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## "To associate ourselves with the men of Ulster:" A Gendered History of Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant and the Ulster Women's Declaration, 1910-1920

### Turner Stone Jacobs

On Ulster Day, September 28, 1912, nearly 450,000 men and women gathered in Belfast to pledge their opposition to the establishment of Home Rule in Ireland.<sup>[1]</sup> For the Protestant men of Ulster, Ireland's northernmost counties, this pledge was made manifest by signing "Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant." Women signed the "Ulster Women's Declaration" in a similar show of support. By utilizing separate documents for men and women, the unionist leadership made a gendered statement about the respective roles of men and women in both society and politics in Ulster during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Women took an active role in the Covenant campaign, matching and perhaps even surpassing the efforts of their male counterparts. This new degree of political involvement marked a change in the role of women in Irish politics. Additionally, the differences between the documents reveal aspects of the construction of "maleness" and "femaleness" in Ulster during the Home Rule crisis.<sup>[2]</sup> The Ulster Covenant and Women's Declaration simultaneously represented and reinforced the distinction between the masculine and feminine experience within the Ulster unionist movement. As viewed through both documents, issues of gender assist in providing a more comprehensive understanding of the events of 1912 in Ulster.

The Ulster Covenant and Ulster Women's Declaration are unique historical documents which demonstrate the highly-gendered nature of the unionist movement during the Home Rule crisis. While the documents' pledges were made moot by the Government of Ireland Act of 1920, the events of 1912 were vital in the development of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Ulster's Solemn

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League and Covenant is frequently cited as a definitive statement of the unionist creed, and subsequent developments in Protestant paramilitary activity in Ulster are best understood to be a result of the Covenant's assertions put into practice.<sup>[3]</sup> The Women's Declaration, however, is frequently left out of accounts of the 1912 Covenant campaign.<sup>[4]</sup> Thus overlooked, the Ulster Women's Declaration has yet to be examined by scholars as a companion document that embodies the gendered aspects of the unionist movement. Analysis of an historical document's "gendered constitution" helps explicate the ways in which the construction of gender affected social and political developments.<sup>[5]</sup> Although gender is a conspicuous element in history, it is commonly taken for granted rather than closely scrutinized. The gendered aspects of the creation and signing of Ulster Covenant and the Women's Declaration consequently deserve a closer examination.

The signings of the two documents mark a significant turning point in the Ulster unionist struggle against Irish Home Rule, a conflict which stemmed from a long history of tense relations between the Protestant north and the Catholic south. The Irish Home Rule Crisis began as early as 1886, when Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone proposed the Government of Ireland Bill which was to give the whole of Ireland its own Parliament while retaining links with Britain for the purposes of "defense, foreign policy, trade, and currency."<sup>[6]</sup> The bill received widespread support in Ireland, but the measure was decidedly unpopular among members of the Tory party who feared that it marked the dissolution of the United Kingdom. Gladstone's subsequent attempt to pass a second Home Rule Bill through Parliament in 1893 similarly failed, demonstrating the scope of resistance in Britain to granting Ireland its independence. Opposition to Home Rule was particularly formidable in the Irish counties of Ulster, where a deeply entrenched population of Protestants descended from Scottish and English settlers retained close ties both ideologically and politically to the British Empire. By the time Prime Minister H.H. Asquith reintroduced the prospect of Irish Home Rule in 1912, these Ulster unionists had formulated an effective anti-Home Rule agenda supported by propaganda and compelling displays of loyalty to the union. The Ulster Covenant came to embody the often confusing and conflicting sentiments of the unionist cause in its plain language, forceful message, and Old Testament rhetoric.

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Resistance to Home Rule was rooted in a distinctive ideology that combined Protestant religious beliefs with fervent British patriotism. Protestant faith, whether Presbyterian, Methodist, Church of Ireland, or non-denominational, was a pivotal aspect of Ulster's opposition to Home Rule. The fear existed that a Parliament in Dublin would subject the citizens of Ulster to "Rome rule" by imposing Catholic morals and enforcing papal ultimatums such as the *ne temere* decree that prohibited marriage between members of the two sects of Christian faith. Such events inspired Ulsterites to take political action through organizations such as the Orange Order, which drew its strength from a non-denominational but devout Protestantism. Its members were resolved to "remedy the greater evil of a Catholic expansionism."<sup>[7]</sup> Orange lodges were generally middle-class institutions with Tory sympathies. Although the Orange lodges were inclusive of the working classes, the platform of the unionist movement stemmed directly from the upper-and middle-class sympathies promoted by its leadership. As with the Ulster Unionist Council and Ulster Women's Unionist Council there was a gendered division, with a separate Association of Loyal Orange Women. Founded in 1911 in Armagh, the Association of Loyal Orange Women lacked the political efficacy of its brother organization. A lack of involvement saw its disestablishment in 1887, but a rekindled interest in defeating Home Rule prompted the organization's revival.<sup>[8]</sup> Despite the organization's existence, there is little to no evidence of substantial political activity on the scale undertaken by the Orange Order. The Loyal Ulster Women's political influence therefore did not rival that of the men's group.

Men and women from a variety of social classes were welcome to participate in unionist activities including the Covenant campaign, although positions of leadership were generally reserved for the social and intellectual elite. There existed a hierarchy within the unionist movement that reflected contemporary political structures. The first signatories of the Covenant, for example, were important aristocrats and clergymen whose influence among the unionist elite ensured them a primary role in the Ulster Day ceremonies. Despite this hierarchy, the class divide between Ulster Protestants was surprisingly fluid in terms of social relations, particularly in Belfast. For example, a Protestant factory

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worker was very likely to attend the same church as the factory owner; as Protestants both individuals could move in some congruent spheres, whereas Catholics would be excluded from such socializing regardless of class.<sup>[9]</sup> Even the Orange Lodges were open to members of all classes, provided that prospective members were not Catholic. Male unionists thus had the capacity to interact with members of other classes, but outside of religious and political activity this was not necessarily put into practice. Despite common political interests, class divides were still deeply-rooted in Edwardian society.

