**Easter Rising – 11 Lives**

**Gordon Lucy**

# Foreword

1916 is a date of crucial importance in Irish history. Ask a historically-minded unionist why and his or her reply will focus on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme. Ask a nationalist counterpart and the answer will refer to the events of Easter week in Dublin. Unionists have made the Somme central both to their sense of identity and the foundation narrative of the Northern Ireland state. Equally, the events of Easter week for many, if not most nationalists, are central to the creation narrative of the Republic of Ireland.

Most publications produced to mark the centenary of the Easter Rising will inevitably concentrate on the signatories to the Proclamation of the Republic or on those who were executed in its aftermath. Here the focus is on eleven Ulster men and women whose lives were otherwise interwoven with the Rising. Some of those profiled are of scarcely less significance than the signatories to the Proclamation. Without their contribution the Rising would never have taken place. A couple were merely chance witnesses to the events — an officer in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers who just happened to be in Dublin at the time and a Belfast day-tripper (and future Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland) who chose to spend the public holiday viewing Dublin’s architectural heritage. Their stories too are worthy of consideration.

‘History’, as Lord Blake has observed, ‘does not consist of a body of received opinion handed down by authority from the historiographical equivalent of the heights of Mount Sinai. It is a subject full of vigour, controversy, life — and sometimes strife’. This is what makes the study of history so pleasurable and fascinating and, although the Easter Rising forms the central foundation narrative of the Irish state, it would be a disservice to preclude it from the same historical analysis and scrutiny as other events in world history.

*Andrew Kernaghan*

# Introduction

The Easter Rising was a conspiracy within a conspiracy. It was planned by the Military Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (colloquially known as the Fenians). This inner group consisting of Thomas Clarke and Sean MacDermott collaborated with Patrick Pearse, Joseph Mary Plunkett, Thomas MacDonagh and Eamonn Ceannt, who were all key figures in the Irish Volunteers. They deliberately and systematically concealed their plans from Eoin MacNeill, the chief of staff of the Irish Volunteers, and from other members of the IRB. In January 1916 James Connolly of the Irish Citizen Army, who had been planning an insurrection of his own, was brought into the plot.

The Irish Volunteers were to provide the foot soldiers for the IRB’s insurrection. They were kept in the dark on the basis that they did not need to know. W. T. Cosgrave — an officer in the Irish Volunteers in the South Dublin Union and one of three future Irish premiers who participated in the Rising — told prosecuting counsel (William Evelyn Wylie) at his court martial that he had never heard of the rebellion until he was in the middle of it and went on to explain that when he set out on Easter Monday he thought he was merely going on a route march.

There is a suggestion too that the Rising was simply intended to be a violent rhetorical gesture. Conor Cruise O’Brien contended that ‘Pearse saw the Rising as a Passion Play with real blood.’ Pearse, who Bulmer Hobson regarded as ‘a sentimental egotist’ with a ‘strain of abnormality’, certainly seemed to possess a strong messianic streak. He believed that if he emulated Christ’s sacrifice on the cross he would redeem the Irish nation. James Connolly as well, supposedly an international socialist, a Marxist even, and an atheist, professed in February 1916 to believe that ‘without the shedding of Blood there is no Redemption’.

There was also a strong desire on the part of members of the Military Council of the IRB to keep alive the Fenian physical force tradition in Irish politics, to honour the dogma that ‘in every generation must Irish blood be shed’ and to add 1916 to the almost mystical chain of insurrections which had occurred in 1798, 1803, 1848 and 1867.

The Military Council of the IRB seemed far more interested that a rising should take place than it should be successful militarily. Pearse, Plunkett and MacDonagh invested much more effort in deceiving the sceptics — notably Bulmer Hobson and Eoin MacNeill — than in proving that their scepticism was misplaced. The Military Council did not plan for success. Its planning was sketchy at best. Dates were almost casually tinkered with and delays did very little to improve the prospect of a positive outcome. It merely *hoped* that the weapons from Germany would arrive to coincide with the Rising rather than organising that they would be delivered in advance of it; and Thomas Clarke seemed to imagine that one had only to put a rifle into an Irish nationalist’s hands and he would know how to use it. Furthermore, there appears to have been no serious plan made on how to distribute the weapons when they did arrive.

On Easter Monday at Liberty Hall, as James Connolly was assembling the Citizen Army prior to marching to the General Post Office, his friend William O’Brien asked if there was any chance of success at all. With absolute candour Connolly replied ‘None whatever.’

During Easter week 1916 very little happened outside Dublin. The capture of Enniscorthy railway station by Sean Sinnott’s ‘Wexford brigade’ and the attack mounted by Thomas Ashe and 45 Volunteers from north County Dublin on the RIC barracks at Ashbourne in County Meath were conspicuous exceptions. There was also a degree of Volunteer activity in County Louth and County Galway but, apart from some posturing in the environs of Coalisland in County Tyrone, nothing happened in Ulster at all. We have this on the authority of the two key participants — Denis McCullough and Patrick McCartan. In 1966, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising, McCullough contributed an account to the *Capuchin Annual*. Twenty years later F. X. Martin reproduced correspondence between Joseph McGarrity and McCartan in an article entitled ‘Easter1916: An Inside Report in Ulster’ in the *Clogher Record*. McCartan demobilized the Tyrone Volunteers under his command, informing them that ‘the contemplated rising in the north would only lead to slaughter’. As the historian Fearghal McGarry has noted ‘The mobilization had failed before it had begun’. McCartan could only bitterly conclude ‘We have failed in Tyrone.’

During the course of the Rising 450 people were killed. Of these, 116 were British soldiers (at least 28 of whom were born in Ireland) and sixteen were policemen. Stephen Gwynn, the Nationalist MP for Galway, noted that one of the earliest British casualties was an officer ‘so nationalist in his sympathy as to be almost a Sinn Féiner’. Originally there was no distinction drawn between the 318 innocent civilians and the insurgents who died. Republican rolls of honour drawn up subsequently claimed 64 casualties as their own. Until comparatively recently there was very little attention paid to the fact that 40 children died as a result of the fighting.

Bulmer Hobson feared that the Rising would destroy ‘the national movement’ and subsequently thought that only the British reaction saved the day and gave it significance. Some contend that the British authorities overreacted to the Rising, whereas others suggest that the response was not unduly harsh and perhaps even quite lenient for the time and under the circumstances.

Of the 186 men and one woman (the Countess Markievicz) who were tried, eleven were acquitted and 88 were sentenced to death. The overwhelming majority of these sentences were commuted so that only fifteen leaders were executed, in addition to Roger Casement. In 1973 J. J. Lee ventured that the executions caused ‘maximum resentment, minimum fear’. More recently Michael Laffan opined ‘Far more men were killed than was necessary to remove dangerous revolutionary leaders, but too few to deter future rebellions’.

Some 3,500 suspected advanced nationalists were detained after the Easter Rising, but approximately 1,500 were released almost immediately. 1,800 were interned on the mainland, but only for seven months at most. Eamon de Valera, Michael Collins and other key figures survived and resumed their political (and military) activities.

Approximately 700 rebels took up arms on Easter Monday. By the end of the week that number had probably doubled. It would be safe to say that more than 1,000 but less than 2,000 took part in the rebellion. This was not an insignificant number, although, taken in context, some 206,000 men from Ireland served in the British army during the Great War, of whom 30,000 died.

Compared to the great events taking place elsewhere in the world the scale of what took place in Dublin was rather modest. The *Irish Times*, then a unionist newspaper, even predicted a week after the Rising had ended that ‘the Dublin insurrection of 1916 will pass into history with the equally unsuccessful insurrections of the past’. And yet, as time would reveal, the IRB had succeeded in stage-managing an event that would impact greatly on the future course of Irish history.

# Roger Casement

(1 September 1864—3 August 1916)

Roger David Casement was born in Sandycove near Dublin, the youngest of four children, the son of Captain Roger Casement of the 3rd Light Dragoons. His father served in the 1st Afghan War, and was latterly for 3 years, until 1858, a Captain in the North Antrim Militia (The Queen’s Royal Antrim Rifles) – not a force with a kindly reputation when dealing with the United Irish rebellion of 1798. The Captain was from Belfast, his own father, Hugh, having a shipping business in the city until it failed in 1842 when he emigrated to Australia. His great grandfather, a solicitor, also Roger, lived at Magherintemple in Ballycastle while the family had Ballymena connections. The boy's mother, Anne Jephson, contrary to widespread belief, was a Dublin Protestant, a member of the Church of Ireland, baptised in St George's, Hardwicke Place. Her own mother was something of a progressive and for many years ran a Ladies Seminary in the north of the city. Anne converted to Roman Catholicism and had her 3 boys boy secretly baptised as such in north Wales in 1868. Roger's upbringing however was Anglican and largely in London. Anne died of liver disease in Worthing when he was 9 and the boy was an orphan by age 12 when his father, who had returned, penniless, to live in Ballymena died in the Adair Arms Hotel. After no formal education in London, at age 12 he started at the Diocesan School in the town (later Ballymena Academy) as a boarder and was cared for by a number of relatives, including the Youngs of Galgorm Castle who put him up in the holidays. His uncle, John Casement, in Ballycastle was effectively his guardian and it was that town (and Magherintemple) which Roger saw as his home and inspiration (certainly not Ballymena), and to which he regularly returned. None the less, no money was found to educate him further despite his academic prowess and he was sent to Liverpool to the home of his mother's sister Grace at the age of 15. Her husband, Edward Bannister, worked for a shipping company, and was a merchant and later a consul in Angola and the Congo.

His nephew, eerily, followed almost exactly in his footsteps, becoming a purser with the Elder Dempster line, working in the Congo initially for King Leopold, then the Sanford Exploring Expedition where he came into contact with Joseph Conrad, and even on a Baptist Mission. In 1892, he joined the staff of the Survey Department at Old Calabar and became assistant Director of Customs in the Niger Coast (Oil Rivers) Protectorate, and then acting vice-consul, his first employment in the consular service.

From 1895 onwards he held various consular appointments in Africa, including in Boma in the Congo, where he investigated and reported on the ‘management’ of what was in effect the Belgian monarch’s personal fiefdom.

As a result his role in highlighting the cruel exploitation of native peoples in both the Congo and subsequently in the Putumayo River region in Peru, Casement enjoyed an international reputation.

His report on the Congo, published in 1904, led to a major reorganization of Belgian rule there in 1908, and his Putumayo report, published in 1912, earned him his knighthood. Despite his experience overseas, he managed to convince himself that Ireland had ‘suffered at the hands of British administrators a more prolonged series of evils, deliberately inflicted, than any other community of civilised men’.

A strong cultural nationalist, he had been a member of the Gaelic League since 1904, a contributor to the nationalist press and was greatly attracted to the values of ‘Irish Ireland’. He even tried to learn Irish but without any great success.

Casement seems to have become ‘radicalised’ by the Ulster unionist campaign of opposition to Home Rule in the years before the outbreak of the Great War. In the autumn of 1912 he wrote to Gertrude Bannister, his cousin, that ‘Ulster Day is come and gone’ and continued:

The poor duped, sincere multitude of honest boys has paraded before Carson, Smith (the intellectually brilliant MP for Liverpool Walton and rising star of the Conservative Party) and the God of our Fathers … I love the Antrim Presbyterians — Antrim and Down — they are good, kind warm-hearted souls and to see them now exploited, by that damned Church of Ireland — that Orange ascendancy gang who hate Presbyterians only less than Papishes, and to see them delirious before a Smith, a Carson (a cross between a badly raised bloodhound and an underfed hyena, sniffing for Irish blood in the track) and whooping ‘Rule Britannia’ through the streets, is a wound to my soul.

That same year, he replied to request for a donation from the Headmaster of his *alma mater* in belligerent terms: ‘I should be glad to help … were I sure it was not to help an institution that was doing its share to denationalise my fellow countrymen’.

On 24 October 1913 Casement, Captain Jack White and Mrs Alice Stopford Green spoke at the celebrated anti-Carson demonstration held in Ballymoney Town Hall. In their speeches, subsequently published as a pamphlet entitled *A Protestant Protest* at Casement’s suggestion, the three speakers appealed for love among Irishmen rather than hate and invoked the spirit of ’98 and the need to revive it. It might be unfair to describe them as having only a tenuous connection with the real world but they clearly romanticised the past and had a completely inadequate grasp of the gulf which now separated unionists and nationalists.

*The Times* dismissed the event as representing only ‘a small and isolated “pocket” of dissident Protestants, the last survivors of the Ulster Liberals of the old types. Ulster Liberalism is very like the Cheshire cat in “Alice in Wonderland”. It has vanished till only its grin lingers furtively in a corner of Co. Antrim.’

While these observations were probably a very fair commentary on the audience in Ballymoney Town Hall, White, Casement and Alice Stopford Green cannot be regarded as old-fashioned Liberals or even Liberal Home Rulers. White’s politics would defy easy categorisation but Casement and Mrs Green were ‘advanced nationalists’. Within a month White would be involved in founding and training the Irish Citizen Army in Dublin. The Irish Volunteers were formed on 25 November 1913 and Casement would become similarly involved with them with Mrs Green happily assisting him by raising money to arm the Irish Volunteers.

Casement and Mary Spring Rice, the offspring of an aristocratic Anglo-Irish family, provided the money which made the Howth gun-running in July 1914 possible.

