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Marnie HAY

Kidnapped

BULMER HOBSON, THE IRB AND THE 1916 EASTER RISING

The kidnapping of nationalist leader Bulmer Hobson

is one of the more intriguing sideshows of the Easter Rising of 24–29 April 1916. The Military Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB)¹ was responsible for planning and leading the week-long rebellion against British rule in Ireland. Members of the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Citizen Army, Cumann na mBan and Na Fianna Éireann participated in the rising, which mainly took place in Dublin. The British authorities later executed sixteen men, including the seven members of the Military Council, for their involvement in the insurrection.² Hobson has the dubious distinction of having been held against his will by his IRB comrades from the afternoon of Good Friday, 21 April 1916 until the evening of Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, the day the rebellion broke out.

Born in Belfast in 1883 to a prosperous Quaker family, Hobson was – at first glance – an unlikely Irish republican nationalist. His father Benjamin Hobson Jr was a commercial traveller and a Gladstonian home ruler from outside Lurgan in County Armagh, while his mother Mary Ann Bulmer was a women's rights activist and amateur archaeologist from Darlington in the north of England. The Hobson family resided on Hopefield Avenue in north Belfast and the three Hobson children attended the Friends' School in Lisburn, a co-educational boarding school.

By the time Hobson left school in 1899, he was a committed nationalist. His political views were the result of influences absorbed through exposure to his parents and neighbours in north Belfast. He grew up in a home where everything was argued and discussed “with good temper and no opinion was barred.”³ From his father he “inherited a natural urge to take the weaker side in every quarrel and to resent injustice of every kind.”⁴ At the same time his mother's involvement in suffrage societies provided him with an early example of political activism. In addition, he was greatly influenced by his neighbours, the poets Alice Milligan and Anna Johnston, who wrote under the pseudonym Ethna Carbery. The pair helped to expose him to the reverberations of the wider Irish cultural revival that were being felt in his native Ulster. They provided him with nationalist reading material, such as Standish O'Grady's retellings of Irish sagas and their own newspaper the *Sban Van Vocht*.⁵

The paper's coverage of the centenary of the 1798 rebellion inspired Hobson to study the lives and ideals of the United Irishmen. He recalled:

I found myself living in a city enriched by their associations. The result was that I decided to spend the succeeding years of my life trying to complete their task.⁶

Esponsing a combination of separatism, republicanism and non-sectarianism, Hobson soon became involved in a string of nationalist organisations, while attempting to pursue a career in the printing trade.

At Carbery's suggestion, Hobson joined the Gaelic League in 1901, where he met Denis McCullough, a young Catholic from the Falls Road area. The pair soon became partners in nationalism. McCullough, who grew up steeped in Fenian tradition, introduced Hobson to the IRB in 1904. Together they worked to revive the secret society in Ulster. In 1905 they formed the Dungannon Clubs, which promoted the Sinn Féin message in Ulster and beyond. Hobson became so prominent as a Sinn Féin propagandist that he, rather than Arthur Griffith, was invited to undertake a speaking tour of the United States in 1907. Unable to find steady employment in the north of Ireland, Hobson moved to Dublin in 1908. There he rose through the IRB ranks to become a member of its governing body the Supreme Council, founded the nationalist youth group Na Fianna Éireann with Countess Constance Markievicz in 1909, and helped to establish the Irish Volunteers in November 1913.

The formation of the Irish Volunteers was a nationalist response to the establishment in January 1913 of the Ulster Volunteer Force to defend Ulster against Home Rule by force of arms if necessary. Dependent on the support of the Irish Parliamentary Party, the Liberal government had been induced to introduce the third Home Rule bill in 1912. Due to the abolition of the veto power of the House of Lords, the bill was likely to pass this time. In response, unionists in Ireland and Britain mobilised against it.

Like many others both inside and outside the IRB, Hobson saw the formation of the Ulster Volunteers as an opportunity to start a similar nationalist Volunteer movement. As Chairman of the Dublin Centres Board of the IRB, he initiated training in military drill in the summer of 1913 in order to ensure that IRB members would have the skills necessary to take a leading role in the new movement.⁷ According to Hobson, the Dublin Centres Board decided in October that the IRB should take the initiative in starting a Volunteer movement before someone else did. Hobson not only gained the Supreme Council's agreement to the scheme, but was deputed to act on the IRB's behalf.⁸

The first challenge was to find a respected, but politically non-controversial figure to serve as a focal point for the movement. The IRB hit upon Eoin MacNeill, Gaelic League founder and professor of Early and Medieval Irish History at University College Dublin, after he published “The north began,” an article advocating the formation of an Irish

Volunteer force, in *An Claidheamb Soluis* on 1 November 1913. Hobson contacted MacNeill through the conduit of the paper's manager Michael O'Rahilly (known as The O'Rahilly) and soon plans were underway to set up a military force (or citizen's army) that proposed to serve broad Irish national interests, as opposed to narrow party interests.⁹ There does not seem to have been any agreement, however, on what Ireland's broad national interests actually were.