Female unionists enjoyed a degree of social fluidity as well. Much like the unionist men, women ranging from aristocrats to workers were active in politics. Working-class women were politically active in attending anti-Home Rule rallies, and their children by extension were frequently involved in unionist events such as the Covenant signings.<sup>[10]</sup> Middle class members of the UWUC in Belfast made sure to canvass poorer parts of town, as for them the issue of Home Rule transcended class boundaries. Leadership positions within the UWUC, however, were generally reserved for aristocrats and members of the upper-middle class. Lady Londonderry, for example, acted as president of the UWUC from 1912 until 1919. The realities of everyday life limited non-aristocrats' ability to participate in politics on as deep a level. Most unionist women could only experience the fantastic soirees hosted by Lady Londonderry through the ladies' magazine articles that reported on their grandeur.<sup>[11]</sup> This socioeconomic disconnect between the leadership and the support base does not appear to have been an obstacle in the unionist movement however. The act of signing the Declaration was virtually removed from conceptions of social class, even if its creation and distribution was not.

Formed in 1905 to consolidate the disparate veins of unionism into a single body, the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) became the main bastion of Ulster Protestants' ideological struggle. The UUC provided unionists with a variety of services, most notably the organization of massive anti-Home Rule rallies and the distribution of propaganda pamphlets and posters. As membership in the UUC was restricted solely to men, unionist women found an opportunity to further their involvement through the establishment of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council (UWUC). Created in 1911, the UWUC was similar to the UUC in

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that it was a synthesis of unionist women's groups that had arisen to combat earlier Home Rule campaigns.<sup>[12]</sup> Although these institutions remained largely autonomous in their leadership and daily operations, the UUC and UWUC were in constant contact and cooperated frequently. Their combined efforts were vital to the success of the Ulster Covenant, which was to be Ulster's most visible exhibition of loyalist sentiment.

As a decision on the status of the Third Home Rule Bill drew nearer, unionist leaders discussed ways to demonstrate the gravity of Ulster's opposition. Edward Carson, leader of the UUC, and James Craig, a fellow unionist leader (and later the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland), discussed the possibility of "the whole body of Ulster Protestants swearing a solemn oath to resist Home Rule."<sup>[13]</sup> This idea would soon come to fruition in the form of Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant, which was penned by Belfast merchant and "convinced Presbyterian" Thomas Sinclair.<sup>[14]</sup> He was an active unionist, having authored pamphlets for unionist rallies such as the demonstration at Balmoral in April 1912.<sup>[15]</sup> The Ulster Covenant was inspired by the Solemn League and Covenant drafted by Scottish Protestants in 1643, in which the signatories accepted the laws of the English king while refusing to ascribe to his High Anglican religious beliefs.<sup>[16]</sup> Sinclair successfully drew upon the original Solemn League and Covenant's statement of a faith in God, declaration of loyalty to the King, and call for solidarity in a just, or, more exactly, Protestant cause when drafting Ulster's Covenant. This document would come to define the platform of the pre-WWI unionist movement with its firm rhetoric and clear message.<sup>[17]</sup>

While the Ulster Covenant was to be signed only by the men of Ulster, the women of Ulster were given the opportunity to affirm their loyalty to the unionist cause by signing the "Ulster Women's Declaration."<sup>[18]</sup> The document was drafted by members of the UWUC but was based on a sample declaration sent to them by members of the UUC, who claimed no more credit in the development of the final document other than simply "offering their help."<sup>[19]</sup> While the women of the UWUC were officially given the freedom to draft their own declaration, it is uncertain to what extent they were influenced by the men. Correspondence between UWUC president Edith Wheeler and R. Dawson Bates

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of the UUC suggests that the men had a final say in certain elements of the Declaration. When Wheeler asked if any unionist women outside of Ulster were permitted to sign the Declaration, his response was concise: "No. Only Ulster women or women domiciled in Ulster."<sup>[20]</sup> As a result, copies of the Declaration were not officially circulated beyond Ulster.

Based on the UWUC's meeting records, the Ulster Women's Declaration appears not to have been an exceptional aspect of their business. During a September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1912 meeting, their last meeting before Ulster Day, it is casually included that "the wording of the Declaration was unanimously approved of" after being "prepared by the Advisory Committee and recommended by them for adoption by the Executive Committee."<sup>[21]</sup> Also included in the minutes is a letter from Lady Londonderry, who was unable to attend the meeting due to health problems. She anticipated that they would also prevent her from attending the Ulster Day celebrations.<sup>[22]</sup> She included in her letter a resolution that she desired to see passed; the resolution's text is remarkably similar to that of the Declaration:

Feeling as we do that the people of England will never support the Government in attempting to carry Home Rule without the consent of the country, we are confident at this juncture that the Ulster Women's Unionist Association will support the men of Ulster and the Unionist Party in their endeavours [sic] to frustrate the Government's plan of disintegrating the Empire. We in Ulster wish and intend to continue inside the Union and under the protection of the British Parliament at Westminster and we refuse to be driven forth by legislation which Ulster rightly declares has under present conditions no moral sanction whatever."<sup>[23]</sup>

The ease with which comparisons can be drawn between Lady Londonderry's resolution and the Declaration suggests that the Declaration's message was already deeply ingrained within the UWUC's credo. Further discussion on the gravity of their pledge was unnecessary, as signing the document was simply a means of publicizing an idea already inherent in the movement.

The only other mention of the Declaration in the UWUC's minutes appears in January 1913. An additional resolution was passed, again mimicking the Declaration's text:

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Because we are entered into times of great difficulty and dress wherein the prosperity and well-being of our beloved Country are threatened, we, as representing the Unionist women of Ulster, hereby declare our unabated loyalty to the solemn Pledge to which we unitedly [sic] and mutually subscribed our names upon Ulster Day.