When the war broke out in August 1914 Casement was in the United States fund-raising for the Irish Volunteers. A year earlier, in July 1913 he had written an article in the *Irish Review* entitled ‘Ireland, Germany and the Next War’, identifying Germany as a potential ally. By now he was passionately pro-German and idealised Germany as the deliverer of small nations. In November 1913 he had written to Alice Stopford Green: ‘Oh! How I sometimes in my heart long for the thud of the German boot keeping guard outside the Mother of Parliaments.’ His internal logic dictated that he should enlist German aid.

Casement was viewed with scepticism by many Irish nationalists who either unfairly suspected his integrity or considered him — with some justice — volatile and dangerous. John Devoy, the Clan na Gael leader, who was hosting his American tour, was originally very wary of Casement but put him in contact with the German ambassador who arranged for him to visit Berlin.

Casement arrived in Berlin on 31 October 1914 and optimistically imagined that his task was simply one of opening German eyes to reality and telling them where to send military aid. On 14 November 1914 he wrote from Berlin to Eoin MacNeill:

Once our people, clergy and volunteers know that Germany, if victorious will do her best to aid us in our efforts to achieve an independent Ireland, every man at home must stand for Germany and Irish freedom. I am entirely assured of the goodwill of this Government towards our country, and beg you to proclaim it far and wide. They will do all in their power to help us to win national freedom.

What Casement did not appreciate was that von Jagow, the German Foreign Minister, had already decided that ‘the military results would be small, possibly even negative, and it would be said that we had violated international law’.

On 20 November the German government did issue a statement that should Germany invade Ireland, it would do so with ‘good will towards a people to which Germany wished only national welfare and national liberty’, a statement which fell significantly short of what Casement wanted to hear.

Casement put three demands to the German government. He wanted arms, German officers to lead an insurrection in Ireland, and the formation of an ‘Irish Brigade’ consisting of Irish prisoners of war in Germany.

Joseph Mary Plunkett, a member of the IRB, the Irish Volunteers’ Director of Operations and a future signatory to the 1916 Proclamation, joined Casement in Berlin in 1915 and submitted a plan requiring a large number of German troops. The Germans refused because the slow-moving transports required would have been intercepted by the Royal Navy.

The Germans promised only a relatively small quantity of arms (20,000 fairly obsolete Mosin-Nagant rifles, ten machine-guns and the appropriate ammunition) and no German officers and no military support. Furthermore, Casement managed to recruit only 56 P.O.W.s for his projected ‘Irish Brigade’.

The realisation that the Germans were never going to meet his demands plunged him into deep depression and despair:

Oh Ireland, why did I ever trust in such a government … they have no sense of honour, chivalry or generosity. They are cads. This is why they are hated by the world and why England will surely beat them.

On learning that an insurrection was planned for Easter, Casement was determined to return to Ireland to prevent it because he believed it was doomed to failure without substantial arms and German support. In this respect he was at one with Bulmer Hobson and Eoin MacNeill. The German consignment of weaponry did not figure prominently or even at all in the thinking of those who had planned the rising in Dublin. At best the guns were going to arrive extremely late in the day. No serious thought was given to their distribution. Nor was any thought given to training Volunteers in their use.

Casement was arrested on Banna Strand in County Kerry on Good Friday 1916, having been put ashore by a German submarine. The *Aud*, the German ship transporting the German rifles, was intercepted by the Royal Navy off the south coast and scuttled by her captain. Casement was taken to the Tower of London and tried for high treason at the Old Bailey.

The Government privately circulated Casement’s ‘Black Diaries’ (as opposed to his ‘White Diaries’ recording the respectable and professional side of his life), detailing his homosexual activity. The intention was presumably to discredit him and either to silence the clamour for clemency (spearheaded by W. B. Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy and Arthur Conan Doyle) and/or to ensure that he did not achieve the status of martyrdom (which his speech from the dock reveals he clearly sought). He was found guilty of treason and, objectively, no other outcome was possible. Before his execution, he was received into the Roman Catholic Church. Roger Casement was hanged at Pentonville Prison on 3 August 1916.

During the greater part of the twentieth century most Irish nationalists, almost as an article of faith, believed that the diaries were forgeries but in 2002 forensic examination of them vindicated their authenticity to almost universal satisfaction. Audrey Giles, the leading forensic handwriting examiner, concluded that ‘the handwriting, ink, paper, pen strokes and pencillings were all genuine’.

Admittedly a small number of nationalists thought there was a fair chance that diaries were genuine all along. For example, Gertrude Parry, Casement’s cousin, more or less confided in Patrick McCartan that diaries might well be genuine. McCartan did not care whether or not they were genuine: ‘If I were her I’d let them do their worst … We all know about Oscar Wilde but who now thinks of his sin?’

# Alice Milligan

1866-1953

Alice Letitia Milligan was born at Gortmore, Omagh, County Tyrone on 14 September 1866 and was the third of 13 children born into a staunchly Methodist family. Her father was Seaton Forrest Milligan, a company director with literary and antiquarian tastes, evidenced by his election to membership of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland in 1884 and to the Royal Irish Academy in 1887. Charlotte Milligan (*née* Burns), her mother, was of Scottish ancestry.

Alice was educated at home, at Methodist College, Belfast (where she excelled across the curriculum), and at King’s College, London. She completed a teacher-training course in Belfast and Londonderry and then went to Dublin to learn Irish. Her interest in the language had its immediate origins in her great-uncle’s farm near Omagh. The labourers and maids came from The Rosses, an Irish-speaking part of County Donegal, and she was fascinated by their conversation. Although a love of the Irish language is not incompatible with unionism, Michael Davitt, the founder of the Land League, once told her that his mother made all her children speak Irish, even when they were in England. According to Mrs Davitt, ‘to speak English’ was ‘a sign of servitude’. It was a lesson that Alice Milligan readily imbibed.

In Dublin she was drawn to the Protestant nationalism of Charles Stewart Parnell. His death and treatment at the hands of the Roman Catholic hierarchy radicalised her. Her fury at the treatment of Parnell by the Roman Catholic Church was a recurring theme of her life. For example, she was contemptuous at the rapturous reception accorded by the Roman Catholic authorities to King Edward VII at Maynooth and scathingly contrasted Parnell’s private life with that of the King.

In 1894 Alice and Jenny Armour founded the Irish Women’s Association which had branches initially in Belfast, Moneyreagh (a hotbed of Presbyterian nationalism in rural County Down) and Portadown. The following year she launched the Henry Joy McCracken Literary Society in Belfast and, with Anna Johnston (whose pseudonym was Ethna Carbery), she co-founded and edited the *Northern Patriot*, the society’s journal. The *Northern Patriot* aspired to unite all those who have ‘one absorbing life purpose’ (i.e. Ireland’s independence). Between 1896 and 1899 she also edited the *Shan Van Vocht* (literally ‘The poor old woman’, a poetic way of referring to Ireland). In a poem, published in the *Shan Van Vocht* and entitled ‘Westminster 1895’, she contended that to negotiate further with the ‘English’ Parliament was to prostitute the honour of Ireland.

*O Irishmen, not here, not here*

*Should Freedom’s boon be longer sought*

*Nor to our foe’s disdainful ear,*

*Demands for Nationhood be brought …*

*… Let none debase our country’s name*

*Stooping to carve our freedom’s name.*

These lines anticipated the formation of Sinn Féin by a decade. The *Shan Van Vocht* ceased publication in 1899 to make way for Arthur Griffith’s *United Irishman*, a development for which Alice had decidedly muted sympathy.

Alice was one of the prime movers in organising the centenary celebrations of the 1798 rebellion in Ulster. As secretary of the organising committee, she invited John O’Leary, the literary Fenian and inspiration and mentor to W. B Yeats, to Belfast. To the consternation of the more unionist members of the family, he stayed in the Milligan home. Edith Milligan indignantly exclaimed: ‘Imagine having that man in the house!’ Alice published a biography of Wolfe Tone to mark the centenary of the rebellion. In 1910 she organised events to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Sir Samuel Ferguson. Her first book, *Glimpses of Erin*, was published as early as 1888, when she was only 22. A collaborative effort with her father, the book concentrates on Ulster and Sligo and might be best described as a hybrid volume combining travelogue with philosophical reflection.

Although primarily remembered for her poetry, she was a prolific author of stories, plays, letters, articles and biography. Much of her poetry appeared in the *United Irishman*. AE (George Russell) rated it as ‘the best patriotic poetry written in Ireland in my time’. In 1900 she wrote a play, *The Last Feast of the Fianna*, for the Irish Literary Theatre, and *The Daughter of Donagh* for the Abbey Theatre. She also wrote a number of novels and published a book of poetry entitled *The Harper of the Only God*.

A list of her friends would constitute a who’s who of advanced nationalism or of cultural nationalism. The following would feature on such a list and it is by no means exhaustive: AE, Francis Joseph Biggar, Winifred Carney, Roger Casement, James Connolly (to whom the *Shan Van Vocht* extended an early platform), Michael Davitt, Eamon de Valera, Maud Gonne (who accurately described Alice as ‘small, aggressive and full of observant curiosity’), Arthur Griffith, Bulmer Hobson (over whom Alice exerted significant influence), Douglas Hyde (one of Alice’s long-standing friends and most frequent correspondents), Thomas MacDonagh (whom Alice regarded as ‘the best living Irish poet’), Standish O’Grady (although he was a cultural nationalist, he was politically a unionist), John O’Leary and William Butler Yeats.

Equally, she was either a member of or had contact with most of the organisations which constituted advanced nationalism. She was certainly a member of Maud Gonne’s *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (‘Daughters of Ireland’), *Sinn Féin* and the Gaelic League. Indeed, between 1904 and 1909 she was organiser for the Gaelic League and gave history lectures throughout Ireland.

Let us take a brief look at two of her friends: Roger Casement and Winifred Carney. Alice first met Casement in June 1904 and viewed him with respect and affection. She was with him the day on which his knighthood was announced in 1911. After the Larne gunrunning in April 1914 she and Casement travelled together to the town and Casement ventured the opinion: ‘We’ll have to do something like this.’ In 1916 she attended every day of his trial in London and never wavered in her loyalty to him. Her poem, ‘The Ash Tree of Uisneach’, was written about the trial and provides a record of her innermost thoughts and feelings about it. Casement wrote to her from prison and on the day he was hanged at Pentonville (3 August 1916) she stood outside the prison.

Winifred Carney acted as Connolly’s personal assistant in the GPO during the 1916 rebellion. In December 1918 she contested the newly-created Belfast constituency of Victoria in the General Election. Alice gave Carney her unstinting support but the female Sinn Féin candidate came a pretty poor third in in this unionist stronghold, polling 539 votes, a measure of how far removed Alice’s politics were from those of north-east Ulster. The successful Unionist candidate polled 9,309 votes and even the Labour candidate managed to poll 3,674 votes.

Although Alice lived to be 86, her campaigning life was essentially over by 1916 and the years thereafter form an anti-climax. She supported the anti-Treaty side in the Irish Civil War, became an admirer of Eamon de Valera and deplored Partition. In January 1938 she was only female signatory to a document issued by the Northern Council for Unity entitled ‘Partition of Ireland: the root cause of Discontent, Disorder and Distress’. In 1941 she received belated recognition for her life’s work in the shape of an honorary degree from the National University of Ireland.

During the final years of her life she was virtually destitute. She died at Tyrcur, near Omagh, on 13 April 1953 and is buried in Drumragh graveyard outside the town. Her headstone has an inscription in Irish: ‘Nior car fod eile Eirinn’, which may be translated as ‘She loved no other place but Ireland’.

Alice Milligan is one of the most significant and influential figures in the Gaelic revival. Yet until very recently, she was a figure who was mentioned ‘in passing’ even by historians of the first rank rather than properly evaluated. In 1999 Catherine Morris submitted a doctoral thesis to Aberdeen University entitled ‘Alice Milligan and the Irish cultural revival, 1888-1905’. Sheila Turner Johnston provides a very accessible account in *Alice: A Life of Alice Milligan* (Omagh, 1994).

# Eoin MacNeill

(15 August 1867 — 15 October 1945)

Eoin MacNeill was born into a middle class Roman Catholic home in Glenarm, County Antrim, and was educated at St Malachy’s College in Belfast and the Royal University of Ireland. Despite his Ulster birth, he had no special insight into the dynamics of Ulster unionism. His upbringing in the Glens and his contact with the liberal Presbyterians led him to underestimate the strength of Ulster unionist opposition to Home Rule, especially during the third Home Rule crisis. Nor had he any comprehension of why unionists opposed Home Rule.

He moved to Dublin in 1887 and secured employment (as a result of merit rather than patronage) as a clerk in the Dublin Law Courts. In his leisure time he immersed himself in the study of early Irish history and developed an interest in the Irish language. In July 1893 he co-founded the Gaelic League with Douglas Hyde, an Irish scholar and language enthusiast, and Father Eugene O’Growney, who had been appointed to a chair in Irish at Maynooth in 1891.

In March 1899 MacNeill became the first editor of *An Claidheamh Soluis* (‘The sword of light’) the organ of the Gaelic League.

In 1904 he delivered his first lectures in early Irish history in University College, Dublin. In that year he described his politics in the following terms:

In theory I suppose I am a separatist, in practice I would accept any settlement that would enable Irishmen to freely control their own affairs. If truth be known, I think this represents the political views of ninety-eight out of every hundred nationalists.

MacNeill’s alignment with separatism rather than the Home Rule movement is evidenced by his involvement, along with Arthur Griffith and Maud Gonne, in the semi-violent disruption of William Murphy’s public meeting to announce an International Exhibition in Dublin, closely modelled on that organised by William Dargan in the 1850s. MacNeill’s exploits on this occasion nearly cost him his job. The International Exhibition was opened in 1907 by Edward VII and was hailed as proof of Ireland’s prosperity and her reconciliation with the Empire. The exhibition proved extremely popular (even with nationalists) but such sentiments were of course anathema to separatists.

