

BULMER HOBSON

Hobson's *choice*

Kidnapped on the eve of the Rising to prevent him interfering with it, he has been written out of its history, writes **Shane Browne**



THE kidnapping of Bulmer Hobson is a remarkable but largely forgotten tale of the Easter Rising. The ambitious Hobson, born in Belfast in 1883, had been a rising star in the Irish Republican Brotherhood but with the establishment of the Irish Volunteers in 1913, his estrangement from the radical and separatist element within the movement had widened, in particular his relationship with Thomas Clarke and Seán Mac Diarmada.

Hobson saw the Irish Volunteers as purely a defensive force, but the radical separatists were of a different ilk, believing it should become “an instrument for insurrection”.

Historian Charles Townshend has described Hobson as an “unusual kind of ‘physical-force man’, but a dedicated revolutionary for all that”. His 1909 pamphlet, *Defensive Warfare: A Handbook for Irish Nationalists* is significant, because it was here he firmly asserted, “We must not fight to make a display of heroism, but fight to win.”

His disillusionment with the 1916 insurrection was not the repudiation of force, but “the futile use of arms”. As a result, Hobson was not privy to the final arrangements for the Rising.

However, it seems that a speech at a Cumann na mBan concert on 16 April was the catalyst that marked him down for arrest by his IRB colleagues. Here Hobson unabashedly warned “of the extreme danger of being drawn in to precipitate action”, proclaiming that “no man had a right to risk the fortunes of a country in order to create for himself a niche in

history”. Desmond Fitzgerald remembered how “one could feel he was treading on dangerous ground”.

Hobson’s influence over Eoin MacNeill, Chief of Staff of the Irish Volunteers, was also a major factor in his kidnapping. By the evening of Holy Thursday, with “definite information that an insurrection was to occur in the immediate future”, Hobson rushed to MacNeill’s home to ensure that measures were put in place to prevent this. Éamonn Ceannt remembered talking with Thomas MacDonagh, who remarked: “Bulmer Hobson is the evil genius of the Volunteers and if we could separate MacNeill from his influence, all would be well”.

Hence, on Good Friday 1916, with the Rising days away, Seán Tobin — who had succeeded Hobson as chair of the Leinster Executive of the IRB — arrived at Volunteer headquarters to persuade him to attend a meeting at the home of fellow IRB man, Martin Conlon.

While Hobson was immediately suspicious, he relented, recalling how he was curious “as to whether... the meeting



Bulmer Hobson (seated) with Padraig Ó Riain.

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was a ruse”. Thus, he was unsurprised when he was greeted with guns upon his arrival at Conlon’s home in Phibsborough. Hobson was “inclined to be obstreperous, protesting against his arrest”, but would later claim that his captors were very nice to him. Con O’Donovan, who was surprised to be guarding Hobson, assumed the reason for his detention was because he was not trusted, but “possibly there was some mistake... which would soon be rectified”. Nevertheless, the situation may not have been as sanguine as Hobson has made out.

Conlon would later recall that shooting Hobson was an option. Once the Rising had commenced, the job of guarding him was of little interest to IRB men who wanted to join the fighting. If we are to take Conlon at his word, he countenanced “any unauthorised action”.

Subsequently, on the evening of Easter Monday 1916, under the orders of Mac Diarmada, Hobson was eventually released. He was no longer considered a threat, as the Rising was under way. Damning accusations of treachery over his arrest would taint his standing, however,

and when he walked from Cabra Park that night, he walked from the pages of history.

Hobson’s crucial mistake was not that he did not take part in the Rising after his release — for he would not be driven against his “judgement by being faced with a fait accompli” — but that he failed to court arrest once the Rising was quashed. MacNeill expressed a keen sense for why such an act would be beneficial, warning Hobson that they would have no political future if they were not arrested.

Instead Hobson opted to go on the run. Upon his re-emergence, he now found that he was ostracised from his former colleagues and soon withdrew from public life. Hobson’s biographer Marnie Hay has surmised: “He disappeared from public view as if he had been executed along with the insurrectionists of 1916, but without the benefit of their subsequent spin doctors”.

Bulmer Hobson’s name was ultimately excluded from the revolutionary narrative.

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SNAPSHOT

JOHN BULMER HOBSON

Born: 14 August 1883, Belfast, Co Down

Educated: Friends’ School, Lisburn

Affiliation: IRB/Irish Volunteers

Career: Revenue commissioner

Died: 8 August 1969, Castleconnell, Co Limerick

LEARN MORE

READ...

- * *Seán Mac Diarmada* by Brian Feeney (O’Brien Press 16 Lives series, 2014)
- * *Seán Mac Diarmada: The Mind of the Revolution* by Gerard MacAtasney (Drumlin Publications, 2006)
- * *Erins’s Tragic Easter: the Irish Rebellion of 1916 and its Martyrs*, edited by Maurice Joy (New York, 1916)
- * *Sport and Ireland: A History* by Paul Rouse (Oxford, 2015)
- * *Ar son na Gaeilge: Conradh na*

- Gaeilge 1893-1993* by Proinsias Mac Aonghusa, (Conradh na Gaeilge, 1993)
- * *A Short History of the Irish Volunteers* by Bulmer Hobson (1918)
- * *Bulmer Hobson and the Nationalist Movement in Twentieth-Century Ireland* by Marnie Hay (2009)

WATCH...

- * *Oglaigh na hÉireann — Bulmer Hobson Interview*, RTÉ, 1963, (RTÉ Archives) www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9nnU6VrSjA
- * *Douglas Hyde, President of*



Ireland, 2007 TG4 documentary. www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxJNCe2s378

LISTEN...

- * *Tomorrow We’ll Gather the Rushes*, 1971 RTÉ radio documentary on Padraic Colum tinyurl.com/qxml5a5

VISIT...

- * The GAA museum at Croke Park has several displays dealing with the fight for independence. Opening times vary but can be checked at www.gaa.ie