

Plunkett, Joseph Mary

by Lawrence William White

Plunkett, Joseph Mary (1887–1916), poet, journalist, and revolutionary, was born 21 November 1887 at 26 Upper Fitzwilliam Street, Dublin, second child and eldest son among three sons and four daughters of George Noble Plunkett (qv) (1851–1948), man of letters, barrister, art historian, nationalist, and papal count, and Mary Josephine Plunkett (née Cranny) (1858–1944). Born into the catholic branch of a family prominent in Ireland for some six centuries – the martyred bishop Oliver Plunkett (qv), co-operativist Sir Horace Plunkett (qv), and writer Lord Dunsany (qv) were all noteworthy kinsmen – Plunkett enjoyed the most moneyed background of the eventual leaders of the 1916 rebellion. His paternal grandfather, Patrick Plunkett (1817–1918), born on a small farm adjoining the demesne of his relatives, the Plunketts of Killeen castle, Co. Meath, entered business in Dublin in the 1840s, first in the leather trade, then in building. He and Plunkett's maternal grandfather, Patrick Cranny (1820–88), likewise a self-made builder, from Borris, Co. Carlow, between them developed much of the south city suburbs; the two men's wives were first cousins, and Plunkett's parents second cousins.

Education, illness, intellectual interests Plunkett was reared in his parents' Dublin home and in two rented properties in the south county: Charleville, Templeogue (briefly in 1897), and Kiltiernan Abbey, near Enniskerry, Co. Wicklow (1900–08). He matured into an eccentric, nervous personality in a household dominated by his mother's erratic, capricious character, alternately neglectful and abusive, alongside his father's benign detachment from domestic life. Owing to his chronically poor health from early childhood - he suffered from glandular tuberculosis, and frequent bouts of pleurisy and pneumonia – Plunkett's formal education, chiefly at a series of Jesuit institutions, was peripatetic. After primary education at the Catholic University School, Leeson St., he briefly attended a Marist school in Paris, before entering Belvedere College, and also had private home tutors. He studied philosophy for two years at the Jesuits' Stonyhurst College, Lancashire, which made a deep and lasting impression. Highly imaginative and verbally agile, dexterous in languages, and autodidactic, he was intellectually inquisitive across a diverse range of subjects, both abstruse and practical. While deeply immersed in scholastic philosophy and catholic mystical writing, he pursued interests in physics, chemistry, aeronautics, photography, and wireless telegraphy, and contemplated a career in science or medicine.

His close and formative friendship with teacher and poet Thomas MacDonagh (qv), who encouraged his interest in poetry, began in 1910 when he sought a tutor in Irish to prepare for the matriculation examination of the NUI (which he failed). Though the two were contrasting personalities – Plunkett, quiet and delicate, MacDonagh vivacious and assertive – their friendship nurtured Plunkett's sense of intellectual

self-confidence. Religion was a recurrent topic of friendly disputation between Plunkett, the believer, and MacDonagh, the sceptic. While attending an Irish summer school at Gortahork, Co. Donegal (1910), Plunkett pursued a doomed romance with a medical student, Columba O'Carroll, the subject of much of his poetry. Though he passed the matriculation examination at the RCSI (1911), ill health precluded his attendance. Seeking a gentler winter climate than Ireland's, he travelled in the eastern Mediterranean, spending the early months of 1911 with his mother in Italy, Sicily, and Malta, and the winter of 1911–12 in Algiers, where he studied Arabic language and literature, and cultivated an interest in orientalism. With MacDonagh's energetic critical and practical assistance, he produced a slim volume of verse, *The circle and the sword*, published during his absence (1911). On returning to Ireland (spring 1912), he fell seriously ill with influenza; suffering lung haemorrhages, he was hospitalised for several months, after which he set up house with his sister Geraldine in a family property at 17 Marlborough Road, Donnybrook.

Political commitments Purchasing a financially unstable literary and topical magazine, the *Irish Review* (June 1913), Plunkett assumed the editorial chair, and was soon working with MacDonagh to alter radically the periodical's policy of political non-partisanship to reflect his own new-found political interests. Engaging for the first time in public affairs, he was joint honorary secretary with his future brother-in-law Thomas Dillon (qv) of the Dublin Industrial Peace Committee, organised by Thomas Kettle (qv) to mobilise intellectuals and clergy behind independent mediation efforts during the 1913 lockout. His intervention varied sharply with that of his mother, who stridently opposed the trade unions' initiative to send children of locked-out workers on respite visits to families in Britain. Trade-union leader James Larkin (qv) refused a subscription from Plunkett as tainted money, owing to the fact that Countess Plunkett, unbeknownst to her family, had recently purchased slum tenements in the city centre.