In 1908 MacNeill was appointed Professor of Early Irish History at UCD and was to claim that ‘an Irish nation’ had existed from antiquity based on ‘a positive conscious nationality, more real and concrete than was ever the conception of nationality in ancient Hellas’. This assertion is much less impressive than it seems. As the citizens of city states such as Athens, Sparta or Corinth, ancient Greeks had an acute appreciation of a common language and culture but none at all of nationality. MacNeill’s assertion was ahistorical because nationalism is only a comparatively recent construct in European history. Just as Leopold von Ranke, the greatest historian of nineteenth-century Europe, never found anything deleterious to the House of Hohenzollern, his patrons, in his extensive archival research, MacNeill would seem never to have unearthed any historical material which might have undermined his political worldview.

Despite the opposition of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, in 1908 and 1909 MacNeill mounted and led a successful campaign to make Irish essential for matriculation in the new National University of Ireland, a campaign which engaged the enthusiasm of Patrick McCartan.

He attracted serious public attention in November 1913 with the publication of his article (in *An Claidheamh Soluis*) entitled ‘The North Began’ in which he called for the establishment of a southern counterpart to the Ulster Volunteer Force. MacNeill imagined that ‘the Orange democracy and the Presbyterian rural party’ were ‘home rulers in principle and essence’ since they wished to hold Ulster against Britain. The only real unionists were ‘the remnant of the aristocracy which had survived land purchase and local government reform’. He also supposed that Carson was a secret home ruler. He contended

the more genuine and successful the local Volunteer movement in Ulster becomes, the more completely does it establish the principle Irishmen have the right to decide and govern their own national affairs.

Within a fortnight a meeting took place in Wynn’s Hotel, Dublin, to advance MacNeill’s proposal. Among those who attended on 11 November were Bulmer Hobson, Sean MacDermott and Patrick Pearse. The Irish Volunteers were called into existence at a meeting on 25 November in Rotunda Rink in Dublin, under the chairmanship of MacNeill. However from the outset most of the key positions in the organisation were in the hands of members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. MacNeill was essentially the ‘front man’ of a ‘front organisation’ set up by and largely, but perhaps not entirely, controlled by the IRB.

Some 4,000 men joined the organisation after the inaugural meeting. Although impressive, the early growth of the Irish Volunteers was not as spectacular as that of the Ulster Volunteer Force.

The formal object of the Irish Volunteers was to defend Home Rule for Ireland with the eventual aim of becoming ‘a prominent element in the national life under a National government’. In other words, the Irish Volunteers aspired to be an independent Irish army in waiting.

By the summer of 1914 John Redmond, the Nationalist leader, belatedly realised that he needed to achieve some control over the organisation if it was not to become a threat to his own authority and that of the Irish Parliamentary Party. On 9 June Redmond issued an ultimatum, via the press, demanding the Executive Committee of the Irish Volunteers co-opt twenty-five Irish Parliamentary Party nominees. MacNeill assured Redmond of his loyalty and his support for Home Rule. In this he was being disingenuous; he had separatist tendencies (as evidenced by his statement of 1904 and his association with Arthur Griffith and Maud Gonne) and was not a conventional Home Ruler.

The outbreak of the Great War was to precipitate a split in the Irish Volunteers. In return for the third Home Rule bill reaching the Statute Book (which MacNeill viewed as a post-dated cheque) and in his belief that a common sacrifice for the British war effort would form the basis of Irish unity, Redmond said in an impromptu speech at Woodenbridge, County Wicklow, on 20 September 1914 that Irishmen should ‘go where ever the firing line extends, in defence of right, of freedom and of religion in this war. It would be a disgrace forever to our country otherwise’. Although the speech was impromptu, its content was fully in accord with his prior thinking and party policy.

Four days after Redmond’s Woodenbridge speech, MacNeill and the executive of the Irish Volunteers repudiated Redmond and his nominees on the committee. The seceding minority led by MacNeill retained the name Irish Volunteers and determined to resist any attempt to force Irishmen ‘into military service under any government, until a free national government of Ireland is empowered by the Irish people to deal with it’.

MacNeill retained control of the *Irish Volunteer* and used it as a vehicle to accuse Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party of mental and moral corruption. It speaks volumes about John Redmond’s character that he still personally intervened with Asquith to ensure that MacNeill did not end up in front of a firing squad after the Rising.

The split (on paper at any rate) in September 1914 heavily favoured Redmond. Perhaps only 12,000 out of 170,000 (numbers vary from account to account, but the overall picture remains the same) followed MacNeill but, significantly, they included a disproportionate number of the activists and geographically they were heavily concentrated in Dublin. Patrick Maume makes the salient point that MacNeill’s volunteers were large enough to be significant and small enough to be manipulated by the IRB.

MacNeill advocated a defensive strategy: the Volunteers should only act to resist any attempt to impose conscription on Ireland or any attempt by the government to abandon Home Rule.

Those aligned with the IRB had radically different ideas. As early as 9 September 1914, the Supreme Council of the IRB had decided to stage an uprising before the end of the war. On 13 March 1915 Pearse, Plunkett, Bulmer Hobson, Edward Daly, Thomas MacDonagh, Eamonn Ceannt and Eamon de Valera discussed the possibility of a rising in September 1915. In January 1916 the Supreme Council of the IRB decided to launch an insurrection at the earliest opportunity. Between 19 and 22 January the Military Council of the IRB agreed to organise a rising for no later than Easter. On 5 February Clan na Gael, IRB’s counterpart in the United States, was informed that there would be a rising in Dublin on Easter Sunday (23 April) 1916.

That MacNeill had some appreciation of this (and perhaps he knew a great deal more than he was prepared to concede subsequently) is demonstrated by his visit to review a Volunteer parade in Limerick in September 1915 and his memorandum of February 1916. At Limerick MacNeill accidentally heard of instructions issued by Pearse to some commandants to make certain ‘definite military dispositions in event of war in Ireland’.

Unlike Pearse, MacNeill did not believe in moral revivalism or ‘blood sacrifice’. Nor did he subscribe to James Connolly’s view ‘that once a stand was made, however brief, in Dublin, the country would turn against the British government and overthrow it’. MacNeill believed a rising should only take place if there was a serious prospect of success. He was particularly dismissive of the concept of ‘blood sacrifice’ which figured very prominently in the thinking (and writings) of Pearse, Joseph Plunkett and Thomas MacDonagh.

In his memorandum drafted in February 1916 MacNeill wrote:

To my mind, those who feel impelled towards military action on any ground that I have stated are really impelled by a sense of feebleness or despondency or fatalism or by an instinct of satisfying their own emotions or escaping from a difficult and complex and trying situation. It is our duty, if necessary, to trample on our personal feelings and to face every sort of difficulty and complexity, and to think only of our country’s good.

MacNeill’s problem was that he was confronted with men who believed that Tone, Emmet, Davis and Mitchel were the ‘Four gospels’ on which the nation was mystically grounded and who viewed the nation ‘not so much a thing which they should be satisfied to serve, but rather a stage upon which they might expect to play a part in the drama of heroism’.

He shied away from a direct confrontation with Pearse because he was anxious to avoid a second split in the Volunteer movement. MacNeill, as Bulmer Hobson suggested, may also have been temperamentally ill-suited to confrontation.

Knowing the limited range of circumstances in which MacNeill would be impelled to act, in April 1916 Pearse and his co-conspirators forged an official document — the so-called ‘Castle Document’ — to convince MacNeill that a government crackdown on the Volunteers was imminent.

On 8 April 1916 Pearse in the *Irish Volunteer* had called for general manoeuvres throughout the country on Easter Sunday, manoeuvres authorized by MacNeill who failed to appreciate that they were intended as a cover for the landing of arms and a full-scale rising that day.

Pearse put the ‘Castle Document’ into play on the Wednesday before Easter. Close and detailed analysis would be required to do justice to the complexity of events over the days which followed, but MacNeill seems to have discovered the plans for a rising on Maundy Thursday. Although he repudiated this version of events, it seems that on Good Friday and Saturday he oscillated between acquiescing in Pearse’s *fait accomplait* and derailing Pearse’s plans. It took him until midnight on Saturday to decide to issue the order cancelling the manoeuvres — the ‘countermanding order’: ‘Volunteers completely deceived. All orders for special action are hereby cancelled, and on no account will action be taken. Eoin MacNeill, Chief of Staff.’ He then visited the *Irish Independent* office to place a similarly-worded advert in the *Sunday Independent*. Pearse *et al.* seemed to be willing to acquiesce in this, but only on the surface. On Easter Sunday at a meeting held in Liberty Hall the conspirators agreed to embark on a rising at noon on Easter Monday.

MacNeill’s countermand has provoked divergent responses. Tom Clarke was furious, but perhaps not very realistic in his assessment of the situation: ‘Our plans were so perfect, and now everything is spoiled.’ MacNeill incurred opprobrium for allegedly preventing greater success and few plaudits for averting unnecessary bloodshed. However, the countermand may actually have assisted the insurgents in Dublin as the authorities believed that because of the interception of the weapons cargo on the *Aud* and the countermand there was no longer any prospect of a rising. After the Rising some held the belief that the countermand was merely a ruse to put the authorities off guard.

Like Bulmer Hobson, MacNeill took absolutely no part in the events of Easter week. He pointed out to Hobson that they would both have no political credibility or future if they were not arrested. MacNeill *was* arrested and ended up having a political future whereas Hobson did not. He was sentenced to penal servitude for life and that sentence undoubtedly assisted with his rehabilitation in some advanced nationalist circles. Hobson went into hiding after the Rising in order to try to avoid arrest and didn’t resurface until after the amnesty of 1917. This led to rumours that he was a traitor and consequently destroyed his political prospects.

In June 1917 he was released as part of a general amnesty and was restored to his chair at UCD (of which he had been deprived). At the Sinn Féin national convention in October 1917 he secured the largest personal vote of the twenty-four people elected to the party executive, a measure of significant rehabilitation.

His failure to understand the nature of Ulster unionism surfaced again in *The Ulster difficulty*, a publication which appeared in 1917. He claimed that ‘history shows that this present sentiment of theirs is a calculated outcome of persistent and unscrupulous policy of English statesmen pursued purely in “the English interest” … the rest of Ulster difficulty consists of fears and prophecies’.

In the General Election of December 1918 he was successful in two constituencies: the National University of Ireland and the City of Londonderry. In 1919 he became Minister for Finance in the first Dáil. In the second Dáil he was elected Ceann Comhairle and presided over the Treaty Debates.

MacNeill supported the Treaty. Two sons, Niall and Turloch, served in the pro-Treaty IRA and another, Brian, in the anti-Treaty IRA. Brian was killed in controversial circumstances in County Sligo by pro-Treaty forces led by a former comrade and close friend.

Between 1922 and 1925 MacNeill was Minister for Education and had no compunction whatsoever in imposing compulsory Irish on Protestant schools and, as a devout Roman Catholic, gave the Roman Catholic Church a free hand in educational matters.

In July 1923 he was nominated as the Irish Free State’s representative on the Boundary Commission to determine the border between Northern Ireland and the Free State. In December 1922 he had expressed the view that Free State’s representative ought to be ‘a man of high standing, and, I think a lawyer’. W. T. Cosgrave thought that Free State’s representative ought to be a minister, a northerner and ‘a Catholic’ and MacNeill was only candidate who met Cosgrave’s criteria.

MacNeill and the other two commissioners (Richard Feetham and J. R. Fisher) interpreted their role in a minimalist way and recommended no more than a modest adjustment of the frontier between the two states. Many nationalists expected the Commission to recommend the transfer of Counties Fermanagh and Tyrone and Derry and Newry to the Free State. When the leaked Boundary Commission’s report failed to deliver these unrealistic expectations, MacNeill fell on his sword and resigned from the Boundary Commission, a step which heralded his political demise as he lost his seat in the Dáil in the general election of June 1927.

He found fulfilment in his final years in the work of the Irish Historical Manuscripts Commission, which he was responsible for setting up and of which he was chairman until his death. From 1937 to 1940 he was President of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and in 1940 he was elected President of the Royal Irish Academy, the ultimate accolade for an Irish scholar.

# Patrick McCartan

(13 March 1878 — 28 March 1963)

Patrick McCartan was one of the five children of Bernard McCartan, a fairly prosperous farmer, and his wife, the former Bridget Rafferty. He was born in Eskerbuoy, near Carrickmore in County Tyrone. He was educated at Tanderagee National School, a local ‘Latin school’, St Patrick’s, Armagh, St Macartan’s, Monaghan (where he was exposed to the celebrations commemorating the centenary of the 1798 rebellion), and finally at St Malachy’s in Belfast (where he was disappointed by the lack of nationalist sentiment at the school).

There was no obvious republican tradition in the McCartan home but Alice Milligan proved a significant influence on McCartan. As he explained to William Maloney, a Scot of Irish descent who had emigrated to America and was prominent in Irish-American politics, in November 1924:

The first real foundation I got for my national faith or instinct was a little “Life of Wolfe Tone” by Alice Milligan … we separatists saturated ourselves with writings by and about the men of 1798, 1848 and 1867.

After he left school (in 1900), he went to United States, taking ship from Londonderry to New York, and from there made his way to Philadelphia to join John McGarrity, with whose brother, Peter, he had been at school in St Patrick’s, Armagh. In 1901 he began a life-long friendship with Joseph McGarrity, John and Peter’s brother. McCartan worked as a barman in various saloons for five years, saving most of his earnings for his intended university studies. He returned to Ireland in 1905 with a view to becoming a doctor. As he had insufficient funds of his own for his medical studies, he received financial assistance from Joseph McGarrity.