And we further record our resolve zealously and constantly to continue in the pursuance of our cause, and against all opposition to promote the same according to our powers. God forbid that we should part with the civil and religious freedom which our fathers won and bequeathed to us as a lasting inheritance.<sup>[24]</sup>

This resolution was unsurprisingly passed unanimously. The consistency of the UWUC's rhetoric is demonstrated in the resolution, as it reinforces the assertions made in the Declaration only four months earlier. There is no explanation for the resolution's necessity, but the patriotic character of the meeting suggests that the Council's second annual meeting of 1913 served as an affirmation of its members' dedication the previous year. An official reminder of their goal ensured continuing solidarity in the fight against Home Rule.

On September 28, 1912, the Ulster Covenant and Women's Declaration were made available for public signature amid a grand public spectacle that reflected the resolve and enthusiasm of the unionist support base.<sup>[25]</sup> While several cities throughout Ulster were provided with copies of each document, the main demonstration occurred in Belfast, Ireland's primary hub of unionist sentiment. At the center of this event was Edward Carson; as head of the UUC he was given the honor of being the first to add his name to the list of Covenant signatories at the Old Town Hall in Belfast. He was followed by other prominent members of the unionist movement; aristocrat and unionist leader Lord Londonderry was the second to sign, and he in turn was followed by several distinguished members of the Protestant clergy.<sup>[26]</sup> The floor was then given to members of the public, thousands of whom waited for hours for their chance to add their name to the Covenant. Signatories added their name and home address to a sheet of paper that included both the Covenant text as well as pre-printed spaces for their personal information.<sup>[27]</sup> Reportedly 237,368 Ulster unionist men signed the Solemn League and Covenant while = 234,406 Unionist women similarly expressed their political viewpoint by signing the Ulster Woman's Declaration.<sup>[28]</sup> This latter figure clearly demonstrates that women closely matched their male

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counterparts in their display of anti-Home Rule sentiment. Whether this is due to the magnitude of their enthusiasm or simply their numerical superiority as a larger portion of the population is uncertain, but the efficacy of unionist women in other political activities suggests that the former is a more realistic assessment.

To commemorate the event, men and women received attractive souvenir copies of their respective documents. Both documents were similar in style as befitting their comparable tone and content. The souvenir copies were printed in color with an elegant typeface and were emblazoned with the Red Hand of Ulster, a heraldic symbol which to this day remains as the symbol of Ulster.<sup>[29]</sup> Additionally, commemorative lapel pins were available for those who further wished to show their support for the day's events. Different versions of the pins existed for men and women, as differences in gendered clothing styles were taken into account. The demonstrations that accompanied the signing of the Covenant were decidedly religious in tone, with the crowds reciting popular Protestant prayers and hymns. The presence of specially-deputized guards carrying batons and wearing armbands ensured that the proceedings remained civilized; amazingly for such a politicized event there were no reports of violence from either unionists or their nationalist rivals.

The role of women in promoting both the male and female versions of the Covenant was integral to the success of Ulster Day. The Belfast Women's Unionist Council was given by the UUC full "responsibility for arrangements made for the signing of the Covenant in the Old Town Hall" on Ulster Day, a responsibility which they received with great honor.<sup>[30]</sup> Organizing the activities of Ulster Day was a substantial undertaking as crowds numbering in the hundreds of thousands were anticipated in Belfast. Volunteers from the UWUC had to ensure that there were sufficient quantities of copies of both the official Covenant documents that would remain with the UUC as well as the souvenir copies given to signatories to commemorate the event. This daunting task was met effectively by the UWUC, who had experience with other similar major political undertakings.

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In 1910, for example, a Protestant woman in Belfast was disowned and left destitute by her Catholic husband whose priest allegedly persuaded him to heed the ne temere papal decree of 1908, which prohibited marriage between Catholics and members of the Protestant faiths. An outraged Women's Council organized a petition against the decree, receiving over 100,000 signatures in January 1912 "foreshadowing the signatures on Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant nine months later."<sup>[31]</sup> Women in this manner therefore were integral to the success of any major political undertaking, and were given the opportunity to engage in politics on an unprecedented scale. This change in political involvement marked an important development in gender relations by demonstrating that women were just as capable as men in planning anti-home rule activities.

The importance of the Ulster Covenant was not lost on the press both domestically and abroad, and its depiction in the popular press varied depending on the source. Conservative publications unanimously agreed that the Covenant was a success. The Irish Times lauded the "earnest religious services" and "great enthusiasm of the people" at the Ulster Day event, while the Northern Whig celebrated a "magnificent response to patriotic appeal."<sup>[32]</sup> English publications generally commented on the moderate wording of the Covenant as the document was widely anticipated to be a work of marked flamboyance. In Scotland, the papers were quick to point out similarities between the Ulster Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Punch, a satirical British periodical known for its clever and evocative political cartoons, published a cartoon entitled "Ulster Will Write," a pun on the popular unionist rallying cry of "Ulster will fight, and Ulster will be right."<sup>[33]</sup> In the cartoon, Carson is depicted atop a horse in a triumphant pose and wielding a gigantic pen which bleeds ink; the accompanying subtext reads: "General Carson. 'The pen (for the moment) is mightier than the sword. Up, nibs, and at 'em!'" One of the more comical depictions of the Ulster Day events came from the Irish News and Belfast Morning News, which criticized the day's "grotesque proceedings" and happily declared "Carson's Covenant Comedy Concluded."<sup>[34]</sup> These varying accounts of the events surrounding the Covenant's introduction reveal that the issue was closely watched by many in the United Kingdom,

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and that the burgeoning Home Rule crisis was large enough news to generate public interest in the matter.