Though his physical infirmities precluded active soldiering, Plunkett offered his services to Eoin MacNeill (qv) on the launch of the Irish Volunteers, and attended the inaugural public meeting at the Rotunda (25 November 1913). Elected to the provisional committee, he utilised the *Irish Review* to propagandise for the movement; the consequent alienation of the journal's traditional readership base (consisting mainly of civil servants) contributed to its demise. When, during a general wartime crackdown on the separatist press, police in London seized a quantity of copies of the November 1914 number, which included the provocative 'Twenty plain facts for Irishmen,' the financial consequences proved fatal to the publication. In 1914 Plunkett became co-partner with MacDonagh and Edward Martyn (qv) in management of the newly launched Irish Theatre, conceived as a vehicle for original plays and translations of continental drama. He supplied the company's premises in the Hardwicke Hall, a property owned by his mother and also housing the Dun Emer Guild, but seems eventually to have differed with his partners over the nature of their agreement, and to have withdrawn from the venture by March 1916.

Though Plunkett supported, in the interests of unity, the co-option to the Volunteers' provisional committee of nominees of Irish parliamentary party leader John Redmond (qv) (June 1914), he adamantly opposed Redmond's declaration at Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow, pledging the support of the Volunteer movement for Britain in the first world war (September 1914). He attended the secret meeting of advanced nationalists summoned by Thomas Clarke (qv) and Sean Mac Diarmada (qv) at the Gaelic League headquarters, Parnell Square, that determined to stage an armed rising against British rule during the course of the war (9 September 1914). Increasingly more prominent within the rump movement of anti-Redmondite Irish Volunteers, at the body's first convention (October 1914) he was named to the twelve-member central executive; in December 1914 he was appointed to the newly formed headquarters staff as director of military operations with the rank of commandant.

Planning the rising At the behest of the advisory committee established at the secret 9 September meeting, Plunkett indulged a long-held amateur interest in military strategy and tactics (nurtured by schoolboy participation in the Stonyhurst officers' training corps), by drafting an embryonic plan for military operations in the Dublin area. Inducted into the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), and admitted into the small band of revolutionary conspirators headed by Clarke and Mac Diarmada, Plunkett became the chief strategist in the planning for the rising, working in concert with Patrick Pearse (qv) and Éamonn Ceannt (qv) on expanding the plans to include the entire country, and on devising the detail. It is probable that Plunkett thus originated the strategy of concentrating the insurrection in Dublin on the seizure and defence of large city-centre buildings.

In March–June 1915 Plunkett travelled by a circuitous route to Berlin – his previous valetudinarian journeys supplying a plausible cover that allowed him to slip through wartime security strictures – to negotiate with the German foreign office for assistance in the planned rising. There he joined Roger Casement (qv) – already seeking German support for an Irish rebellion, sponsored by the American-based Clan na Gael – in drafting a lengthy memorandum, styled the 'Ireland report', outlining an ambitious operation involving a Volunteer rising in Dublin and the west, coordinated with a German invasion up the Shannon estuary. Though the Germans ultimately rejected the plan, Plunkett – who disagreed with Casement's insistence on the necessity of an invading German expeditionary force – secured a tentative German undertaking to land a shipment of small arms and ammunition on the eve of an Irish rising, sometime in spring 1916 (a date necessitating postponement of the rising from its initial designation for autumn 1915).

While Plunkett was absent on this mission, the planning group, comprising him, Pearse, and Ceannt, was formally constituted by Clarke, without the knowledge of the IRB supreme council in its entirety, as a military committee (May 1915), subsequently styled the military council. Plunkett travelled to New York to brief Clan na Gael leader John Devoy (qv) on the progress of the German negotiations and

the status of preparations for the rising within Ireland (September–October 1915). He played a decisive role in persuading the socialist revolutionary James Connolly (qv) to cooperate with the IRB conspirators; highly impressed with Plunkett's plan, after co-option to the military council (January 1916) Connolly was Plunkett's chief associate in finalising preparations.

