson was eager to help but feared that Home Rule might be forced on Ulster whilst her men were away fighting. On 30 August 1914, he wrote to Spender: 'I am going to do my best to get our Force to join the new army so far as it's possible - the War Office will preserve the units as battalions of the Royal Irish Rifles and Inniskillings. The War Office will also let us have back any officers that are available. Hickman and Craig will be gazetted Recruiting Officers. I have to this without any conditions as to Home Rule and therefore how many we get is problematical. I should like you if it is possible to be with our men and shall suggest application for your services when I go over tomorrow night as you do not object. The news today is very bad and I think it was a mistake to keep the people in ignorance. What a nation we are. With the everlasting agitation against a proper force and with everything hampered by political or rather party considerations'.

On 2 July 1916, the 36th (Ulster) Division fought in the Battle of the Somme. It attacked between the villages of Hamel and Thiepval. The casualties over two days' fighting amounted to 5500. Spender wrote an account of this action to his wife and it was published anonymously in the press throughout the world: 'I am not an Ulsterman but yesterday as I followed their amazing attack I felt that I would rather be an Ulsterman than anything else in the World...the enemy's gun raked them from the left and machine guns in a village enfiladed them on the right, but battalion after battalion came out of the awful wood as steadily as I have seen them at Ballykinler, Clandeboye or Shane's Castle...the corps on our right and left had been unable to advance, so that the Ulstermen were the target of the concentrated hostile guns and machine guns behind and on both flanks though the enemy in front were vanquished and retreating...'



## **Papers, 1921-1944**

The papers for the period 1921-1944 (under D1295) are extremely miscellaneous and include newspaper cuttings and a folder of 'Confidential letters with the British Government', 1922-1924, which reflect Spender's role as Secretary to the Northern Ireland Cabinet. The topics covered are wide-ranging, including the following subjects: the Imperial Economic Conference; Civil Service estimates; the organisation of the Great Northern Railway; the composition of the Privy Council for Northern Ireland; the Ulster Special Constabulary; and the Boundary Commission. The most frequent correspondents are the Rt Hon. H.M. Pollock (Minister of Finance), Sir Ernest Clark (Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service) and the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Sir James Craig.



## **Sir Wilfrid's Diaries**

The other major constituent of the archive comprises Sir Wilfrid's diaries (24 volumes) for the period, 1934 to 1944 during which time he was Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (D715 and MIC559). In conjunction with the papers described above, they give a rounded picture of a remarkable man. They also provide an interesting insight into attitudes and views on the island of Ireland concerning the Second World War. An entry dated 11 December 1940 records a conversation Spender had with Sir John Loader Maffey, the United Kingdom representative in Eire (later Lord Rugby), about De Valera's opposition to assistance being given to German U-boats on the west coast of Ireland. Maffey was 'quite sure that the Eire Government...would not countenance the giving of petrol to enemy submarines if they were made aware of it'. Further, De Valera seemed ready 'to investigate any rumours' that Maffey brought to his notice. Spender was perhaps conscious of his experiences in the Great War and the supreme sacrifice of many Ulstermen, which he witnessed, when he turned his attention to the matter of possible conscription. He observed that if a large number of Northern Ireland inhabitants were to cross the border into Eire in order to escape conscription, 'there would be a very bitter sentiment on the part of the men who joined up...'

[Originals closed - please use MIC559].



## **Access to the papers of Sir Wilfrid Spender, D715, (MIC559) and D1295**

The papers of Sir Wilfrid Spender (D715, (MIC559) and D1295 are Permit Class. This means access will be granted on completion of an application form, stating purpose of research.

Forms are available in the Public Search Room, PRONI.