Photographs of the Ulster Day celebrations, however, complicate the question of women's involvement in the events. Ulster Day was extensively documented in Belfast, where the largest celebration in Ulster occurred. Most photographs from the event depict the massive crowds gathered outside of the Old Town Hall.<sup>[35]</sup> The wide camera angles utilized by photographers present at the Covenant's signing clearly depict a predominantly male crowd. Thousands of men in suits and flat caps can be seen lined up awaiting their turn to sign the Covenant. Especially prominent in photographs from Ulster Day are the City Hall Guards, baton-wielding volunteers bedecked in bowler hats and special armbands designating them as peacekeepers.<sup>[36]</sup> The politicized nature of the event as well as the anticipated size of the crowd ensured that extra men would be needed to maintain an orderly celebration. Volunteers were drawn from local Orange Lodges and organized by Major Fred H. Crawford, organizer of the 1914 Larne gun-running operation and allegedly the only person to have signed the Covenant in his own blood.<sup>[37]</sup> The proliferation of these images in popular depictions of the Covenant campaign gave the story a sensationalist and masculine character that neglected the social realities of the event.

The few women who can be clearly seen in the crowd appear to be observers rather than participants, watching the parades in which the men of the Orange Lodges march. Additionally, women are entirely absent from depictions of Carson's first ceremonial signing of the Covenant within Town Hall.<sup>[38]</sup> Photographic evidence of the 1912 Ulster Day celebrations stands in distinct contrast to the figures given for the number of Declaration signatories. As men and women turned out in nearly equal numbers, it would be expected that the crowd's constitution would reflect this gender balance. Women were most likely absent from the photographs due to geographical constraints: the Women's Declaration was signed in the Ulster Hall, a separate location down the road from the Old Town Hall.<sup>[39]</sup> Press coverage of the event focused almost exclusively on the Covenant campaign, and as such the events at Ulster Hall were largely ignored. Outside of Belfast, a more balanced portrait of the

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Covenant and Declaration signings emerges. The dual signing ceremonies at Raphoe in County Donegal show male and female unionists in equal turnout.<sup>[40]</sup> It should be noted however that the desk used in the ceremony is labeled "Signing the Covenant." Even if this went unchanged for the sake of simplicity, it demonstrates that the Covenant was viewed as the primary document of the pair.

The lack of contemporary press coverage surrounding female unionist activities is more indicative of the newspapers' priorities than it is of the efficacy of female actions. Rallies and parades held by the UUC were grandly-orchestrated affairs that could help sell newspapers, as the story of a province moving towards revolt was one that snatched readers' attention. For example, reading of "The Men of Destiny in Ulster" and their Covenant preparations was an exciting prospect for newspaper customers.<sup>[41]</sup> The UWUC by contrast garnered little to no press attention, as many of their activities were more subtle and supportive. Women typically did not march in demonstrations, and were thus not featured as prominently when more titillating material about their male counterparts' borderline militant activities was available for reporting.

Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant represents the fear of "failure to achieve a sense of autonomous identity or to preserve a sense of masculine capacity and strength," both of which were perceived to be at stake with Home Rule's approach.<sup>[42]</sup> The tone is at once protective and aggressive. A clear sense of entrenchment emanates from the document's language, stressing the importance of protecting one's family and "well-being." Despite the grave character of the Covenant's prose, there exists a distinctive quality of aggression befitting the expectations of masculine behavior in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the threat to use "all means which may be found necessary"<sup>[43]</sup> to oppose Home Rule, the Ulster Covenant strongly suggests the potential use of force in the event of Home Rule's enactment. Signatories of the Covenant were thus assigned the gendered role of the soldier. Similar appeals to male sensibilities would be evoked two years later with the onset of the First World War, when the British government began circulating propaganda that further reinforced the masculine ideal of a soldier defending his

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homeland.<sup>[44]</sup> The famous rallying cry of "Ulster will fight, and Ulster will be right" is echoed in the Covenant, and would later manifest itself in unionist paramilitary activities.

The Women's Declaration is roughly half the length of the Covenant, but it utilizes similar language in delivering its message. Due to its brevity, the Declaration is an effective summary of the Covenant's political position. Both documents begin with an affirmation of loyalty to the crown, and both invoke God as an integral part of the unionist cause. Also significant is the corresponding use of the word "calamity" to describe the impending consequences of Home Rule.<sup>[45]</sup> It was widely feared that an Irish parliament run by southern Catholics would result in the disruption of both religious and economic activity. The emphasis upon disaster and subjugation is expressed with equivalent passion in both documents, although these fears are expressed in distinctly gendered forms.

Through their pledge to "associate [them]selves with the men of Ulster" rather than to swear dedication directly to the unionist agenda, signatories of the Declaration made a strongly gendered statement in support of their male counterparts.<sup>[46]</sup> Women, who in Britain and Ireland were culturally and historically discouraged from participating in combat, would not have been expected to engage in the physical conflict anticipated by many unionists. After the formation of the Ulster Volunteers, women's non-combatant participation within the organization represented this promised supportive role. One particularly notable aspect of the Women's Declaration is that Ulster is referred to in the feminine form. The document suggests that Home Rule would "place her [Ulster] under the domination and control of a Parliament in Ireland," evoking the powerful cultural image of a vulnerable female subjected to a foreign and male threat. Visual depictions of Ireland and Ulster as virginal maidens were common elements in contemporary pro- and anti-Home Rule propaganda.<sup>[47]</sup> Such images on a subsurface level support the "characterization of women as weak, passive" individuals in need of God and Ulster's protection.<sup>[48]</sup> By directly associating with the men, however, women demonstrated that they were willing to commit to the unionist cause despite the potential for danger.