Rebellion, marriage, and execution From summer 1915 Plunkett resided at Larkfield, a rambling rural property recently purchased by his mother in Kimmage, Co. Dublin, and used by the Volunteers as a weapons store, explosives factory, training base, and quarters for enlistees returning from overseas. Over the winter he became engaged to Grace Gifford (qv) – illustrator, caricaturist, and MacDonagh's sister-in-law – drawn to her by their deep mutual interest in the catholic religion, to which she converted (7 April 1916). Suffering a serious breakdown in health, in the first week of April 1916 Plunkett underwent surgery on tubercular glands in his neck, convalescing thereafter in a nursing home on Mountjoy Square, but attending to military council business on several daytime visits to Larkfield. He was instrumental in the genesis of the 'castle document', a seeming government order for sweeping arrests of nationalist leaders; long thought to have been an outright forgery accomplished by Plunkett and his cohorts, it was likely an authentic, leaked contingency plan, which Plunkett altered to appear more extensive in scope and imminent in intent. Its circulation was intended to galvanise sentiment within the Volunteers towards intensified military preparedness and probable armed resistance.

On Good Friday (21 April) Plunkett moved to the Metropole hotel, close by Dublin's General Post Office. He participated in the final pre-rising deliberations attending MacNeill's countermand of the Volunteers' Easter Sunday manoeuvres. As a member of the military council he signed the proclamation of the republic and served on the provisional government. Pallid and wan, his neck swathed in bandages, but attired in elaborate military costume, and charged with 'a hectic energy' (MacDonagh (1945), 588), throughout the week-long rebellion he served with the headquarters garrison in the GPO, where his aide-de-camp was Michael Collins (qv). Court-martialled and sentenced to death, on the evening of 3 May, hours before his execution, Plunkett married Grace Gifford in the chapel of Kilmainham jail. Separated immediately after the service, the couple were allowed a ten-minute visit in Plunkett's cell later in the night. Plunkett was executed by firing squad on 4 May 1916. The pathos of his last hours contributed to the sway of public opinion toward sympathy for the insurgents. According to Plunkett's sister Geraldine, Gifford was pregnant at the marriage, and miscarried some weeks later while living at Larkfield.

Assessment: poetry, politics, and character A sequence of poems entitled 'Occulta', completed by Plunkett in July 1915 and intended as a separate volume, was included with earlier and later verse in a posthumous collection, *The poems of Joseph Mary Plunkett* (1916); edited by Geraldine Plunkett, the volume enjoyed brisk sales for a time, going through four printings within three years. In subject and technique Plunkett's poetry bespeaks his deep devotion to Christian and

neo-platonic mysticism, and his later dabbling with orientalism. Influenced by William Blake, Francis Thompson, and George Russell (qv) ('Æ'), and by such mystical writers as SS John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, his verse is compact, rhapsodic, and strongly rhythmic. Flawed too frequently by vagueness, strained imagery, and tortured syntax – the work of an apprentice who never achieved mature poetic articulation – his poems are most powerful when expressing an intense inner conflict, arising from consciousness of 'the gulf between human capacity and human aspiration' (Kennelly, 56), and anguish over the intimate duality between good and evil at war within the human heart. A common theme is mystic union with a suffering other – the poet's beloved, the crucified Christ, the feminine personification of the Irish nation – as the tragically necessary crucible of renewal and rebirth.

Though party to the declaration of an Irish republic, Plunkett ideologically was more a catholic nationalist, who mooted within conspiratorial circles the post-war advisability of an independent Irish kingdom under a German catholic prince. Serious and intellectual in disposition, he expressed a taste for the theatrical in flamboyant, exotic clothing and jewellery. His characteristically nervous manner could, at times of heightened emotion, border on the histrionic. Despite his physical frailty, he was mentally robust and possessed of a steely inner resolution.

Family Several of Plunkett's immediate family were involved in the Easter rising and the subsequent republican movement. His father, Count Plunkett, in early April 1916 dispatched from Berne a message to Casement in Berlin, then proceeded to Rome where he discussed the Irish nationalist case with Pope Benedict XV. Imprisoned briefly in Dublin after the rising, he and Countess Plunkett were deported for nine months to Oxford. Winning a parliamentary by-election (February 1917), and aligning with Sinn Féin, he opposed both the 1921 treaty and the 1926 launch of Fianna Fáil, remaining committed to republican abstentionism as a member of the legitimist second dáil. Joseph Plunkett's elder sister, Philomena ('Mimi') Plunkett (1886–1926), served as courier in 1916 between the IRB military council and Clan na Gael leaders in New York, and afterwards was secretary of Cumann na mBan. She married Diarmuid O'Leary, a London-based IRB man, and later an ITGWU official. A younger sister, Mary Josephine ('Moya') Plunkett (1889–1928), largely apolitical, joined a catholic religious order for eight years without professing, then worked as a qualified midwife in Africa. Geraldine Plunkett (1891–1986), who studied science at UCD, married Thomas Dillon (qv), UCD lecturer and later professor of chemistry at UCG, on Easter Sunday 1916, and witnessed the occupation of the GPO from their bridal room in the Imperial hotel; an intended double wedding with her brother and Grace Gifford had been obviated by Plunkett's illness and the rising. Their children included writer Eilís Dillon (qv) and journalist Michael Dillon (qv). The youngest sister, Josephine Mary ('Fiona') Plunkett (1896–1976), long active in Cumann na mBan and imprisoned during the civil war, was subsequently imprisoned for involvement in a 1928 campaign of intimidation of judges and juries, and in a 1936 agitation against moneylenders; she was among thirteen women interned in Mountjoy jail under the

