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BULMER HOBSON, key republican figure of the early years of the century—by Cathal O'Shannon

ONE of the small group of young men who in the first decade of the century led the re-organisation and revitalisation of the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood, Bulmer Hobson was born in 1883 in Holywood, County Down, of Quaker stock that had settled in the North of Ireland for several generations.

Through family associations with cultural activities in Belfast he had come in contact with Irish minded societies before he was out of his teens. One of these was the Gaelic League in which in Belfast there were a number of Protestant members of liberal opinion.

In 1901-1902 he was secretary of the Ollamh Fodhla branch of the Gaelic League and about the same time became connected with a local branch of Cumann na nGaedheal, the federation of early Sinn Fein societies which was the outcome of Arthur Griffith's propaganda in his weekly *The United Irishman*, and which to some extent was dominated by the I.R.B.

Like other young men of his way of thinking in the Gaelic League and Cumann na nGaedheal who were good material for recruitment into a revolutionary movement he was sworn into a Belfast Circle of the I.R.B. and in years to follow he was to become one of the most important influential leaders of the secret Organisation and of the open Sinn Fein movement throughout the country.

One of his special interests in those years was in the potentialities of young boys for the development of a militant national movement and to develop on these lines on a definitely separative basis he established a boys' athletic club to which was given the name of the ancient corps, Fianna Eireann.

By 1905 he and Denis McCullough, the most prominent of the younger leaders of the I.R.B. in the North and son of a well-known Fenian, had established the Dungannon Club, Republican in aim and largely influenced by the I.R.B. For this, Hobson wrote his first publication "To the whole people of Ireland the Manifesto of the Dungannon Club," to which was appended the text of the constitution of the new body. This appeared in 1905.

Dungannon Club

A subsequently notable recruit to the Dungannon Club and to the I.R.B. was Sean MacDermott with whom he was to be closely associated until 1914.

Clubs in London and Dublin were established with P. S. O'Hegarty, of Cork, and Robert Lynd, of Belfast, in leading roles in the former, and Pat McCartan, of Tyrone, in the latter, MacCullough, Hobson, MacDermott, McCartan and O'Hegarty, in close and vigorous comradeship with Tom Clarke on his return from America to Dublin in 1907, were the men whose new leadership and widespread re-organisation of the I.R.B. prepared the way for the Irish Volunteers, the Rising of Easter Week, the War of Independence, and the establishment and recognition of the sovereign Irish State.

It was by his own deliberate and well considered choice that Hobson was not with Clarke and MacDermott and their fellow-members of the Provisional Government, P. H. Pearse, James Connolly, Joseph Plunkett, Eamonn Ceannt and Thomas MacDonagh, in the planning and carrying out of the Insurrection when the time for it had come. That choice was to give him a place in history different from theirs, and to some of those who had followed him through the years made him a national leader *manqué*.

All through his life Hobson had a penchant for editing journals of opinion, with good taste in paper of quality, print, and layout. His first was *The Republic*, this weekly organ of the Dungannon Club, which ran to 23 numbers from December 1906 to May 1907. To it he contributed a series of articles, "The Creed" of the Republic,"

which in 1907 was published as a pamphlet with that title at the Republican Press, 114 Royal avenue, Belfast.

Another series from *The Republic*, Robert Lynd's "The Orangemen and the Nation," was also issued. A third series, "Fenianism in Practice: A Philosophy of Irish Ireland" by P. S. O'Hegarty, ran in the paper, but although announced as a pamphlet by the Republican Press it never came out.

A fourth pamphlet was to be a reprint of John Mitchel's "Letters to the Ulster Protestants" from his insurrectionist weekly *The United Irishman*. Years later this was published in Dublin, probably at Hobson's suggestion.

Ulster Literary Theatre

Almost all Hobson's writing was political but for a year or two before he left Belfast and settled in Dublin he turned to more literary work and the stage. He was one of the founders of the Ulster Literary Theatre which had part of its origin among members of a Protestant national society in Belfast. For it he wrote "Brian of Banba," a poetic heroic piece on the young Brian before he became Boramha, and this was produced by that company in 1905.

