

O'Connor, Roderick ('Rory')

by Lawrence William White

O'Connor, Roderick ('Rory') (1883–1922), republican, was born 28 November 1883 at 23 Kildare St., Dublin, son of John O'Connor, solicitor, of that address, and Julia O'Connor (née O'Farrell). He was educated at St Mary's College, Dublin, Clongowes Wood College, Co. Kildare (1900–01), and UCD, where he read experimental physics, logic, and metaphysics; he also attended the College of Science, Merrion St. He took the BA of the RUI (1906) and received a B.Eng. (NUI) (1911). Prominent in UCD's Literary and Historical Society, he advocated militant constitutional nationalism as one of the many society members active in the Young Ireland branch of the United Irish League. Working as a railway engineer in Canada (1911–15), after being briefly employed by the Canadian Pacific, he joined the Canadian Northern railway as a resident engineer in Montreal and Ontario, eventually becoming assistant chief engineer.

Easter rising and Anglo–Irish war Returning to Ireland, reputedly at the behest of the IRB, he worked as a civil engineer with Dublin corporation, and was involved in the Gaelic League and Irish Volunteers. Associated with the Volunteer garrison of returned émigrés based on the Kimmage, Co. Dublin, estate of Count George Noble Plunkett (qv), he helped train garrison members in bomb-making. He assisted the Plunkett brothers, Joseph (qv) and George (qv), in the production, printing, and dissemination of the forged 'Castle document', a purported government order for the suppression of nationalist organisations, unveiled on the eve of the Easter 1916 rising to galvanise opinion behind militant action. O'Connor's precise role in the rising is not clear; wounded by sniper fire, he was suspected of involvement in explosives manufacture, and was interned for a time, probably in Woking prison. He resigned from the IRB, believing with Éamon de Valera (qv) and Cathal Brugha (qv) that secret societies were outmoded and could never command mass popular support. He was prominent in the successful parliamentary by-election campaign of Count Plunkett in Roscommon North (February 1917), and helped prepare the agenda for the subsequent 'Plunkett convention' of advanced nationalist opinion that debated future options. After the merger of Plunkett's short-lived Liberty League with Sinn Féin (June 1917), he entered the latter body's executive, urging abandonment of the dual-monarchy policy of Arthur Griffith (qv) and adoption of a fully republican programme.

Appointed to the Volunteers' general headquarters staff as director of engineering in March 1918, he held the post throughout the Anglo–Irish war, attaining the rank of commandant-general, responsible for devising the strategy and tactics of sabotage operations and the use of explosives in combat. He was clerk of Dáil Éireann during its secret sessions of 1919, worked in the engineering section of the dáil department of local government, and assisted in the control of food supplies. A close personal

friend and valued associate of Michael Collins (qv), he was involved in the planning and execution of prison escapes in both Ireland and Britain, most notably the daring daylight escape of Piaras Béaslaí (qv), Austin Stack (qv), and four others from Strangeways prison in Manchester (25 October 1919); he thus bore the unofficial (and jocular) titles of 'OC Escapes' and 'director of jail deliveries'. Appointed director of military operations in England in August 1920, he coordinated the conveyance of arms procured in Germany. He planned an extensive campaign of sabotage in several English cities to occur in conjunction with Collins's 'Bloody Sunday' strike against British intelligence in Dublin, which was only partly implemented: the dramatic burning of warehouses on the Liverpool docks (28 November 1920), which transpired despite the prior capture and publication of the overall sabotage plans. O'Connor's subsequent schemes for simultaneous sabotage operations in numerous British locations tended to frustrate local initiative by the more active IRA units.

The treaty crisis In the early months of 1922 O'Connor was the chief catalyst in the group of senior IRA officers that opposed the Anglo-Irish treaty. Elected chairman of the acting military council formed by the dissidents, he initiated a letter sent (11 January) to the new pro-treaty minister for defence, Richard Mulcahy (qv), that condemned the ratification of the treaty by Dáil Éireann four days earlier as a subversion of the republic, and demanded a general army convention to consider withdrawing the army from dáil control. He also notified the army's pro-treaty chief of staff, Eoin O'Duffy (qv), that the dissident officers would henceforth obey O'Duffy's orders only if countersigned by him. Despite sharp differences between the two camps, a meeting of pro- and anti-treaty officers (18 January) agreed on an army convention within two months, and stipulated that local army units, regardless of their treaty allegiances, should take over barracks evacuated by British troops. Anxious, despite his militancy, to avoid an immediate military showdown, O'Connor defused an ominous conflict in Limerick over control of barracks (March), refusing the request of Ernie O'Malley (qv) for engineers to facilitate an assault on pro-treaty positions, and negotiating a compromise resolution.

