

MacNeill, Eoin (John)

by Patrick Maume and Thomas Charles- Edwards

MacNeill, Eoin (John) (1867–1945), Gaelic scholar and nationalist politician, was born 15 May 1867 in Glenarm, Co. Antrim, sixth of eight children of Archibald MacNeill, baker, sailor and merchant, and his wife Rosetta (née Macauley).

Family background and education MacNeill was profoundly influenced by his upbringing in the Glens of Antrim, a catholic enclave which still retained some Irish-language traditions and was to become a major focus for Ulster-based Gaelic revivalists (especially in the period before the Great War). The fact that local protestants shared with catholics a veneration for St Patrick based on his association with Slemish, the existence of a few Irish-speaking presbyterians in the Glens, and the strength of the presbyterian liberal tenant-right tradition in Co. Antrim, led MacNeill to see Ulster unionism as a superficial product of elite manipulation; this perception might have seemed less convincing in the embattled borderlands of South Ulster. His father had been prosecuted in 1872 for participating in a demonstration against the first Orange march in the Glens by a lodge recruited among the protestant lumpenproletariat by the local rector and land-agent.

The MacNeill family attached considerable importance to education. All five sons had distinguished educational records, and the youngest daughter became a hospital matron and inspector of industrial schools. (Her two elder sisters ran the family business.) He received his primary education in local schools, and his secondary education (1881–5) at St Malachy's College, Belfast, in whose collegiate division from 1885 he began his studies for the (examination-only) RUI after securing a Modern Languages scholarship. He secured a degree in constitutional history, jurisprudence and political economy in 1888 having attended law lectures at TCD and King's Inns.

In 1887 MacNeill obtained a junior clerkship in the accountant-general's office in Dublin law courts. He was the first clerk in the office to be appointed by competitive examination rather than patronage; he was also the first not to be a member of the Church of Ireland. (When he left in 1909 nine of the eleven clerks were catholic; the others were Englishmen). MacNeill's position as a civil servant attracted some criticism from separatist opponents within the Gaelic League. When MacNeill assisted in disrupting a meeting organised by William Martin Murphy (qv) to gather public support for a proposed Dublin International Exhibition (denounced by Irish Irelanders as a denationalising project), the *Irish Independent* sneered at 'a civil servant masquerading as Robert Emmet' (qv) and MacNeill narrowly escaped dismissal.

MacNeill, the Irish language and the Gaelic League From 1887 MacNeill took up the study of Irish. In 1890 he began to study Old and Middle Irish in his spare time under the Jesuit scholar Edmund Hogan (qv); this led him to study Irish history and to learn spoken Irish through annual visits to the Aran Islands (1891–1908). These studies, and the bitter political factionalism of the Parnell split (in which MacNeill was strongly anti-Parnellite), led MacNeill to develop a theory of Irish identity which stressed cultural factors (especially the language) over state power; in later life he accused those historians (generally imperialist) who equated the progress of civilisation with the growth of state power of ‘worshipping the Beast and his image’. This distrust of state absolutism echoed his strongly-held catholicism, though he was not necessarily clericalist.

He contributed articles on the language to the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* and the *Gaelic Journal*, and in 1893 took a leading role in the group of clerks who founded the Gaelic League under the inspiration of Douglas Hyde's (qv) *The necessity of de-anglicising Ireland*. From 1893 to 1897 MacNeill acted as unofficial (and unpaid) secretary to the Gaelic League. The burden of work this entailed brought on a nervous breakdown which left him with an abiding lassitude and a distaste for correspondence. (He developed a tendency to write letters forcefully setting out his position, but not posting them.) MacNeill edited the *Gaelic Journal* (1894–7), co-edited *Fáinne an Lae* (1898–9), and became the first editor of *An Cláideamh Soluis* (1899–1901), without pay. In 1898 he nominated Patrick Pearse (qv) as a member of the Gaelic League executive, and they worked together on the publications committee. The fact that Pearse and MacNeill are generally thought of in connection with their roles in the Irish Volunteers tends to obscure the length of their personal friendship and professional association in the Gaelic League; this underlay MacNeill's willingness to accept Pearse's assurances in 1914–16, and his lasting indignation at the revelation that his friend had systematically misled him.