Hobson's rising star within the IRB began to descend in June 1914 when he went against an IRB decision and voted, for tactical reasons, to accept the Irish Parliamentary Party leader John Redmond's nominees onto the governing committee of the Irish Volunteers. By this time tensions were already evident between Hobson and his fellow members of the IRB Supreme Council and future insurrectionists Tom Clarke and Sean MacDermott. The trio had once been close, with Clarke serving as a father figure to Hobson and MacDermott. Over time, however, diverging political views combined with personal and political rivalries drove them apart.

Born in 1857, Clarke had spent fifteen years in an English jail for his involvement in a bomb attack. He and Hobson first met in New York in early 1907 when Clarke made the arrangements for Hobson's American lecture tour. They renewed their acquaintance after Clarke and his wife Kathleen (née Daly) moved back to Ireland later that year. According to Kathleen, her husband envisioned Hobson as "another John Mitchel," the Ulster Protestant journalist and revolutionary of the nineteenth century. As much as she liked Hobson, she warned Tom that "he was idealising the man too much."¹⁰ Hobson introduced Clarke to many of the younger republicans, such as MacDermott and McCullough. Despite differences in age, there was a strong mutual attraction between Clarke and the active, enthusiastic, younger men of the IRB.

Hobson was not the only ambitious young man who rose through the ranks of the IRB under the fatherly gaze of Clarke. MacDermott's star was also on the ascendant. Born in 1884 in Kiltyclogher, County Leitrim, MacDermott was a former protégé of Hobson and McCullough, who had recruited him into the IRB in Belfast in 1906. Outgoing, athletic and handsome, MacDermott shared Hobson's self-confidence, drive and organisational skill. Although Clarke once rebuked MacDermott for descending to tricks to gain votes during the 1908 North Leitrim by-election, which he felt might damage their cause, he found in the young man a talented and seemingly loyal partner-in-revolution who shared his goals, his methods for attaining these goals, and his propensity for pulling strings behind the scenes in nationalist organizations.¹¹ In the autumn of 1911 MacDermott experienced a personal setback when he was nearly killed by an attack of polio, which left the once physically dynamic man crippled and requiring the aid of a walking stick. After his recovery he spent much time being cared for by Kathleen Clarke's family, the Dalys, in Limerick and by Kathleen herself in Dublin.¹²

From 1912 onwards Hobson's relations with Clarke and MacDermott began to deteriorate.¹³ A rivalry for Clarke's affection, esteem and confidence appears to have sprung

up between Hobson and MacDermott. The year 1912 was significant for two reasons. It was the first year in which Clarke and the younger men finally had full control of the IRB's destiny after a power struggle with the organisation's old guard. It was inevitable that differences of opinion over future policy and tactics would emerge among the new leaders. It was also the year in which MacDermott began coping with life after polio.

Hobson partially blamed his drift apart from MacDermott on differences in background, education and values. While he never doubted MacDermott's deep sincerity as a nationalist, he did question his narrow partisanship, his judgement and his methods. Hobson also suspected that MacDermott harboured an unconscious resentment of his own able-bodied capacity for activity.¹⁴

In addition to the closer ties resulting from the time that MacDermott spent with Kathleen and her family, Clarke's shift in confidence from Hobson to MacDermott may have been a response to Hobson's connection to people beyond the circles of the IRB. Hobson mixed with people from a variety of social classes and creeds, ranging from Catholic, working-class Fianna boys to titled Protestants such as Countess Markievicz and Sir Roger Casement. While Clarke welcomed Hobson's involvement with the former group, he questioned his links to the latter, even suspecting Casement of being a British spy.¹⁵ Hobson's close friendship with Casement, which dated back to the summer of 1904, opened him up to a social and political world far beyond the circles of the IRB.

Hobson's involvement in the Irish Volunteers signalled the beginning of the end of his IRB career. Although the active role he played in the formation of the Volunteers benefited the IRB, it was also a cause for concern. Early on, Hobson took an independent line in relation to the Volunteers that brought him into conflict with key members of the IRB. P.S. O'Hegarty recorded that the Supreme Council issued an order that IRB members were permitted to join the Volunteers, but were warned against taking a prominent role for fear that the British authorities might suppress the nascent movement if it appeared "to be a physical force separatist movement rather than an all-party movement."¹⁶ Although Hobson in particular was publicly associated with physical force separatism, he was reluctant to abandon a project in which he had been such a key force. His decision, against IRB instructions, to accept an official position on the Provisional Committee, the governing body of the Volunteers, induced anxiety in members of the Supreme Council such as Clarke. "It shook the complete faith he had in Hobson," recalled his wife Kathleen. Clarke and MacDermott decided to make the best of it, however, agreeing that "perhaps the secretaryship was too important a position to leave in other hands than those of a member of the IRB."¹⁷

In Hobson's view, by taking a leading role within the Volunteers, he was helping to steer a broad-based movement that had an important part to play in working towards the IRB goal of an independent Ireland. His IRB colleagues, however, feared that Hobson's position on the Provisional Committee might jeopardise the secrecy of the IRB connection and, by extension, the continuance of the movement. In addition,

Clarke and MacDermott may have begun to suspect that, with Hobson at the steering wheel, they might not be able to control the direction of the Volunteer movement.

Over the course of 1914 a public struggle emerged over who would control the Irish Volunteers: the original members of the Provisional Committee, many of whom secretly represented the IRB, or John Redmond, the Irish Parliamentary Party leader. This public struggle brought to the surface a private conflict over who would dictate IRB policy, particularly with regard to the Irish Volunteers. This second struggle was waged between Hobson on the one hand and Clarke and MacDermott on the other.