In 1901 John McGarrity had persuaded him to join Camp 428 of Clan na Gael, which was the American equivalent of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Before McCartan left America Joseph McGarrity introduced him to John Devoy and Tom Clarke in New York.

In Dublin McCartan transferred from Clan na Gael to the IRB, joining the Teeling Circle whose membership included Sean T. O’Kelly, Ernest Blythe, John O’Byrne, and Sean O’Casey. He also joined the Keating branch of the Gaelic League which had very close links with the Teeling Circle of the IRB (which probably had either overlapping or identical membership).

 McCartan enrolled as a student in the Medical School of University College at Cecilia Street. While not neglecting his studies, he immersed himself in political activity and secured election to the national executive of Sinn Féin at the first convention held in the Rotunda in November 1905. He also became close to Denis McCullough, Bulmer Hobson and Sean MacDermott and joined them in addressing various public meetings in Ulster. He formed a Dungannon Club among the university students in Dublin, and secretly recruited a number of them into the IRB.

He actively supported the revival of the Irish language and in 1909 campaigned to have Irish accepted as an essential subject for the matriculation examination of the National University. He was one of the principal speakers at a students’ meeting in the Dublin Mansion House at which Douglas Hyde also spoke. He founded *The Student* (which he published from his digs) in May 1910 to lend weight to the campaign, but after a short time, in deference to the wishes of *An Claidheamh Soluis*, he voluntarily suspended publication. Its secondary thrust was that the university ought to be ‘national’ rather than ‘Catholic’, a reflection of McCartan’s anti-clericalism.

As a result of his clashes with the authorities of University College, Dublin, on the language issue, he switched his studies to the Royal College of Surgeons from which he graduated in 1910 and became a Fellow in 1912.

In 1908, while still a student, he was elected a Sinn Féin member of the Dublin Corporation for the Rotunda Ward, largely through the influence of the IRB.

Throughout he maintained contact with Joseph McGarrity and, as the Irish correspondent of the *Gaelic American*, was a regular contributor to John Devoy’s paper. In November 1910 he became briefly the editor of the IRB’s weekly newspaper *Irish Freedom* at Bulmer Hobson’s suggestion.

In March 1911 McCartan precipitated a significant crisis within the IRB which resulted in a transfer of power from ‘the Old Guard’ to ‘the Young Turks’ represented by McCullough, Hobson, P. S. O’Hegarty, and MacDermott, who looked to Tom Clarke for leadership.

King George V was due to visit Ireland in July 1911 but the cautious IRB leadership decided that no IRB man should publicly propose resolutions hostile to the royal visit. In flagrant violation of this prohibition, at an Emmet Commemoration Concert in the Rotunda in March 1911, McCartan jumped onto the stage and proposed such a motion. McCartan’s explanation for his action was that he was intensely moved by Patrick Pearse’s oration, particularly by the following sentence: ‘Dublin would have to do some great act to atone for the shame of not producing a man to dash his head against a stone wall in an effort to rescue Robert Emmett.’ Pearse and the Countess Markievicz, (and even Clarke who had previously cautioned McCartan against such rashness) supported the motion and the resolution was enthusiastically adopted by those present. ‘The Old Guard’ withdrew from the leadership of the IRB and were replaced by ‘the Young Turks’. As Charles Townshend has observed: ‘This coup set the IRB on a course of activity more energetic than any since its early years.’

When he qualified as a doctor, McCartan worked in the Mater and Cork Street hospitals in Dublin. He began to practise medicine in Tyrone early in 1912 but returned to Dublin in the autumn to study for the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons. Having secured his Fellowship he was appointed dispensary doctor in Gortin, County Tyrone, where he took up residence in April 1913.

At this stage the IRB in Tyrone was virtually moribund. The dominant nationalist organization in the county was Joseph Devlin’s Ancient Order of Hibernians. Although an IRB Circle survived in Carrickmore, McCartan both as a boy and young man had been unaware of its existence.

With the foundation of the Irish Volunteers at Dublin in November 1913, McCartan set about setting up Volunteer companies and reviving the IRB in Tyrone. In this he had the support of many of the Roman Catholic clergy. Two in particular, Father James O’Daly of Clogher and Father Eugene Coyle of Fintona, were happy to be aligned with the IRB. The RIC considered — correctly — McCartan as the driving force behind the republican revival in the county.

In 1914 (or possibly 1915) McCartan travelled to the United States at his own expense to raise funds for both the IRB and for St Enda’s, Patrick Pearse’s Irish-speaking school, and to explain the split in the Volunteer movement. He also assured Clan na Gael of Casement’s *bona fides*. McCartan brought back £2,000 in gold from the Clan for the IRB and £700 in gold as a personal gift from McGarrity for St Enda’s.

In late 1914 McCartan was co-opted onto the Supreme Council of the IRB. At the final meeting of the Supreme Council before the Rising in late January 1916 McCartan supported a rising in principle, subject to the Volunteers being better armed and the assurance of a German force landing in Ireland.

Without these two conditions being met McCartan thought there was no justification for leading men into armed rebellion. For this reason, as McCartan explained in a letter to Joseph McGarrity (dated 2 June 1916) that ‘long before Easter I had no heart in it’. He thought the orders he received on Good Friday were ‘unfeasible’ (even before Eoin MacNeill’s countermand). He also thought that Rising was ill-planned and ill-timed. Thus, the Tyrone men — as Denis McCullough discovered — ‘refused point blank to take the orders’.

As Father James O’Daly explained in a witness statement to the Bureau of Irish Military History:

The plan of campaign ordered from headquarters was that the northern Volunteers — including Belfast — would concentrate somewhere in Tyrone, march across the Shannon and form up with the Connaught forces and await the arrival of the Germans. Without casting any reflection on headquarters, this seemed impossible. That a few hundred volunteers, poorly armed and without any means of transport, could pass the British garrison at Enniskillen and reach the western seaboard was truly heroic.

Father Eugene Coyle endorsed Father O’Daly’s assessment in his witness statement to the Bureau of Irish Military History:

All the leaders there were strongly in opposition to this plan, as it was considered not practicable or possible to carry out those plans. The country over which the Volunteers were ordered to march was not organised and was strongly held by hostile forces.

Nora Connolly, daughter of James Connolly and a member of Cumann na mBan (the female equivalent of the Irish Volunteers), was particularly scathing of McCartan:

I asked McCartan why he had got nothing done; did he not know the men in Dublin were fighting. He said they were all demobilised. It was much more difficult in the country to get men together once they had dispersed. There was no use waiting — waiting for what? We had a very bitter discussion. It was quite definite nothing was going to happen — that they were not going to fight in the north at all.

Father Coyle mounted a fairly robust defence of McCartan:

Why especially condemn him [McCartan] for inactivity when in areas like Cork and Kerry with friendly populations, with better organisation, more men, more arms and better equipment, no action took place?

After six months in hiding McCartan returned to his medical practice at Gortin. In February 1917 he was arrested in a swoop which the authorities made on a number of rebel leaders who were still at large, including Terence MacSwiney, Sean T. O’Kelly and Thomas MacCurtain.

He was interned in an open prison in England but absconded and in May 1917 he was busy campaigning on behalf of Joseph McGuinness, then a prisoner in Lewes Jail, in the South Longford by-election.

McCartan contested the by-election in South Armagh of 2 February 1918 on behalf of Sinn Féin but was defeated by Patrick Donnelly, a Newry solicitor and the Irish Parliamentary Party candidate, who polled 2,324 votes to McCartan’s 1,305 votes. An independent unionist polled 40 votes. It was an ill-natured and violent election with clashes between members of the AOH (‘the Hibs’) and ‘bands of Sinn Féin Volunteers armed with hurleys’. De Valera was physically assaulted by ‘Hibs’ in Crossmaglen. John D. Nugent, the secretary of the AOH, accused McCartan of allowing his car to be used in the Larne gunrunning.

McCartan was subsequently elected unopposed in the Tullamore by-election on 19 April 1918. He was re-elected in the new constituency of King’s County in the general election of 1918. At the meeting of the First Dáil he was appointed Sinn Féin’s representative in the USA where he would remain until 1921. While in the USA he met up with Joseph McGarrity. Together they persuaded Eamon de Valera to support the Philadelphia branch of Clan na Gael against the New York branch led by John Devoy and Judge Daniel Cohalan in their struggle to concentrate the resources of the Friends of Irish Freedom to Irish independence rather than domestic American politics.

McCartan’s disillusionment with de Valera began in 1919 when he noted Dev’s growing distaste for contradiction and even discussion. By 1924 he was telling William Maloney that de Valera was ‘the most honestly dishonest man I had ever met. He kids himself and poses. Give me a bloody crook if this be honesty.’

Back in Ireland he was re-elected for Leix-Offaly at the general election of 1921. He gave the Anglo-Irish Treaty his reluctant support. In the debate in the Dáil he said he would not ‘vote for chaos’. In a letter (dated 31 January 1922) to Maloney, he explained:

I voted for the damned Treaty because I thought it was in danger — and it was, until Burgess [Cathal Brugha] made his silly attack on Collins and Griffith took advice and did not overstate his case. The longer I listened to our leaders the more I became convinced that we got much more than we deserved and that if we did not accept it England could afford to leave the rest of the fight to ourselves.

He thought the whole cabinet was at fault and concluded that ‘The Republic of which Mr. de Valera was President is dead’.

Disillusioned, he gave up politics for the next twenty years. But as he explained to Maloney in a letter in November 1926, the malaise was clearly deeper:

I was quite happy in the mountains of Tyrone and would probably have married some publican’s daughter who had been a few years in a convent and could scream Songs of Araby or some atrocity but the lights of the Great White Way [a stretch of Broadway which includes New York’s theatre district and Time Square] or the things which they stand for separated me from the life of a flourishing vegetable.’

McCartan had become a very different man as a result of his mission to the United States though, as he said himself, he did not realize it until after his return in 1921:

The houses and streets in the local town looked cold and deserted on Christmas Eve and those in the village worse. My mind was made up. It was Dublin or New York.

He chose New York over Dublin and only returned to Ireland in 1937. He contested the 1945 Presidential election as an Independent candidate, coming third and securing 20% of the vote. A left-leaning republican, he was a founder member of Clann na Poblachta in 1946 and was an unsuccessful candidate in the general election of 1948, but served as a member of the Seanad between 1948 and 1951. In 1932 he published a book entitled *With De Valera in America*. In 1937 he married a lady from County Kerry rather than a convent educated Tyrone publican’s daughter. Their daughter Deirdre married the folk musician ‘Ronnie’ Drew. To his dying day, in any discussion of the Rising he vigorously defended his old comrades Bulmer Hobson and Denis McCullough.

# Thomas James Kennedy

(*circa* 1881 — 9 September 1916)

Thomas James Kennedy was the eldest son of Samuel and Mary Kennedy of Tyresson, Cookstown, and was born in County Tyrone about 1881.

A journalist by profession, he worked on a variety of provincial newspapers in Dungannon, Londonderry, Dublin and Dundalk. Before the war he had served in the South Irish Horse, a yeomanry regiment which had been formed in 1902. At the outbreak of the Great War, he was editor of the *Northern Standard*, Monaghan’s unionist newspaper. He obtained a commission in the 36th (Ulster) Division but subsequently seems to have been transferred to the 16th (Irish) Division.

Kennedy was serving in Dublin during Easter week, attached to the 12th Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, and found himself in the vicinity of St Mary’s Pro-Cathedral (i.e. the city’s Roman Catholic cathedral) in Marlborough Street. Richard Bowden, the Cathedral’s administrator, sent the following letter, warmly commending Kennedy’s conduct, to Sir John Maxwell, the General Officer commanding the British forces in Ireland:

After the telephone message to the military to occupy the Pro-Cathedral, I deem it my duty to state to you my great appreciation of the efficiency and courtesy with which the occupation was carried out by the 12th Inniskillings. I wish to mention specially Mr Kennedy (Lieut), who signalled to have the iron gates and doors opened, and arranged for his men to cross under fire without loss, and through whose courtesy afterwards, arrangements were made to cease fire for fifteen minutes so as to enable me to procure provisions for the large number of refugees who were compelled by the fire to take refuge with us.

The *Mid-Ulster Mail* of Saturday 12 August 1916 reported that Kennedy had been wounded in the hand on 4 August but that he expected to be able to return to duty ‘soon’.

A month later, on 9 September 1916, he was killed in action on the Somme, serving with the 8th Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, presumably during the battle for Ginchy.

In early September the 16th Division played an important role in capturing the towns of Guillemont and Ginchy, but paid a very high price in doing so. Between 1 and 10 September the Division lost 224 officers and 4,090 men but gained a reputation as first-class shock troops.

Major A. J. Walkey of the 8th Inniskillings wrote to Kennedy’s parents:

I regret having to inform you that your son was killed while leading his men during an attack on the 9th September. I have gathered that he was going down a trench with his bombers, when they met a party of Germans, who put up a fight, one of them throwing a bomb which killed your son. I am glad to say that afterwards some of his men got him away and buried him in decency. Please accept my sincerest sympathies in your bereavement.

Samuel Kennedy also received a letter from Sir John Leslie Bart of Glasslough, who held the rank of Temporary Lieutenant-Colonel in the 12th Reserve Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, paying tribute to his son:

I cannot say how much I feel for you and your family in the loss you have sustained in the death of your gallant son. In this battalion, he was beloved by both officers and men, and none of us are more grieved by his loss than I am myself. I had always a very strong liking for him ever since the evening he offered me his services at Monaghan, where his talents as a journalist were fully recognised. No one helped me more than he did in forming the Battalion, where he was so quick to learn and impart the knowledge he had acquired. He accompanied me often on the recruiting platform, and none could speak better.

