

# James Cooper and the Defence of Fermanagh's Electoral Arrangements 1923-1924

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## Introduction

In August 2020, Michelle O'Neill, Vice-President of Sinn Féin and Deputy First Minister, said "When it comes to partition Northern Ireland was built on sectarianism, gerrymandering (tampering with voting districts to deliver certain results) and an inbuilt unionist majority and that is not something that I would ever celebrate" <sup>1</sup>. Although I believe these allegations are unfounded, it underlines the fact that events of a hundred years ago are still influential in shaping modern political attitudes.

In 1923 the boundaries of rural district council electoral divisions were thoroughly revised, particularly in Counties Fermanagh and Tyrone. These changes were the subject of charges of gerrymandering. This term is defined by Webster's Third New International Dictionary as follows:

"To divide (a territorial unit) into election districts in an unnatural and unfair way with the purpose of giving one political party an electoral majority in a large number of districts while concentrating the voting strength of the opposition in as few districts as possible."

The data which would allow claims of gerrymandering in the rural districts to be evaluated is often rather sparse. What are needed are religious/political breakdowns of local government electoral registers (to provide the paper majority in each division) and maps showing electoral divisions (to allow us to see the geographical distribution of voters). This will help us decide whether the divisions are unnatural and unfair, or simply a reflection of how population is naturally distributed. Such data is available for the Omagh Rural District, which is the subject of a separate paper <sup>2</sup>.

In the case of Fermanagh, which had three rural districts subject to boundary revisions, we are indebted to James Cooper, a Unionist solicitor and MP. It was he who prepared a detailed article for the now defunct *Fermanagh Times* <sup>3</sup>, answering Nationalist charges of gerrymandering in the *Fermanagh Herald* <sup>4</sup>. Documents authored by Cooper, which include what seem to be early drafts and proofs for his newspaper article, are held in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), where they have lain largely neglected.

James Cooper was one of eight members of the Northern Ireland Parliament elected for the constituency of Fermanagh and Tyrone under a system of proportional representation (PR). He served from 1921 to 1929 and worked in the family firm of solicitors. Students of more modern periods of history will probably recall his grandson, also called James, who worked in the same firm of solicitors, and became Vice-Chairman of the Ulster Unionist Party. The grandson was perhaps best known for his support of the Belfast Agreement. His grandfather would have probably held a slightly different point of view.

## The Need for Boundary Revision

The electoral boundaries of the rural district councils dated back to the 1838 Poor Law legislation. The passage of time meant that there were serious inequalities in the population and electorate of these divisions. Figures had been prepared by T.S. Strahan of the Ministry of Home Affairs <sup>5</sup>.

**Table 1. Inequalities in Electoral Divisions of County Fermanagh Rural Districts**

<b>Rural District</b>	<b>Highest Population</b>	<b>Lowest Population</b>	<b>Highest Valuation (£)</b>	<b>Lowest Valuation (£)</b>
Enniskillen	1308	136	9514	547
Irvinestown	2036	143	5583	168
Lisnaskea	2158	165	7827	798

The valuation or rateable value of electoral divisions was relevant, because ever since the Town Improvements (Ireland) Act 1854, there had been a legal requirement to take into account both population and valuation in fixing boundaries. This requirement was continued in the Local Government Act 1922 which said that “electoral divisions shall be arranged with a view of the population of each division being, so nearly as conveniently may be, equal, regard being had to a proper representation both of the rural and urban population, and to rateable valuation”<sup>6</sup>. The intention was that rateable value should not be dramatically unequal between electoral divisions, so that they did not pay significantly different amounts of rates. However, the Commissioner tasked with chairing public inquiries into proposed boundary changes in 1923, Judge John Leech KC, consistently stated that he regarded population as the most important factor<sup>7</sup>. As the century progressed, the equalisation of the number of voters, rather than population, was seen to be more relevant.

### **Inquiries Hear About Previous Inequalities**

The three rural district council inquiries presided over by Judge Leech all heard evidence of the inequalities of population in the old electoral divisions. James Cooper, appeared at each inquiry in his capacity as a solicitor. He represented the Enniskillen Rural District at their inquiry, a number of Unionists proposing a new scheme at the Lisnaskea inquiry, and a group of ratepayers at the Irvinestown inquiry.