In 1902 MacNeill took a leading role in establishing an Irish-language printing business, which eventually involved him in heavy losses. In 1903 he became vice-president of the Gaelic League in succession to Fr Michael O'Hickey (qv). In 1909 he was appointed to the chair of early (including medieval) Irish history at UCD (incidentally forfeiting his civil service pension rights); he took a leading role in the campaign to make Irish compulsory for matriculation in the new university, publishing *Irish in the National University: a plea for Irish education* (1909).

The Irish Volunteers On 1 November 1913 MacNeill published an article, ‘The North began’ in *An Cláideamh Soluis*. He claimed that the creation of the Ulster Volunteers marked the inception of a popular movement which would end by overthrowing the decayed feudal leadership of unionism, suggested that Edward Carson (qv) was a crypto-nationalist, and called for the formation of Irish Volunteers on the Ulster model. (MacNeill's view of Carson as crypto-nationalist, which he only abandoned after the outbreak of the Great War, reflected the unionist leader's participation in a protest campaign against Irish overtaxation in the late

1890s; MacNeill attached great importance to the taxation issue as a means of converting Ulster unionists. His practice of advocating cheers for Carson at early Irish Volunteer meetings caused some difficulties.) As a result of his article, MacNeill was approached by a group of separatists associated with the IRB, who asked him to take the lead in organising the Irish Volunteers (launched 11 November 1913).

MacNeill is often seen as a straightforward Redmondite loyalist manipulated by the IRB. In fact, it is clear that he had his own agenda; he hoped that John Redmond (qv) could use the Volunteers' existence to demand an end to compromise and pressurise the Liberals into granting home rule. (MacNeill believed H. H. Asquith never intended to grant home rule and was secretly encouraging Ulster resistance to provide a pretext for abandoning the bill; this belief derived from memories of Asquith's earlier association with the Liberal imperialist faction who had regarded home rule as a political liability after the retirement of Gladstone.) When Redmond, having initially opposed the Volunteers, demanded that as civil leader of the Irish nation he should control this military force, MacNeill replied that a nation's military forces should not be controlled by the leader of a single party and suggested that by joining the Volunteers the Irish people had given MacNeill a mandate independent of Redmond. When Redmond threatened to establish his own rival organisation MacNeill was persuaded by Bulmer Hobson (qv) to give in to avoid nationwide disruption; this set the pattern for the organisation's subsequent history in which a faction led by MacNeill with Hobson as his chief counsellor was intrigued against by IRB militarists centred on Tom Clarke (qv) and allied to Pearse.

MacNeill and 1916 On the outbreak of war in August 1914 MacNeill initially hoped that Redmond's suggestion in parliament that the Volunteer forces should take over the defence of Ireland represented an attempt at non-involvement, but Redmond's Woodenbridge speech (20 September) advocating recruitment for overseas service precipitated the final split. As editor of the weekly *Irish Volunteer* newspaper MacNeill accused Redmond and his followers of mental and moral corruption, while proclaiming that both British parties were joined in a conspiratorial 'continuity coalition' to defeat home rule, and only the existence of the Volunteers could prevent this. This view of the government as determinedly and systematically hostile underlies both the MacNeill group's resistance to the IRB project of a pre-emptive rising (they believed it would inevitably be suppressed by the government, which would take the opportunity to abandon home rule) and MacNeill's reluctance to split the Volunteers by confronting the conspirators. (A memorandum which MacNeill prepared for presentation to the Volunteer executive but never produced for discussion advocates the defensive strategy on both practical and moral terms; the contrast between the sensibilities of MacNeill and Pearse is indicated by the difference between MacNeill's invocation of catholic casuistry on the conditions for a just war and Pearse's deployment of apocalyptic and devotional rhetoric to present the Rising as a supreme act of sacrificial faith.) MacNeill's associates appear to have had a better grasp of the prospects for guerrilla warfare than their opponents,

though the latter could see the defensive strategy as leaving the initiative with the government.

Early in April 1916 the IRB group convinced MacNeill that a crackdown was imminent by producing a forged 'Castle document' (possibly based on genuine contingency plans). Only on Maundy Thursday (20 April) did he discover that the IRB group was using preparations for a general mobilisation on Easter weekend to bring about a rising on Easter Sunday. MacNeill initially acquiesced, but after discovering that an arms ship sent from Germany had been sunk and that the Castle document had been forged, he sent out messengers around the country ordering a general demobilisation, following this up with an advertisement in the *Sunday Independent*. This decision delayed the rising for a day and largely frustrated it outside Dublin. MacNeill was arrested after the suppression of the Rising, court-martialled, sentenced to life imprisonment, and deprived of his UCD chair (he was reinstated after his release in June 1917).

