

# The experiences of Irish MPs at Westminster during the nineteenth century



**WRoCAH funded Collaborative Doctoral Award between the School of History, Philosophy and Digital Humanities, University of Sheffield and the History of Parliament Trust**



## Lead Academic and Partner Organisation Supervisors

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## Project summary

This project explores the contribution to parliamentary culture in the United Kingdom made by Irish MPs during the nineteenth century. Looking beyond the drama of the 'Irish Question', the project examines the social networks of Irish MPs, their sensory experiences as legislators and how 'Irishness' was perceived and reshaped through the prism of parliamentarism. Irish MPs were not merely cogs in a party machine, but active agents in the constitutional process and wider parliamentary scene. This project thus facilitates a new interpretation of Irish politics and the development of British parliamentary practices during the nineteenth century.

## PhD Project description

The study of politics in Ireland during the nineteenth century is heavily dominated by the rise of nationalism, the mobilisation of mass movements and the controversial campaigns waged by Irish nationalists at Westminster. The wider contribution of Irish MPs to parliamentary and political life within the United Kingdom, beyond their role as agitators, has as a result been sorely neglected. Critically, the emergence of distinctive Irish socio-cultural identities

at Westminster - based around the activities of Irish MPs from across the political spectrum working behind the scenes, their interactions with wider political and social networks, and their role in shaping popular perceptions of Ireland - has not received the attention it deserves.

Irish MPs during the nineteenth century occupied a dual role: representatives of a peripheral unit within a multi-union state, but with political lives rooted in the centre. As such, they were moulded, emboldened and constrained by British parliamentary practices and Irish expectations. A major component of political thought in the United Kingdom during the nineteenth century was the idea that a representative assembly provided the most legitimate form of governance. Yet the role of Irish MPs within this rubric was complex: Irish MPs endured a form of constitutional hybridity, being Irish in a nominally 'British' Parliament, often praising the theory of the English constitution while criticising its operation in Ireland. The tension inherent in this hybridity is ripe for interrogation, offering an alternative, more nuanced understanding of Irish MPs' sense of place within the Westminster system.

Building on the History of Parliament's 'official' parliamentary biographies of Irish MPs, this project will expand the study of Irish national identities at Westminster to include areas not covered by the History's traditional volumes. Breaking new ground, it will trace the social, emotional and sensory dimensions of being an Irish representative, focussing particular attention on concepts of Irish masculinity and sociability.

There is ample scope for the student to develop the project within these broad themes. Possible topics include the ways in which Irish MPs from across the divide operated within London's social networks, their interactions with political allies and foes outside the corridors of the Commons, and their involvement in clubs and 'affairs of honour' (duels). The extent to which wives and families accompanied and influenced Irish MPs in their work can be examined. Other avenues of investigation include the changing patterns of parliamentary oratory pioneered by Irish MPs, through their distinct forms of language and rhetorical performances, and their treatment by parliamentary reporters. The resulting perceptions of the 'Irish Question' in the popular press, read through the prism of reportage on Irish MPs, is another potential angle for interrogation.

### **About the History of Parliament Trust**

The History of Parliament Trust has been promoting research on the UK's political history for over 60 years. Its publications include 65 volumes examining the House of Commons and House of Lords in periods from the 14th century onwards, alongside a series of books aimed at wider audiences. The History's related website provides detailed biographies of those who served in Parliament and in-depth studies of constituency politics. There are also survey

volumes collating the findings of the research and examining the operation of Parliament as an institution.

As part of its broader objective to disseminate historical research about the UK Parliament to a wide range of audiences, the Trust is producing parliamentary profiles of all the 2,591 MPs elected to the Commons between 1832 and 1868, 15% of whom represented Irish constituencies. This work has opened a range of unresolved issues regarding the emergence of distinct Irish political identities in and around Westminster, and the extent to which these cut across traditional politico-religious divisions and were formulated around shared cultural values and experiences. These issues are not explored in the History of Parliament's conventional biographies, providing opportunities to promote an under-explored component of Irish political history and uncover new perspectives about the practical operation of Irish representation after the Union, as well as the Irish MPs' sensory, emotional and social experiences of parliamentarianism. Using the expertise of the Trust's 1832-68 section and its resources, the PhD will provide a much-needed additional and accessible approach to the political history of 'Irishness' in the period, helping to broaden public awareness of the UK's 'four nations' political heritage.