In the Enniskillen Rural District it was proposed that the number of electoral divisions be reduced from 33 to 26. It was reported by Cooper that “Under the old system, the five divisions of Enniskillen Rural, Florencecourt, Lisbellaw, Newporton and Tempo, had a population of 5,960 and returned five members, while Aghnaglack, Ballycassidy, Ballydoolagh, Ballreagh, Clabby, Collyeror, Cultiagh, Derrybrusk, Doagh, Gardenhill, Glenkeel, Innishmore, Killesher, Kinglass, Oldbar, and Ross combined had only a population of 5,513, and yet returned sixteen members. As examples of glaring inconsistencies Mr.Cooper mentioned that the electoral division of Aghnaglack had a population of only 136 with a valuation of £527, while the division of Enniskillen Rural had a population of 1,308, with a valuation of almost £10,000, and yet each of these divisions had exactly the same voting power at the District Council. The electoral division of Gardenhill had a population of 229, Innishmore 284, Oldbar 295, and Cultiagh 267, while on the other hand Florencecourt had 1,129, Lisbellaw 1,103, Newporton 1,006, and Tempo 1,144”<sup>8</sup>.

In Lisnaskea there was a proposal to reduce the number of divisions to 30 from the 31 that existed in the combined Lisnaskea and Clones No.2 Districts, which were due to be amalgamated. At the time of the inquiry in 1923, the Lisnaskea Rural District had been suspended for refusing to acknowledge the Northern Ireland Government, and had been placed in the hands of a Commissioner. He was not present or represented at the inquiry. As was quite common, the sole proposal for updating the divisions was presented by some private citizens. “Mr Cooper laid considerable stress on the inequalities in the population of the existing divisions, pointing out that Kilturk had a population of only 165, whereas Rosslea

had a population of 2,158. Two divisions, he said, with a combined population of 3,703, returned only two members, while nine divisions whose combined populations were 3,326 returned nine members”<sup>9</sup>. The population of Crum alone exceeded the population of the five divisions of Kilturk, Armagh Manor, Carnmore, Springtown and Carrickmacusker”<sup>10</sup>.

At the Irvinestown inquiry, Mr.F.A.Clarke, Chairman of the Rural District Council, reported that the proposed revised scheme, which would reduce the number of electoral divisions from 23 to 19, had been drawn up by a council sub-committee. He stated that “no question of politics arose in connection with this scheme, as both sides were represented on the committee”<sup>11</sup>. “Captain Gordon [a solicitor representing the Irvinestown Rural District Council] said under the old scheme there was a population of 2,036 in Inishmacsaint, as compared with 143 in Mullybreen, the former being 14 and a half times the latter. In Irvinestown division there was a population of 1,581 as compared with 305 in Lisnarick”<sup>12</sup>.

There were therefore significant inequalities in population and voters between electoral divisions, and there was a pressing need for change.

**Figure 1. The Three Fermanagh Rural District Councils 1924**<sup>13</sup>



Figure 1 (above) shows the three rural district councils which were the subject of boundary revisions. A fourth council, Enniskillen Urban District can be seen in the middle of the Enniskillen Rural District. As was the case in other urban districts, it did not suffer from pronounced population inequalities in its electoral divisions and was not included in the

programme of revisions. Its boundaries had been fixed in more recent times by the Local Government Board based in Dublin <sup>14</sup>.

Both James Cooper and the *Fermanagh Herald* had produced political breakdowns of the electoral register in each division. These differed slightly. There may have been genuine disagreements, but most of the difference is likely to be accounted for by the fact that Cooper used the 1922 electoral register, while the Nationalists who supplied information to the *Fermanagh Herald* had apparently used the 1923 version.

Cooper explained his choice. “We take the 1922 register as a more reliable guide as everyone knows that the 1923 register was specially famous owing to the number of bogus voters enrolled by both sides out of bogus bog-lettings, hen houses, stables, and so forth” <sup>15</sup>. This needs to be expanded upon.