And he was among the poets in the U.L.T.'s quarterly "Uladh," which issued also from 114 Royal avenue. One of his verse contributions was "Song of the Dreamers."

About 1905 Hobson became a close friend of Roger Casement to whose heart Irish independence had become very dear. From Casement he was able to get valuable support for several of his national interests, including propaganda against recruiting Irishmen for the British army. And it was he who, when staying with Casement at Cushendall, persuaded him, but with difficulty, not to refuse acceptance of the British Order of St. Michael and St. George conferred on him for distinguished foreign service.

In 1907 he paid a visit to the United States as representing the forward elements in the I.R.B. and Sinn Fein and through John Devoy and the Clan na Gael helped to strengthen the activist alliance between the Clan in America and the I.R.B. at home in Ireland.

That year the Dungannon Club amalgamated with Cumann na nGaedheal to become the Sinn Fein League. Soon after the League amalgamated with the National Council and the united body formally took the name Sinn Fein. Hobson became one of its vice-presidents.

In the next three years he was a contributor to W. P. Ryan's weekly in Dublin, *The Peasant*, and its successor and in 1909 he edited a short-lived weekly, the *County Dublin Observer*, issued from *The Peasant* office.

By this time he had settled in Dublin. And between other jobs he helped F. J. Bigger, of Belfast, to prepare a series of volumes on prominent Northern men among the United Irishmen in 1798. Only

the United Kingdom in 1929. Only one of these, that on William Orr, was published.

Fianna

In 1909, with the Countess Markievicz he founded in Dublin the national boy scouts' organisation, Fianna Eireann. It was at his suggestion that name was taken from his earlier boys' organisation in Belfast. A vital difference, however, was that the new body was a drilled military corps on a national scale while the Belfast body had been a local junior athletic club with classes in Irish and Irish history.

That year also he issued a small volume entitled "Defensive Warfare — A Handbook for Irish nationalists." This, however, did not find favour with the I.R.B. in Dublin and by arrangement with him it was published by the West Belfast branch of Sinn Fein, successor of the Dungannon Club.

On transfer to Dublin Hobson was elected Centre, or chairman, of one of the city's Circles of the I.R.B. and from that Chairman of The Dublin Centres Board and the Leinster Board with consequent membership of the Supreme Council, the executive authority of the Organisation. Colleagues of his in the Supreme Council were Clarke, MacDermott, O'Hegarty, MacCartan and MacCullough.

In 1909-1910 differences in the executive of Sinn Fein on policy and activity developed in opposition to Arthur Griffith and his friends and at one stage Hobson contemplated withdrawing from the controlling body. In these differences associates with him were O'Hegarty, MacCullough and Countess Markievicz.

Already, like the others in the leadership of the I.R.B., he was looking forward to war between Germany and Great Britain, a prospect also strongly in the view of Casement. Inspired by this, Casement in 1910, at Hobson's request, prepared a memorandum on the position of Ireland in relation to Germany in the expected war. Hobson proposed that this should be transferred to Germany but this was not done at that time and the document remained with Hobson. Hobson gave this to John Devoy for the German Authorities when he was in the U.S.A. in the spring of 1914. Towards the end of 1910 Hobson was one of the founders of *Irish Freedom* as the monthly official organ of the Supreme Council of the I.R.B.

Hobson as a young man. Robert Lynd once wrote of his appearance on a public platform in these terms: ". . . a young man at once curiously boyish and curiously Napoleonic in appearance."

Irish Freedom

To its first number he contributed the first editorial, "The Flowing Tide" and by arrangement with him this was published by I.R.B. friends in Belfast as No. 1 of a series of Freedom Club leaflets.

For some months MacCartan was editor of this monthly but much of the actual direction was by Hobson and after a time Hobson succeeded to that post and continued in it until his sharp disagreement with the controlling elements in the Supreme Council in 1914. The last few numbers in 1914 were directed by Clarke and MacDermott until its suppression in December.

A selection from the monthly was published in 1913 in a volume entitled "The Voice of Freedom."