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That the women of the UWUC were encouraged to construct the Ulster Women's Declaration independently from the UUC is important in looking at its language. While it exhibits many similarities to Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant, the Women's Declaration is much more concise than its brother document. The Covenant's language and format are clear and simple, especially for the time period, but much of the text provides "padding" that can be viewed as frivolous. In fact, the Covenant shocked commentators when its text was publically revealed: most expected a lengthy, drawn-out monstrosity rather than a comparatively terse listing of Ulster's grievances.<sup>[49]</sup> The Women's Declaration, considering this, is even more direct and to the point. Women who signed the Declaration would have known precisely what they were supporting when making their pledge. The fact that signatories of the Declaration subverted their chances for social equality was not viewed as an issue even among most women at the time. By willingly perpetuating their secondary position in society, unionist women demonstrated that their gendered identities were deeply ingrained. Far from resenting this disparity in status between themselves and their male counterparts, many unionist women took pride in their role of assisting the men of Ulster. This willingness to offer support is congruent with the contemporary view of women as the nurturing aspect of the family, and therefore was readily acceptable to a majority of unionist women.

During the Edwardian period, social relations in the United Kingdom had changed little since the preceding Victorian period. Traditional values and morals dictated acceptable behavior and reinforced strict gender roles, placing an importance on family, piety, and chastity. Men were seen as breadwinners, and were expected to ensure the physical and financial security of their families. Women cared for the children, and were expected to maintain the home. While in reality this ideal was not always practiced, there was intense social pressure to conform to these deeply-ingrained moral standards. Protestant unionists in Ulster were no exception, and indeed embodied these beliefs in many ways. Covenant signatories, through their pledge to defend "[them]selves and [their] children" gave their assent for these family values that permeated Edwardian social belief. The Declaration's comparatively passive language reinforces the social hierarchy, as its signatories simply pledge their

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support to the men. As supporters in the home, women similarly acted as supporters in politics. It was taken for granted that males would take the lead in political developments, although women's participation was not only appreciated but also encouraged. Strict though social spheres may have been, women were still free to engage in a different form of political involvement that had before been limited.

The Home Rule crisis occurred in a period before gender became a topic of interest within society. Differences in males and females were seen to be inherent, and these differences were believed to manifest themselves in the respective roles expected of men and women. The issue of gender construction was far from the public mindset unless traditional values were challenged. Gender equality was only recently emerging as a serious concept, and therefore both women and men tended to accept the positions they were raised to inhabit. In 1912 the concept of having two separate documents was seen as logical. Women did not lament the fact that they were to sign a different document. Instead, the only concern expressed on behalf of the female unionists was that they had input on its final version.<sup>[50]</sup> Their words were not to be determined by the unionist men, even if the men determined the general course of action. Signatories of the Declaration, however, were not without critics of their actions. Irish suffragists condemned "the idea that women should need their own declaration or petition."<sup>[51]</sup> Alternately, the suffragist publication *Votes For Women* applauded unionists' decision to include women in the campaign.<sup>[52]</sup>

The embodiment of men and women's respective roles and pledges are best demonstrated through the Ulster Volunteers or Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a unionist militia said to have reintroduced the gun into Irish politics.<sup>[53]</sup> Formed in 1913, the UVF existed as the official military branch of Ulster's Provisional Government and was notorious for its illegal gun-running activities such as the operation at Larne in 1914. Members were trained by ex-military officers who lent the organization an air of authenticity that tempered the controversy surrounding the UVF's often questionable activities. Although the UVF's capabilities have been called into question, the organization existed as the most

visible manifestation of the Ulster Covenant.<sup>[54]</sup> Volunteers participated in military drills involving small arms and vehicles training, and many members were armed with German rifles obtained through the 1914 operation at Larne. If the unionists' critics in 1912 had reason to doubt the assertions of the Covenant, the UVF soon proved them wrong. The UVF can be viewed as one of the "means" through which Ulster could be defended and Home Rule defeated. Roughly 85,000 men may have been active in the UVF, suggesting that a significant proportion of the Covenant's signatories felt compelled to transform their pledge into physical action. The formation of a civilian army is congruent with the masculine ethos outlined in the Covenant: through show of arms, the Ulster unionists would attempt to prove that their position was immovable.

Before the formation of the UVF however, Protestant Ulstermen had expressed their political views in massive demonstrations that frequently bordered on displays of militarism. As the Home Rule crisis began to intensify, unionist rallies organized by the UUC were held throughout Ulster. Common elements in these rallies included the display of patriotic flags and banners, including a flag allegedly carried by William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne.<sup>[55]</sup> While supporters of Home Rule questioned the authenticity of the flag, it existed as a strong connection to the military engagements that occurred between William and his Irish Catholic rivals during the 17<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Ascendancy. Additional militaristic activities included a rally that took place in Belfast soon after the Covenant was signed. A British journalist for Sketch who witnessed the rally described the march of "'troops' with toy rifles," as well as a fake cannon.<sup>[56]</sup> Women were involved in the march as well, but instead of toting dummy guns they were dressed as nurses, indicating the role that they would later play in the burgeoning UVF. Male and female roles within unionist rallies therefore reflected the Covenant and Declaration's rhetoric even before the documents were created.

Women were also involved in the UVF, albeit in non-combat roles befitting the sensibilities of the times. In order to fulfill their declared support to the men of Ulster, the UWUC created the Ambulance and Nurses Corps which provide the UVF with "ambulance drivers, dispatch riders, nurses, and signalers in

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the event of civil war" with Irish nationalists.<sup>[57]</sup> These functions are vital to any military operation, and the UVF's relatively small support base necessitated that administrative support come from outside of its ranks. By adopting vacant positions within the civilian sector, women allowed men to serve in their expected roles as combatants. This practice was not particular to Ulster, despite manifesting itself earlier than in the rest of the United Kingdom. With the outbreak of the First World War 1914, women throughout the UK took nearly identical actions in volunteering to support the military.<sup>[58]</sup> Unionists in this way anticipated a major social trend in British wartime activities. After the war began, unionist women continued to support the UVF, which transitioned into the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster division. The UWUC sent substantial donations of luxury and comfort items to soldiers overseas, significantly bolstering their soldiers' morale while they fought for the Union of which they sought to remain a part.