The Local Government Act 1922 had provided for a business occupier’s vote in local government. This applied to people who occupied business premises in a council area but did not have a vote in their capacity as an occupier of a dwelling house (as a domestic ratepayer). They did business in a particular area but lived elsewhere. This led to some rather imaginative claims as to what constituted occupation of a business premises. The problem was eventually addressed by requiring that the business premises in question have some minimum rateable value.

“In the absence of such a provision, John Keenan, an enterprising Catholic registration agent in Enniskillen, had claimed an occupier’s vote on the strength of his owning a grave in the town. Some 80 other Nationalist voters were employing the same argument and were waiting for the outcome of this test case at the Registration Court (sometimes referred to as a Revision Session), which was a body appointed to adjudicate in disputed cases about who was entitled to a vote. The Revising Officer ruled as follows.

‘After some legal argument, Mr Hanrahan, in giving judgement, said he was quite clear that Mr Keenan was the owner of the plot of ground, but the only occupation of a grave could be by a dead body, as a grave could not be occupied by anybody or anything except a corpse. He would therefore disallow this claim and all the others dependent upon it’ <sup>16</sup>.

The loophole was closed in the Local Government (Franchise) Act 1923, which set the minimum rateable value to qualify for a business premises vote as £5 (increased to £10 in 1946). [Because the graves and other properties used to acquire bogus business occupiers’ votes were of negligible rateable value, the introduction of the £5 minimum valuation was effective in eliminating the abuse].

In the debate on the legislation, further examples of previous abuses were given. James Cooper, speaking as one of the MPs for Fermanagh and Tyrone, ‘in supporting the Bill, referred to an instance in which he said that the owner of a beehive purchased the square yard of land on which it stood, thus securing for himself a vote as tenant. In a second instance there were twenty-five stalls in a stable at the rear of a Roman Catholic church and people attending the church and drove there on Sundays secured tenancies for the stalls from the priest, entitling them to twenty-five votes. In a case where a monthly fair was held the stalls in the market place were rented and seventy-five votes were secured. In other cases a number of votes had been obtained from tenancies of hen-houses’ <sup>17</sup> ” <sup>18</sup>.

**Table 2. Comparison of Breakdowns of the Fermanagh Rural District Councils' Electoral Registers by James Cooper (1922) <sup>19</sup> and the Fermanagh Herald (1923) <sup>20</sup>**

	<b>Enniskillen</b>	<b>Irvinestown</b>	<b>Lisnaskea</b>
Cooper Un. Voters	3632	2762	3519
Herald Un. Voters	3663	3128	3504
<b>Un. Difference</b>	<b>+31</b>	<b>+366</b>	<b>-15</b>
Cooper Nat. Voters	3153	2583	4315
Herald Nat. Voters	3280	2959	4506
<b>Nat. Difference</b>	<b>+127</b>	<b>+376</b>	<b>+191</b>
Cooper Total Voters	6785	5345	7834
Herald Total Voters	6943	6087	8010
<b>Total Difference</b>	<b>+158</b>	<b>+742</b>	<b>+176</b>

In Table 2, a plus sign (+) indicates that the *Fermanagh Herald* estimate of the number of voters is greater than James Cooper's estimate in the *Fermanagh Times*. A minus sign (-) indicates that James Cooper's estimate is greater. The differences in Enniskillen and Lisnaskea Rural Districts are modest but not insignificant, particularly in the estimates of the number of Nationalists. In Irvinestown Rural District, however, the differences are highly significant. Of the three councils, this is the one which had the smallest paper majority on the register (less than 200 in the Unionists' favour). It is therefore the local authority where there would be the greatest incentive to game the system by claiming extra business premises votes. There seems to be no other ready explanation for the local government electorate increasing by over 700 (13%) in one year. As Cooper had indicated, both sides seemed to have been equally imaginative in acquiring what turned out to be bogus votes.

### **Lisnaskea Rural District Council**

Table 2 indicates that there was generally believed to be a Unionist paper majority on the local government electoral register in both the Enniskillen Rural and the Irvinestown Rural District Council areas. However, in Lisnaskea, Cooper's figures showed there was a notional 4315 to 3519 Nationalist majority on the register. After the revision of the electoral districts in this council area, Unionists were left with 18 seats compared to the 13 Nationalists representing single member divisions. Lisnaskea would therefore be the main focus of controversy.