By 1912 *Irish Freedom* and its editor and the Separatists in the I.R.B. had found a militant ally in P. H. Pearse and his open insurrectionist weekly, *An Barr Buadh*. This was an alliance assiduously cultivated by Hobson and it was through his influence that late in 1913 or early in 1914 Pearse became a member of the I.R.B.

That alliance had the most important result in November, 1913,

when the Irish Volunteers were founded at the instance of I.R.B. leaders acting partly through the non-party and non-I.R.B. but influential and scholarly Vice-President of the Gaelic League, Eoin MacNeill.

The exact fact has not been clearly established but it would appear that it was Hobson who acted for the I.R.B. in conveying to MacNeill, possibly through Casement, the suggestion that he should, after his leading article, "The North Began," in the Gaelic League's weekly on November 1st, assembled the group of men that organised the big public meeting at which the Irish Volunteers were founded, with MacNeill in the chair.

Hobson was appointed honorary secretary of the Provisional Committee and quarter-master of the new force and until the week of the Rising was one of its most effective and influential organisers. MacNeill was appointed chairman of the Provisional Committee and Chief of Staff of the Volunteers and members of the committee included Pearse, MacDermott and Casement.

Breach

The serious breach between Hobson and the leadership of the I.R.B. took place in June, 1914, when he, Casement and MacNeill agreed reluctantly to the demand of John E. Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party in the British House of Commons, that Redmondite nominees should be added to the Provisional Committee to number one half of its membership. The influence of Hobson and MacNeill carried this by a majority, Hobson's explanation being that this was necessary to prevent a tragic split in the entire membership of the Volunteers throughout the country.

This decision alienated Hobson particularly from Clarke and MacDermott and forfeited their confidence in him for the ensuing critical months.

In these circumstances Hobson resigned from the Supreme Council of the I.R.B. but continued as chairman of the Dublin Centres Board and of the Leinster Board. He resigned from the Supreme Council, he maintained, in order to prevent a split in the I.R.B. over this sharp division of opinion and action.

Another consequence was that he lost his post as Irish correspondent of John Devoy's Clan na Gael organ, the Gaelic American, a post he had taken up in succession to MacCartan. After heated exchanges Devoy agreed before the end of 1914 to accept his correspondence again but this was prevented by the conditions prevailing after the outbreak of the first world war in

August.

Hobson continued his activities in the organising and arming of the Volunteers and he was largely instrumental in arranging the gun-running for the Volunteers at Howth on July 26, 1914, and mobilising and directing at Howth the Volunteers and Fianna who took over the arms on landing.

His version of that achievement and of events in connection with the armed movement until September, 1914, is in his book "A Short History of the Irish Volunteers, Vol. I," with an introduction by MacNeill, published in Dublin in 1918. No second volume, if completed, appeared, presumably because the publisher or the author believed that it would have antagonised the re-organised Volunteer movement then assuming control as the Irish Republican Army.

Shortly after the outbreak of the first world war in August 1914 the Supreme Council of the I.R.B. formally decided that there should be insurrection in Ireland before the conclusion of hostilities and later appointed a Military Council to make the secret preparations for the armed rising, using the Irish Volunteers as the striking force. As Hobson was no longer a member of the Supreme Council he was not present at these decisions and until the week preceding Easter 1916 he had no positive knowledge of the steps taken to implement the Supreme Council's decisions.

Clarke, Pearse and MacDermott became members of the Military Council and in 1916 it was this Council that was constituted the Provisional Government that led the fighting in the Rising at Easter.

On the expulsion of the Redmondite nominees from the Provisional Committee of the Volunteers as a consequence of Redmond's call to the Volunteer body to enlist in the British army for service in the war Hobson and MacNeill continued in their posts in that, now minority, section which adhered to the original Provisional Committee and the original aims and constitution.

From this period forward to the Rising two groups with strongly opposed policies divided the leadership of the Volunteers: the insurrectionist led by Pearse and MacDermott and the Military Council of the I.R.B. and against it

COUNCIL OF THE I.R.B., and against the anti-insurrectionist group led by Hobson and MacNeill.