In June 1914 Redmond, alarmed that the rapid growth of the Irish Volunteers was beyond his control, threatened to split the movement if his own nominees were not co-opted to the Provisional Committee. Fearing that the Volunteers were not yet strong enough to withstand such a split, Hobson ignored the orders of the IRB and not only supported the co-optation of Redmond's nominees onto the Provisional Committee of the Volunteers, but also influenced others to support the co-optation. Clarke regarded Hobson's action "as cold-blooded and contemplated treachery likely to bring about the destruction of the only movement in a century which brought promise of the fulfilment of all his hopes."¹⁸ Shortly after the decision to accept Redmond's nominees, Hobson was summoned to a meeting of the IRB executive held in Clarke's home. There he was astonished by the depth of hostility displayed by Clarke and MacDermott. They bombarded him with accusations of having betrayed the movement and being in the pay of Redmond. Fearing that his success in averting a split within the Volunteers might lead to a split within the IRB that would render the latter organisation impotent, Hobson resigned from the Supreme Council and as editor of the newspaper *Irish Freedom*, the two positions that brought him into contact with Clarke and MacDermott, but retained his other roles within the IRB. He was aware that his resignation from the Supreme Council was exactly what the pair wanted.¹⁹ Years later Hobson admitted that his resignation had been "a blunder," resulting from overwork and a "distaste for fighting old friends": "I ought to have stayed and fought them to the finish as I easily could have done."²⁰

Redmond's propensity to dictate policy without prior consultation eventually led to the split in the Volunteers that Hobson had hoped to delay. Redmond's address to a Volunteer parade at Woodenbridge, County Wicklow on 20 September 1914 precipitated the split. Redmond announced that it was the duty of the Irish Volunteers to enlist in the British Army in order to fight in the First World War which had broken out in the previous month. The Irish Volunteers had been founded to provide Ireland with a national defence force, not as a recruiting ground for British troops. In response to Redmond's announcement, twenty out of the 27 original members of the Provisional Committee, including Hobson, signed a manifesto on 24 September 1914 ousting Redmond's nominees. Redmond and his supporters started a rival organisation, the National Volunteers, which the majority of Volunteers joined. Its numbers dwindled away, however, as its members headed off to fight in the war and the prospect of Home Rule drifted further into the future.

Hobson's support for the ejection of Redmond's nominees failed to rehabilitate him with Clarke and MacDermott. Despite this, Hobson never apologised for his role in the acceptance of the nominees. He regarded his involvement in securing their co-optation "as one of the wisest and most misunderstood of [his] actions."²¹ He was adamant that the intervening time between the acceptance of Redmond's nominees and their ejection made all the difference to the Volunteers by consolidating the work that had been done to organise the force.²²

The historian F.X. Martin has concurred that Hobson, MacNeill and Casement had "acted wisely" in accepting Redmond's nominees: "To have withstood Redmond at the height of his popularity in June 1914 would have been to court disaster for the Volunteers." Due to the maintenance of outward unity within the Volunteer organisation at this critical time, the Howth and Kilcoole gun-running plans, which provided essential arms for the 1916 rising, were a success.²³ When the split in the Volunteer movement finally came in September 1914, it was over a more fundamental issue: whether or not the Volunteers would fight for Britain in the war. Splitting over this issue served to strengthen the Irish Volunteers by purging the moderate nationalists and leaving a concentration of advanced nationalists.

Amongst the minority group who remained loyal to MacNeill, a difference of opinion arose. Some asserted that the Irish Volunteers should remain, as their constitution stated, purely defensive while others believed that they should become an instrument for insurrection. Hobson and MacNeill advocated the former view while Clarke and MacDermott were determined that the latter view would prevail.

Shortly after the outbreak of the First World War the IRB decided to stage a rising while Britain was preoccupied in continental Europe. The IRB's Military Council planned the rising for Easter 1916, but kept its exact plans a secret from everyone except a select few. The idea was that Sunday manoeuvres by the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army would be the cover for the launch of a rebellion.

The Military Council of the IRB decided to kidnap Hobson before the outbreak of the rising because its members recognised that Hobson, as quartermaster general and secretary of the Irish Volunteers and chairman of the Dublin Centres Board of the IRB, was the one man who possessed the influence and knowledge to scuttle their plans for a rising. MacNeill, the leader of the Irish Volunteers, could be hoodwinked – at least for a little while – but Hobson was so important that he had to be taken out of commission until the rising was underway.

Despite his IRB membership, Hobson was one of the moderates within the Volunteer leadership. Although he was amenable to a rebellion with significant and decisive support from Germany, he refused to support an insurrection that had little chance of military success. Instead he favoured a policy of guerrilla warfare should the British government attempt to disarm the Volunteers or pursue a policy of conscription in Ireland.