Within a few months of the UVF's formation, the UWUC canvassed neighborhoods for donations towards an Ulster defense fund. Other women assisted by utilizing their traditional practice of sewing. In villages throughout Ulster, sewing circles were "formed for the making of bandages, pillows, pajamas, sheets, pillowslips, and other articles that would be required in war hospitals."<sup>[59]</sup> Nearly 1000 women in Belfast alone signed up to work with the Red Cross for matters of first aid and ambulance services. Additionally, many wealthy women offered their homes as makeshift hospitals in the event of warfare in Ulster. Other women became involved in communications, working as signallers, telegraph workers, and postal clerks. In the event of the British government "carry[ing] out its threat of cutting off Ulster from the Imperial postal and telegraph service," there existed the framework for a female-run organization that was prepared to assume those duties.<sup>[60]</sup> Many women feared that war was approaching too quickly for new skills to be obtained, and offered to work as cooks and even laundresses for UVF detachments if their services were needed.

Women both affiliated and unaffiliated with the UWUC were eager to include their children in many anti-Home Rule activities. Serving as both the moral and ideological compass of their families, unionist women raised their children to share a firm belief in unionist ideals. Women were encouraged to

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accompany their older children to anti-Home Rule rallies and later to signings of the Covenant. Many working-class mothers involved in politics had little choice but to include their children in unionist activities, thus exposing the youth to unionism from a very young age.<sup>[61]</sup> Even infants were subject to daily displays of unionist slogans! In a 1912 article from the Daily Express, a surprised reporter noted that a staunch Ulsterwoman proudly showed him her three-year-old's porridge bowl inscribed with the message "We will not have Home Rule."<sup>[62]</sup> She claimed that for the majority of Ulsterwomen, the issue of Home Rule was rather a matter of faith than of politics. Thus Protestant women diligently claimed the task of securing the future of the unionist movement by encouraging a nearly religious enthusiasm for unionism among the Protestant youth of Ulster.

In 1913 the UUC began drafting an outline for a provisional government in Ulster, which was to be established in the event of Home Rule's enactment. The proposed government included a stipulation that allowed women basic voting rights for local matters but promised nothing more. This was grudgingly permitted by Carson, who was willing to extend to Ulsterwomen the same rights possessed by English women, but not by Ulstermen or Englishmen. Unsurprisingly, members of the UWUC had little to say about this provision. Opinions were split between the attendant suffragists and those who called for a veto of the stipulation, prompting Lady Londonderry to suggest "that it would be best entirely to ignore the suffrage part" and instead continue to focus on Home Rule.<sup>[63]</sup> As president of the UWUC in 1913, Lady Londonderry had a lukewarm reaction to news of the UUC's concession. After receiving the news from Dawson Bates of the UUC, she responded that the women of the UWUC would act "in accordance with the terms of the Declaration."<sup>[64]</sup> Nearly a year after the Declaration's signing, it continued to exist as the framework for interaction between the men's and women's councils. By using the Declaration as means of decision-making, Lady Londonderry demonstrated that the Declaration ensured passivity as implied in its text. Even if the issue at hand was not of interest, women who stood by the Declaration undermined their own growing political power.

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As the burgeoning vein of militancy grew within the Ulster unionist movement, politicians in Westminster began to take more seriously the Ulster unionist opposition to Home Rule. Events such as the signing of the Covenant indicated that a substantial portion of Ulster's population would create problems if they were to fall under the jurisdiction of a parliament in Belfast. Although the Third Home Rule Bill was defeated in 1912, it was passed after being reintroduced by Asquith in 1914.<sup>[65]</sup> As Ulster was planning for the possibility of revolt against the United Kingdom, their actions were fortuitously delayed by the onset of the First World War. Instead of fighting against Britain in an ironic demonstration of their loyalty to the crown, many unionists clambered to fight for their country against a common German foe; if there had been any question of the unionists' alleged sympathies to Germany, their widespread support for the British military put the issue to rest. The Ulster Volunteer force was incorporated into the British Army as the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Regiment, lessening the threat of unionist hostility towards governmental authority.<sup>[66]</sup> Many male unionists hoped that their participation in the war would encourage the British government to consider revoking the bill or settling for Ulster's exclusion from the rest of Ireland; signatories of the Covenant had found a new means by which to fight Home Rule. Many Irish nationalists enlisted with similar hopes: that Ireland would receive some degree of independence from Britain if they fought against Britain's enemies. During the First World War, the concept of separation began to look more realistic as Unionist leaders collaborated with Westminster to provide a reasonable solution to the issue of Home Rule.

By the end of WWI, Prime Minister Lloyd George's government was prepared to tackle the issue of implementing Home Rule in a manner deemed acceptable by both unionists and nationalists. During the course of the war unionists came to accept that the entirety of Ireland would not likely remain a part of the United Kingdom, although they continued to petition for Ulster's exclusion from a Dublin-controlled Ireland. Ulster consists of nine counties, and of those nine, six housed distinctive Protestant majorities. By 1920, unionist leader Walter Long organized a committee which proposed that the six counties of Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, and Tyrone be excluded from the remainder of Ireland while Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan would fall under the jurisdiction of the Dublin parliament.