The decision of the pro-treaty provisional government, alarmed by indications of overwhelming anti-treaty sentiment in the army, to reverse its earlier undertaking and ban the army convention (16 March) was the fulcrum that propelled O'Connor into a course of ever-increasing intransigence and confrontation. Suspecting the government of biding time as it recruited its own pro-treaty national army, he mustered some fifty senior officers to defy the ban and issue summons for the convention. Asserting himself in the public eye as the foremost spokesman of the anti-treaty officers, at a notorious press conference (22 March) he declared that it would be within the power of the republican army to prevent an election, warned that 'if a government goes wrong it must take the consequences', and noted that armies had overthrown governments in many countries. Asked if he was proposing a military dictatorship, he replied: 'You can take it that way if you like' (Macardle, 615–17; Hopkinson, 67). The pursuant general army convention (convened on 26 March and resumed on 9 April), attended by 220 delegates representing fifty-two of

the army's seventy-three brigades, reaffirmed the army's republican identification, and restored its original status as an independent volunteer force governed by its own internally elected executive, thereby revoking the authority of Dáil Éireann. Elected to the new sixteen-strong army executive, O'Connor was appointed director of engineering on the army council chosen by the executive from among its own numbers. However, the appointment of the more moderate Liam Lynch (qv) as chief-of-staff represented both the numerical strength and influence of Lynch's 1st Southern Division and a considerable body of opinion within anti-treaty ranks more inclined to conciliation than was O'Connor.

The Four Courts garrison Amid a general upsurge in republican military activity, anti-treaty forces seized several Dublin buildings, including the Four Courts, where the republican executive established military headquarters (14 April); the occupation of such a major public building in the heart of the capital posed a conspicuous challenge to the authority of the provisional government, and outraged British official and public opinion. With Lynch continually shuttling between Dublin and his Munster command, O'Connor and Liam Mellows (qv) were the dominant personalities in the Four Courts garrison, moulding it into a revolutionary republican vanguard. Nonetheless, their authority over the loosely knit anti-treaty army was tenuous, most operations throughout the country being initiatives of local commanders. After agreeing to a truce, O'Connor participated sporadically and cautiously alongside anti-treaty colleagues in negotiations with pro-treaty representatives (May–June); these 'army unity talks' transpired against the background of the Collins–de Valera electoral pact, Collins's efforts to draft a Free State constitution acceptable to republican sentiment, and the clandestine cooperation of both sides in military activity in Northern Ireland. Amid the prospect of an agreed election and a coalition government of national unity, O'Connor seems to have agreed in concept to a coalition army council to command a reunified army. However, he rejected the final compromise formula that allocated the top military offices to pro-treatyites. The breakdown in the talks (14 June) marked O'Connor's policy break with Lynch, who was prepared to accept the compromise formula as an alternative to possible civil war. At a stormy army convention on 18 June, two days after the general election and publication of the Free State constitution, O'Connor split openly with Lynch. Refusing to entertain discussion of the compromise army unity proposals, he led his supporters in a walkout from the convention, and barred Lynch and his coterie from the Four Courts.

Over the next ten fateful days, as the Four Courts leaders plotted a major offensive in Northern Ireland and groped toward a rapprochement with Lynch, events overtook them. The assassination in London on 22 June of Sir Henry Wilson (qv), former chief of the imperial general staff and military adviser to the Northern Ireland government, by two gunmen acting either independently or in concert with Collins, was blamed wrongly on O'Connor and his colleagues, and precipitated intense British pressure on the Irish provisional government to suppress the Four Courts rebels. On 26 June O'Connor authorised the kidnapping of J. J. 'Ginger' O'Connell (qv), pro-treaty

deputy chief-of-staff, and offered him in exchange for Leo Henderson, a republican officer arrested by pro-treaty forces earlier the same day. O'Connor thus supplied the provisional government with the public pretext for the attack on the Four Courts on the morning of 28 June, the act that precipitated outright civil war. After three days of incessant shelling, with the building in flames and partly occupied by the attackers, the defenders reluctantly surrendered, but not before mining and firing the remainder of the Four Courts, destroying in the process the Public Record Office. O'Connor was imprisoned with the other survivors in Mountjoy jail (July–December).