The Rev Patrick D. McCaul of St Eunan’s College in Letterkenny, who became President of the College in 1919, wrote to the family:

You have my deepest sympathy in your great sorrow caused by the death of your son. During the week of the Rebellion I met him a good deal, and I must say that Lieutenant Kennedy was a general favourite with all the people staying in the Hamman Hotel. He was more than kind to myself, personally. He was affable, gentlemanly, fearless, and good humoured. I am deeply touched by his death. The loss of such a noble son is a crushing blow. His parents and other members of the family have my deepest sympathy. May God comfort you in your sorrow is the earnest prayer of one who greatly admired your darling son.

Although Kennedy’s body was carefully buried at the time, his remains could not be found subsequently by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (because graves were often obliterated by shell fire and disappeared without trace). Thus, Thomas James Kennedy has no known grave but is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing at Pier and Face 4D and 5B. He is also commemorated on the Cenotaph in Cookstown and on the Roll of Honour in Molesworth Presbyterian Church in the town.

# Bulmer Hobson

(14 January 1883 — 8 August 1969)

Many fondly believe that John Bulmer Hobson was born in Holywood, County Down. However, both the 1901 census and that of 1911 record his place of birth as Belfast. Actually, he was born into a prosperous Quaker family living at 5 Magdala Street, close to the then Queen’s College. In a memoir published in 1947, Mary Ann Bulmer, Hobson’s English mother, recalled that the house was surrounded by ‘undisciplined [sic] and unruly’ students living in digs.

Benjamin Hobson, his father, a grocer by trade, came from County Armagh and was a Gladstonian Home Ruler in politics. Mary Ann Bulmer was interested in female suffrage and active in the cultural life of Belfast, especially the Belfast Naturalists’ Field Club. In 1911 she participated in a demonstration in London in support of female suffrage and she was the Belfast Naturalists’ Field Club’s representative at the British Association’s meeting in Leicester in 1901. Bulmer’s architect sister had been born in Monasterevin, County Kildare, where Benjamin and Mary Ann started married life. In 1911 Bulmer was 28 and still living in the family home in Ballycultra (Holywood). He was a journalist and a member of the Society of Friends (i.e. a Quaker). In the 1901 census he was described as an ‘apprentice printer’ and was living in the family home at 6 Hopefield Avenue, Belfast.

He received a ‘fairly strict’ Quaker education at Friends’ School, Lisburn. In *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890-1923* (London, 2013), R. F. Foster observes: ‘always counter-suggestible, he emerged from its Quaker conditioning as a physical force nationalist’. After the Howth gun running of July 1914, he resigned from the Society of Friends because it was opposed to the use of violence.

Alice Milligan and Anna Johnston’s *Shan Van Vocht* magazine, which was published in Belfast between 1896 and 1900, was a major influence in shaping the adolescent Hobson’s separatist worldview.

Hobson was an enthusiastic joiner and prolific founder of organisations. He joined the Tír na nÓg branch of the Gaelic League in 1901 and became the first secretary of the County Antrim Board of the GAA the same year.

In 1903 he founded both the Protestant National Society (which ‘had neither a long nor important existence’) to recruit young Ulster Protestants in Belfast into ‘the national movement’ and Fianna Éireann, a scouting organisation for boys which was named after the legendary Fianna. The following year he was sworn into the Irish Republican Brotherhood by Denis McCullough.

In 1905 he co-founded the Dungannon Clubs and the Ulster Literary Theatre. The Dungannon Clubs, the first meeting of which took place at 109 Donegall Street in Belfast on 8 March 1905, were ostensibly founded to commemorate the Volunteer convention in Dungannon in February 1782 but, in reality, were intended as an IRB counterweight to Sinn Féin which at this stage advocated Arthur Griffith’s policy of dual monarchy.

Something of the flavour of the Dungannon Clubs may be obtained from an address given by Hobson in Carrickmore in the autumn of 1906 where he told his audience that ‘since the coming of the English to Ireland they had carried out a war of extermination, which was still going actually on. Either the English government or the Irish people had to go.’ This judgement may have been somewhat harsh on James Bryce the Belfast-born, mild-mannered and scholarly Liberal Chief Secretary for Ireland.

The Ulster Literary Theatre (which survived until 1934) might be regarded as a precursor of ‘Agitprop’ as deployed in the Soviet Union: the staging of plays with an explicit political message. The young Hobson was very taken by Alice Milligan’s pageant-dramas and *tableaux vivants*.

Initially Fianna Éireann made negligible impact, but in August 1909 Hobson and Countess Markievicz relaunched the organisation and enjoyed greater success. Two early recruits to Fianna Éireann, Con Colbert and Sean Heuston, were among those executed after the 1916 Rising.

Hobson edited *Irish Freedom*, the IRB monthly launched in November 1910. It proved very successful. The first issue had a print run of 7,000 copies and the second issue had a print run of 6,000. In 1912 Sean MacDermott boasted that its circulation was double that of *Sinn Féin* and *An Claidheamh Soluis* combined. Ernest Blythe was a regular contributor. Hobson subsequently used *Irish Freedom* as a vehicle to promote Casement’s advocacy that Ireland’s best interests lay in an alliance with Germany.

In November 1913 he became the secretary of the executive of the Irish Volunteers, a position which, to the great annoyance of Tom Clarke and Sean MacDermott, gave him far too much influence.

In June 1914 he supported John Redmond’s demand for half the seats on the executive of the Irish Volunteers (largely out of a desire to avoid splitting the organisation). As a result he incurred the enmity of Tom Clarke and Sean MacDermott. Clarke accused Hobson of being in the pay of Dublin Castle. They never exchanged civilities again but this does not signify that Tom Clarke was a hawk and Bulmer Hobson a dove. Hobson defended his decision to the end of his life and described it as ‘one of the wisest and most misunderstood of my actions … we never lost grip. I even appointed the office staff at headquarters while there was a Redmondite majority on the Committee.’

The placement of Redmondites on the executive of the Irish Volunteers frankly made very little difference. Despite the presence of his nominees on the Volunteer executive Redmond had no advance warning of the Howth gun running — planned by Hobson with the finance being arranged by Roger Casement — which took place the following month.

On 24 September, four days after John Redmond’s Woodenbridge speech which committed the Irish Volunteers to supporting the war effort at both home and abroad, Eoin MacNeill, Hobson and the executive of the Irish Volunteers repudiated Redmond and his nominees on the committee. They retained the name Irish Volunteers and determined to resist ‘any attempt to force the men of Ireland into military service under any government, until a free national government of Ireland is empowered by the Irish people to deal with it’.

As early as 9 September 1914 members of the Supreme Council of the IRB secretly resolved to plan a rising before the end of the war. Hobson was more interested in guerrilla warfare than the open insurrectionism advocated by the leaders of the proposed rising, particularly Patrick Pearse, Joseph Mary Plunkett and Thomas MacDonagh.

In 1934 Hobson told McGarrity:

I think it was in December 1915 Denis McCullough told me that the Supreme Council [of the IRB] had decided to bring off an insurrection before the end of the European war. This was vague, and never was conveyed to me in any regular manner. It was in direct violation of the constitution of the IRB.

In 1915 Hobson thought the proper policy for the Volunteer executive was

To go on building an armed Volunteer force, which would defend the country against any attempt to enforce conscription, developing and relying on a tactic of guerrilla warfare …

He recalled a conversation with James Connolly:

He [Connolly] told me that the working class was always revolutionary, that Ireland was a powder magazine and that what was necessary was for someone to apply the match. I replied that if he must talk in metaphors, Ireland was a wet bog and that the match would fall into a puddle.

In March 1916 he informed Eoin MacNeill of what Pearse *et al.* were planning, but MacNeill did not have the stomach for a stand-up row with Pearse.

On Palm Sunday 1916, a week before the Easter Rising, Hobson spoke at a fund-raising event in the Foresters’ Hall in Dublin and infuriated some of his audience by observing that rash action was in the air, and counselled caution.

He was effectively kidnapped by members of the IRB on Good Friday and held in a house (76 Cabra Park) in Phibsboro’ until the evening of Easter Monday. By then his erstwhile colleagues calculated that he could do no further damage to their cause.

Sean T. O’Kelly, a future President of Ireland, was sent to release him from house arrest. Together, to the sound of gunfire, they both walked back towards the centre of Dublin. O’Kelly subsequently claimed to have invited Hobson to join the fray. Hobson said that he would go home, fetch his rifle and find his detachment of Volunteers, but this was simply a stratagem to get rid of O’Kelly because he wanted to talk to Eoin MacNeill. At the canal, they shook hands and parted. As R. F Foster has observed: ‘Hobson walked home, and out of history’. Like MacNeill, he stayed home all week. Unlike MacNeill, he would never return to the political stage.

In 1933 Joseph McGarrity asked Hobson why he did not participate in the Rising. Hobson denied that it had anything to do with his kidnapping and explained that he was convinced that the thing was wrong, that it was a blunder which ‘I had honestly attempted to prevent, and to join up and add to the victims I felt would be a mistake’. Hobson believed that a rising threatened the entire future of ‘the national movement’ and would almost certainly have done so but for the reaction of the authorities. However, at the time, when soldiers were being executed on the Western Front for the treasonable offence of falling asleep on duty, the British government would have had great difficulty in justifying clemency towards participants in the Easter Rising.

For the rest of his life Hobson found himself politically ostracised and sidelined. He was not invited to the fortieth anniversary of the Rising in 1956 (because he ‘didn’t take part in the fighting’) nor the fiftieth in 1966. Disillusioned, Hobson wrote to Denis McCullough on 30 April 1956:

I cannot write about the people and times when we were young for reasons that are long and complicated. Briefly the phoenix of our youth has fluttered to earth such a miserable old hen I have no heart for it…

During the 1950s Hobson resolutely refused to speak about the 1916 Rising, unless it was with respect to Casement, whom he passionately believed was innocent of the charge of homosexuality.

In the 1960s Hobson underwent a change of heart, possibly because of F. X. Martin’s interest in his papers in the National Library in Dublin, and became willing to share his account of events with the public. The year before he died, he published his autobiography, *Ireland Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Tralee, 1968).

Hobson was a man of very considerable ability. Without him there would probably have been no rejuvenated IRB, the Volunteers probably would not have been in as good shape and without the Howth gun running both the IRB and Volunteers would have lacked the weaponry to fight during Easter week. Yet Hobson attracts very divergent assessments. On one hand, Sean O’Casey thought he was vain and manipulative. If true, he certainly was not as manipulative and vain as the membership of the Military Council of the IRB. On the other hand, Eoin MacNeill admired his quiet determination and selflessness but it is possible to agree that Hobson would occupy an honoured place in the republican pantheon but for three key decisions: firstly, his decision to accept John Redmond’s demand for half the seats on the executive of the Irish Volunteers in June 1914; secondly, his consistent opposition to the sort of rising envisaged by Patrick Pearse, Joseph Mary Plunkett and Thomas MacDonagh with its emphasis on blood sacrifice and rhetorical gesture rather than the prospect of military success; thirdly, his refusal to participate in the rising after he was released from his house arrest on Easter Monday. If he *had* participated in it he would almost certainly have been executed for an action that he genuinely believed to be a blunder and a mistake.

# Denis McCullough

(24 January 1883 — 11 September 1968)

Denis McCullough’s grandfather and father were both Fenians. He was born in Divis Street in Belfast and, unsurprisingly, brought up in ‘a nationalist and separatist atmosphere’. He was educated by the Christian Brothers, a teaching order which was enthusiastic in its advocacy of Irish nationalism, the language revival and Gaelic sports. In most of their schools Gaelic football and hurling were encouraged to the exclusion of all other sports. There were even examples of boys being punished for playing soccer. Conor Cruise O’Brien described the Christian Brothers as ‘the most indefatigable and explicit carriers’ of ‘the Catholic nation idea’.

McCullough became a piano-tuner in Belfast and eventually set up a music business in the city, which he subsequently transferred to Dublin, ironically because of the Belfast boycott, an attempt by Irish nationalists to prevent goods from Ulster being imported into the south of Ireland.

At 18 he joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood. His initiation took place at the side door of Donnelly’s public house on the Falls Road by an obese tailor called Ibbotson who seemed to view the ritual as a disagreeable distraction from the more important work of a night’s drinking. The experience was a source of immense disappointment to McCullough. He was disgusted with ‘the type of men’ he found controlling the organization: ‘they were mostly effete and many of them were addicted to drink’. He immediately vowed to overhaul and rejuvenate it. This he did with the assistance of Bulmer Hobson (whom he swore into the IRB) and Sean MacDermott. He even ejected his father from the organisation because of his lack of sobriety.

In a witness statement to the Bureau of Military History, McCullough recalled:

It was only after the advent of Tom Clarke into the movement that it really shaped like taking serious action. His reputation enabled the younger men on the Supreme Council, like Sean MacDermott, P. S. O’Hegarty, Diarmuid Lynch and Bulmer Hobson, to move forward with his backing in organising, preaching and teaching the value and necessity of a physical force meeting.

By 1906 he was a member of the Supreme Council of the IRB. In 1913 he was one of several IRB men who colonized the executive of the Irish Volunteers. By late 1915 he was President of the Supreme Council of the IRB, the titular head of the organisation. Tom Clarke, the treasurer, and Sean MacDermott, the secretary, had supported his nomination as president almost certainly because, by virtue of McCullough being in Belfast, he would be in absolutely no position to interfere with their plans. McCullough had no role in the planning of the rising. He was not even aware of the existence of the secret and secretive Military Committee that was responsible for its planning.