Political career 1918–27 Despite recriminations he took an active role in the reconstituted Sinn Féin party. In 1918 he was elected to the first dáil for Sinn Féin as agreed nationalist candidate for Derry City and as representative of the NUI. In May 1921 he was re-elected for both constituencies in the elections for the northern parliament and southern parliament (second dáil) respectively.

In January 1919 MacNeill was appointed minister for finance in the first dáil government; he was relegated to minister for industries when Michael Collins (qv) was appointed to finance in April 1919. MacNeill's three eldest sons were active in the IRA. In mid-1920 he witnessed large-scale sectarian violence in Derry city. He was arrested in November 1920 and remained in jail until released on 30 June 1921. In August 1921 he was elected speaker of the second dáil. In this capacity he presided over the Treaty debates, attempting unsuccessfully to get both sides to agree to ratify the Treaty with an explanatory declaration on disputed points. He spoke in favour of the Treaty, but as speaker did not vote.

In 1922 MacNeill was elected as a pro-Treaty TD for Clare; he was re-elected in 1923. During the civil war he was a strong supporter of the government's reprisal policy. He is alleged to have been one of the two strongest advocates (with Ernest Blythe (qv)) of the summary execution of four imprisoned republicans in retaliation for the assassination of Seán Hales (qv); when Thomas Johnson (qv), the Labour leader, protested in the subsequent dáil debate that such measures were rendering the government morally indistinguishable from the previous British administration, MacNeill retorted that the old regime had used force to suppress the will of the people, whereas the current government was stern in order to uphold the people's will. MacNeill experienced personal tragedies. His sister Anne McGavock, already suffering terminal illness, came south from Glenarm to plead unsuccessfully for the life of Erskine Childers (qv); the siblings quarrelled and were not reconciled. His second son Brian joined the anti-Treaty forces and was killed during fighting in Sligo;

MacNeill convinced himself that (authentic) reports that his son and those with him had been killed after surrendering were republican propaganda devised to torment him.

As minister for education (1922–5) MacNeill was largely inactive, because he saw the primary responsibility for education as lying with the churches rather than the state; his principal legacy was the stringent implementation of compulsory Irish. In these respects he set a pattern for state education policy which lasted until the 1960s. His ministerial role was further diminished in 1924, when he became the Irish representative on the Boundary Commission. There is some evidence that he expected the failure of the commission and accepted the position in the knowledge that he would serve as a scapegoat, but his maladroit behaviour made his position worse. Seeing the commission as a quasi-judicial body, he made no attempt to inform his cabinet colleagues of developments (he was not imitated in this by the Northern Ireland representative) and by acquiescing when he was outvoted on the points at issue he strengthened the legal position of the other commissioners. In November 1925, when a leak revealed that the border would be virtually unchanged, he resigned as commissioner and as minister. In the June 1927 general election he stood as a Cumann na nGaedheal candidate for the NUI, but received little support from his party.

Academic career 1927–45 His narrow defeat ended his political career and he returned to academic life. He chaired the Irish Manuscripts Commission from its foundation in 1928; he was president of the newly founded Irish Historical Society (1936–45), the RSAI (1937–40) and the RIA (1940–3). He retired from his professorship in 1941 and died of abdominal cancer on 15 October 1945 at his residence, 63 Upper Leeson Street, Dublin. On 19 April 1898 MacNeill married Agnes Moore; they had four sons and four daughters.

Political reputation MacNeill's reputation has been dominated by his role in relation to the 1916 Rising. Early accounts written by admirers of Pearse generally presented MacNeill as comically ineffective or even treacherous, and displayed little concern for accurately recounting his actions or for understanding his motives. MacNeill's later years were distressed by this; he frequently explained himself to friends, and composed fragmentary memoirs. His version of events, however, attracted little attention until 1961 when F. X. Martin (qv) edited for publication in *Irish Historical Studies* two self-justificatory memoranda prepared by MacNeill in 1915 and 1917. MacNeill's historical reputation was further rehabilitated through the efforts of his son-in-law Michael Tierney (qv), who arranged the publication of the essay collection *Eoin MacNeill: the scholar revolutionary* (edited by F. J. Byrne and F. X. Martin), and who himself undertook an official biography of MacNeill (edited for publication by F. X. Martin after Tierney's death). The Northern Ireland crisis after 1969 and the reassessment of Pearse's messianic nationalism in an Ireland increasingly less receptive to catholic valorisations of sacrifice contributed to the re-evaluation of MacNeill; it is arguable that this exaltation of MacNeill as 'man of

