

Edward Henry Carson

Known as Sir Edward, Carson was an Irish unionist politician, barrister and judge.

Carson was leader of the Irish Unionist Alliance and Ulster Unionist Party between 1910 and 1921, held numerous positions in the Cabinet of the United Kingdom and served as a Lord of Appeal in Ordinary.



Politics

Carson was elected Liberal Unionist MP for Trinity College, Dublin in 1892 and took his seat at Westminster. His star rose in tandem with his spectacular career in the English courts. He was at one time considered a potential leader of the Conservative Party.



Home Rule

In February 1910, he accepted an invitation from the prominent Ulster politician James Craig to lead the Ulster Unionist Party's fight against 'Home Rule' - the establishment of a devolved Irish parliament in Dublin.

The idea of Home Rule was abhorrent to a staunch Ulster Unionist like Carson, who feared that it would serve the interests of the rural, Catholic south and threaten those of the industrial, Protestant north.

In April 1911 British Prime Minister HH Asquith introduced the third Home Rule bill. There had been two general elections in 1910, both resulting in a hung parliament. Asquith was only able to form a government in coalition with the Irish Parliamentary Party, whose leader, John Redmond, demanded a Home Rule bill in return.

The brink of civil war

By 1914, Home Rule seemed inevitable. Carson's deputy, James Craig, convinced his colleagues that the Ulster Volunteers – a militia formed for Unionist resistance – should be armed. Carson accepted the plan for a gun-running expedition, telling one UVF regiment: "I rely on you to keep your arms with a view to keeping the peace."

Meanwhile the Irish National Volunteers, an unofficial army formed by nationalists in the south of Ireland, were openly drilling and ready to fight for Home Rule. Ireland was on the brink of civil war.

Oscar Wilde

Carson had been a contemporary of the playwright and wit Oscar Wilde at Trinity. In 1895, Wilde brought an ill-advised libel case against the Marquess of Queensberry. Incensed at Wilde's relationship with his son, the marquess accused the playwright of being homosexual. Wilde sued. Representing the marquess, Carson cross-examined Wilde in court. A reporter wrote:

"It was a duel of thrilling interest. Mr Carson's wig throws his white, thin, clever face into sharp relief. When he is angry it assumes the immovability of a death mask."

Wilde lost his libel case, and Carson's skilful cross examination laid bare lurid details of his private life. He was subsequently arrested and tried for gross indecency. Carson refused to take any part in the prosecution that saw Wilde imprisoned. He appealed to the solicitor general to show mercy to a man already disgraced and bankrupt.



The voice of Ulster Unionism

In September 1911, at a massive outdoor demonstration, Carson addressed 50,000 unionists from across Ulster: "With the help of God, you and I joined together ... will yet defeat the most nefarious conspiracy that has ever been hatched against a free people ... We must be prepared ... the morning Home Rule passes, ourselves to become responsible for the government of the Protestant province of Ulster." The following year, on 28 September 1912, nearly half a million people signed the Ulster Covenant – a pledge to defend their way of life from the growing threat of Home Rule.



World War One

The outbreak of war with Germany in August 1914 halted plans to enact the Home Rule bill. Unionists and nationalists fighting over the internal issue of Home Rule postponed their differences in the face of a shared external enemy.

Carson joined HH Asquith's coalition government as attorney general. His focus moved away from Northern Ireland during the conflict. He was also a member of the War Cabinet and First Lord of the Admiralty.

During the war, to the displeasure of many supporters, he spoke in favour of all-Ireland political institutions and structures.



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Carson retired in October 1929. In July 1932, he had witnessed the unveiling of a large statue (sculpted by L. S. Merrifield) of himself in front of Parliament Buildings at Stormont.

The Final Years

The statue was unveiled by Lord Craigavon in the presence of more than 40,000 people. The statue was cast in bronze and placed upon a plinth. The inscription on the base read **“By the loyalists of Ulster as an expression of their love and admiration for its subject”**. This was the final time he visited Belfast.



“His larger than life-size statue, erected in his own lifetime in front of the Northern Ireland parliament at Stormont, symbolizes the widely held perception that Northern Ireland is Carson’s creation.”



State Funeral

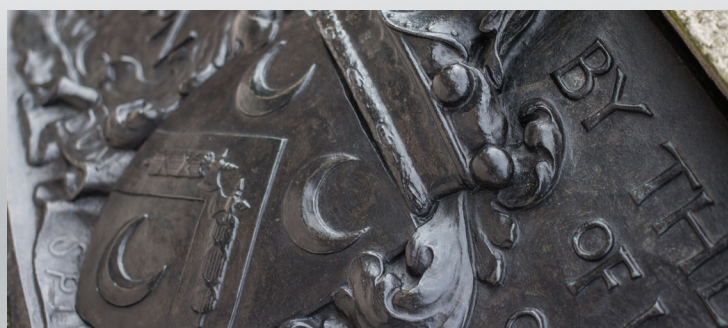
Lord Carson lived at Cleve Court, a Queen Anne house near Minster in the Isle of Thanet, Kent, bought in 1921. It was here that Carson died peacefully on 22 October 1935.

The United Kingdom gave Lord Carson a British state funeral making him one of the only non-monarchs to receive such an honor. The internment took place here at Belfast Cathedral requiring the “Carson Burial Bill” to be passed by the then Northern Ireland Parliament allowing him to be laid to rest. He is still the only person buried within the Cathedral.

The Navy warship HMS Broke brought his body to Belfast and the funeral took place on Saturday

26 October 1935. Thousands of shipyard workers stopped work and bowed their heads as HMS Broke steamed slowly up Belfast Lough, with Carson’s flag-draped coffin sat on the quarterdeck.

On arrival in Belfast the coffin was placed on a gun-carriage which was hauled by naval ratings through the streets which were thronged by silent crowds. On arrival at Belfast Cathedral Carson was carried through the West Door by eight Royal Ulster Constabulary sergeants. Dr Charles D’Arcy, the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland led the service drawing attention to the sacrifices made by Lord Carson;



At the funeral service, earth from each of the Six Counties of Ulster was strewn on the coffin, and subsequently the handsome silver Bowl which had contained this earth was presented to the Cathedral for use at baptismal services. As he was laid to rest, buglers sounded the Last Post and Reveille and the congregation sang “O God our Help in Ages Past”, the “battle hymn” of Ulster unionism. The Tomb is railed in bronze and marked by a massive but simple granite stone from the Mourne mountains bearing the one word ‘Carson.’ A Memorial Plaque has been placed on the wall above.