Although, unlike Bulmer Hobson, McCullough did not oppose the rising, like Hobson he was deliberately kept in the dark. He was provided with none of the detail until Good Friday. Patrick Pearse told him that ‘the northern Volunteers were to assemble in the Dungannon area, join the men of Tyrone, all march to Galway and join up with Liam Mellowes and his men there’. It is often said that as President of the IRB, according to its constitution, the President of the Irish Republic ought to have been McCullough but that Pearse usurped his position. Be that as it may, McCullough did not make an issue of it. We are on much safer ground in observing that strictly speaking McCullough ought to have been issuing the orders rather than Pearse. Nevertheless his more immediate problem was that the Tyrone men ‘refused point blank to take the orders’ at a meeting on Good Friday.

Dr Patrick McCartan, the organiser of the Volunteers in County Tyrone and the key figure in the IRB in the county, regarded the orders as unfeasible even before the countermand. So too did two Roman Catholic curates active in the Tyrone Volunteers who were closely aligned with McCartan, Father James O’Daly of Clogher and Father Eugene Coyle of Fintona. On Easter Sunday McCullough told the Tyrone leaders ‘that if they would not undertake to get their men moving and ready to start with mine for Connaught in the morning, I would order my men back to Belfast and disband them there’.

The impasse left McCullough ‘worn out in mind and body’. He ‘could not face the responsibility of keeping’ the ‘hundred or so men and boys’ — the number is usually cited as 132 — that he had brought to Tyrone and among people of whom he had no knowledge. Eventually McCullough and McCartan agreed to obey the countermand.

When the captain of the Blackwater company of the Volunteers arrived in Coalisland he found the Tyrone men in a hall adjacent to the square. Some were cooking and others eating. The Belfast men were ‘formed up in military formation on the square’ and ‘soon after … they marched out of the town’, escorted by the Benburb Company on their way to Cookstown to get the train back to Belfast. McCullough paid for the fares personally.

While on his way to visit McCartan in Carrickmore, McCullough had managed to shoot himself.

… I took out a small automatic [pistol] to examine it. I was fool enough to press the trigger to ascertain if it was loaded — it was, and the bullet went through my left hand, breaking no bones, but leaving a large gap where it passed out.

Events in Tyrone cost McCullough his pre-eminent position in advanced nationalist circles in Belfast. According to the Belfast IRB man Sean Cusack:

There was an intense feeling of dissatisfaction amongst the men who had travelled to Tyrone on the Saturday of Holy week, 1916, against the leadership displayed on that occasion … I was instructed [after the rising] to inform him [McCullough] that the rank and file in the Volunteers would be relieved to know that he would not attempt to again assume leadership.

After the Rising McCullough was arrested and taken to Richmond Barracks in Dublin. He was then briefly interned in Frongoch in north Wales. There he met Michael Collins, whose importance was still unrecognised by the authorities.

Collins virtually alone of those who played a significant role in the Easter Rising in Dublin was highly critical of the military planning. He described it as ‘bungled terribly’ and complained that the rebellion was ‘not an appropriate time for memoranda couched in poetic phrases, or actions worked out in similar fashion’. This may well have been the basis of the excellent rapport which seems to have existed between Collins and McCullough. In Frongoch Collins suggested to McCullough that an insurance company should be set up in Ireland to prevent large amounts of money going ‘out of the country’ to English (and presumably Scottish) insurance companies. Their conversations would appear to have been the origin of the New Ireland Assurance Company which was founded in 1918.

Between the rising and the War of Independence, McCullough was in and out of prison on a regular basis. In the General Election of December 1918 he unsuccessfully contested South Tyrone, a seat which he was never likely to win. In the elections to the first Northern Ireland Parliament in May 1918 he failed to secure election in West Belfast, a commentary possibly on his role in Coalisland in April 1916.

McCullough supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Between March and June 1922, he undertook a mission (at the request of George Gavan Duffy) to the United States to unite the various warring factions in Irish America, especially Clan na Gael, but in this he was unsuccessful.

In November 1924 he was elected on behalf of Cumann na nGaedheal in a by-election in County Donegal. The following year he resigned in protest at the report and outcome of the Boundary Commission. He did not seek re-election in the General Election of June 1927 and retired from politics.

Unlike Bulmer Hobson, McCullough possessed serious business acumen and was involved in a variety of successful enterprises, notably the New Ireland Assurance Company and the Clondalkin Paper Mills, and became prominent in the business life of the Irish Free State.

Culturally, he was involved in the establishment of Gate Theatre and became Vice-President of the Royal Irish Academy of Music.

In old age McCullough wrote to Richard Mulcahy, his brother-in-law and fellow IRB man and Irish Volunteer, musing on the past:

*We lived in dreams always: we never enjoyed them.*

*I dreamed of an Ireland that never existed and never could exist.*

*I dreamt of the people of Ireland as a heroic people, a Gaelic people:*

*I dreamt of Ireland as different from what I see now - not that I think*

*I was wrong in this …*

As Lord Acton may have observed: ‘Ideals in politics are rarely realised but through the pursuit of them men make history.’

# Mabel FitzGerald (*née* McConnell)

(4 July 1884 — 24 April 1958)

Mabel Washington McConnell was born into a wealthy Belfast Presbyterian and unionist family. Her date of birth and her father’s enthusiasm for the United States account for her middle name (which she resented). She was the youngest daughter of John McConnell and Margaret Neill. Her father was successively the American agent of Dunvilles (the Craig family’s whiskey distillery), a director and ultimately managing director. Margaret Neill was the daughter of James Orr Neill of Ballyrobin House, Killead, near Aldergrove, who had made his wealth in the meat trade in Chicago.

Mabel attended Victoria College (1894-1902) and Queen’s College, Belfast (1902-6), and St Mary’s Training College, Paddington, where she acquired a teaching qualification in 1908. However, it was at Queen’s that she became a convinced nationalist and Irish language enthusiast, joining both Sinn Féin and the Gaelic League. At Gaelic League classes in London in 1910 she met Desmond FitzGerald (born Thomas Joseph FitzGerald), an aspiring journalist and poet whose family roots were in Counties Cork and Kerry. They fell in love, but Mabel’s father did not relish the prospect of his daughter marrying an impecunious Roman Catholic clerk in the civil service.

Having returned unwillingly to Belfast, Mabel discovered she was pregnant. She escaped (out of a window one night) and fled back to London. She and Desmond were married in a Roman Catholic ceremony in May 1911, although Mabel did not convert to Roman Catholicism until 1943. In April 1949 she explained to George Bernard Shaw (whose secretary she was briefly and who retained a life-long affection for her): ‘I always wanted to be a Catholic but suspected I did not want it enough.’

At this stage Desmond was markedly less nationalist than Mabel and, in truth, he never did manage to match her nationalist zeal. His love letters to her were in English and he had not yet espoused her Sinn Féin sympathies. In 1911 they moved to Saint-Jean-du-Doigt, Brittany, where they pursued a bohemian lifestyle, and then to Ventry, County Kerry, in March 1913. In both Brittany and Kerry Mabel aspired to live the life of a peasant (like the Narodniki in Russia in the 1860s) and Shaw predictably mocked her for it. In 1914 Mabel wrote to Shaw that she was bringing up her son to speak Irish and to adopt ‘the sound traditional hatred of England and all her ways’. Shaw affectionately rebuked her: ‘You must be a very wicked devil to load a child’s innocent soul with a burden of hatreds and rancours that Ireland is sick of … You make that boy a good International Socialist — a good Catholic, in fact, in the true sense — and make him understand that the English are far more oppressed than any folk he has ever seen in Ireland …’ Shaw also informed Mabel that ‘he who is master of the English language is master of the world’ and pointed out that Gaelic revivalism was ‘not Irish’ but ‘the invention of Bedford Park, London, W’ (a carefully aimed swipe at W. B. Yeats).

Shaw’s advice had little impact on Mabel. Mabel’s sons have observed: ‘Looking back on Desmond FitzGerald’s early life … there seems little that foreshadowed his entry into the militant Irish separatist movement’. It was through Mabel’s forceful personality and ‘intellectual enthusiasms’ that Desmond’s politics were radicalised during their time in Kerry. He organised the Irish Volunteers in the county and in 1915 he was convicted and imprisoned for making seditious speeches.

Both Desmond and Mabel were in the GPO during the ‘1916 Rising’. In his memoir, Desmond recalled approaching the imposing building on Dublin’s O’Connell Street as ‘the flag of the Irish republic’ was being hoisted above the roof. ‘This is worth being wiped out for’, he commented to his wife. How this is to be reconciled with his discussions with Patrick Pearse and Joseph Mary Plunkett inside the GPO during Easter week is another matter.

In the GPO, being totally devoid of military skills, Desmond took the opportunity to explore the rationale of ‘the Rising’ with Pearse (who was equally bereft of military skills) and Plunkett (who had travelled to Germany in 1915 to secure German support). Both signatories of the proclamation fully expected the Germans to win the war and believed that a ‘rising’ lasting three days would guarantee ‘Ireland’ a place at the peace conference. Despite the proclamation of the Republic, Pearse and Plunkett, according to Desmond’s memoirs, speculated that it might be necessary to invite Prince Joachim Franz Humbert of Prussia, the Kaiser’s youngest son, to reign over a reformed kingdom of Ireland, where Irish would be the vernacular.

After ‘the Rising’ Desmond was sentenced to life imprisonment, later commuted to 20 years. In the General Election of December 1918, while he was still in prison, Mabel energetically masterminded his election as a Sinn Féin candidate for the Pembroke division of County Dublin. She exhibited a greater understanding of the nuts and bolts of electioneering than her husband would ever muster in the future.

On his release from prison Desmond was appointed director of publicity for *Dáil Éireann* in April 1919 and edited the underground *Bulletin*. Between 1918 and 1922 Mabel was an executive member of *Cumann na mBan*. Unlike Desmond, Mabel opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty and their marriage almost floundered on the rocks of the treaty. The couple’s nine-year-old son took to addressing his father as ‘you bloody traitor.’ Desmond was Minister of External Affairs in both the Provisional government and the first government of the Irish Free State. In 1924 he became Minister of Defence.

Although Mabel differed from her husband politically, woe betide anyone who sought to minimise or write his achievements out of the historical record. For example, Robert Brennan and Frank Gallagher, who were on the same side of the Treaty debate as Mabel, incurred her wrath for ignoring Desmond’s role as director of publicity for *Dáil Éireann* and his contribution to the *Bulletin*. She similarly dismissed Dorothy Macardle’s *The Irish Republic* (1937) as ‘1,000 pages of untruths’.

As she grew older Mabel morphed from aspiring peasant to intimidating matriarch and *grande dame*. As Jennifer FitzGerald told R. F. Foster when he was researching *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890-1923* (London, 2013): ‘The Mabel who tried to live like a peasant in Brittany and Kerry as an older woman terrorized daughters-in-law with inflexible standards re china and bone-handled knives.’

Just as the upper-class British socialists of the first decade of the twentieth century ended up in the 1950s complaining about the difficulties in securing decent servants and voting Conservative, Mabel’s political views underwent significant transformation, as she candidly admitted to Shaw in 1944:

I have changed my own views greatly since youth. About adult suffrage, for instance. I find the masses always wrong, they seem to stand for the worst in man. Certainly not for integrity, which I put first as the essential virtue in private and public life. Also I am convinced that education is necessary to the forming of views that are worthwhile at all, and I don’t believe the majority of people can take education. If poverty and dirt and disease could be abolished, and I hope they may be, the multitude would want more dog racing, more drink, more pictures, more tabloid views from the cheap press … Adult suffrage seems to have led only to the supremacy of the people without standards and values and of the half-baked educationally. Government and all control will soon be in the hands of the uneducated or the semi-educated … They already dominate everything here and you seem to be heading for the same situation in England.

Desmond and Mabel had four sons. The youngest — future Fine Gael leader and *Taoiseach* — Garret FitzGerald was born in 1926. In 1981, invoking his mother’s Presbyterian heritage, he announced his ‘Constitutional Crusade’ to create a pluralist Ireland where Ulster Protestants of his mother’s family tradition and the southern Roman Catholics of his father’s could feel equally at home. He genuinely believed that he had special insight into the ‘northern unionist community’ because he ‘belonged’ to them and he was ‘brought up with them’. However, Garret failed to appreciate that his mother was a very atypical Ulster Protestant and only succeeded in provoking a conservative Roman Catholic backlash in the Republic as evidenced by outcomes of the constitutional referenda on abortion in 1983 and divorce in 1986. The limits of his special insight into the ‘northern unionist community’ were starkly exposed by the Anglo-Irish Agreement of November 1985. Curiously, in a speech in the Mansion House in Dublin two years earlier he had disavowed any intention to reach any understanding or deal with the British government over the heads of the unionist community.

# Ernest Blythe

(13 April 1889 - 23 February 1975)

Ernest Blythe was born into a County Antrim farming family with an 80 acre farm close to Magheragall, near Lisburn. His father James was a member of the Church of Ireland, his mother Agnes was a Presbyterian (although she is recorded as being Church of Ireland in both the census of 1901 and that of 1911). His father’s family could trace their roots back to a William Blyth of Lambeg, whose daughter Elizabeth, was baptized in Lisburn Cathedral on 17 July 1665. Another daughter, Mary, was baptised there on 23 February 1667, and a son, James, on 24 July 1671.

