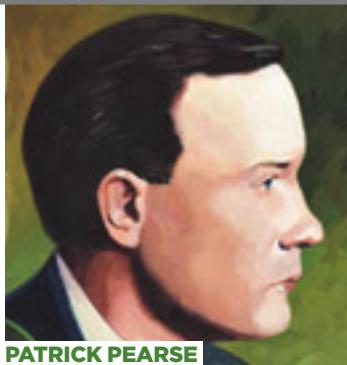


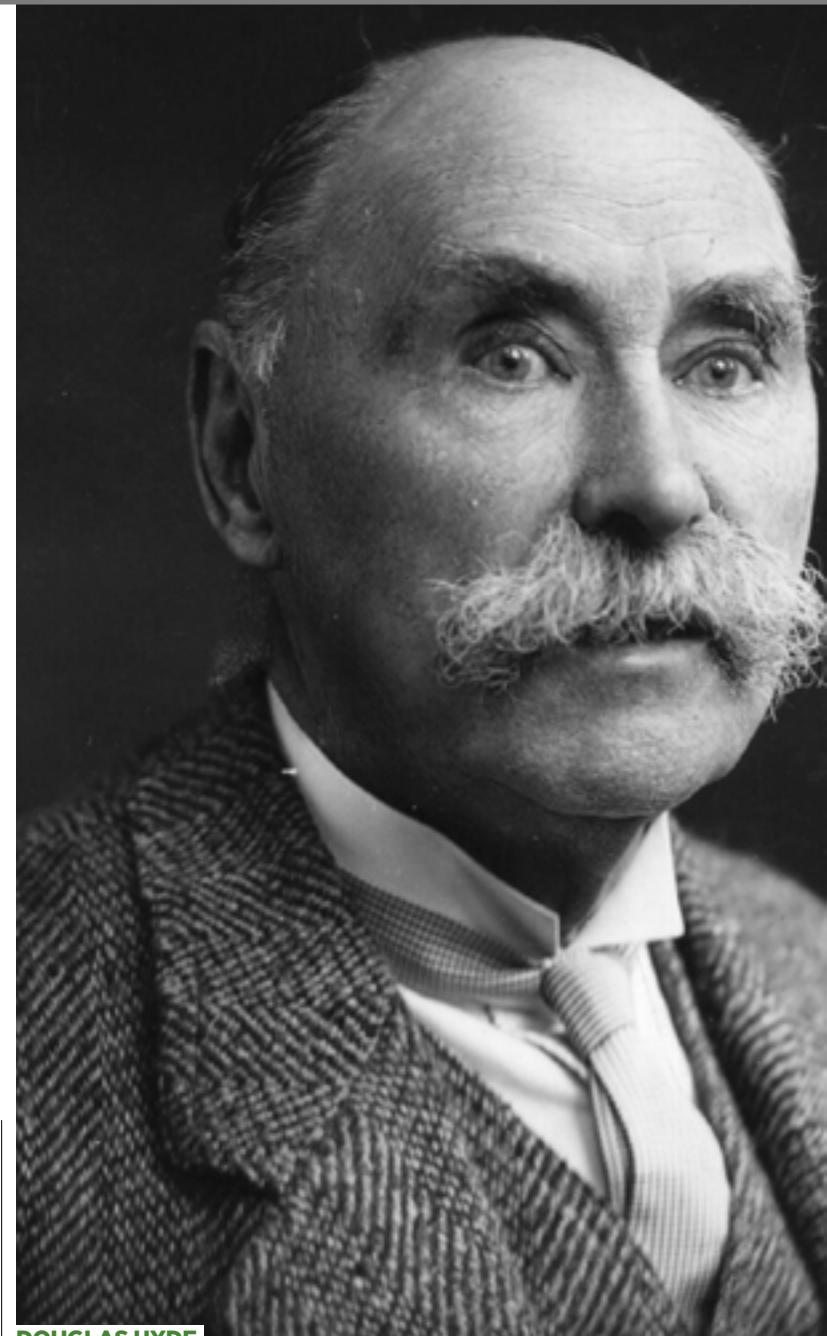
THOMAS MacDONAGH



PATRICK PEARSE



EOIN MacNEILL



DOUGLAS HYDE

A League of extraordinary gentlemen

Gaelic League was breeding ground for rebels, writes **Richard McElligott**

RELECTING on the rebellion that had given him his first taste of military action, Michael Collins lamented that the Easter Rising was hardly the “appropriate time for memoranda couched in poetic phrases, or actions worked out in similar fashion”. This assessment encapsulates the generational gulf between the romantic idealism of the revolutionaries of 1916 and the military efficiency of those who would successfully lead the Irish independence struggle five years later.

But perhaps the idealism of the rebels of 1916 is understandable. The Rising was precipitated by a generation who had come of age amidst the heady optimism of Ireland’s Gaelic Revival — a moment when the possibilities for fundamentally reshaping Irish political, social and cultural makeup seemed endless.