peace' underestimates the extent to which he and Pearse shared terms of reference, while differing on strategy. Even MacNeill's sceptical and iconoclastic nephew Brian Moore (qv) revered his integrity, and saw him as embodying the idealism of the Revival generation (as well as some of its limitations). In the long run MacNeill's reputation is more likely to rest on his epochal contributions to language revival than on his ambivalent and chequered political career, which combined selfless dedication with weak execution and considerable capacity for self-deception.

Intellectual achievement MacNeill's interest in early Irish history grew out of his interest in Irish. According to himself, it was a chance remark of his father's that awakened his interest in the language, but it was also the circumstances of time and place. The Glens of Antrim were one of those districts in which, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the language was just slipping beyond the horizon. A sense of the loss of a language and of the culture embodied in the language, and a consequent impoverishment of national distinctiveness, a sense of a break with a shared tradition that had lasted since the dawn of Irish history – all this was enough to make him desire to recover what had been lost. This desire would, in him, work towards making him an historian, especially of that first period of Irish history, just as it led him to learn the language and to promote it in the Gaelic League. His first ambition was to learn the Irish of the Glens, about which he would later write, but a meeting in 1890 with Eugene O'Growney (qv), professor of Irish at Maynooth, and a subsequent decision to become a pupil of Edmund Hogan (1917), widened his ambitions. In 1891, on O'Growney's advice, he visited Inishmaan in the Aran Islands, the principal resort at that time for scholars wishing to learn to speak Irish. He returned annually until 1908. At the same time he soon became not so much Hogan's pupil as, in MacNeill's own words, 'my professor's apprentice'. Hogan, as Todd Professor in the RIA, was working on an edition of the Middle Irish text 'Cath Ruis na Ríg'. MacNeill became his assistant, subsequently writing that 'he made me do all the spade-work', a contribution handsomely acknowledged by Hogan. This was hugely advantageous, since MacNeill was thereby introduced, under supervision, to skills he would later need: reading and comparing manuscripts, establishing a text, translation, textual commentary, and compiling a vocabulary. When he himself, with Hogan's encouragement, went on to edit texts on his own, he chose three Middle Irish poems about the legendary Battle of Mucrama; here he was dealing with one of the principal Irish 'origin legends', stories that purported to recount the beginnings of the early Irish political order. One of his major contributions was his discussion of 'the Irish synthetic historians' and their construction, partly out of such origin legends, of a pre-Patrician history for Ireland.

MacNeill's contributions to early Irish scholarship may be placed under three headings: first, 'Where does Irish history begin?', the title of one of his lectures; secondly, the history and hagiography of St Patrick (qv); and thirdly, early Irish law. The first was his main preoccupation up to the Great War, the second a comparatively brief phase arising out of his imprisonment in Mountjoy, while the

third occupied him especially between 1923 and 1934. The synthetic historians had been successful in creating a history that established a line of narrative from the Book of Genesis to early Christian Ireland. This history was later given memorable expression in Geoffrey Keating's (qv) *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*; and, down the centuries, what began as a learned construction became the standard view of the Irish past. A scholarly Irish history could not exist until the Milesian Legend embodied in *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, 'The book of the settlement of Ireland', had been analysed and mere fiction separated from what might be history and from what was history. For MacNeill, establishing a scholarly history did not entail throwing away all early Irish narrative about the centuries before St Patrick: the strategy was to isolate those stories and aspects of stories that were inconsistent with the Milesian legend. The most important of these was the Ulster cycle, which cast doubt on the antiquity of an all-Ireland kingship of Tara.

