

Ian Mitchell's British-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

10 – *Bonar Law* - Adams

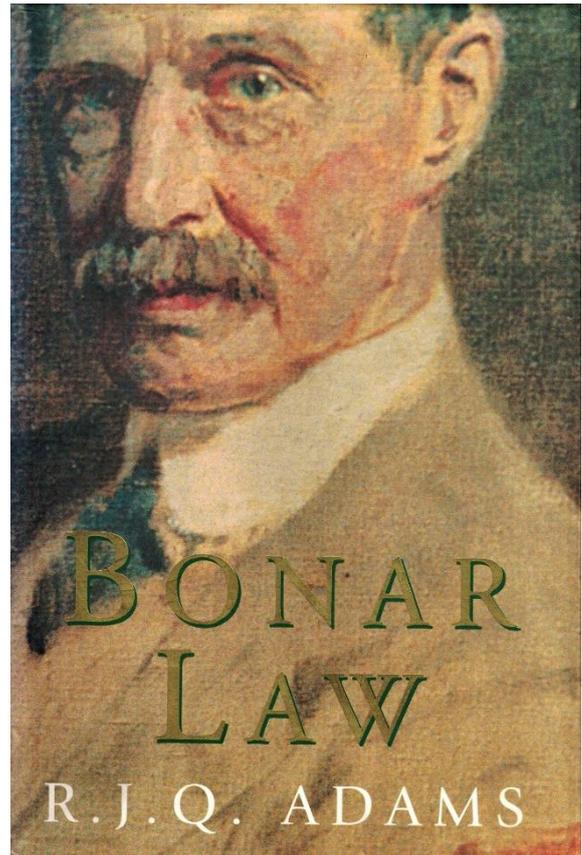
Title: BONAR LAW

Author: R.J.Q. Adams

Publication info: John Murray, 1999
(available on Amazon, [click on cover image for link](#))

Keywords: Bonar Law, Conservative Party, Unionist Party, Ulster, Ireland, Home Rule, Imperial Preference, Lloyd George, First World War, Irish Independence, Glasgow

Reviewer: Ian Mitchell 27 June 2018



Reason to read: Gives the most relevant historical view I have read of the circumstances surrounding the campaign for Irish Home Rule, and the achievement of independence, from the point of view of an Ulster-supporting Tory. Bonar Law was the last Prime Minister of Britain who still regarded Scotland as his home; life in London was more of an employment-related secondment. He wished to be buried in Helensburgh, next to his beloved wife, but higher powers consigned him instead to Westminster Abbey. Bonar Law was born of Irish/Scots Free Church stock in New Brunswick, Canada. He made his fortune as a metal trader in Glasgow before going into politics, where he was almost universally admired for his business-like practicality, his industriousness and his conciliatory approach to disagreement. He had a very happy home life (six children) until his wife died and two of his sons were killed on the Western Front in WWI. Bonar Law was a teetotaler, who smoked cheroots continually and died of throat cancer at the age of 65. This is the only full biography written of him since Robert Blake's relevantly-named study: *The Unknown Prime Minister* (1955).

Main talking points:

1. Ireland: ever since Gladstone took up the cause of Home Rule for Ireland in the early 1880s, the issue had been a running sore in British politics. Bonar Law achieved the unusual feat of becoming trusted by moderate people of both sides. He recognised the ultimate reality that civil war would be the result of trying to force Protestant Ulster into a new, Catholic state in Ireland. That was, to use the modern argot, an “existential” issue for the North. Asquith's Home Rule proposals had never been put forward as the main plank in a general election platform. Bonar

Law thought he was trying to slip a major constitutional realignment in by the back door. The reason was that Asquith, the smooth, semi-nouveau toff who was the Liberal Prime Minister, was being kept in power by the 100 or so Irish Nationalist MPs without whom he would not have had a majority. Bonar Law's position was unlike that of the more radical Ulster loyalists in that he said repeatedly that if the whole country voted for Home Rule in a referendum, or specifically for it in a general election, then he would (reluctantly) accept that. His concern was with process, which is just as important as policy if the framework of civil government is to be preserved. Later on, his realistic, practical approach to emotionally-charged political issues was on many occasions to avert disaster in the First World War. Until late 1916 he was the leader of an explicitly co-operative Opposition; after that, he was Lloyd George's invaluable deputy.