Realising that the myriad of cultural organisations emerging across Ireland could provide a valuable stream of potential recruits, a newly reenergised IRB began to systematically infiltrate them in the years after 1900. Thus participation and membership in these societies helped bring Irish men and women into contact with the revolutionary republican tradition. Little wonder that many would experience what one veteran of 1916, Padraig O’Kelly, described as “a kind of natural graduation” from cultural nationalism to republican violence.

Foremost among these new cultural associations was the

The Gaelic League was undoubtedly the formative nationalist organisation in the development of the revolutionary elite of 1916.

With the rapid decline of native Irish speakers in the aftermath of the Famine, many sensed the damage would be irreversible unless it was halted immediately. In November 1892, the Gaelic scholar Douglas Hyde delivered a speech entitled ‘The Necessity for de-Anglicising Ireland’. Hyde pleaded with his fellow countrymen to turn away from the encroaching dominance of English culture before they lost forever their sense of a separate nationality.

He observed how “Irish sentiment sticks in this half-way house — how it continues to apparently hate the English, and at the same time continues to imitate them”. Hyde’s remedy was to rediscover as much as possible from Ireland’s past — its language, its customs, its traditions. Hyde’s speech offered the blueprint for the emerging cultural nationalism that the likes of Arthur Griffith’s Sinn Féin would subsequently develop into political theory.

In July 1893, Hyde and Eoin MacNeill launched the Gaelic League, a society which aimed to preserve and revive the Irish language.

More than this, the Gaelic League aimed to reconstruct a populist rural Gaelic civilisation. In the process they hoped to recover Ireland’s perceived Gaelic golden-age.

The Gaelic League quickly turned into a powerful mass movement. By revitalising the Irish language, the League also began to inspire a deep sense of pride in Irish culture, heritage and identity. Its wide and energetic programme of meetings, dances and festivals injected a new life and colour into the often depressing monotony of provincial Ireland.

Another significant factor for its popularity was its cross-gender appeal. The League actively encouraged female participation and one of its attractions lay in the opportunities it provided for romantic and sexual contact. The League also developed close ties with the GAA and both would become the supporting pillars of the Gaelic Revival. In particular, the League was instrumental in the early development of camogie and women’s formal

participation in Gaelic games. Within 15 years the League had 671 registered branches.

Hyde had insisted that the Gaelic League should be strictly apolitical. But he never fully accepted the radical political implications of his warning that Ireland needed to be de-Anglicised. Many others would. The League would soon provide a valuable breeding ground for revolutionary republicanism. In the decade before the Rising, British intelligence reports repeatedly noted that the Gaelic League had come under the influence of men “of extreme views”.

It was Patrick Pearse who would personify the direct link between cultural and physical force nationalism. Having joined the Gaelic League as a 17-year-old in 1896, within two years Pearse had been co-opted onto the League’s Ruling Executive Committee. In 1903 he succeeded MacNeill as the editor of the society’s newspaper, *An Claidheamh Soluis*.

For Pearse, the language was seen as the essence of Ireland’s separate national identity. He warned that if the Irish allowed their language to die, they “would go down to their graves with the knowledge that their children and their children’s children

cursed their memory”. Pearse was prominent in the League’s successful campaign to get Irish included as a compulsory subject in the national school system.

For IRB men like Thomas Clarke and Seán Mac Diarmada, the League represented the perfect platform to help spread their republican doctrine. Both became enthusiastic members of the organisation, using it as conduit to recruit its more radical members into the IRB.

It was through their shared membership of the Gaelic League in Dublin that Mac Diarmada indoctrinated Pearse and Éamon Ceannt into the Brotherhood. Meanwhile Thomas MacDonagh wrote of how his first Gaelic League meeting became his “baptism in nationalism”. Through him, his close friend Joseph Plunkett also joined.

In the two years before the Great War, the Gaelic League became increasingly associated with the militant developments within Irish nationalism. In particular, Eoin MacNeill was warming to the political expediency of physical force. In response to the emergence of the Ulster Volunteers, MacNeill used the pages of *An Claidheamh Soluis* to publish his celebrated article, ‘The North Began’ in



IRELAND IN 1916

Ireland reliant on shipping and stout for employment

H&W and Guinness dominated, writes Fergus Cassidy

Brough A.21
I think I should next deal with an important meeting which was called at the suggestion of some members of the I.M.S. Supreme Council. I was consulted by Clarke and Mac Dermott as to whether it would be convenient for me to allow an important meeting, which was proposed should be held to consider the new situation created by the war in Europe, to take place in my office at 25 Parnell Square. They explained that they wanted a meeting of representatives of the different National bodies whom they regarded as anti-War, and they wished this to take place as secretly as possible, and they thought that the Library of the Gaelic League which I used as an office would be a suitable place if I consented to have it held there. I agreed, and they asked me at once if I would consent to attend the meeting. I asked what the purpose of the meeting was and they said to try to get the heads, or at any rate the influential leaders amongst their sections, of progressive National organisations together to consider what actions could jointly be taken by them in view of the outbreak of the European War. From my conversation with these two members of the Supreme Council of the I.M.S. I gathered that it was their intention to try to organise the progressive – or as others might call, the extreme Nationalist – element to work together to promote certain activities that they had in mind towards achieving independence while the war continued.