emergency legislation of 1940. Thrice engaged but never married, she suffered from mental instability in her later years.

The second of the Plunkett brothers, George Oliver Plunkett (qv), fought in the Easter rising, war of independence, and civil war. Prominent in the IRA throughout the 1920s–30s, he served on the army council that launched the 1939 British bombing campaign, when he was arrested and interned. The youngest sibling, John ('Jack') Plunkett (1897–1960) fought in Easter week in the GPO and with the anti-treaty Four Courts garrison during the civil war. A one-time UCD engineering student, through lengthy membership of the IRA he exercised his technical skills by specialising in production of explosive devices and in radio transmission. Arrested in a December 1939 police raid on an IRA wireless broadcasting station, while interned in the Curragh he survived a forty-day hunger strike. A chronic depressive, he worked as an engineer in the ESB.

GRO (b. cert.); *Catholic Bulletin*, vi, no. 7 (July 1916), 397; Padraic Colum (ed.), introduction to *Poems of the Irish revolutionary brotherhood* (1916), ix-xxxvi; Geraldine Plunkett (ed.), foreword to *The poems of Joseph Mary Plunkett* (1916), vii-xvi; Donagh MacDonagh, 'Joseph Plunkett,' *An Cosantóir*, v, no. 11 (Nov. 1945), 581–8; Diarmuid Lynch, *The IRB and the 1916 insurrection* (1957); F. X. Martin (ed.), *The Irish Volunteers 1913–1915: recollections and documents* (1963), 31, 96–7, 155, 162, 195, 199, 201–02; Max Caulfield, *The Easter rebellion* (1964); Brendan Kennelly, 'The poetry of Joseph Plunkett,' *Dublin Magazine*, v, no. 1 (spring 1966), 56–62; Geraldine Dillon, 'Joseph Plunkett,' *ibid.*, 63–5; *Ir. Times*, Easter rising supplement, 7 Apr. 1966; Breandán Mac Giolla Choille (ed.), *Intelligence notes 1913–16* (1966); Martin Shannon, *Sixteen roads to Golgotha* (c.1966); F. X. Martin (ed.), *Leaders and men of the Easter rising: Dublin 1916* (1967); Edd Winfield Parks and Aileen Wells Parks, *Thomas MacDonagh: the man, the patriot, the writer* (1967); *Memoirs of Desmond Fitzgerald: 1913–1916* (1968); Kevin B. Nowlan, *The making of 1916: studies in the history of the rising* (1969), 164–6, 172–4, 177–9, 182–3, 194, 219, 223–5, 245–9, 257–9, 303; Piaras F. Mac Lochlainn, *Last words: letters and statements of the leaders executed after the rising at Easter 1916* (1971); Sydney Czira, *The years flew by* (1974); *Ir. Times*, 30 Dec. 1974, p. 10; Leon Ó Broin, *Revolutionary underground: the story of the Irish Republican Brotherhood 1858–1924* (1976); Johann A. Norstedt, *Thomas MacDonagh: a critical biography* (1980); Roger McHugh and Maurice Harmon, *A short history of Anglo-Irish literature* (1982); Conor Foley, *Legion of the rearguard: the IRA and the modern Irish state* (1992); Moira Laffan, *Count Plunkett and his times* (1992); Uinseann MacEoin, *The IRA in the twilight years* (1997); *1916 rebellion handbook* (1998 ed.); Michael Foy and Brian Barton, *The Easter rising* (1999); Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin party, 1916–1923* (1999); Patrick Maume, *The long gestation: Irish nationalist life 1891–1918* (1999); Marie O'Neill, *Grace Gifford Plunkett and Irish*

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