How is such a turnaround possible? As with other studies of mine on the electoral arrangements of the Londonderry Corporation and the Omagh Rural District Council, the answer lies in the way each side's voters were distributed <sup>21 22</sup>. Where there are single member wards under a first-past-the-post system of voting, overall victory goes to the party which has a majority in the greater number of communities. Parties which waste votes by building up large majorities in a small number of electoral divisions are disadvantaged. They are often said to display poor vote efficiency. "Vote efficiency bias occurs where one party's votes are more efficiently distributed across the wards than are its opponent's" <sup>23</sup>.

The key question is then whether these concentrations of population are natural, due to historical patterns of settlement, or whether they are artefacts of drawing boundary lines in strange places on maps (gerrymandering). With single member electoral divisions, the main thing to look for is a contiguous cluster of such divisions each displaying a significant majority of a particular party's voters. Such clusters are pretty much impossible to produce by simply drawing boundary lines in unusual places. Figure 2 below shows the electoral divisions within the Lisnaskea Rural District.

Figure 2. Lisnaskea Rural District Electoral Divisions <sup>24</sup>



In the South-West corner of the district can be seen the contiguous electoral divisions of Aughakillymaude, Springtown, Drumully, Aghyoule, and Drumshemuck. These are close to the border with the Irish Free State (later the Irish Republic) and Beyond the Lakes, that is South-West of a line formed by Upper and Lower Lough Erne which run throughout Fermanagh from the North-West to the South-East. It is in this area that the Catholic population was disproportionately concentrated. This can be seen by the estimated number of Unionists and Nationalists on the electoral register in these five divisions. At this time “Unionist” simply meant Protestant and “Nationalist” meant Catholic.

**Table 3. Political Breakdown of Lisnaskea Nationalist Divisions Beyond the Lakes** <sup>25 26</sup>

<b>Electoral Division</b>	<b>Cooper Nat Voters</b>	<b>Cooper Un Voters</b>	<b>Herald Nat Voters</b>	<b>Herald Un Voters</b>
Aughakillymaude	177	79	180	81
Aghyoule	190	45	195	38
Drummully	220	38	220	43
Drumshemuck	184	47	191	44
Springtown	217	23	220	23
Total	988	232	1006	229

The Catholic population was also disproportionately concentrated in five other electoral divisions adjacent to the border with the Irish Free State. There was a bloc of three divisions, Carnmore, Eshnadarragh and Rosslea on the Eastern border of the Lisnaskea Rural District. A further two electoral divisions, Derrysteaton and Clonkeelan were on the South-Eastern border. See Table 4.

**Table 4. Political Breakdown of Five Further Lisnaskea Nationalist Border Divisions** <sup>27</sup>  
<sup>28</sup>

<b>Electoral Division</b>	<b>Cooper Nat Voters</b>	<b>Cooper Un Voters</b>	<b>Herald Nat Voters</b>	<b>Herald Un Voters</b>
Carnmore	253	21	284	22
Clonkeelan	152	98	164	97
Derrysteaton	182	59	193	54
Eshnadarragh	240	0	251	1
Rosslea	204	45	208	39
Total	1031	223	1100	213

It can be seen that in Eshnadarragh, the concentration of Catholics was so great that James Cooper could not find any Protestant voters at all. The *Fermanagh Herald* identified just one.

Tables 3 and 4 underline the fact that Catholics were disproportionately located in 10 divisions adjacent to the border. This concentration of population affected what has become known as the electoral efficiency of the political candidates they supported. Piling up huge majorities in a small number of areas was not the best way of maximising a party's number of representatives.

The proportion of Catholic voter in these 10 electoral divisions can be discerned from Table 5.