It has been suggested that Hobson's advocacy of a defensive military policy and his opposition to the Easter

Rising were a result of latent Quakerism, even though he had resigned from the Society of Friends in 1915.²⁴ Hobson, by his own admission, placed more importance on achieving Irish independence than on adhering to Quaker principles.²⁵ Even MacNeill, a Catholic, shared Hobson's support for a defensive military policy. MacNeill deemed military action without "a reasonably calculated or estimated prospect of success, in the military sense" as morally wrong.²⁶ Their concern with military success as opposed to heroic futility may have been a way of trying to reconcile the military use of violence in a just war with a regard for human life.

The decision to arrest Hobson was probably made at a meeting of the IRB Military Council held on Monday, 17 April 1916. This decision may have been sparked by an impromptu speech that Hobson had given at a Cumann na mBan concert the previous night when he had warned "of the extreme danger of being drawn into precipitate action," asserting that "no man had a right to risk the fortunes of a country in order to create for himself a niche in history."²⁷ Alternatively, the decision may have been made after Hobson accidentally discovered the plans for the rising on the night of Holy Thursday and galvanised MacNeill into action to oppose it.

There are two versions detailing how the IRB took Hobson into custody. In his book *Easter 1916*, the historian Charles Townshend states that on the orders of MacDermott and the Military Council, Hobson was arrested by some of his colleagues on the Leinster Executive of the IRB at Volunteer Headquarters on Dawson Street and conveyed to the home of IRB member Martin Conlon.²⁸ Hobson himself reported that he was waiting for MacNeill to come into the Volunteer office when Sean Tobin, who had succeeded Hobson as chair of the Leinster Executive, invited him to a meeting of that body. Hobson later claimed that he was reluctant to attend because he could not see what possible purpose it would serve, unless it was a ruse to obstruct his actions.²⁹

When Hobson arrived at the alleged meeting at Conlon's house at 76 Cabra Park in north Dublin, four or five IRB men produced guns and told him that he was under arrest.³⁰ He later recalled:

"I laughed and said, 'you are a lot of damn fools.' There was nothing I could do, so I sat back and accepted the situation. I felt I had done my best to stop the rising.

He even claimed that he felt "a sense of relief."³¹

Hobson spent much of his time in custody reading as he did not think his guards would want to converse about his opposition to the rebellion.³² He showed them no personal animosity and asked them no questions. They in turn volunteered no information about what was happening in Dublin or elsewhere.³³ At other times, however, he was "obstreperous" and complained about his confinement.³⁴ By Sunday night he was giving his guards so much trouble that Mrs Conlon was sent out for reinforcements.³⁵

Meanwhile Hobson's fiancée and secretary Claire Gregan was rushing around Dublin trying to ascertain his whereabouts and secure his release. She feared that his kidnappers would shoot him.³⁶ The Military Council,

however, had no such plans. As Éamonn Ceannt explained to fellow IRB man Seamus O'Connor, "Hobson has been an obstacle in our path. He is opposed to an insurrection. He is perfectly honest, he is not a traitor, but it would be better if he were as then we could shoot him."³⁷

On Easter Sunday Gregan went to Liberty Hall to find out the effect of MacNeill's order countermanding the planned "manoeuvres" for that day, which had been published in the *Sunday Independent*, and to demand information about Hobson's whereabouts. She spoke with James Connolly, Patrick Pearse and MacDermott in turn. They assured her that Hobson was safe and explained that he had been arrested in order to stop him from interfering with their plans and influencing anyone.³⁸ According to Áine Ceannt, Thomas MacDonagh told her husband Éamonn that Hobson was "the evil genius of the Volunteers" and that "all would be well" if the Military Council could separate MacNeill from his influence.³⁹ Gregan pressed Connolly, Pearse and MacDermott to agree, which they did, that Hobson was "a man of integrity and sincerity." In recalling the episode, Gregan described Connolly as surly, Pearse as nice and polite, and MacDermott as reassuring and sympathetic – although she thought him "deadly Sly."⁴⁰

During the course of the weekend Gregan, having remembered that Hobson had mentioned a meeting at the Conlon home, visited the red brick house where her fiancé was held captive. Maurice Collins, the guard at the door, decided that it was better to deny Hobson's presence when she repeatedly demanded to see him. Hearing her voice, Hobson made a move to come to the door but his guard pointed a gun at him. When she finally gave up and left, Hobson, who was in the front room, saw her heading towards the gate.⁴¹

Once the rising was underway, Hobson's captors were frustrated that their assignment was confining them to the sidelines. Conlon reported that Hobson's guards contemplated executing him and dumping his body on the railway line that ran behind the house. As a result of Conlon's refusal to "countenance any unauthorised action" and willingness to use his revolver to enforce his refusal, the guards decided to await their orders regarding the prisoner's fate.⁴²

Both The O'Rahilly and Piaras Béaslaí asked MacDermott to sanction Hobson's release. O'Rahilly had opposed the insurrection, but chose to join in anyway. Béaslaí felt that some of his "most trusted men," who were guarding Hobson, would be better employed with their battalion in the Four Courts area. Persuaded that Hobson was no longer a threat, MacDermott dispatched Sean T. O'Kelly with the order for his release on the evening of Easter Monday.⁴³

O'Kelly found Hobson in the sitting room ensconced in an armchair with a book in his hands, while his guard Maurice Collins sat by the door with a gun in his hand. Conlon and Collins were visibly relieved by the release order. On the way into the city centre O'Kelly urged Hobson to accompany him to the rising's headquarters at the General Post Office on Sackville (now O'Connell) Street, but Hobson refused, saying he was going home. O'Kelly pointed out that as the rising was already underway, they should both play their part, especially as Hobson had devoted so much of his life to this cause.⁴⁴