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The issue of separation generated controversy, particularly among unionists who had signed the Covenant eight years earlier. Their solemn vow to defend Ulster was wavering, and the unionist leadership increasingly recognized the political realities that prevented them from asserting their earlier claims. In a 1919 letter regarding the controversy surrounding the three-county exclusion plan, Lord Farnham expressed his concern that "if [the] Covenant is once tampered with[,] the respect for the Ulsterman vanishes and it will be cast in our teeth for generations."<sup>[67]</sup>

With the separation of Ireland, the Covenant's professed pledge to fight Home Rule in all forms had become severely diluted. On the second anniversary of the Covenant's Ulster Day signing, Carson gave a speech in which he stated that "while reiterating our Solemn League and Covenant [we] emphatically declare that we will never recognize a Parliament in Dublin, or submit to its authority, and will take such steps as are necessary to prevent the Government of Ireland Act being enforced as law in Ulster."<sup>[68]</sup> Thus, in 1914, the unionist commitment to the Covenant was still comparable to what was expressed in 1912. The political realities of the post-WWI world demonstrated, however, that despite the unionists' overwhelming support for the war effort in Europe the entirety Ulster would not escape Home Rule as once desired. Lord Farnham's prediction did not come to fruition; Ireland's separation does not appear to have been an altogether humiliating experience for unionists despite the partial abandonment of the Covenant. Mention of the Covenant in a political context is nearly nonexistent after 1919. The exclusion of three counties from Ulster made for an uneasy truce, but the unionists may well have failed in securing any degree of separation had it not been for their firm display of resistance in the signings of the Covenant and Declaration.

Upon their release, Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant and the Ulster Women's Declaration served the purpose of codifying as well as publicizing the unionist anti-Home Rule agenda. They caught the attention not only of the British public and Parliament, but of other members of the Union in Scotland and Canada as well. However, the Covenant's direct, lasting political impact left much to be desired for the unionists. This failing of the unionists to uphold their pledges does not render the documents

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irrelevant, but instead provides the opportunity to explore them in a new context that went generally unnoticed by contemporary observers and participants. As historical phenomena representing the viewpoints and roles of both genders within an influential political movement, the Covenant and Declaration provide fascinating examples of codified ideologies that both reinforce and reflect social gender norms in a political context. As befitting its analytical and historical value, the Ulster Covenant continues to generate scholarly interest to this day. September 2012 will mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Covenant and Declaration's signings, prompting a new round of investigation as to the lasting importance that the documents hold for the study of Irish unionism.

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[1]The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland officially lists that 237,368 men signed the Solemn League and Covenant while 234,406 *women signed the Ulster Woman's Declaration*. Other sources place the figures at 218,206 men and 228,991 women, suggesting that the women's signatures actually exceeded those of the men. Note that many impromptu and unofficial signings of both documents occurred outside of Ireland which may account for a deviation in the numbers. See Lucy, 49 and PRONI's online Ulster Covenant signatory database

([http://www.proni.gov.uk/index/search\\_the\\_archives/ulster\\_covenant.htm](http://www.proni.gov.uk/index/search_the_archives/ulster_covenant.htm))

[2]For a further explanation of maleness and femaleness, refer to Meissner, W.W. "Gender Identity and the Self: I. Gender Formation in General and in Masculinity." *Psychoanalytic Review*, 92(1) (2005), 1-27 and Meissner, W.W. "Gender Identity and the Self: II. Femininity, Homosexuality, and the Theory of the Self." *Psychoanalytic Review*, 92(1) (2005), 29-66

[3]See Bowman, Timothy. "The Ulster Volunteer Force and the formation of the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division." *Irish Historical Studies* 128 (2001); Jackson, Alvin. "Unionist Myths 1912-1985." *Past and Present* 136 (Aug 1992); Kennedy, Thomas C. "Tory Radicalism and the Home Rule Crisis, 1910-1914: The Case of Lord Willoughby de Broke." *Canadian Journal of History* 37 (2002); Lucy, Gordon. *The Ulster Covenant: A Pictorial History of the 1912 Home Rule Crisis* (Belfast: New Ulster Publications Ltd., 1989); Megahey, Alan. "'God will defend the right!': the Protestant Churches and opposition to Home Rule." *Defenders of the Union*. Ed. D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day (London: Routledge, 2001)

[4]Lucy describes the Declaration in detail; Jackson erroneously refers to the document as "the women's Covenant." See Jackson, Alvin. "Irish Unionism, 1870-1922." *Defenders of the Union*. Ed. D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day (London: Routledge, 2001)

[5]Berger, Stefan, et.al. *Writing History: Theory and Practice*. (London: Hodder Arnold, 2010), 289

[6] Pugh, Martin. *State and Society: A Social and Political History of Britain since 1870* (London: Hodder, 2008), 88

[7] Jackson. "Irish Unionism," 118

[8] Gathered from an undated newspaper clipping about the organization's founder

[9] Akenson, Donald Harman. *God's Peoples: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 145

[10] PRONI Ref. D2638/E/16

[11] Ibid

[12] Jackson, 127

[13] Lewis, Geoffrey. *Carson: The Man Who Divided Ireland* (New York: Hambledon and London, 2005), 102

[14] Lucy, 43

[15] Sinclair, Thomas. "The Ulster Unionist Demonstration of 1912 Official Programme." Public Record Office of Northern Ireland

[16] Signatories of the Original Solemn League and Covenant were subject to brutal reprisals, and Ulster's allusion to its infamous parent document undoubtedly conjured images of religious persecution, a feared consequence of Home Rule.

[17] The text of Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant is as follows: *"Being convinced in our consciences that Home Rule would be disastrous to the material well-being of Ulster as well as of the whole of Ireland, subversive of our civil and religious freedom, destructive of our citizenship, and perilous to the unity of the Empire, we, whose names are underwritten, men of Ulster, loyal subjects of His Gracious Majesty King George V., humbly relying on the God whom our fathers in days of stress and trial confidently trusted, do hereby pledge ourselves in solemn Covenant, throughout this our time of threatened calamity, to stand by one another in defending, for ourselves and our children, our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom, and in using all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland. And in the event of such a Parliament being forced upon us, we further solemnly and mutually pledge ourselves to refuse to recognize its authority. In sure confidence that God will defend the right, we hereto subscribe our names. And further, we individually declare that we have not already signed this Covenant."*