**Table 5. The Ten Lisnaskea Nationalist Border Divisions as a Percentage of the Total <sup>29</sup>**

	<b>Cooper Nat Voters</b>	<b>Cooper Un Voters</b>	<b>Herald Nat Voters</b>	<b>Herald Un Voters</b>
<b>Ten Nationalist Border Divisions</b>	2019	455	2106	442
<b>Lisnaskea Total</b>	4315	3519	4506	3504
<b>The Ten as a %</b>	<b>46.79</b>	<b>12.93</b>	<b>46.74</b>	<b>12.62</b>

Thus, just under half of the Catholic electorate was located in 10 of the 31 electoral divisions. Conversely, over 87% of the Protestant voters lived in the other 21 divisions. This was not achieved by drawing lines in strange places on maps, but simply reflected the historical patterns of settlement. In these other 21 electoral divisions, Protestant voters outnumbered Catholics by 3064 to 2296 on James Cooper's figures, and by 3062 to 2400 on the *Fermanagh Herald* figures. The more widely dispersed Protestant population exhibited greater electoral efficiency, which allowed it to win a majority of seats in the Lisnaskea Rural District.

### **Irvinestown Rural District Council**

We can see from Table 2 that Irvinestown Rural District had a small Protestant majority on the electoral register. The key, as usual, is to study how the electorate was distributed.



Figure 3. Irvinestown Rural District Electoral Divisions <sup>30</sup>



We have noted that in the case of Lisnaskea Rural District Council, Catholics were disproportionately concentrated in 10 of the 31 electoral divisions. In Irvinestown Rural District, this concentration was even more marked, as can be demonstrated in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6. Political Breakdown of Irvinestown Nationalist Border Divisions <sup>31 32</sup>

Electoral Division	Cooper Nat Voters	Cooper Un Voters	Herald Nat Voters	Herald Un Voters
Aghamuldowey	268	45	331	47
Belleek	219	47	243	41
Castlecaldwell	220	55	256	53
Innishmacsaint	262	34	302	33
Lattone	285	24	293	23
Total	1254	205	1425	197

**Table 7. The Five Irvinestown Nationalist Border Divisions as a Percentage of the Total**  
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	<b>Cooper Nat Voters</b>	<b>Cooper Un Voters</b>	<b>Herald Nat Voters</b>	<b>Herald Un Voters</b>
<b>Five Nationalist Border Divisions</b>	1254	205	1425	197
<b>Irvinestown RDC Total</b>	2583	2762	2959	3128
<b>The Five as a %</b>	<b>48.55</b>	<b>7.42</b>	<b>48.16</b>	<b>6.30</b>

In the case of Irvinestown, almost half of the Catholic electorate lived in just five of the 19 single member electoral divisions, namely Aghamuldowney, Belleek, Castlecaldwell, Innishmacsaint, and Lattone. These wards were spread along the border with the Irish Free State in the West of the district. Around 83% of Protestant voters lived in the other 14 divisions, outnumbering Catholic voters by 2557 to 1329 on Cooper's figures. James Cooper and the *Fermanagh Herald* agreed that there were 11 divisions with a Unionist majority on the register and seven with a Nationalist majority. They disagreed about Garrison. Cooper thought there was a Protestant majority of three on the register, whereas the *Herald*, working off figures which were probably artificially inflated, thought there were twelve more Catholics than Protestants. From any point of view, the Garrison electoral division was very marginal.

### **Enniskillen Rural District Council**

This rural district provided the least controversy, because as can be seen from Table 2, there was general agreement that there was a Protestant majority of several hundred on the electoral register. Nevertheless, it will be instructive to note that the Catholic population was similarly concentrated in the border areas Beyond the Lakes. Table 8, read in conjunction with Figure 4, underlines this point.

**Table 8. Political Breakdown of Enniskillen Nationalist Border Divisions** <sup>34 35</sup>

<b>Electoral Division</b>	<b>Cooper Nat Voters</b>	<b>Cooper Un Voters</b>	<b>Herald Nat Voters</b>	<b>Herald Un Voters</b>
Aghnaglack	227	23	213	21
Doagh	199	91	188	57
Holywell	210	52	201	37
Kinawley	216	51	214	41
Kinglass	147	96	168	113
Old Barr	244	36	222	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>1243</b>	<b>349</b>	<b>1206</b>	<b>290</b>

**Figure 4. Enniskillen Rural District Electoral Divisions** <sup>36</sup>



Table 9 below demonstrates that slightly under 40% of Catholic voters were located in just six of the 26 single member electoral divisions, with 90% of Protestant voters living in the remaining 20 divisions, where they outnumbered Catholic voters by 3283 to 1910 on Cooper’s figures.