### **Engagement, outreach, dissemination and impact initiatives**

The History of Parliament runs a programme of public engagement activities, many of them in partnership with parliamentary agencies, such as the Parliamentary Works of Art Collection and the Parliamentary Archives, alongside a series of academic seminars and conference collaborations. Outcomes of this collaboration will include papers written by the student for the History of Parliament's 'Parliaments, Politics and People' seminar at the Institute of Historical Research, a key feedback forum for ECRs; regular blogs on the popular Victorian Commons website highlighting key research findings, and the opportunity for scholarly contributions to the project's published 1832-68 survey volumes, drawing on the PhD research. The student will be mentored by the 1832-68 project's in-house team of experts, given full access to their unique datasets and resources, and be invited to participate in regular events and colloquiums held in Parliament. Career development opportunities will include the ability to work alongside the History's and Parliament's public engagement team(s), media training related to appearing on radio and television, and participation in research workshops hosted by our university partners, including in Ireland. We will also be able to facilitate networking across heritage departments within and outside Parliament.

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### **Financial support**

Studentships for doctoral research are 40 months in duration for full-time study. Awards are subject to satisfactory academic progress. Awards must be taken up in October 2025; no deferrals are possible as this is the final round of recruitment to WRoCAH Studentships. Awards will comprise fees at Research Council rates and a tax- and national insurance-free maintenance grant

(£20,780 in 2025/26). The grant pays the fees at the Home/UK rate; international students are, however, eligible to apply for this Studentship. It is possible that the difference between the Home/UK and International fee may be met by the University of Sheffield for a successful international applicant. Irish nationals living in the UK or Republic of Ireland may be eligible for home fee status. Awards may be taken up on a part-time basis if a student is eligible to undertake part-time study; international applicants may be required to study full-time under the terms of their visa.

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## **Qualifications**

Strong applicants will have a good first degree in an appropriate subject, as well as a Master's degree (or be working towards one), usually at Distinction level, or professional experience relevant to the scope of the project. We are looking for a well-qualified student with a background in any of the following disciplines: History, Political Science, English Literature, Economics, Philosophy, Sociology, Anthropology.

## **Requirements of the Studentship**

This opportunity is being offered as a full time studentship but part time study may be an option subject to agreement with the supervision team.

WRoCAH students are required to undertake a bespoke training package and to complete a Researcher Employability Project of at least a month and a Knowledge Exchange Project.

**All WRoCAH students must submit their thesis for examination within the funded period.** This is a requirement of the Arts & Humanities Research Council, which provides the funding for WRoCAH, and is a condition of accepting a Studentship.

Before applying for any WRoCAH Studentship, please first ensure that you have read the WRoCAH webpages about the WRoCAH training programme and requirements, as well as other funding opportunities

[wrocah.ac.uk](http://wrocah.ac.uk)

## How to apply

By 12 noon GMT on Wednesday 5 March 2025, applicants are required to submit to WRoCAH an Expression of Interest, which should include:

1. A CV with details of academic qualifications
2. A covering letter comprising a two-page statement to convey your motivation and enthusiasm for the project, and to demonstrate your suitability for your intended PhD studies with the University and Project Partner.

*The covering letter should specifically highlight the following:*

- Your interest in the project and details on why you have chosen that University and Project Partner.
  - How you will apply your current skills, knowledge and experience to undertake a PhD and the approach you would take to develop the project.
  - How the project fits into your career plans and ambitions.
- 17 March 2025: decision on short-listing  
The shortlist of candidates to be invited for an interview will be announced on Monday 17 March 2025.
  - *Short-listed candidates must complete a PhD programme application before interview.* If you are short-listed for an interview you will be sent details of how to apply for a place at the University of Sheffield. At that point you will need to submit the names and contact details of two referees, copies of transcripts of your academic qualifications and (if applicable) an IELTS certificate.
  - 7-30 April 2025: interviews

Interviews will involve the academic supervisor, Project Partner supervisor and a member of the WRoCAH Studentships Committee. They will be conducted online.

## For more information about this project contact

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