Execution After the executions of Erskine Childers (qv) and seven other republican soldiers for possession of arms (November), Liam Lynch as anti-treaty chief of staff threatened 'very drastic measures' against pro-treaty TDs who had supported the newly enacted public safety act. On 7 December, the day after the Irish Free State officially came into existence under the terms of the treaty, republican Volunteers killed Brigadier Seán Hales (qv), TD, and wounded Pádraic Ó Máille (qv), TD and *leas ceann comhairle* (deputy chairman) of the dáil. The following morning, 8 December 1922, on order of the Free State cabinet, O'Connor and three other veterans of the Four Courts executive (Mellows, Joseph McKelvey (qv), and Richard Barrett (qv)) were executed by firing squad in the yard of Mountjoy jail as a reprisal for the murder of Hales and a 'solemn warning' against further assassinations. Among the most deplorable deeds of a period of Irish history rife with bloodshed and atrocity, these summary executions of four prisoners, without due legal process of trial or conviction, polarised yet further the already embittered allegiances of the civil war, widening political and social rifts that would persist for generations. Denounced as official murder by Labour TDs and foreign newspapers, the action was defended by the government as both punitive and deterrent, a necessary countering of terror with terror, intended to protect civil government against an armed minority bent on its intimidation and destruction. In a poignant visitation of the tragedy incumbent in civil war, Kevin O'Higgins (qv), minister for home affairs, at whose wedding fourteen months previously O'Connor had been best man, passionately denied that the government had been motivated by revenge: 'Personal spite, great heavens! Vindictiveness! One of these men was a friend of mine' (*Dáil Éireann deb.*, ii (1922–3), 73).

Assessment O'Connor's role in the events leading to the civil war was founded on a steadfast, principled refusal to compromise his oath to uphold the republic; asserting that no people had a right to vote away their independence, he regarded the declaration of the republic as an irreversible act not subject to repudiation or bartering by subsequent majority opinion. He was deeply sceptical that compromise or coalition was possible under the terms of the treaty, or that Britain would countenance Collins's efforts to draft a thinly disguised Irish republican constitution. In pursuing his own purist principle, however, he failed to devise any coherent, viable policy, either political or military. Though the inflexibility of his position made armed conflict against erstwhile comrades all but inevitable, he was reluctant to fire the first shots of a civil conflagration, and neglected to formulate a comprehensive

military strategy on which to conduct a civil war, but entertained ever more chimeric (indeed, nostalgic) hopes of reuniting the army by a renewal of hostilities with Britain. Ultimately, when conflict commenced, he was left with no policy but a futile, if heroic, defence of a Dublin public building. Even veterans of the Four Courts garrison (for example, Peadar O'Donnell (qv)), while crediting his courage and integrity, cited his utter lack of political acumen. Physically frail, with chronic lung ailments, O'Connor was a cultured man devoted to classical music, bridge, and chess. At the beginning of the treaty crisis he was residing in a house overlooking the sea in Monkstown, Co. Dublin.

GRO (birth cert.); letters from Rory O'Connor, 1911–16 (UCD archives, P65); *Freeman's Journal, Ir. Independent, Ir. Times*, 9 Dec. 1922 (photos); T. Corcoran, *The Clongowes record 1814 to 1932* (c.1932), 206; Ernie O'Malley, *On another man's wound* (1936), 77, 114, 210–11, 219–20; Desmond Ryan, *The rising: the complete story of Easter week* (1949); James Meenan, *Centenary history of the literary and historical society of University College Dublin 1855–1955* (c.1955); Peadar O'Donnell, *The gates flew open* (1965 ed.), 15, 17–18, 33, 36–41; F. X. Martin (ed.), *The Easter rising and University College, Dublin* (1966); Dorothy Macardle, *The Irish republic* (1968 ed.); C. Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows and the Irish revolution* (1971); Michael McLnerney, *Peadar O'Donnell: Irish social rebel* (1974); Ernie O'Malley, *The singing flame* (1978); Joseph M. Curran, *The birth of the Irish Free State 1921–1923* (1980); Michael Hopkinson, *Green against green: the Irish civil war* (1988); Tim Pat Coogan, *Michael Collins: a biography* (1990); Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, *Portrait of a revolutionary: General Richard Mulcahy and the founding of the Irish Free State* (1992); Tim Pat Coogan, *De Valera: long fellow, long shadow* (1993); *1916 rebellion handbook* (1998 ed.), 86; Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin party, 1916–1923* (1999); Patrick Maume, *The long gestation: Irish nationalist life 1891–1918* (1999); John M. Regan, *The Irish counter-revolution 1921–1936: treatyite politics and settlement in independent Ireland* (1999); Bill Kissane, *Explaining Irish democracy* (2002); Frank Costello, *The Irish revolution and its aftermath 1916–1923: years of revolt* (2003); Peter Hart, *The IRA at war 1916–1923* (2003); id., *Mick: the real Michael Collins* (2005); Bill Kissane, *The politics of the Irish civil war* (2005); information from NUI archives