Hobson continued to give him evasive answers because he wanted to shake him off and find MacNeill.⁴⁵

Hobson chose not to participate in the insurrection. Years later when Clan na Gael leader Joseph McGarrity asked if this was because his IRB colleagues had kidnapped him and appeared to mistrust him, Hobson said no. He explained that he did not join the rising because he “was convinced that the thing was wrong, that it was a blunder which [he] had honestly attempted to prevent, and to join up and add to the victims [he] felt would be a mistake.”⁴⁶ Perhaps he thought that he would be in a position to pick up the pieces after the insurrection failed. In any case, Hobson refused “to be driven against [his] judgement by being faced with a *fait accompli*.”⁴⁷ He was determined that his erstwhile associates Pearse, MacDermott and Clarke would not force him into doing something with which he so vehemently disagreed.

For Hobson’s sister Florence, Ireland’s first woman architect, this stance was entirely in keeping with his character. When they were children, she could never divert her younger brother from his set course and channel him into hers “It was because he had this moral fibre in an unusual degree that he would not agree to go into something he believed to be untimely and therefore wrong.” She maintained that this aspect of her brother’s character fuelled his opposition to the rising.⁴⁸

The day after Hobson’s release by the IRB he and Gregan walked out to the MacNeill home at Woodtown Park in Rathfarnham, which was south of Dublin, where they spent the remainder of Easter Week.⁴⁹ The artist Cesca Chenevix Trench visited the house during Easter Week and found that the circle gathered there were “furious” with the insurrectionists and harboured “the most gloomy views” of the situation. In her diary she quoted Hobson at his begrudging and egotistical best: “If by a miracle they succeeded, of course, I suppose they’d be justified; but if we’d shot a few of them, I’d have saved the country.”⁵⁰

Shortly after the surrender MacNeill asked Hobson to sign a letter to General Sir John Grenfell Maxwell, the army officer responsible for the suppression of the rising, suggesting a meeting aimed at stopping more violence. Hobson refused to sign the letter on the grounds that it would reveal their whereabouts to Maxwell who would have them arrested. MacNeill pointed out that they would have no political future if they were not arrested. Hobson, who had enjoyed playing a cat and mouse game with the authorities for years, “replied that while I probably would be arrested, I was not going to ask for it.”⁵¹

William Glynn, a Quaker, viewed Hobson’s refusal to participate in the rising or to court arrest in order to “retain his political influence,” as examples of a Quaker-influenced “moral courage to act in accordance with his convictions.” Glynn mused: “Had [Hobson] been less inflexible he might well have become a minister in the subsequent Irish Free State.” Glynn also wondered if there was “too much of the Quaker” in Hobson “to make a successful politician.”⁵²

The letter to Maxwell did lead to MacNeill’s arrest, court martial and imprisonment, thus facilitating the continuance of his political career (at least until the Boundary Commission in 1925). Although the officer who came to arrest MacNeill was

a Belfast man with whom Hobson had been well acquainted previously, he showed no sign of recognising him.⁵³ Perhaps he genuinely did not recognise Hobson or he was protecting an old acquaintance. Maxwell and his associates were still in the first flush of “executionary” zeal – arrest might have been fatal for Hobson at this point.

Hobson remained in Dublin for several months, taking precautions to avoid arrest. The Dublin Metropolitan Police, who sought his apprehension, circulated the following unflattering description of him:

5 ft. 8 ins., slight make, brown hair, worn long; grey eyes, long nose, clean shaven, long visage, fresh complexion, theatrical appearance; blinks with both eyes when speaking; bad teeth; slightly bow legged; wears dark clothes and black trilby hat.⁵⁴

Hobson may have changed his hair and clothing style and grown a moustache or beard to disguise his appearance while on the run. He and Gregan were “secretly” married on 19 June 1916 in the sacristy at St Mary’s Roman Catholic Church in Rathfarnham.⁵⁵ Later that day Hobson, perhaps fearing that their nuptials might betray his whereabouts, went to stay with Mary Hutton, a translator of the *Táin Bó Cúailgne*, at Palmerston Lodge in Dartry in south Dublin. Her home was considered safe because she was not connected with politics. A few weeks later a priest gave Hobson a lift on a motorbike to his parents’ home in Marino, a small lough-side community close to Belfast. Gregan joined him and they stayed there until the amnesty in June 1917. To evade arrest during this time he did not go into Belfast.⁵⁶ Hobson’s disappearance was so complete that in August 1916 General Maxwell reported to Prime Minister Herbert Asquith “an unconfirmed rumour” that the IRB had shot Hobson as a traitor during Easter Week.⁵⁷

