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INTRODUCTION

ULSTER WOMEN'S UNIONIST COUNCIL PAPERS

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Ulster Women's Unionist Council Papers (D1098)

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Summary

c. 150 volumes, documents and photographs comprising the records of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council and its various branches and associations, 1892-1975.



Establishment

The establishment of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council on 23 January 1911 was a significant event in the history of women's political activism in Ireland. This organisation quickly developed into a strong, active and democratic body that bound the Unionist women of Ulster together in one common aim - resistance to Home Rule for Ireland. Within a year of its establishment the organisation was easily the largest female political group Ireland had ever seen, with an estimated membership of 115,000 - 200,000 members.

Unionist women were involved in the anti-home rule campaign from the time Gladstone introduced the first Home Rule Bill to the Commons in 1886. Although the Bill was quickly defeated, the Unionist reaction was still one of shock and disbelief and sparked an unprecedented coming together of Unionists, as opposition to the Bill overcame former denominational, class and, to some extent, gender divisions. Unionist women, unable to express their political distaste for home rule by means of a parliamentary vote, instead petitioned, demonstrated, fundraised and canvassed for unionist candidates. This was essentially auxiliary work and in many respects it set the tone for women's later involvement in the anti-home rule campaign of the early twentieth century through the work of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council.



Women in British politics

The increasingly public profile of Unionist women at this time fits into the wider context of women in British politics as the 1880s and 1890s saw a proliferation of mixed sex and, more commonly, women-only political associations. The Conservatives' Primrose League and the Women's Liberal Federation were founded in 1883 and 1886 respectively, with the Women's Labour League following in their wake in 1906. The reasons for the establishment of these political associations are less feminist than pragmatic. The Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883 forbade the payment of political canvassers and this legislation, coupled with the extension of the electoral franchise in the following year, encouraged party organisers to look for a source of unpaid and volunteer political labour. Women seemed to fit this remit perfectly.



Inauguration and Organisation

The inauguration of the UWUC in January 1911 was certainly welcomed as a valuable addition to the Unionist campaign, but it was also an important turning point for female Unionists. The establishment of a formal and permanent association gave women an opportunity to work together in a more systematic and co-ordinated political campaign. It was clear from the outset that the UWUC had a very focussed idea of the type of campaign it wanted to wage. A great asset, of course, was the instant popularity of the organisation much of which lay in the fact that the years 1911-1914 were seen as a crisis point in the history of unionism. The Parliament Act of 1911 removed the last constitutional bulwark against home rule, which was potentially calamitous in that the power of the House of Lords was limited to a two-year veto. Furthermore, the fact that the UWUC was led by members of Ulster's aristocratic elite, such as the organisation's early presidents, Mary Anne, 2nd Duchess of Abercorn, Theresa, 6th Marchioness of Londonderry, Rosalind, 3rd Duchess of Abercorn and Lady Cecil Craig, added respectability to the organisation.

The UWUC was essentially an auxiliary organisation, formed to help the all-male Ulster Unionist Council oppose home rule, promote Unionist propaganda and preserve the legislative union between Great Britain and Ireland. These aims are constantly referred to in the three minute books of the UWUC Executive Committee, Jan. 1911-Apr.1940, eg, the minutes of 28 January 1919, (D1098/1/3) record the words of Theresa, 6th Marchioness of Londonderry, that the Women's Unionist Council was formed 'to express the feelings of the people of Ulster, who have fought with every means in their power to remain associated with England... We banded ourselves together to see how we might best organise ourselves to impress our fellow-countrymen in England with the fact that Ulster will not consent to the tearing asunder of this country.'

Their efforts were certainly very successful. The UWUC Annual Report for 1913 stored in PRONI (D2688/1/3) records that between April and May 1914, fifty-six UWUC members left their homes to conduct registration and canvassing work, and that time spent varied from as little as four days to as much as five weeks or more at the zenith of the third Home Rule Bill crisis. Further, the UWUC Executive Committee Minutes for 19 May 1914 (D1098/1/2) detail that from June 1913 to March 1914, literature was sent to 14,902 electors in 65 English and Scottish constituencies and that such distribution was based on the Council's maxim that, with regards to Home Rule, 'prevention is better than cure'.



First World War

By the end of July 1914 it seemed as if unionist determination to resist home rule by military means would be put to the test. However, the political climate was suddenly and significantly altered by the outbreak of the First World War. In tangent with the Unionist truce, the main political activities of the UWUC were suspended and much of the work was scaled down accordingly. The Council opined that Ireland should join Britain's war effort in a common bond of service to the empire. To fulfil this aim the organisation became engaged in extensive charity work, making arrangements to care for those who were discharged from the forces on medical grounds and inaugurating the Ulster Women's Gift Fund for Soldiers, which by the end of the war had raised in excess of £100,000. Indeed, the D2688 constituent of the archive contains some papers and minutes of the Fund and the researcher should also be aware of the Ulster Gift Fund archive for the 2nd World War (see PRONI reference D912).



Post war role

The role of the UWUC assumed new importance with the passage of the Representation of the People Act in 1918 granting the electoral franchise to women aged over thirty, prompting the UWUC to become involved in the registration of women voters, spending £500 paying 'preferably women' electoral canvassers and inspectors. This was obviously perceived as fundamentally important work as the Council expended such a sizeable amount at a time when many local associations were failing to pay affiliation fees because of the hardships of the war. At any rate, the organisation sank into the red and matters were not helped by reluctance on the part of the Ulster Unionist Council and leaders like Sir Edward Carson to encourage female parliamentary candidates.

Much more successful, however, was the UWUC scheme of reorganisation that was launched with the aim of 'forming a connected chain from the organisation at Headquarters down to the most remote or scattered districts throughout the six counties' (D1098/1/2). This rejuvenation involved speakers' classes, meetings that combined education with entertainment, and the holding of meetings outside Belfast to increase interest in the work of the Women's Council at a local level. This local activity is reflected in the content of the collection which includes: Minute book of Women's Unionist Association, North Tyrone, 1907; General Committee Minute Book of St. Anne's Women's Unionist Association, 1918-1923; records of North Down Women's Unionist Association, 1914-1969; Minute book of Ballycastle Branch of North Antrim Women's Unionist Association, 1911-1934; Minute book of Strandtown Branch of Victoria Women's Unionist Association, 1947-1958.

Although the UWUC must be viewed as an intrinsically auxiliary and conservative organisation, it was not without significance and, neither is its archive, which provides a fine and not yet fully tapped source for both the history of Unionism and the history of women in early-twentieth century Ireland. The UWUC was undoubtedly the largest female political force Ireland had ever seen. It made a significant contribution to the strength of popular Unionism and its espousal of Unionist principles, and although having much in common with those of male Unionists, was not mere imitation.