An avid Irish language enthusiast, Blythe stated in his autobiography that his interest dated from his childhood and stemmed from two sources: the Irish-speaking Roman Catholic servant girls from Newry and South Armagh (especially a girl called Mary O’Hanlon) who worked on his family’s farm and his mother’s stories of her Irish-speaking Presbyterian relations who lived near Castlewellan.

In 1905, at the age of fifteen, he moved to Dublin to work as a clerk in the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction. There he became friendly with Sean O’Casey, the future playwright, who swore him into the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He claimed that the only political activity in this era was an unsuccessful attempt to break up a meeting in the Mansion House on the Irish Council bill of 1907, at which John Redmond and John Dillon were the principal speakers.

He also became a member of the Gaelic League. His Irish teacher was Sinéad Flanagan, the future wife of Éamon de Valera. He believed that it was essential that the Irish language should be restored to widespread and general use if Irish independence was to have any meaning. It was a view which he retained until his death.

In 1909 he turned to journalism and took a job with the *North Down Herald*, a newspaper based in Bangor with unionist leanings. He also took on the role of IRB organiser in Ulster but kept his political views to himself. He also contributed articles to *Irish Freedom*, the IRB monthly. In one article he described Sinn Féin as ‘valueless’ except as the complement to a military organization.

The 1911 census records him as living at the parental home at Magheraliskmisk and as speaking ‘Irish and English’. In 1912 James Blythe signed the Ulster Covenant (in Donaghadee) and Agnes signed the parallel Women’s Declaration (in Newtownards). In 1913 Ernest went to live in the Dingle peninsula to improve his fluency in Irish. He supported himself by working as a farm hand for Gregory Ashe, the father of Thomas Ashe who was to become a founder member of the Irish Volunteers. There he became a neighbour of Desmond and Mabel FitzGerald and Michael O’Rahilly (also known as The O’Rahilly) all of whom were later to play a role in the 1916 rising.

In 1914 he became a full-time Volunteer Organizer for Counties Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Clare. In trying to set up Volunteer companies Blythe recalled getting a poor response in Cork. He described Kerry as ‘moderately good’ and Clare ‘worst of all’, so much so that he was practically driven out of Ennis. Although Limerick was ‘best of all’, when Patrick Pearse visited the city in May 1915 the small contingent of Volunteers there was pelted with garbage.

The authorities viewed Blythe as a very dangerous man because he made no secret of the fact that he was very pro-German and wanted ‘England beaten in the war’. At a meeting in Dublin Castle senior members of the Irish administration concluded that he was more dangerous than Tom Clarke, an outspoken proponent of armed revolution. Thus he was jailed in 1914, 1915 and early 1916, missing participation in the Easter Rising.

He was released at Christmas 1916 and spent the holiday period with Kathleen Clarke, the widow of Tom Clarke, and her family in Limerick and resumed work as a Volunteer organiser. He was again arrested and imprisoned, first in Cork and then in Belfast.

In October 1917 he was one of 24 people elected to the executive of Sinn Féin, another measure of his status.

In *An tOglac*, dated 14 October 1918, Blythe contributed a menacing article entitled ‘Ruthless warfare’. He contended that in opposing the ‘atrocity’ of extending conscription to Ireland

*We must decide that in our resistance we shall acknowledge no limit and no scruple...[man who] assists directly or by connivance in this crime against us should be killed without mercy or hesitation... The man who serves on an exemption tribunal, the doctor who examines conscripts, the man who voluntarily surrenders when called for, the man who applies exemption, the man who drives a police-car or assists in the transport of army supplies, must be shot or otherwise destroyed with the least possible delay.*

While conscription never was extended to Ireland, this article virtually constitutes the blueprint for the IRA’s *modus operandi* in the War of Independence. He had some reservations about killing RIC officers, probably because in November 1919 he married Annie McHugh, the daughter of a Roman Catholic RIC inspector. Their only child, Earnán, was born in 1925.

In the General Election of December 1918 he contested two constituencies: North Armagh and North Monaghan. In North Armagh he was heavily defeated by William Allen, the commanding officer of the Ulster Division’s pioneer battalion, but in North Monaghan he saw off a strong Unionist challenge from M. E. Knight, the Clones solicitor and Orange County Grand Master of Monaghan, and was elected MP for the constituency.

Blythe embarked upon an impressive ministerial career. He was Minster for Trade and Commerce in the First and Second Dáil and Minister for Finance from 1923 to 1932. Between 1927 and 1932 he was Vice-President of the Executive Council of the Irish Free State (i.e. Deputy Prime Minster).

He supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 6 December 1921. As he explained in the Treaty debate in the Dáil on 3 January 1922:

Republicanism is with me not a national principle but a political preference. I am against monarchy, because I believe monarchies in the world as it is to-day are effete and out of date. I believe the Irish people, when they voted for a Republican majority in this Dáil, and when they declared themselves for an Irish Republic, were not thinking of constitutional privileges very much, but were thinking of the complete freedom of Ireland (hear, hear). I think that is the ideal for which the Irish people have declared. I think that, like myself, they have a preference for the Republican form of Government, because I do not see how anybody could, at the present day, prefer any other form of Government; but I believe the main thing that was in their minds was the securing of the complete independence of Ireland. As far as I am concerned, I wanted the Irish Republic, as I believe the people of Ireland did, in order that Ireland might be free. With me the Republic was a means to an end and not an end in itself.

Kevin O’Higgins is normally regarded as the ‘hard man’ of W. T. Cosgrave’s Cumann na nGaedheal government. On 7 December 1922 Anti-Treaty IRA gunmen shot two pro-Treaty TDs in Dublin, killing one and badly wounding the other, as they were on their way to the Dáil. After an emergency cabinet meeting, the Free State government decided on the retaliatory executions of four prominent Republicans (one from each province). The tough measures to restore law and order are normally attributed to O’Higgins but anecdotal evidence suggests that Blythe was even more hardline. He was, after all, the author of ‘Ruthless warfare’. In all, the Irish Free State formally sanctioned the execution of between 77 and 81 anti-Treaty IRA men during the Civil War.

As Minister for Finance, Blythe was a stern fiscal conservative who believed in balanced budgets and keeping a tight rein on public expenditure, relaxed only very rarely for favoured projects like the Abbey Theatre, to which he made a small annual grant of £1,000. This made the Abbey one of the first state-sponsored theatres in the World.

He famously — or infamously — reduced Old Age Pensions from ten shillings a week to nine shillings a week in his budget of 1924, a fact which was still part of Irish political folklore in the 1990s. Of much greater interest is the reason why this step was necessary. In 1909 John Redmond denounced old age pensions as ‘an extravagance that would not have been indulged in by an Irish [Home Rule] parliament’. On the eve of independence the Exchequer in London subsidised Irish pensions to the tune of £4 million, three-quarters of which went to the twenty-six counties which constituted the Irish Free State. Without the British subvention, Blythe was obliged to confront the painful reality that cost of the British standard of pension provision was too great for the IFS to bear. Indeed pensions accounted for the bulk of welfare spending in the IFS.

In 1932 Cumann na nGaedheal was defeated in the general election and in the following year’s election Blythe lost his Monaghan seat. He was briefly a Senator (1933-6) and then he retired from politics. His activities and interests thereafter focused on the Irish language, the theatre and the question of partition.

As an Ulster Presbyterian, his views on Ulster and Partition were markedly different to those of most nationalists. In August 1920 he opposed the ‘Belfast boycott’. Two years later he drafted a memorandum for his ministerial colleagues which was highly critical of Michael Collins’ covert operations to overthrow or destabilize the Northern Ireland state.

In 1955 he published *Briseadh na Teorann* (‘The smashing of Partition’). He accepted that Partition existed because of the wishes of the Ulster unionist population in Northern Ireland rather than as the result of the wishes of the Westminster government. He contended that the only way to end Partition was to persuade a few hundred thousand unionists to vote for its abolition. To this end, he advocated friendly contact and engagement with unionists, believing that strident anti-Partitionist rhetoric was simply counterproductive. He also favoured the deletion of Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution.

Blythe combined his love of the Irish language and his desire to end Partition in an interesting way. In order to persuade unionists to re-join Ireland, it was essential to offer them a common Irish identity, demonstrated through the Irish language. He wished to establish that culture and not religion was the distinguishing feature of Irish identity.

Blythe had to endure a certain amount of sectarian abuse on account of his background. For example, in the aftermath of the Easter Rising, a Kerry newspaper with Redmondite sympathies dismissed him as ‘an Orangeman from Belfast’. In the second general election of 1927 a successful Fianna Fáil candidate publicly stated that Monaghan was ‘a Catholic county and should be represented by Catholics’. On another occasion the parish priest of Scotshouse told voters that Blythe and Cumann na nGaedheal ‘were worse on the Irish people than Cromwell’. Such abuse is unlikely to have caused Blythe much angst.

In addition to *Briseadh na Teorann* (1955), Blythe wrote two volumes of autobiography *Trasna na Boinne* (1957) and *Slan le hUltaibh* (1969), and produced a volume of poetry in 1938.

# Sean MacEntee

(23 August 1889 — 10 January 1984)

According to his birth certificate, John Francis McEntee was born at 47 King Street in Belfast. He was the eldest son of James McEntee, a prosperous Roman Catholic publican (the proprietor of three public houses including the Crown Bar) and merchant in the city. John Francis, who was later to become known as ‘Sean’ when a prisoner in England in 1916, was educated at St Malachy’s in Belfast and Belfast College of Technology, where he qualified as an electrical engineer. His father had been a member of the IRB, an admirer of Parnell and a member of Belfast Municipal Council, which undoubtedly influenced him in the development of his own political views. He joined the Irish Socialist Republic Party which was originally founded by James Connolly in 1896 and then revived in 1909 after five years of inactivity.

The family return for the Census of 1911 was made in Irish despite the fact that no member of the family was proficient in the language. John Francis MacEntee was a cultural nationalist and a member of both the Gaelic League and the Ulster Literary Theatre which had been founded by Bulmer Hobson. He was also poet. A volume of his verse was published in 1917 and a number of his poems featured in the anthology *Poets of the Insurrection* (1918).

He briefly toyed with the idea of emigrating but, in January 1914, he took employment as the assistant to the town engineer in Dundalk on a salary of £100 *per annum*. It was in Dundalk that he became involved in both the Irish Volunteers and Sinn Féin. He attributed his radicalization to Edward Carson: ‘He not only preached rebellion, he openly armed for it. And he did so with impunity’.

On Easter Sunday 1916 the Dundalk Volunteers marched to Slane to await orders that never materialised. MacEntee travelled to Dublin to obtain instructions from Pearse. He made contact with Pearse and Connolly in Liberty Hall but missed his train and did not get back to Dundalk until the early hours of Monday morning. He had a despatch from Pearse in his possession: ‘Dublin is in arms. You will carry out your original instructions’. MacEntee was now in the grip of a ‘strange feeling of independence’ and declared ‘… exhilaration possessed me … we were soldiers of the free Irish nation. A yoke seemed lifted from my shoulders’.

On Easter Monday at Castlebellingham MacEntee and his associates captured ten unarmed members of the RIC. Another RIC man, Constable Charles Magee, approached on a bicycle. He was ordered to dismount and was placed with the other prisoners. A passing car was stopped, containing Second Lieutenant Robert Dunville of the Grenadier Guards (who was travelling from Kingstown to Belfast). He too was put with the other prisoners, but was not searched. What happened next is not entirely clear, but Dunville seems to have produced a gun, or was perceived to be doing so. Challenged, he refused instructions to put his hands up. Shots were fired — by whom is unclear — and Constable Magee was killed and Lieutenant Dunville sustained a minor wound.

MacEntee returned to Dublin on Wednesday to report to Connolly on what had happened in County Louth, although events there are unlikely to have featured prominently among Connolly’s concerns. Under heavy fire, MacEntee managed to gain access to the General Post Office in the early hours of Thursday morning and he was there to experience the bombardment of it on Friday afternoon. In his *Episode at Easter* (which was written in prison in 1916 but only appeared in print in 1966) MacEntee recalled:

Now there was a good deal of activity — the first noticeable thing about it was that each window on the ground floor was manned and there were changes of guards periodically, they were strengthening the defence of the Post Office … the roof was ablaze for part of that period, but there wasn’t any sort of desire to get away … it was still fairly close tight discipline.

In addition to providing an account of the final days of the Rising in the GPO, *Episode at Easter* contains a fascinating series of insider portraits of Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, Thomas MacDonagh and Eamon Ceannt in the GPO.

MacEntee was later found guilty of the murder of Constable Magee and the attempted murder of Second Lieutenant Dunville, for which he was subsequently sentenced to death. At his court martial in June, MacEntee expressed his regret at the shooting of the police officer and said that the constable had received no abuse from him, that he was his fellow countryman, discharging his duty, and that he lamented his death.

Although condemned to death, the sentence was commuted and he was subsequently made an inmate of Dartmoor, Lewes and then Portland. While in Dartmoor he first met de Valera with whom so much of his future political life was to be entwined. He was released from prison under the terms of the general amnesty of 1917 and became active in both Sinn Féin and the IRA (which had emerged from the Irish Volunteers).

The *Catholic Bulletin* of July 1917, a journal which did much to facilitate the seismic shift from the Irish Parliamentary Party to Sinn Féin, described MacEntee in glowing terms as

One of the most highly gifted of men connected with the rebellion. He was well known in Belfast and Dundalk, particularly in Irish Literary and Irish Volunteer circles. He possessed rare intellectual gifts, was an able and cultured speaker, and his poetry was of a very high order. His was a very lovable character, noted for courteousness and gentleness, but absolutely fearless where the honour of Ireland and her rights to full Nationhood were at stake.