Scurrilous tales about Hobson’s alleged treachery and cowardice abounded after the rising. By late May 1916 Hobson’s disappearance was fuelling suggestions that he had betrayed the cause.⁵⁸ Presumably an element of the IRB was responsible for the organisation of an alleged hate campaign against Hobson. For example, Sean McGarry, who became president of the IRB Supreme Council and general secretary of the Irish Volunteers, was reputed to be so incensed by Hobson’s actions between 1914 and 1916 that he wanted to deny his former colleague any credit for his contributions to the nationalist movement.⁵⁹ Such antipathy towards Hobson was not shared by all of the insurrectionists or by all members of the IRB. Pearse’s attitude was relatively positive. He is reputed to have told Volunteers at St Enda’s School that although “he did not share Hobson’s policy or approve his attitude,” “Hobson was not lacking in physical courage,” but in “the imagination and decision of a revolutionary leader.”⁶⁰ Some IRB men, whom Hobson had also known through his involvement in the Dungannon Clubs and the Fianna, remained supportive of him. For instance, Irish Free State government minister Ernest Blythe and civil servant P.S. O’Hegarty were probably instrumental in helping Hobson to secure a civil service job as Deputy Director of Stamping in the Printing Department of the Office of the Revenue Commissioners in 1924.

After the insurrection the new Supreme Council of the IRB had to decide what to do about IRB men who had opposed the rising. When Hobson's case was being discussed in the Dublin circles, Michael Collins contended that "Hobson could only be tried by his peers who were now all dead." Valentine Jackson countered that Hobson "was already being judged and condemned without trial by many of his former colleagues and that surely there were still enough people left who could examine into and prove or disprove these charges." Collins, changing tack, pointed out that the IRB had far more important things to do than try Hobson. Jackson let the issue drop.⁶¹ In the view of Collins' most recent biographer Peter Hart, his harsh reaction was motivated by a desire "to avoid an acrimonious show trial which would do nothing to further the cause," rather than a vendetta, which he was "rarely interested in pursuing."⁶²

After he came out of hiding Hobson found that many of his old friends and colleagues in the nationalist movement "would not notice or come near him."⁶³ This ostracism resulted from a misinterpretation of his actions and a determination to punish him. His Quaker background may have given some people the impression that he was a crypto-pacifist who had misled his associates in the IRB and the Irish Volunteers about his true intentions. In addition, some may have feared that Hobson, with his sixteen distinguished years of nationalist experience, would usurp their newly won power and positions within the nationalist movement. Frozen out, Hobson refused to force himself upon his former associates. This situation left him with no immediate opportunity to explain his actions or the choices that he had made. As a result, Hobson, either through exclusion or choice, did not participate in the nationalist organisations to which he had belonged prior to the Easter Rising.

"Unwilling to cause dissension by leading a personal following," Hobson withdrew from the nationalist movement after Éamon de Valera refused to allow the surviving members of the Volunteer Executive to attend the October 1917 convention to re-organise the Irish Volunteers.⁶⁴ In early 1918 Sean McGarry, who had succeeded Hobson as secretary of the Volunteers, sent him two written invitations to submit himself for court martial in relation to his Easter Week stance.⁶⁵ Hobson appears to have ignored the letters. He did not submit to a court martial, probably because in his opinion it was the insurrectionists, not himself, who were in the wrong, having violated the constitutions of the IRB and the Irish Volunteers and disregarded MacNeill's countermanding order. The IRB constitution prohibited the staging of an insurrection until the majority of the Irish people supported one, while the Volunteers were officially a *defensive* paramilitary force.

In withdrawing from public life, Hobson contrasted with other surviving members of the pre-1916 Volunteer Executive who opposed the rising. MacNeill, Sean Fitzgibbon and J.J. O'Connell were allowed (or perhaps *allowed themselves*)

to continue playing a part in the nationalist movement.⁶⁶ Unlike Hobson, however, the trio had not been members of the IRB. A further comparison can be drawn to Sean Lester, a future Irish diplomat and the last Secretary-General of the League of Nations. Like Hobson, he was an IRB member and an Ulster Protestant who did not participate in the insurrection, but his arrest shortly after the event ensured his continuance in the movement.⁶⁷ If Hobson had been arrested and imprisoned after the executions, he, like MacNeill, might have been able to overcome the hostility that some people felt towards him.

Hobson played no part in the subsequent events that preceded the formation of what he later referred to as "the so-called Free State," his choice of adjective revealing his ambivalent attitude toward the independent state that was created in twenty-six counties.⁶⁸ He led a full – but very different – life after the rising. Upon his return to Dublin after the amnesty, he worked in publishing, serving as a director of the Candle Press and Martin Lester Ltd., before becoming a civil servant. He and his wife Claire raised two children and helped to establish Dublin's Gate Theatre. In the 1930s he wrote and edited numerous pamphlets and two periodicals on economic issues, addressing such problems as poverty, unemployment and emigration. His failing eyesight, combined with a lack of public interest, eventually contributed to the end of his activities as a part-time economic propagandist. He spent most of his retirement living alone in Roundstone, Connemara, his marriage, forged so romantically while on the run, having failed. Encouraged by media interest in 1916 survivors and F.X. Martin's re-assessment of the rising and the period leading up to it, Hobson finally published a book entitled *Ireland yesterday and tomorrow* in 1968. It included his witness statements to the Bureau of Military History and some of his economic writings from the 1930s. He died at his daughter Camilla's home in Castleconnell, County Limerick on 8 August 1969, the same month in which rioting broke out on the streets of Derry and his native Belfast.

