

Redmond, William Hoey Kearney ('Willie')

by Terence Denman

Redmond, William Hoey Kearney ('Willie')(1861–1917), Irish nationalist and British soldier, was born 13 April 1861 in Grassendale, Liverpool, England, second son of William Archer Redmond (qv), and younger brother of John Edward Redmond (qv). He had two sisters. His mother, Mary (née Hoey), was a protestant from Co. Wicklow. The catholic Redmonds had long been associated with Co. Wexford. His father was home rule MP for Wexford (1872–80). Willie Redmond grew up at 'Ballytrent', on the south-eastern tip of Co. Wexford. He was educated at Carlow College (1871–2) and Clongowes Wood College (1873–6).

He served as a merchant sailor, before becoming (December 1879) a second lieutenant in the Wexford militia battalion of the Royal Irish Regiment. Promoted to lieutenant (October 1880), he considered a regular army career. But he resigned his commission to join the Land League agitation. In February 1882 he was arrested for possessing seditious pamphlets, and served three months in Kilmainham. He shared a cell with Charles Stewart Parnell (qv).

Willie Redmond was elected MP for Wexford borough in July 1883. In 1885 he was returned for Fermanagh North; his time in that constituency was important. He became overly sanguine about reconciling Ulster protestants to home rule, and his later expectations of an Irish unity forged in the trenches of the western front drew heavily on his hopes for protestant and catholic amity, formed in his years as an Ulster MP. From 1892 till his death he was MP for Clare East.

Foreign travel for the nationalist cause was an important part of Willie Redmond's life, and shaped his political views. He went first to the United States with Michael Davitt (qv) in June 1882 to collect money for the Land League. In February 1883 he arrived in Australia. He met Eleanor Mary Dalton, eldest daughter of James Dalton, a wealthy trader of Irish stock, of Orange, New South Wales. (They married in London in February 1886.) With his brother he collected £15,000 for the Irish National League. They then collected another £15,000 in the United States. Willie Redmond undertook almost annual visits to the Irish emigrant communities of the United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Canada. He wrote two books – *A shooting trip to the Australian bush* (1898), and *Through the new commonwealth* (1906) – about his travels. The dominion status achieved by Australia and Canada influenced his conception of an independent Ireland within the British empire.

Willie Redmond was never in the front rank of the Irish parliamentary party, even after his brother became its leader in 1900. He spoke frequently in the commons, and was famous for his passion, if not for his intellectual coherence. He was ejected several times from the house for his excesses. But there was something theatrical

about his performances, and he remained popular, even with unionists. In Ireland his speeches were even more extreme, and often hinted at violent rebellion. But, fundamentally, he remained a constitutional nationalist. He was imprisoned in September 1888 for helping oppose an eviction in Wexford. When the Irish party split in 1890 he followed Parnell unhesitatingly. Parnell's death shook him to the core; he seems to have seen Parnell later as an almost Christ-like figure. An ardent catholic, he was particularly dismayed at the church's antagonism to Parnell.

His close involvement in the land agitation linked to the United Irish League saw him imprisoned at Kilmainham again in November 1902. He increasingly saw home rule as one part of 'progressive' social and political change, and supported such radical causes as old-age pensions and female suffrage. Influenced once again by his foreign travels, he now described himself as a 'socialist' on the Australian model. An impassioned teetotaler, but a devoted smoker, he also encouraged tobacco cultivation in Ireland.

At the outbreak of the second South African war (1899) Willie Redmond had joined younger nationalists, such as Arthur Griffith (qv), Maud Gonne (qv), and James Connolly (qv), to oppose the war and stop Irishmen enlisting, becoming treasurer of the Irish Transvaal Committee. So it is paradoxical that he is best remembered for his service in the first world war. He enthusiastically backed his brother's support for Irish involvement. Although 54, he enlisted (February 1915) in the 6th Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment, part of the 16th (Irish) Division, composed of nationalist recruits. Unlike his brother, he enjoyed good relations with the division's Irish protestant commander, Sir Lawrence Parsons (qv). As a captain, he commanded B company of his battalion when it arrived in France (December 1915). He wrote regularly for the newspapers (articles posthumously published as *Trench pictures from France*). The 1916 Easter rising shook him terribly, and he realised that constitutional nationalism had taken a wrong turn in supporting the war. But he continued to speak in parliament; most movingly in March 1917, when he pleaded for immediate home rule and presented the war as a chance to bring the two Irish traditions together.

His health collapsed, and he transferred, unwillingly, to a divisional staff post as major. But he badgered his superiors till allowed to join the assault on Wyttschaete, Belgium, on 7 June 1917. The 16th Division attacked alongside the 36th (Ulster) Division. Wounded by shellfire, he was carried from the field by Ulster troops and died that evening in the Ulster division's field hospital at Dranoutre. His death caused widespread grief. He was buried in the garden of the convent at Loker (now Loker). The grave, despite efforts by the authorities to gather his body into an official war cemetery, is still there, symbolic in its isolation. Commemorations (organised by local people) took place at the grave in 1967 and 1997.

Wexford town boasts a bust of him, by Oliver Sheppard (qv), in a park. His Irish house, 'Glenbrook', Delgany, still stands. His wife died in 1947. He left no children (his only son died in 1891, aged 5).

Willie Redmond was his brother's closest political confidant (and physically very similar), but contemporaries noted how different in character he was from John: volatile, indiscreet, impetuous, garrulous, and generally mirthful. He preserved a perennially youthful aspect till the war aged him. He appears now the most tragic representative of the thousands of Irish nationalists who served in 1914–18. The Clare East constituency vacated by his death elected, prophetically, Sinn Féin's Éamon de Valera (qv).

---

W. H. K. Redmond, *Trench pictures from France* (1917) (biog. notice); A. Ryan (ed.), *Major William Redmond* (1917); PRO, War Office records; S. Gwynn, *The last years of John Redmond* (1919); *DNB*; T. Denman, *A lonely grave: the life and death of William Redmond* (1995) (photos); private family papers held by Dr M. Green