In this conflict of purpose and action Hobson and MacNeill were approved to using the Volunteers in insurrection except in defence in the event of an attack by the British Government or in resistance to the imposition of conscription of Irishmen into the British army, and maintained that the Volunteers should be held intact without going into armed action and should be used to enforce Irish national claims and rights on behalf of an all-Ireland Parliament after the Allied war against the Central Empires.

Detained

In post-Rising years O'Hegarty and Hobson claimed that the action taken by the Supreme Council and the Military Council were a breach of the Constitution of the I.R.B. and therefore irregular, unauthorised and indefensible. In the critical months in 1916 before the rising this view was nowhere advanced or argued. Openly it was only in James Connolly's weekly, *The Workers' Republic*, that the argument in favour of insurrection was vigorously pursued while the more moderate peace position was maintained by MacNeill in the weekly *Irish Volunteer* which he edited for the armed force for which he was Chief of Staff.

Neither Hobson nor MacNeill—never a member of the I.R.B.—had any knowledge of the decisive agreement come to in January, 1916, between the Military Council and James Connolly on the date and final arrangements for the Rising.

It was Hobson who on Holy Thursday made the correct deduction that insurrection was imminent and conveyed this startling news to

MacNeill. And it was to Commandant Hobson. MacNeill in one of his counter-manding orders virtually handed over command of the Volunteers.

The arrest of Hobson on Good Friday by I.R.B. men in a ruse to get him to attend an I.R.B. meeting, probably by order of the Military Council, and his detention in the house of an I.R.B. man on the North Circular Road, Martin Conlon, until he was released by Sean T. O'Kelly on Easter Monday when the fighting had begun, effectively nullified this particular order of MacNeill's.

Aftermath

Hobson succeeded in evading arrest after the Rising and remained in seclusion for some time. In the succeeding years he kept his silence in public on the tragedy that had removed him from the high position in which he had served before the insurrection but from 1917 he continued in contact with MacNeill and with old I.R.B. friends and colleagues like O'Hegarty.

Two important memoranda on events leading up to the Rising and the discussions and confusions in the week preceding were edited with other relevant material and notes by Father F. X. Martin in *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. XII, No. 47, March, 1961. For this valuable information was supplied by Hobson.

From Easter, 1916, Hobson took no further part in public affairs but from time to time interested himself in afforestation, theories of social credit, support of the Dublin Gate Theatre and publications mostly of a non-political character.

After the establishment of Saorstát Éireann, the Irish Free State, in 1922 he was appointed chief of the official Stamp Department in Dublin Castle. On retiring from this in 1948, he settled in Roundstone, Co. Galway, and later went to live with his daughter, Mrs. John Mitchell, in Castleconnell, Co. Limerick. (His son, Declan, lives in London.)

All through the years from 1916 he was an untiring champion in vindication of the character and service of his friend, Roger Casement, not least in the matter of the alleged "black diaries," and in this he used radio broadcasting and newspaper interviewing. He preserved a great many letters from Casement.

Occasionally he agreed to give information to authors of books and to answer queries put to him in letters from old associates or friends.

Publications

Among his publications were "A Short History of the Irish Volunteers, Vol. 1," with an introduction by Eoin MacNeill, 1918; "The Life of Wolfe Tone," abridged, with extracts from Tone's political writings, 1919, followed shortly afterwards by a selection of unpublished letters of Tone's: *The Irish Review*, of politics, literature and economics, seven numbers, October, 1922, to January, 1931; "A National Forests Policy," privately printed in 1923. In 1931 also he contributed to *An tOglach* several articles on the origin and the history of the Irish Volunteers, and he edited, with illustrations, a Dublin Civic Week handbook, and in 1934 "The Gate Theatre, Dublin." (His last publication was "Ireland Yesterday and Tomorrow": Anvil Books.)

In what might be described as his unregenerate days he added at least one verse to the old anonymous County Down ballad in commemoration of the United Irishmen in 1798. The ballad is variously known as "General Munroe" and "The Battle of Ballynahinch":

"All ye good men who listen,
just think of the fate
Of the brave men who died in
the year Ninety-Eight,
For poor old Ireland would be
free long ago
If her sons were all rebels like
Henry Munroe."

