



E OIN MacNEILL

UCD's scholar revolutionary

Maurice Manning on Eoin MacNeill, the historian and language activist who made a crucial intervention which hindered the Rising's chances of success

SNAPSHOT

E OIN MacNEILL

Born: Co Antrim, 15 May 1867

Educated: St Malachy's (Belfast), Queen's University Belfast

Affiliation: Irish Volunteers

Career: Clerk; journalist; Professor of Early Irish History, UCD; TD (1918–27); Minister for Finance (1919), Industries (1919–21) and Education (1922–25); Chairman of the Irish Manuscripts Commission

Died: Dublin, 15 October 1945

E OIN MacNEILL was a most unlikely revolutionary. In appearance he presented as a slightly absent-minded scholar and in temperament he was prone to periods of depression and lassitude. For many years in the last century he was best remembered in folk memory as the man who tried to call off the Easter Rising and succeeded in delaying it for a day, and also as the Irish minister who failed in his role on the Boundary Commission in 1926 which set in permanent form the partition of the country.

It is an unfair portrayal, not entirely so, but the passage of time has softened that view and begun to see MacNeill in the totality of his life's work, to see him as a pioneering scholar and a significant formative influence on the shaping of today's Ireland.

MacNeill was a very good example of the newly-emerging Irish Catholic meritocracy which began to emerge at the end of the 19th century. Coming from a merchant background in the Glens of Antrim he was first and foremost a scholar whose reputation in his chosen field of early Irish history has grown rather than diminished over the years.

By the time of the Easter Rising MacNeill was 49 years of age and, unlike most of the other Sinn Féin leaders he was already an established figure in Irish life. He was a graduate of the old Royal University (predecessor of the National University of Ireland) and began his working life as a clerk in the law courts. He was essentially self-educated in Irish history and his publications in this area established him to the extent that in 1909 he was appointed foundation Professor of Early Irish History in UCD and was elected to the first Senate of the new NUI where, along with Douglas Hyde, he campaigned to make Irish a compulsory subject for entry to the university.

It was through his efforts to revive the Irish language that he became nationally known. He was one of the founders of the Gaelic League in 1893, acted as its unpaid secretary from 1897 and always saw the struggle for independence as a cultural battle as much as a political one.

It would be wrong to see MacNeill as some sort of ineffectual academic. He could be practical and energetic, writing endless newspaper articles, publishing pamphlets, speaking at meetings and rallies and engaged in robust public debate. He lost considerable amounts of his own money attempting to establish an Irish language printing business. He was close to Patrick Pearse — a deep and personal friendship with each profoundly influencing the other.

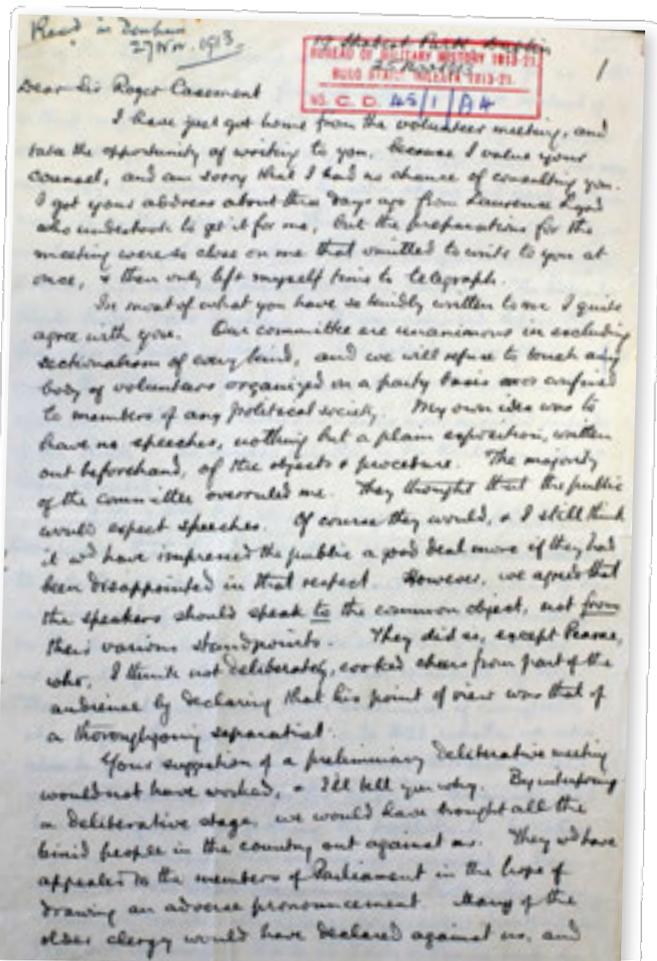
His reaction to the establishment of the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1913 was to see it as an opportunity rather than a threat for nationalists and his article *The North Began* called for the formation of the Irish Volunteers. He played a leading part in setting up that organisation which grew rapidly and he became its first leader.