In the years after 1916 Hobson was for some "a national leader *manqué*,"⁶⁹ for others he was a republican "has-been" who failed to make the grade when the fight for Irish independence stopped being a war of words. He disappeared from public view as if he had been executed along with the insurrectionists of 1916, but without the benefit of their subsequent spin doctors.⁷⁰ Ultimately, however, he was the victim not only of rumours that he was a coward and a traitor, but of his own refusal, born of pride and obstinacy, to justify his actions to the survivors of the insurrection that he had opposed.

Notes:

- ¹ The members of the IRB Military Council were Tom Clarke, Sean MacDermott, Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, Joseph Mary Plunkett, Éamonn Ceannt and Thomas MacDonagh.
- ² Fifteen men were executed in Ireland in May 1916 while a sixteenth, Roger Casement, was hung for high treason in London in August of that year.
- ³ TV interview with Bulmer Hobson, by John O'Donoghue, broadcast on Radio Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) on 5 Dec. 1963, RTÉ Libraries and Archives.
- ⁴ Bulmer Hobson, draft memoirs, National Library of Ireland (NLI), Bulmer Hobson Papers, MS 18,283 (1).
- ⁵ Bulmer Hobson, *Ireland yesterday and tomorrow* (Tralee: Anvil Books, 1968), 1-2. Hereafter this book will be cited as Hobson, *IYT*.
- ⁶ Seán Ó Luing, "Talking to Bulmer Hobson," *Irish Times*, 6 May 1961.
- ⁷ Hobson, "The IRB and the Fianna" in *The Irish Volunteers 1913-1915: recollections and documents*, ed. F.X. Martin (Dublin: James Duffy, 1963), 21-2.
- ⁸ Bulmer Hobson, MS of the "The origin of Óglaigh na hÉireann," an article published in *An t-Óglach* (Mar. 1931), NLI, Hobson Papers, MS 13, 169.
- ⁹ Hobson, *IYT*, 43.
- ¹⁰ Kathleen Clarke, *Revolutionary woman, 1878-1972*, ed. Helen Litton (Dublin: O'Brien, 1991), 40, 46.
- ¹¹ Michael Foy and Brian Barton, *The Easter Rising* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004), 6; Gerard Mac Atasney, *Seán Mac Diarmada: the mind of the revolution* (Manorhamilton: Drumlin Publications, 2004), 40.
- ¹² C. Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows and the Irish revolution* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 42, 45; MacAtasney, *Seán Mac Diarmada*, 54.
- ¹³ P.S. O'Hegarty, Bureau of Military History (BMH) witness statement, 19 Sept. 1947, National Archives of Ireland (NAI), BMH WS 26.
- ¹⁴ Hobson, *IYT*, 52, 71.
- ¹⁵ Hobson, *IYT*, 52. Casement was baptised a Catholic, raised a Protestant and died a Catholic, thus having a foot in both religious camps. Markievicz later converted to Catholicism.
- ¹⁶ P.S. O'Hegarty, BMH witness statement, 19 Sept. 1947, NAI, BMH WS 26.
- ¹⁷ Clarke, *Revolutionary woman*, 44.
- ¹⁸ Sean McGarry, BMH witness statement, 15 Apr. 1950, NAI, BMH WS 368.
- ¹⁹ Hobson, *IYT*, 52-3; Bulmer Hobson, statement to Joseph McGarrity, 1934, NLI, Hobson Papers, MS 13,171.
- ²⁰ Hobson, statement to McGarrity, 1934, NLI, Hobson Papers, MS 13,171.
- ²¹ Hobson to Patrick McCartan, 13 Feb. 1924, NLI, Patrick McCartan Papers, MS 17,675 (5).
- ²² Hobson, MS of "The origin of Óglaigh na hÉireann – II," an article published in *An t-Óglach* (June 1931), NLI, Hobson Papers, MS 13,169.
- ²³ F.X. Martin, "McCullough, Hobson and republican Ulster" in *Leaders and men of the Easter Rising*, ed. FX Martin (London: Methuen, 1967), 103.
- ²⁴ Friends Historical Library, Dublin, Genealogical File 69/2. This suggestion has been raised at seminars where I have presented papers on Hobson.
- ²⁵ TV interview with Hobson, 5 Dec. 1963, RTÉ Libraries and Archives.
- ²⁶ Eoin MacNeill, "Memorandum I" in F.X. Martin, "Eoin MacNeill on the 1916 Rising," *Irish Historical Studies*, xii (1961), 234.
- ²⁷ Hobson, *IYT*, 74-5.
- ²⁸ Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: the Irish rebellion* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 137.
- ²⁹ Hobson, *IYT*, 76.
- ³⁰ Ted Nealon, "Hobson throws new light on IRB caucus," *Sunday Press*, 1 May 1960.
- ³¹ Ó Luing, "Talking to Bulmer Hobson," *Irish Times*, 6 May 1961.
- ³² Ó Luing, "Talking to Bulmer Hobson," *Irish Times*, 6 May 1961.
- ³³ Nealon, "Hobson throws new light on IRB caucus," *Sunday Press*, 1 May 1960; Maurice Collins, BMH witness statement, no date, NAI, BMH WS 550.
- ³⁴ Martin Conlon, BMH witness statement, 9 Feb. 1953, NAI, BMH WS 798.
- ³⁵ Mrs Martin Conlon, BMH witness statement, no date, NAI, BMH WS 419.
- ³⁶ Desmond FitzGerald, *Memoirs of Desmond FitzGerald*, ed. Fergus FitzGerald (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1968), 121.
- ³⁷ Seamus O'Connor, BMH witness statement, 14 June 1948, University College Dublin Archives (UCDA), Eoin MacNeill Papers, LAI/G/117.
- ³⁸ Claire Hobson (née Gregan), BMH witness statement, no date, NAI, BMH WS 685.
- ³⁹ Áine Ceannt, BMH witness statement, no date, NAI, BMH WS 264.
- ⁴⁰ Claire Hobson, BMH witness statement, no date, NAI, BMH WS 685.

