Proportional representation in Ireland

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PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION IN IRELAND.
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BY

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DUBLIN:
EDWARD PONSONBY, LTD., 116 GRAFTON STREET.

LONDON:
SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, HAMILTON, KENT, & CO., LTD.
1913.
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PREFACE.

The discussion to which the following pages are devoted is inspired by the same idea as appears to have inspired an article which recently appeared in an English magazine under the title "Proportional Representation—What is it?"—the idea, namely, that the recognition of the principle of proportional representation in the Government of Ireland Bill may possibly have given rise to a nascent desire on the part of a few electors to know what proportional representation means and what party is intended to be prejudiced by it.

Proportional representation is generally supposed to be something that could only appeal to persons of a peculiarly academic turn of mind. But the truth is that we have long been in enjoyment of a system of proportional representation without knowing it. Hence, instead of asking what proportional representation is, it would be more appropriate to ask, by what sort of an electoral system it would be entirely excluded. The question is easily answered. If the whole country formed one single constituency, and if each elector could vote for 670 members, a party having a majority of one might return the whole 670 members. The minority would be completely unrepresented. Such would be the electoral system that would entirely exclude proportional representation. But if each of
the constituent countries in the United Kingdom formed a separate constituency, and if each elector could vote for as many members as his country returned representatives, there would be proportional representation as between the different countries, though not as between the different parties in each country. Our present system, however, goes further than this. It divides each country into a number of constituencies, with the result that the geographical distribution of parties works out a representation that is roughly proportionate to party strength. Thus, in Ireland, North, South, and East Belfast, and a few other aristocratic constituencies, are able to return members to represent the wealth, intelligence, culture, and toleration of the enlightened minority; the remaining constituencies being left to return members to represent the blind prejudices and superstitions of the uneducated masses. And if none but Unionists could live in certain counties in Ulster, and none but Nationalists in the remaining counties of Ireland, then, supposing there were no anomalies of distribution, our present system would be a perfect system of proportional representation. But, as matters stand, more Unionists are able to live in the Nationalist counties than there are Nationalists able to live in the Unionist counties. The result is that the Unionists are under-represented; and so the system has to be changed in order to make the balance fairer when the Union is abolished.

But to devise a better system of proportional representation than the present is a difficult matter. At first sight it might seem sufficient to make the whole