Left: Douglas Hyde with Eoin MacNeill, with whom he formed the Gaelic League.
GETTY IMAGES

Right: One of two letters from Eoin MacNeill to Roger Casement sent on the same day concerning the first meeting of the Irish Volunteers at the Rotunda Rink in 1913.
IRISH MILITARY ARCHIVES

Below: Maurice Manning, Chancellor of the National University of Ireland.
FRANK McGRATH



MacNeill was not a military figure so the question arises as to why he was made leader. The suspicion — indeed reality — is that he was used by the Irish Republican Brotherhood, by Tom Clarke and MacNeill's own friend Pearse, as a respectable front while they used the Volunteers to secretly prepare for a Rising.

MacNeill was not so naïve as not to suspect that this was so but deluded himself into thinking that the existence of the Irish Volunteers would help John Redmond put pressure on the Liberal Government to grant Home Rule.

When Redmond insisted on taking over the Volunteers he was resisted by MacNeill and Bulmer Hobson and after Redmond's Woodenbridge speech urging recruitment to the British army, the break was total. However, while MacNeill remained leader of the breakaway group the main positions of influence were again held by the IRB.

MacNeill was opposed to the idea of a Rising but was reluctant to provoke a split in the Volunteers. He was largely unaware of the plans for the Rising, mainly because he had been misled by his colleagues, including his friend Pearse. The story is well known of his attempts to halt it and it can be said he had good military reasons for his decision given the sinking of the

arms ship sent from Germany. In the event his call for a general demobilisation had the effect of delaying the Rising for a day and largely frustrating it outside Dublin.

Even though he was not involved, MacNeill paid a heavy price. He was arrested after the defeat of the rebels, court-martialed, sentenced to life imprisonment and deprived of his UCD chair.

However, in spite of some recriminations over his actions he remained in Sinn Féin. He was elected to the first Dáil and remained a TD until 1927. He was Minister for Finance in the government of the first Dáil. He was again arrested in November 1920 and remained in jail until June 1921.

He was Speaker of the second Dáil and presided over the debate on the Treaty — which he supported — but as Speaker did not vote.

He took a strong pro-Treaty line and supported the hardline measures of the Cosgrave government including the policy of reprisals. He argued that while the old regime had used force to suppress the will of the people, the government of which he was a member was stern in order to uphold the people's will.

For him and his family it was a time of

great personal grief. Two of his sons fought on the Pro-Treaty side but his second son, Brian, joined the Anti-Treaty forces and was killed by government forces during fighting on the Ox Mountains in Sligo.

He was Minister for Education from 1922–25. The Civil War conditions made it difficult for him to achieve much even if he had been temperamentally inclined to do so. His main achievement was the stringent implementation of a policy of compulsory Irish which he had long advocated and which came to be widely resented.

He was appointed in 1924 as the Free State representative on the Boundary Commission to determine the border between Free State and Northern Ireland. By this stage the die was probably already cast in that any major changes or transfer of territory from north to south were unachievable. MacNeill probably knew it was a poisoned chalice but even with that he was a not a good choice. He saw himself as having a judicial rather than an advocacy role, did not keep his colleagues informed of developments and gave in far too easily on key issues.

His political career ended in failure. He resigned from the government and lost his Dáil seat in 1927. In the words of

Professor FX Martin he 'was too delicate an instrument for so crude a job'.

But in some ways MacNeill's most productive days were ahead. He returned to UCD and scholarship. He was first president of the Irish Manuscripts Commission, a body which did extraordinary work in finding and preserving for future generations a range of valuable material which would otherwise have been lost. In some ways this and his founding role in setting up and popularising the Gaelic League will be seen as his most enduring legacies.

Of his scholarship it can be said that much of it has not just stood the test of time but has received favourable reassessment from a new generation of scholars in recent years. He had what Professor Dan Binchy called 'his uncanny sense of communion with a long dead past'.

The final word on MacNeill is well summed up in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*: 'a reputation more likely to rest on his epochal contribution to language revival than on his ambivalent and chequered political career'.

Maurice Manning is Chancellor of the National University of Ireland