**Table 9. The Six Enniskillen Nationalist Border Divisions as a Percentage of the Total <sup>37</sup>**

	<b>Cooper Nat Voters</b>	<b>Cooper Un Voters</b>	<b>Herald Nat Voters</b>	<b>Herald Un Voters</b>
<b>Six Nationalist Border Divisions</b>	1243	349	1206	290
<b>Enniskillen RDC Total</b>	3153	3632	3280	3663
<b>The Six as a %</b>	<b>39.42%</b>	<b>9.61</b>	<b>36.77</b>	<b>7.92</b>

The same pattern of Catholic voters living disproportionately in a small number of electoral divisions is repeated in the Enniskillen Rural District. On Cooper's (probably more reliable) figures, 39% of Catholic voters were located in just 23% of the electoral divisions. This enabled Unionists to have majorities in 17 of the 26 divisions.

### **The Question of Valuation**

The Northern Ireland Government had a legal responsibility to take account of valuation (rateable value) in approving the boundaries of electoral divisions. Some attempt should have been made to equalize the amount of rates paid by each area, or at least to minimise the differences. This requirement seems to have been first introduced in the Town Improvements (Ireland) Act 1854 and was continued in Northern Ireland's Local Government Act 1922.

However, at the public hearing into the Lisnaskea electoral scheme, the Commissioner, Judge John Leech, stated that he was taking more account of numbers of people than valuation. "He was going on the basis of population, taking into consideration to some extent the question of valuation, where they could not equalise the population. The principle on which he went in his recommendations to the Ministry was the question of population. That was the principle most favourable to the humbler or smaller class of people, as if they went entirely on the question of valuation it would put the matter entirely into the hands of large landowners, and he was avoiding doing that." <sup>38</sup>

In the case of Lisnaskea and Enniskillen Rural District Councils there is no evidence that a higher number of voters was associated with a lower valuation or a lower number of voters with a higher valuation.

The correlation between these variables is 0.17 in the case of Lisnaskea and -0.10 in the case of Enniskillen. This is indicative of a random relationship.

Irvinestown is different. The correlation between electorate and valuation is -0.63. This significant negative correlation does suggest a higher electorate is associated with a lower valuation and a lower electorate with a higher valuation. Some attempt was made to take valuation into account.

An inspection of the data suggests that the correlation is driven by the fact that the Unionist divisions of Churchill, Lisnarick and Killadeas paid the most rates and had the smallest electorates. They were, however, outliers – unusual cases that distort the big picture. Disregarding these three divisions produces a small negative correlation of -0.25. In general,

the Unionist electoral divisions paid 50% more rates than their Nationalist equivalents, but of the eight divisions with the most voters, four had Unionist majorities and four had Nationalist majorities.

The variations in numbers of electors in each division we are talking about are very small. The mean average number of voters in an electoral division was 281. The range of electorates was 232 to 322 (using Cooper's figures in these calculations). Seats with a Unionist majority had, on average, 271 voters, while Nationalist divisions had 296 voters (leaving marginal Garrison out of the calculation). A Unionist division would have a valuation, on average, of £3328. The valuation of an average Nationalist division would be £2147.

A Unionist division's valuation was typically 50% bigger than its Nationalist counterpart, but in terms of electorate was, on average, only 10% smaller. This does suggest that the adjustment to each division's electorate because of valuation, which would have favoured Unionists, was fairly modest. It would not affect the balance of power in the Irvinestown Rural District.

In the Lisnaskea Rural District, the mean average number of voters in an electoral division was 253. The average division with a Unionist majority had 257 voters, and one with a Nationalist majority had 247 voters. The average valuation in a Unionist electoral division was £3167, and the average Nationalist counterpart was £2382. Big disparities in average valuation were clearly tolerated while the number of voters in each division was very similar.