- ⁴¹ Claire Hobson, BMH witness statement, no date, NAI, BMH WS 685; Maurice Collins, BMH witness statement, no date, NAI, BMH WS 550.
- ⁴² Martin Conlon, BMH witness statement, 9 Feb. 1953, NAI, BMH WS 798.
- ⁴³ Aodogán O’Rahilly, *Winding the clock: O’Rahilly and the 1916 Rising* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1991), 212-3; Piaras Béaslaí, “Moods and memories,” *Irish Independent*, 24 Apr. 1963, UCDA, Denis McCullough Papers, P 120/40 (14).
- ⁴⁴ Seán T. O’Kelly, *Seán T.*, ed. Proinsias Ó Conluain (Dublin: Foilseacháin Náisiúnta Teoranta, 1963), 177-8.
- ⁴⁵ Nealon, “Hobson throws new light on IRB caucus,” *Sunday Press*, 1 May 1960; Hobson, statement to McGarrity, 1934, NLI, Hobson Papers, MS 13,171.
- ⁴⁶ Bulmer Hobson, statement to Joseph McGarrity, Apr. 1933, NLI, Joseph McGarrity Papers, MS 17,453.
- ⁴⁷ Hobson, statement to McGarrity, 1934, NLI, Hobson Papers, MS 13,171.
- ⁴⁸ Florence Patterson (née Hobson) to William Glynn, 21 May 1972, FHL, Box 3A, No. 85.
- ⁴⁹ Claire Hobson, BMH witness statement, no date, NAI, BMH WS 685; Michael Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill: scholar and man of action, 1867-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 219.
- ⁵⁰ Hilary Pyle (ed.), *Cesca’s diary, 1913-1916* (Dublin: Woodfield Press, 2005), 205.
- ⁵¹ Hobson, *IYT*, 77.
- ⁵² William Glynn, “The Quaker in Bulmer Hobson – Part 1,” *Irish Young Friend*, [Apr. or May] 1972, a clipping from the Cork Archives Institute.
- ⁵³ Hobson, *IYT*, 77-8.
- ⁵⁴ *The Police Gazette or Hue-and-Cry*, 7 Nov. 1916.
- ⁵⁵ Mary Hobson, “Bulmer Family Chronicle from before 1050 to 1936,” NLI, MS 5220; Parish marriage register, Rathfarnham, NLI, microfilm no. P 8972.
- ⁵⁶ Claire Hobson, BMH witness statement, no date, NAI, BMH WS 685.
- ⁵⁷ John Maxwell to Herbert Asquith, 3 Aug. 1916, quoted in Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin Party, 1916-1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 46.
- ⁵⁸ Cesca Chenevix Trench reported these rumours in her diary entry of 21 May 1916. See Pyle (ed.), *Cesca’s diary*, 228.
- ⁵⁹ Cathal O’Shannon to Denis McCullough, 25 Mar. 1958, UCDA, McCullough Papers, P 120/15 (3).
- ⁶⁰ Louis N. Le Roux, *Patrick H. Pearse* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1932), 337.
- ⁶¹ Valentine Jackson, BMH WS 409, quoted in Peter Hart, *Mick: the real Michael Collins* (London: Macmillan, 2005), 143.
- ⁶² Hart, *Mick*, p. 143.
- ⁶³ Hobson, statement to McGarrity, Apr. 1933, NLI, McGarrity Papers, MS 17,453.
- ⁶⁴ Hobson, statement to McGarrity, 1934, NLI, Hobson Papers, MS 13,171; Hobson, BMH witness statement, 17 Dec. 1947, NLI, Hobson Papers, MS 13,170.
- ⁶⁵ Sean McGarry to Hobson, 12 Feb. 1918, 21 Mar. 1918, NLI, Hobson Papers, MS 13,161 (4).
- ⁶⁶ F.X. Martin, “1916 – myth, fact and mystery,” *Studia Hibernica*, no. 7 (1967), 89.
- ⁶⁷ Douglas Gageby, *The Last Secretary General: Sean Lester and the League of Nations* (Dublin: Townhouse, 1999), 13-4.
- ⁶⁸ Hobson, statement to McGarrity, Apr. 1933, NLI, McGarrity Papers, MS 17,453.
- ⁶⁹ Cathal O’Shannon, “Bulmer Hobson, key republican figure,” *Irish Times*, 9 Aug. 1969.
- ⁷⁰ F.X. Martin, “1916 – myth, fact and mystery,” 89.