Another prerequisite was a critical analysis of the medieval collections of genealogies, which in their overall structure presupposed the Milesian legend and yet contained a mass of essential material about early Irish royal dynasties: MacNeill's 'Notes on the Laud genealogies', published in 1911, supplied a model study of how to work on these extraordinarily voluminous sources. A further approach to the half-known period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the seventh century was epigraphy, a subject mainly cultivated by MacNeill's colleague, R. A. S. Macalister (qv). MacNeill wrote two papers for the RIA that occupy a central position in his most fertile period as an historian, 1900–1914. One was principally linguistic, 'Notes on the distribution, history, grammar, and import of the Irish Ogham inscriptions', in one section of which he proposed a rule (subsequently known as 'MacNeill's Law') governing an early Irish sound-change. The other, 'Early Irish population-groups: their nomenclature, classification, and chronology', used evidence from the ogham inscriptions, in conjunction with annals, genealogies, and hagiography, to establish changes in the way collective groups were described from the time of Ptolemy's Geography up to the Viking period. In these two papers MacNeill's conjunction of linguistic and historical skills can be seen to their best effect. In his more general books, *Phases of Irish history* (1919) and *Celtic Ireland* (1921), his preoccupation with the beginnings of Irish history are just as apparent as in his more specialised work.

At the same time MacNeill was also giving major assistance to Hogan's last and greatest work, *Onomasticon Goedelicum*, taking over a position that had been occupied by his elder brother, Charles (1862–1958). The *Onomasticon* has ever since been an indispensable tool for early Irish historians and editors of texts: not only did it collect together a vast mass of references to places, peoples, and dynasties from medieval Irish texts, only some of them in print, but it also drew on the pioneering work of John O'Donovan (qv) and William Reeves (qv). MacNeill was always concerned with the where as well as the when of Irish history: perhaps the most valuable strand in his work on St Patrick between 1923 and 1934 was his analysis of the topography of the Tripartite Life of St Patrick. This source offers the

first comprehensive single view of the geography of power in Ireland and the related geography of churches; and MacNeill's account corrected several misconceptions, and has ever since been a *vade mecum* for early Irish historians.

Two elements in MacNeill's account of the Patrician material have not endured so well. The first is his over valuation of the evidence linking St Patrick with Ulster. MacNeill is seen at his best and at his worst close to home – at his best in his correction of earlier views on the boundary between Dál Riata and Latharna (the church of Glore and, therefore, his birth place, Glenarm, belonged to the latter); and at his worst in his attempt to show that the *Silva Foculti*, 'the Wood of Fochloth', mentioned in Patrick's *Confessio* was to be located in Ulster, and, therefore, that the story of Patrick in slavery on Slemish propounded by the seventh-century hagiographers, Tírechán (qv) and Muirchú (qv), was historical. The other contention that soon came under damaging fire was his claim that the Tripartite Life embodied Tírechán's own revision of his earlier *Collectanea*.

MacNeill was capable of misjudging texts and issues, as in his dating 'The Book of Rights', *Lebor na Cert*, to the reign of Brian Bórama (qv). Yet even his mistakes were often fruitful for the discipline, since they usually contained some element of truth and they elicited further research. Sometimes his views now look closer to the truth than they did to his immediate successors, as with the kingship of Tara. Sometimes, too, the occasional rash speculation has been exaggerated: he did not think that the Book of Rights as we have it went back to the time of Benignus (qv), disciple of St Patrick, merely that Benignus could have been responsible for an earlier text on the same topic, a text written in Latin. Moreover, his mistakes pale into insignificance beside what the leading Irish medieval historian of the next generation, D. A. Binchy (qv), called 'his uncanny sense of communion with a long-dead past'. The truth is that he had read widely and sympathetically in the primary sources, and he had a sense of how all the elements of society fitted together into a functioning whole. He was the first historian of early medieval Ireland of whom this can be said, and his work thus marks the start of a new era in the subject he made his own.

MacNeill papers in UCD Archives and NLI; Eoin MacNeill, *Shall Ireland be divided?* (1915); *DNB* 1941–1950 (entry by D. A. Binchy); F. X. Martin & F. J. Byrne, *The scholar revolutionary: Eoin MacNeill, 1867–1945, and the making of the new Ireland* (1973); Michael Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill: scholar and man of action 1867–1945*, ed. by F. X. Martin (1980); Charles Townshend, *Political violence in Ireland* (1985); Pádraig Ó Snodaigh, *Two godfathers of revisionism: 1916 in the revisionist canon* (1991); J. A. Gaughan (ed.), *The memoirs of Senator Joseph Connolly: a maker of modern Ireland* (1996); Patrick Maume, *The long gestation. Irish nationalist life 1891–1918* (1999); Patrick Maume, 'Anti-Machiavel; three Ulster nationalists', *Irish Political Studies* (1999); *ODNB*

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