In the Enniskillen Rural District, the average division with a Unionist majority had 259 voters, and an average division with a Nationalist majority had 265 voters. The average valuation in a Unionist electoral division was £3710, and the average Nationalist area was valued at £2765. This is a similar pattern to Lisnaskea. Average numbers of voters per electoral division were similar, but average valuations were not.

This additional data reinforces the conclusions drawn by looking at the very low (negative) correlation between voter numbers and valuation figures. In Lisnaskea and Enniskillen Rural Districts, there is no evidence that valuation was given any serious weight in drawing boundaries.

### **James Cooper, the *Fermanagh Herald* and the *Fermanagh Times***

The local Nationalist paper, the *Fermanagh Herald*, had published a long article in its issue of 1 December 1923 under the heading, "Gerrymandering of Fermanagh". The argument is predictable but not very effective. The *Fermanagh Herald* complained that there were more Catholics than Protestants in County Fermanagh and that this was proof that the electoral arrangements had been gerrymandered. The same argument was being used 40 (and even 100) years later.

But there is no guarantee under a first-past-the-post system that a majority of voters (and certainly not a majority in the population) across a county or district will be translated into an electoral majority. It depends on how a party's voters are distributed. If it wastes votes building up large majorities in particular electoral areas, it is electorally inefficient.

What the *Fermanagh Herald* needed to prove gerrymandering was an additional argument that the way the electoral areas were drawn up was unfair and unnatural. This it failed to do. It complained about voters in certain areas having a long trip to the nearest polling centre, but Cooper was later to reply that "The divisions are compact and the distances voters will have to travel to record their votes are very short, scarcely exceeding two or three miles in any case"<sup>39</sup>.

The newspaper uses a most unusual argument. In relation to the Enniskillen Rural District, it says that “it requires 364 Nationalist voters to elect a member, while it only requires 215 Unionists to elect one”<sup>40</sup>. But this is to say little more than that Nationalists wasted votes by building up big majorities in a small number of areas. The concentration of Nationalists in areas close to the border was not an artificial phenomenon. Once the vast differences in the population of electoral areas had been eliminated, the full scale of Nationalist electoral inefficiency became apparent.

The editor of the *Fermanagh Times*, a Unionist newspaper, had approached James Cooper to pen a reply. Cooper felt it wise to first write to the Northern Ireland prime minister, Sir James Craig, on 18 January 1924, to get his blessing. He sent Craig a full draft of his reply to the *Fermanagh Herald* complaints<sup>41</sup>. Cooper’s *Fermanagh Times* article finally appeared on 24 April 1924 under the heading, “Alleged Gerrymandering in Fermanagh – Reply to Nationalist Criticism”. It was this article which reproduced the detailed maps of electoral areas in each of the rural district council areas used in this paper. It is only when such maps are available, accompanied by a religious breakdown of each electoral division, that the distribution of voters becomes apparent.

In referring to the *Fermanagh Herald* article and similar offerings in other newspapers, Cooper says that “any redistribution of the electoral divisions which failed to give the Nationalists majorities on each council would be termed gerrymandering.” In highlighting the distribution of voters, he said that apart from a few mountainous and remote areas “there is a substantial Unionist majority over the whole county.” By this, Cooper meant that Unionists were geographically dominant. They were in a majority in most parts of County Fermanagh, and the areas where Nationalists predominated were something of an exception. Under such circumstances, the first-past-the-post system would favour Unionism. That was not something for which it was morally culpable.

### **A Familiar Pattern**

Previous studies about the Londonderry Corporation and the Omagh Rural District Council showed that Nationalist parties displayed poor electoral efficiency<sup>42 43</sup>. They wasted votes accumulating large majorities in a few areas. Those accumulations are quite easily explained by natural patterns of settlement and people’s preferences about where they wanted to live.

There is a not dissimilar story in the case of the Fermanagh rural district councils. The clustering of Catholic voters along the border with the Irish Free State (later the Irish Republic) was not the result of public sector housing policy and it cannot be explained by someone drawing lines in strange places on maps. It reflected historical patterns of settlement. Given such electorally inefficient concentrations, any fair drawing of boundaries would favour Unionists. It was they who had majorities in a greater number of electoral divisions.

