

O'Rahilly, Michael Joseph ('The O'Rahilly')

by Patrick Maume

O'Rahilly, Michael Joseph ('The O'Rahilly') (1875–1916), nationalist and journalist, was born at Ballylongford, Co. Kerry, on 22 April 1875, third child and only son of Richard Rahilly, businessman and magistrate, and his wife, Ellen (née Mangan); his father claimed collateral descent from Aodhagan Ó Rathaille (qv), his mother from James Clarence Mangan (qv). Sighe Humphreys (qv) was the daughter of Michael's sister; Alfred O'Rahilly (qv) and T. F. O'Rahilly (qv) were his first cousins. He was related to the McEllistrim Fianna Fáil political dynasty.

The young Michael Rahilly was educated at Ballylongford girls' national school (1880–82), Ballylongford boys' national school (1882–9), learning Irish after school hours, and Clongowes Wood College, Co. Kildare (1890–93); he started to study medicine at UCD (1894–6) but his studies were interrupted by tuberculosis and he abandoned them altogether to run the family business after his father's death. The business was sold after Rahilly married an Irish-American, Nancy Brown, on 15 April 1899; they were to have six children. After a long honeymoon the Rahillys settled in Bray, Co. Wicklow, in 1900. 'If I had stayed in Ballylongford I would have taken to drink', he told his children (O'Rahilly (1991)). A family settlement gave him £450 a year; he sometimes mocked himself as a 'licensed loafer'.

At Bray Michael continued to study Irish, genealogy, archaeology, and local history; he was a JP for Co. Kerry 1903–7. Experience of Dublin snobbery strengthened his childhood nationalism and Nancy reacted against Dublin after the death of their son Robert in August 1903. They moved to Brighton in 1904, and Michael briefly joined a London branch of the United Irish League. Rahilly may have written to the *United Irishman*, the nationalist paper of Arthur Griffith (qv), as early as 1899, and frequented An Stad, an Irish Ireland shop in North Frederick Street, Dublin, but he became a regular contributor to the paper only in June 1904. Around this time he coined the title 'The O'Rahilly', though his use of it did not become habitual until c.1911, and added the patronymic prefix to his surname. In 1905 the Rahillys moved to Philadelphia to try to salvage the Brown family linen mills and Rahilly temporarily severed his connection with Griffith. He found America 'a vortex of corruption . . . the stronghold of materialism' (O'Rahilly (1991), 53).

The family returned to Ireland in mid 1909 and settled at Ballsbridge, Dublin. Thereafter nationalism provided this gifted but slightly aimless man with his central purpose in life. Rahilly wrote extensively for Griffith's short-lived daily *Sinn Féin* (1909–10), subscribing £100 to its support and visiting America to seek funds. He joined the Sinn Féin party executive in October 1910 and became its best-known activist after Griffith; one of his first campaigns was to orchestrate opposition to the 1911 royal visit. In 1911–13 he published a circulation-boosting series on Irish

family history for the weekly *Sinn Féin*, and painted pedigrees and coats of arms on request. He wrote for the republican monthly *Irish Freedom* under his own name and as 'Rapparee'.

O'Rahilly improved his children's Irish by hiring an Irish-speaking servant and buying a holiday cottage near Dingle, Co. Kerry. He joined the Five Provinces branch of the Gaelic League and became its president; in 1912 he was elected to the league executive. O'Rahilly devised numerous schemes to raise the league's profile. 'Most of the plans were rather fantastic', recalled his friend Desmond Fitzgerald (qv), but this was not invariably true: O'Rahilly persuaded the Gaelic League to adopt American-style flag days (hitherto unknown in Ireland); he organised the translation of Dublin street names into Irish and the transcription of ordnance survey material compiled by John O'Donovan (qv); he campaigned to make the post office accept parcels addressed in Irish; and applied his talents as a designer to Irish-language cheque books and a simplified Gaelic type. He was also a motoring enthusiast and founder member of the Irish Aero Club.

In 1913 O'Rahilly revamped the loss-making Gaelic League paper, *An Claidreamh Soluis*. He solicited articles from Eoin MacNeill (qv) and Patrick Pearse (qv), which stimulated the formation of the Irish Volunteers; O'Rahilly had already advocated the recruitment of nationalist volunteers and founded a gun club, and he became treasurer of the new movement on its establishment in November 1913. Although he cooperated with the IRB in prompting MacNeill to form the Volunteers, he held the Young Ireland view that secret societies were demoralising and separatists should operate openly. O'Rahilly was central to the Volunteers' gun-running and arms procurement in 1914–15 (even casting bullets in his own house). In April 1915 he published *A history of the Irish Volunteers*, in which he accused John Redmond (qv) of sabotaging the movement, and in mid 1915 he was served with an order excluding him from Kerry and the south-west.

O'Rahilly apparently favoured a *coup d'état* against Dublin Castle on the outbreak of the first world war, and attempted to organise contacts with Germany during the August 1914 crisis; once this opportunity passed, however, he was aligned with Eoin MacNeill and Bulmer Hobson (qv), who opposed a pre-emptive rising and favoured a defensive strategy. In April 1916, after discovering that the 'Castle document' (which he distributed in Munster) was forged and hearing of Hobson's kidnap and the arrest by British forces of the German arms shipment intended for the Volunteers, O'Rahilly played a leading role in persuading MacNeill to call off the rising planned for Easter day. He confronted Pearse, with the words 'Anyone who kidnaps me will have to be a quicker shot', and was the courier who took MacNeill's countermanding order to Limerick. Nevertheless, O'Rahilly believed he had a moral duty to stand with men he had recruited and trained. He joined the rebels when they mobilised on Easter Monday: 'I helped to wind up the clock, so I might as well hear it strike.'

At the General Post Office in Dublin he was placed in charge of the roof, food stores, and the prisoners (whom he treated humanely). Desmond Fitzgerald, his aide-de-camp, recalled him as cheerful though he was convinced that the rising was doomed; he resisted entreaties to return home (his wife was pregnant). On Thursday 27 April, during the evacuation of the post office, O'Rahilly was fatally wounded charging a British barricade in Moore Street. He bled to death slowly in a doorway in Moore Lane (latterly O'Rahilly Place), crying for water and writing his name in blood on a wall; he died on Friday 28 April. The ballad 'The O'Rahilly' by W. B. Yeats (qv) celebrates him as an exemplar of existential heroism. His family remained active in republican politics; his elder son Richard 'Mac' O'Rahilly (1903–84) (styling himself 'The O'Rahilly') was a barrister and treasurer of Clann na Poblachta, and his younger son Aodhagan (qv) was a prominent businessman and engineer.

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Michael Joseph O'Rahilly, *The secret history of the Irish Volunteers* (1915); Marcus Bourke, *The O'Rahilly* (Tralee, 1967); Desmond Fitzgerald, *The Memoirs of Desmond Fitzgerald, 1913–1916* (1968); Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: the triumph of failure* (1977); Aodhagan O'Rahilly, *Winding the clock: the O'Rahilly and the 1916 rising* (1991)