In the General Election of December 1918, he was elected MP for South Monaghan, the county in which his family was conscious of having its origins. In the Dáil he did not shy away from controversy. He was critical of de Valera’s mission to the United States because it lacked Dáil approval. He also objected to Erskine Childers’ appointment as head of propaganda because he was not a member of the Dáil. On both occasions, he believed he was upholding the integrity of the institution.

Unlike Ernest Blythe, his fellow Ulsterman and his neighbour in North Monaghan, MacEntee opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 on the grounds of partition, rather than over the issue of sovereignty. By doing so, he provoked this response from the pro-Treaty side: ‘Is the speaker prepared to coerce the six counties’ The question was neatly side-stepped.

Again unlike Blythe, he supported the ‘Belfast boycott’, a campaign in which his wife Margaret was heavily involved. He contended that they ‘could not reduce Belfast by force of arms, but could bring them to reason by economic force’.

During the Civil War he was imprisoned by the Free State and, on release from jail, he returned to electrical engineering.

He sought election to the Dáil in 1923 and 1924, but without success. He became a founder member of Fianna Fáil in 1926. Asked why he had returned to politics, he replied ‘Just a determination not to be beaten. It wasn’t a case of going out of politics. In internment, you’re in politics. You are surrounded by politicians.’

He eventually secured election in 1927 and again in 1932. That latter year marked the beginning of a long and notable ministerial career. He was Minister for Finance between 1932 and 1939 and for a second time between 1951 and 1954. In 1939 he was appointed Minister of Industry and Commerce and in 1941, following a cabinet reshuffle, he became Minister for Local Government and Public Health. Between 1957 and 1965 he served in the department of Health and Social Welfare. He was a formidable figure in Fianna Fáil and a long-term rival of the more pragmatic Sean Lemass.

MacEntee started off on the left of the political spectrum but moved steadily to the right. Like Blythe, he was a fiscal conservative. As Minister for Finance he thought that Fianna Fáil’s commitment to job creation and increased public spending on social welfare was ‘economically unsound’. In the general election of 1943 he alleged that the Irish Labour Party had been infiltrated by ‘a middle class intelligentsia’ and was taking its orders from Moscow. He was extremely hostile to the Beveridge Report in the United Kingdom. He contended that Beveridge threatened to make the state ‘omnicompetent’ and that Beveridge’s proposals were at variance with those articles in the Irish Constitution of 1937 which guaranteed the role of the family as bearing primary responsibility for the welfare and education of its members. He also harboured serious doubts about the compatibility of Lemass’s reforms in the 1960s with the republican project.

His views on Partition came to have some affinity to those of Blythe. In June 1946 he maintained that the only way to end it was through a policy of ‘national reconstruction, social progress, industrial development and letting people in the North see what would be their lot if they came in with us’. He believed in the principle of consent long before it was enshrined in the Belfast Agreement of 1998.

Apart from Ernest Blythe, MacEntee was the most senior politician in the independent Irish state to have been born in what became Northern Ireland. Both Blythe and MacEntee served as Minister for Finance and as deputy prime minister, Blythe as Vice-President of the Executive Council and MacEntee as *Tánaiste*. However, MacEntee surpassed Blythe in terms of political longevity.

In 1972 he was asked what it was like to be involved in the Rising. He replied:

It had been in every sense of the word, an adventure. People felt toughened and hardened by the fact that they had ran so close and not been pushed over.

MacEntee lived long enough to see the outbreak of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. In September 1971 he drew a clear distinction between the republicans of 1916 and those of 1971:

The men of 1916 did not plant bombs in public places, caring not whom these might kill or maim, whether men, women or children. Neither did they fan sectarian hatred, as neither did they turn their guns on each other in furtherance of personal or organisational rivalries. They were true soldiers and fought a clean fight.

In July 1974 he expressed the view that the Rising, ‘whether right or wrong’, was inevitable:

There was no stopping it. I was all for it personally. It was the only action to take at the time. For me to think anything else would be to my whole life’s work unreal or false.

# John Clarke MacDermott

(12 April 1896 — 13 July 1979)

John Clarke MacDermott was the third son of the Reverend John MacDermott, minister of Belmont Presbyterian Church and Moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly in 1903, and his wife Lydia. To his friends he became known as John. Within his family he was called Clarke. He was educated at Campbell College, Belfast, and was awarded a scholarship to Queen’s University, Belfast, in 1914.

His brother, Robert Wilson MacDermott, known as Robin, was killed in action on 8 January 1916 at the Somme and is usually regarded as the first officer of the 36th (Ulster) Division to be killed in the Great War.

In order to make a contribution to the war effort, J. C. abandoned his studies temporarily and worked as a labourer in Workman & Clark Ltd, affectionately known as ‘the wee yard’, the smaller of Belfast’s two great shipyards.

On Easter Monday 1916, a public holiday, MacDermott and his friend Robert Orchard, the son of Wallace Orchard, a manager of a timber business, decided to visit Dublin for the first time. They travelled by train and arrived at Amiens Street station (now Connolly Station). They walked along Talbot Street, which led to Nelson’s Pillar (which was destroyed by an IRA bomb on 8 March 1966) in Sackville Street (now O’Connell Street), and proceeded past Trinity College and up Grafton Street to St Stephen’s Green. They paid little heed to several small bodies of men in green uniforms who appeared to be on patrol but who failed to attract surprise or attention from passers-by. They had a snack in St Stephen’s Green and visited St Patrick’s Cathedral where they encountered many visitors, including other friends from Belfast. Afterwards they were told that Sinn Féiners — as people incorrectly believed the insurgents to be — had occupied St Stephen’s Green and that Madame Markievicz had set up her command post on the road bounding it on the west.

Lunch in the Dublin Bread Company’s restaurant in Sackville Street was punctuated by shooting and an explosion. They paid their bill and ‘said good-bye to DBC’s fine premises — a last good-bye for they were destroyed not long afterwards’. They failed to get a tram and had to ‘skirt a pool of blood’ on the pavement. Slowly they began to realise that Dublin was in the grip of ‘rebellion’ and decided to take the next train back to Belfast but there were no trains running either.

They saw a detachment of Lancers ‘looking as they had just passed through some disturbing experience’ and a number of the Lancers’ horses lying dead or dying in the street. They witnessed the looting of one of Noblett’s Toffee Shops and discovered that the railway line to Belfast had been blown up at Balbriggan. They found they could not make a telephone call home and popped into a cinema in Talbot Street but the cinema closed after an hour on account of the disturbed state of the city. Eventually they managed to return to Belfast without mishap by the simple expedient of walking towards Drogheda and then negotiating a ride for the exorbitant sum of ten shillings with ‘a tough looking fellow’ who had possession of a jaunting car. Having obtained a meal in Drogheda, they then had no difficulty in getting a train to Belfast where they arrived in the small hours to the great relief of their respective families. MacDermott recorded his experiences of that day in his memoir *An Enriching Life* which was privately published, but a copy is available for consultation in the Linen Hall Library, Belfast.

Before the end of the year MacDermott volunteered for service in the Great War, serving in the machine gun battalion of the 51st Highland Division. He saw action in the second Battle of the Marne and won the Military Cross. He was member of the post-war British army of occupation in Germany before he was demobilised in the spring of 1919.

MacDermott returned to his studies at Queen’s and graduated with a First in Law in 1921 and won the Dunbar Barton prize (as his brother Robin had done). He also won the Victoria prize and exhibition at King’s Inn, Dublin, and obtained first-class honours in his final examination.

He was called to both the Irish and Northern Ireland Bar in 1921. Between 1932 and 1936 he lectured in Jurisprudence at QUB and between 1929 and 1938 he was determiner of Industrial Assurance Disputes. He became a King’s Counsel in 1936.

In 1938 he was elected to the Northern Ireland House of Commons (as one of the four MPs for Queen’s University). Privately, he was a critic of Neville Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement (which the Unionist Party supported). The Munich Agreement of 30 September 1938 (which dismembered Czechoslovakia) left him ‘greatly depressed’. He believed that Nazi Germany’s demands were insatiable and that another German onslaught under Hitler ‘seemed inevitable’.

With the approach of the Second World War, he volunteered for the army in August 1939 and served in the Royal Artillery. After the evacuation of Dunkirk he was released from military service at the request of the Northern Ireland Government and became Minister of Public Security from 25 June 1940 to 10 November 1941. From his first day in office he was convinced that Belfast would become a target of the Luftwaffe and was appalled to discover that the Ministry of Home Affairs had been returning fire-fighting equipment to Britain on the assumption that it would not be needed. In March 1941 MacDermott requested — in vain — more guns, searchlights and night fighters, predicting that ‘the period of the next full moon from, say, the 7 to the 16 April may well be our turn’. And so it proved to be. The first German raid came on the night of 7 April but was a minor affair compared to the massive raid that followed on Easter Tuesday. Nevertheless, it resulted in 13 deaths.

On Easter Tuesday (15 April) some 180 German bombers launched a five-hour assault on Belfast, resulting in the deaths of 900 men, women and children. Approximately 55,000 houses were damaged, leaving some 100,000 people temporarily homeless.

As MacDermott had feared, the massive bombing played havoc with the water mains. There were 32 factures in all, and the water pressure fell to 50 per cent of normal at exactly the wrong time. MacDermott realised that he needed assistance on an impressive scale.

Almost exactly 25 years after his visit to Dublin in 1916, at around 1:30 am on 16 April 1941 (the Wednesday after Easter) MacDermott took the unprecedented step of ringing Dublin, asking to speak to ‘someone in authority’ and requesting that fire appliances be sent across the border as quickly as possible. Eamon de Valera was woken at 2:00 am and, taking ‘what was possibly the fastest decision of his career’, ordered Irish fire brigades north to render assistance to Belfast’s hard-pressed firefighters. Thirteen appliances in all — from Dublin, Dun Laoghaire, Drogheda and Dundalk — hurtled north.

MacDermott made his telephone call just in time. At 1:45 am a massive explosion had put Belfast’s central telephone exchange out of action, severing all local and trunk lines out of Belfast.

On 22 April 1941 in the Northern Ireland House of Commons he paid tribute to the assistance received from the South:

The help received from our neighbour, Eire, was not related to any bond of war or any political consideration and was above and beyond politics. It was based on common humanity; we gratefully accept and acknowledge it as such.

MacDermott was one of the few Northern Ireland politicians to emerge with any credit from the Belfast blitz. He served briefly as Northern Ireland’s Attorney General before being appointed a Judge on the High Court Bench in London 1944. In 1947 he was made a Lord of Appeal, the first to be appointed from Northern Ireland. He became Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland in 1951, a position he retained until 1971. In September 1966, as Lord Chief Justice MacDermott, he told the Grand Jury at the opening of the Belfast City Commission that ‘it had been a period of some tumult … some rioting and violence … You may well reach the conclusion that the gunman has come amongst us again’. He was of course referring to events such as the murder of a young Roman Catholic barman in Malvern Street and rioting in Cromac Square in Belfast in June of that year, and the heightened communal tension prompted by the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising.

In 1977 MacDermott offered to redeliver a lecture at the Ulster Polytechnic in Jordanstown that had been interrupted the previous March by a bomb in the lecture hall which killed two and wounded forty-one others, including MacDermott himself.

# Suggested Further Reading

## The broad context

Paul Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity 1798-2006* (Oxford, 2007)

Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798-1998* (Oxford, 1999)

Keith Jeffrey, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge, 2000)

Keith Jeffrey, *1916: A Global History* (London, 2015)

J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989)

## The more immediate context

Paul Bew, *Ideology and the Irish Question: Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism 1912-16* (Oxford, 1994)

Roger Blaney, *Presbyterians and the Irish Language* (Belfast, 1996)

Ronan Fanning, *Fatal Path: British Government and Irish Revolution 1910-1922* (London, 2013)

R. F. Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890-1923* (London, 2014)

Fearghal McGarry, *Rebels: Voices from the Easter Rising* (Dublin, 2011)

Patrick Maume, *The Long Gestation: Nationalist Life in Ireland 1890-1918* (Dublin, 1999)

Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (London, 2005)

Lawrence William White & James Quinn (eds), *1916: Portraits and Lives* (Dublin, 2015)

## Biographies

Jeffrey Dudgeon, *Roger Casement: The Black Diaries — With a Study of His Background, Sexuality and Irish Political Life* (Belfast, 2002, revised 2016)

Tom Feeney, *Sean MacEntee: A Political Life* (Dublin, 2008)

Fergus Fitzgerald (ed.), *Desmond’s Rising: Memoirs 1913 to Easter 1916* (London, 1968)

Garret FitzGerald, *All in a Life: An Autobiography* (Dublin, 1991)

Marnie Hay, *Bulmer Hobson and the Nationalist Movement in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Manchester, 2009)

Denis McCullough, ‘The Events in Belfast’, *Capuchin Annual* (1966), pp. 381-4

John Clarke MacDermott, *An Enriching Life* (privately printed, Belfast, 1979)

F. X. Martin, ‘The McCartan Documents, 1916’, *Clogher Record*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1966), pp. 5-65

Catherine Morris, *Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival* (Dublin, 2013)

Trevor Neill, ‘Ernest Blythe: The Man from Magheragall’, Lisburn Historical Society, Vol 2, Pt 4 (December 1979)

Sheila Turner Johnston, *Alice: Life of Alice Milligan* (Newtownards, 1994)

Michael Tierney: *Eoin MacNeill: Scholar and Man of Action 1867-1945* (Oxford, 1980)