2. When it became clear that Asquith really intended to put the Home Rule Bill on the statute book without specific approval from the electorate, the Conservatives in the House of Commons staged a walk-out. Reading about it recalled to my mind the farcically self-regarding (sniggering, selfies, etc.) demonstration by SNP MPs recently when they walked out of the House of Commons after being denied the right to debate a motion concerning Brexit at the time they thought it ought to be debated. Bonar Law's walk out was an altogether different matter. For a start it was over a mortally serious matter. It took place a month after the outbreak of WWI. His principle was that, in the middle of a national crisis, he would not oppose the government on a major issue like Ireland. He said that in wartime there should be "no parties, there would openly [*sic* – "only"?] be a nation." Secondly, it was done with dignity and genuine reluctance. "We leave the House not under protest and still less as a demonstration. We leave it because, in my belief, to have forced us to debate this subject at all under present circumstances is indecent, and we will take no part in that indecency." (p. 174)
3. The main practical fact which impacted on the issue of whether Ulster should be forced into a Union with the south of Ireland was this: would the Army stay loyal to a government which ordered them to use violence on their fellow Protestants? So many of Britain's soldiers came from Ireland, and so many of those were Protestants, that Imperial Britain could hardly risk that. Without an effective army in Ireland, civil war would have been the result of any attempt to enforce a solution that was unacceptable to one side or the other. Bonar Law, as always, looked facts in the face and said: "The plain issue is: shall the Army be used to coerce Ulster *without the consent of the electors?*" (p. 149) (emphasis added)

Thought(s) provoked: What a well-resourced country Britain can be when its statesmen rise above nationalism. Bonar Law was very typical of one sort of Scot; Lloyd George of a very different sort of Welshman; Maynard Keynes, who was Bonar Law's principle adviser when he ran the Treasury (1916-9), was typical of another sort of Briton, namely the high-brow, *haute bourgeois* Englishman; and, in a hundred other ways, the many Irishmen, from north and south, who float through these pages, often playing a positive part, sometimes a negative one, but always challenging British assumptions and beliefs to an unpalatably healthy extent. Politics was a less tramlined and insiderish game then. Political correctness was limited to personal courtesy.

Incidental interest: As a consistent opponent of religious sectarianism, “Bonar Law was quite prepared to play the Orange card of Ulster to stop Home Rule, but he would never beat the Orange drum of anti-Catholic hatred.” (p. 101)

Bonar Law was totally without ostentation, and therefore completely unlike modern politicians. He thought most great men “humbugs”. He was respected not only for his personal honesty but his political plain speaking. He himself once said: “In dealing with any political question I have only two methods: one is to say what I think, the other is to say nothing.” (p. 254)

Surprising points: Just before the Irish separation went through, in November 1921, Bonar Law told Lloyd George what he thought should be said to the nationalist negotiators about the exclusion of Ulster from the new Free State. “If the Sinn Feiners refuse the plan I have sketched I would say to them, ‘Very well: go to the devil in your own way – govern your part of Ireland as you please. If you ... behave decently to Protestants there and make no attempt on Ulster, we will not interfere with you. We will allow trade to go on at present. On the other hand, if you don’t behave decently we will spend no more British blood in Ireland. We will fight you by economic blockade.’” (p. 305)

Negative issue(s): Nothing major, beyond slightly sub-standard proof-reading by the publisher (see, for example, the “Amusing bit” below).

Style: The book is exhaustively researched and authoritatively written. The style is pure academia, which is a shame (not a ghost of the wit and twinkle of, say, A.J.P. Taylor, who wrote a lot about Bonar Law). However, the story is so unusual, and the narrative so well organised, that I found this book hard to put down.

Amusing bit(s): In the Asquith government, Bonar Law was Colonial Secretary. In 1922, when he formed his own government, “he offered the Colonial Office to Viscount Ullswater.” (p. 332)

Author: Ralph James Quincey Adams is an American professor who writes mostly about modern English history, and who bears some facial resemblance to Bonar Law. He has also written a highly acclaimed biography of A.J. Balfour, Bonar Law’s predecessor as leader of the Conservative Party. Bonar Law thought him the greatest man in parliament.

Link(s): Nothing of any substance that I can find. Professor Adams appears to be a modest cove.

Overall recommendation level: VERY HIGH

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a multi-volume study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*. He lives in Campbeltown and can be contacted at ianbookrec@gmail.com. For other reviews in this series, see: <https://www.moffatrussianconferences.com/ian-mitchell-s-russia>