Perhaps it is best to leave the last word with James Cooper. “The Nationalists did not submit any schemes, but it is evident they would have had great difficulty in submitting schemes to give them greater representation which would have provided equality in voters and which had any regard whatever to the question of valuation”<sup>44</sup> (*Fermanagh Times* 24 April 1924).

## References

- <sup>1</sup> *Irish News* 13 August 2020
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- <sup>3</sup> *Fermanagh Times* 24 April 1924. Some of the proofs for this article are in PRONI CAB/9/B/13/1
- <sup>4</sup> *Fermanagh Herald* 1 December 1923
- <sup>5</sup> *Reconstitution of District Electoral Divisions*, PRONI CAB/9/B/13/2
- <sup>6</sup> Ministry of Home Affairs for Northern Ireland (1936) *Londonderry County Borough proposed reconstitution of wards* (Inquiry presided over by the Ministry Inspector, Vice-Admiral N.E. Archdale). PRONI HA/51/1 p.11
- <sup>7</sup> *Mid Ulster Mail* 17 February 1923; *Fermanagh Herald* 3 March 1923
- <sup>8</sup> *Fermanagh Times* 8 March 1923; *Fermanagh Herald* 10 March 1923
- <sup>9</sup> *Freemans Journal* 1 March 1923
- <sup>10</sup> *Fermanagh Herald* 3 March 1923
- <sup>11</sup> *Northern Whig* 1 March 1923
- <sup>12</sup> *Northern Whig* 1 March 1923
- <sup>13</sup> *Fermanagh Times* 24 April 1924
- <sup>14</sup> *Redistribution of Electoral Areas in County Fermanagh*, PRONI CAB/9/B/13/1
- <sup>15</sup> *Redistribution of Electoral Areas in County Fermanagh*, PRONI CAB/9/B/13/1
- <sup>16</sup> *Belfast Telegraph* 30 November 1922
- <sup>17</sup> *Northern Whig* 12 May 1923
- <sup>18</sup> Kingsley P. (2021) [A Short Guide to Elections for the Londonderry Corporation 1920-1967 p.38-39](http://analogical.org.uk/historical-papers/p.38-39) Available online from: <http://analogical.org.uk/historical-papers/>
- <sup>19</sup> *Fermanagh Times* 24 April 1924
- <sup>20</sup> *Fermanagh Herald* 1 December 1923
- <sup>21</sup> Kingsley P. (2020) *British Standards, the Drawing of Londonderry's Ward Boundaries and the Location of Ulster's Second University* Available online from <http://analogical.org.uk/historical-papers/>
- <sup>22</sup> Kingsley P. (2021) *The Omagh Rural District Electoral Divisions Scheme 1923: Climbing the North Face of the Eiger*, Available online from <http://analogical.org.uk/historical-papers/>
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- <sup>24</sup> *Fermanagh Times* 24 April 1924
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<sup>29</sup> *Fermanagh Times* 24 April 1924; *Fermanagh Herald* 1 December 1923; and the author's own calculations

<sup>30</sup> *Fermanagh Times* 24 April 1924

<sup>31</sup> *Fermanagh Times* 24 April 1924

<sup>32</sup> *Fermanagh Herald* 1 December 1923

<sup>33</sup> *Fermanagh Times* 24 April 1924; *Fermanagh Herald* 1 December 1923; and the author's own calculations

<sup>34</sup> *Fermanagh Times* 24 April 1924

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<sup>37</sup> *Fermanagh Times* 24 April 1924; *Fermanagh Herald* 1 December 1923; and the author's own calculations

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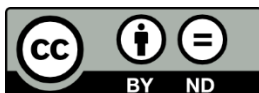
<sup>40</sup> *Fermanagh Herald* 3 March 1923

<sup>41</sup> Letter from James Cooper to Sir James Craig 18 January 1924, PRONI CAB/9/B/13/1

<sup>42</sup> Kingsley P. (2021) [A Short Guide to Elections for the Londonderry Corporation 1920-1967 p.38-39](http://analogical.org.uk/historical-papers/p.38-39) Available online from: <http://analogical.org.uk/historical-papers/>

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