[18] The Ulster Women's Declaration reads as follows: *"We, whose names are underwritten, women of Ulster, and loyal subjects of our gracious King, being firmly persuaded that Home Rule would be disastrous to our Country, desire to associate ourselves with the men of Ulster in their uncompromising opposition to the Home Rule Bill now before Parliament, whereby it is proposed to drive Ulster out of her cherished place in the Constitution of the United Kingdom, and to place her under the domination and*

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*control of a Parliament in Ireland. Praying that from this calamity God will save Ireland, we here to subscribe our names."*

[19] Edith Wheeler asked R. Dawson Bates of the Ulster Day Committee if the UWUC was "right in assuming that the Covenant that the women of Ulster are to sign is prepared by the men, and that we have nothing to do with this matter?" Bates insisted that "The [U]WUC are, of course, responsible for settling what Declaration they issue, and the men have nothing to say in regard to it beyond offering their help." Nevertheless, the UUC's influence is apparent in the final draft of the Declaration. See PRONI Ref. D1098/2/3

[20] Ibid. Bates appears to have had a slightly adversarial relationship with the UWUC based on the organization's minutes. In April 1911 an incident occurred in which Bates failed to reserve seats for UWUC members at an Easter Rally. The council was understandably upset by his failure to carry through, especially as Bates refused to take any action other than offering a refund for tickets already purchased. See UWUC executive council minutes, April 10 1911

[21] UWUC executive council minutes, September 17<sup>th</sup> 1912

[22] Ibid

[23] Ibid

[24] UWUC minutes, 16 January 1913

[25] For an exceptional collection of newspaper articles documenting the event, see PRONI Ref. D1889

[26] Lucy, 28

[27] PRONI has a searchable archive of all signatories that can be viewed online free of charge. A full-color example of these sheets, including signatures and addresses, can be viewed on the website.

[28] Other sources place the figures at 218,206 men and 228,991 women, suggesting that the women's signatures actually exceeded those of the men. Note that many impromptu and unofficial signings of both documents occurred outside of Ireland which may account for a deviation in the numbers. See Lucy, 49 and PRONI's online Ulster Covenant signatory database ([http://www.proni.gov.uk/index/search\\_the\\_archives/ulster\\_covenant.htm](http://www.proni.gov.uk/index/search_the_archives/ulster_covenant.htm))

[29] The Red Hand is drawn from lore surrounding the establishment of an early kingdom in Ulster. It was agreed that whoever managed to touch Ulster's shore first would be made king. A clever chieftain realized that he was going to lose the race, so he severed his own hand and hurled it upon the shore. This imagery has remained a part of Ulster and features heavily in unionist art and propaganda. See Lewis, 105

[30] Edith Wheeler to the Ulster Day Committee, personal letter, 1912. PRONI Ref. D1098/2/3

[31] Megahey, 166

[32] Author unknown. *Irish Times*, 30 September 1912. PRONI Ref. D25; Author unknown, *Northern Whig*, 30 September 1912. PRONI Ref. D1889

[33] Douglas, Roy; Harte, Liam; O'Hara, Jim. *Drawing Conclusions: A Cartoon History of Anglo-Irish Relations 1798-1998* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press Ltd., 1998), 162

[34] Author unknown. *The Irish News and Belfast Morning News*, 30 September 1912. PRONI Ref. D1889

[35] Ibid.

[36] PRONI Ref. INF/7A/2/32

[37] Several historians refer to the singing of the Covenant in blood, but there is no evidence of this occurring on as widespread a level as is often implied. Although the official register's signatures are entirely in ink, it is impossible to tell how many personal souvenir copies may have been signed more sensationally. Crawford's action, if indeed true, is likely the source of the legend. Any additional evidence is simply anecdotal.

[38] PRONI Ref. INF/7A/2/48

[39] Lucy, 52

[40] Ibid, 75-6

[41] PRONI Ref. D1889

[42] Meissner, 15

[43] Sinclair, Thomas. "Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant"

[44] Refer to London's Imperial War Museum WWI poster collection

[45] Covenant: "...throughout this our time of threatened calamity..."; Declaration: "Praying that from this calamity God will save Ireland..."

[46] Ulster Women's Unionist Council. "Ulster Women's Declaration."

[47] Foy, Michael. "Ulster Unionist Propaganda against Home Rule 1912-14." *History Ireland*, Vol. 4, No.1 (Spring, 1996), 53

[48] Meissner, 53

[49] PRONI Ref. D1889

[50] PRONI Ref. D1098/2/3

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[51] Kelly, Vivien. "Irish Suffragettes at the Time of the Home Rule Crisis." *History Ireland*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring, 1996), 35

[52] Fletcher, 109

[53] This phrase is used commonly and in a variety of forms, but is not ascribed to any source in particular. Irish nationalists formed a similar organization, the Irish Volunteers, as a response to the UVF's creation.

[54] See Bowman, Timothy. "The Ulster Volunteer Force and the formation of the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division." *Irish Historical Studies* 128 (2001)

[55] PRONI Ref. D1889

[56] PRONI Ref. D2638/E/16

[57] Finley-Bowman, Rachel. "'United We Stand, Divided We Fall'" The Role of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council During the Third Home Rule Crisis and its Aftermath." Pg. 25

[58] See Thom, Deborah. *Nice Girls and Rude Girls* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1998)

[59] United Press. *Oxnard Daily Courier*, May 9, 1914

[60] Ibid

[61] Lucy, 52

[62] When asked about her children, a politically-active shipwright's wife stated "I want to take the baby along too, but she's only 3 years old." The woman proceeded to the bowl to the journalist, who fails to disclose whether the child was presented with equal enthusiasm. (Author unknown. *Daily Express*, 20 September 1912. PRONI Ref. D2638/E/16)

[63] Kelly, 37

[64] Ibid

[65] Lewis, 134

[66] Bowman, 498

[67] Letter from Lord Farnham to Spender, 1919

[68] Carson, Edward. "Ulster Day two-year anniversary speech." September 28, 1912.