As far as I can remember, I consented to the meeting being held in the Library of the Gaelic League and I agreed to attend the meeting. I was told then that a number of important men in the Volunteers would be invited to attend and that others to be asked would be important people in the I.M.S. and in Sinn Féin. I personally had nothing to do with the organising of the meeting. I do not know who issued the invitations to the various people who afterwards did attend the meeting, but I presume they were informally invited by Seán MacDermott acting

Extract from statement to the Bureau of Military History by Séan T Ó Kelly, President of Ireland 1945-1959, who facilitated the September 1914 meeting in the offices of the Gaelic League in Parnell (then Rutland) Square in September 1914.
Credit: Irish Military Archives.

which he argued that Irish nationalists needed to similarly arm to protect their right to secure Home Rule for Ireland.

Once the Irish Volunteers were established, local Gaelic League branches were instrumental in spreading the movement. In September 1914, Republicans chose the League's library at 25 Parnell Square, Dublin, as the venue for their conference which agreed that the Great War offered an opportunity to mount a rebellion against British rule.

Throughout 1915, Pearse and the IRB's Military Council were also able to use the nexus of control and influence that the Brotherhood enjoyed among nationalist organisations such as the Gaelic League and the GAA to plan their insurrection.

Furthermore by 1915, members of a radical group of Irish language activists with strong IRB connections, known as 'The Left Wing', had staged a coup among the Gaelic League's leadership. The group which included O'Rahilly, Ceannan and Thomas Ashe managed to take effective control over the League's ruling Executive Board.

At its Ard Fheis in August 1915, they passed a resolution declaring: "The Gaelic League... shall devote itself to realising the

ideal of a Gaelic-speaking and free Irish nation, free from all subjection to foreign influences." This radical pledge of support for Irish sovereignty marked a definite break with the non-political policy of the League's founder Douglas Hyde who subsequently stepped down as president, being succeeded by Eoin MacNeill.

Dozens of Gaelic League activists were among the 1,500 rebels who marched into history on Easter Monday. In the aftermath of the rebellion, the British authorities were quick to identify the League as one of four "anti-British bodies" which had supplied the rebel's entire leadership.

Under the terms of Martial Law, which was declared across Ireland in the aftermath of the Rising, the League was officially suppressed for several weeks. Yet by then its contribution to the revolutionary generation had clearly been made.

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In the 30 years up to the outbreak of the First World War, world trade grew by 40pc. Economies were growing fast, driven by huge changes in railroads, refrigeration and steamships.

By 1913, European countries accounted for 80pc of world trade. Forty years earlier, Britain was the sole economic superpower, accounting for almost one-third of global manufacturing output.

Even though competition, especially from Germany, France and USA, saw its share of world trade beginning to erode in the early 1900s, it remained an economic giant. Industrial expansion, along with population growth, meant that in 1913 Britain accounted for 17pc of all global imports and remained the largest shipbuilder in the world.

The Irish economy was small compared with Britain, with a Gross Domestic Product of around 6pc of the British total. Agriculture was the mainstay, with output twice that of industrial manufacture. In 1911, 846,000 people worked in agriculture and food, and 401,000 in industry, with most of that output based in the north-eastern part of the island, and Dublin. Shipping, linen, food, drink, brewing and distilling were the products of industry.

Outside Dublin, manufacturing was directed at the home market, in areas such as railway engineering, construction, printing and flour milling. From around 1850 small, craft-based manufacture lost out, as observed by Tom Kelly walking around the Francis Street area of Dublin in 1909: "Today they are nearly all gone... Boot-making, brogue-making, clay pipe-making, tobacco and snuff manufacture, the making of hair cloth and curled hair, tabinet [a type of silk] and poplin weaving, hosiery and sock weaving, velvet making, nail-making, soap-boiling, whip-making..."

"I looked through last year's Directory to see what it had to tell, and this is what I found: In Francis Street 60 of the houses are marked tenements and 14



Harland & Wolff employed almost 9,500 people between 1907 and 1912, when the Titanic was completed. GETTY IMAGES

ruins. In the Directories of 60 and 50 years ago, industries predominated in this area – today it is tenements."

Mechanisation accounts for some of the decline but globalisation was also a significant factor. Faster transport enabled products like American and Canadian grain, Argentine beef, Australian mutton, and New Zealand butter to be sold abroad.

In 1907 Belfast was Ireland's major industrial city accounting for two-thirds of exports. Its population grew from 100,000 in 1851 to 400,000 in 1914.

Founded in 1861, the Harland and Wolff shipyard – the largest in the world – employed almost 9,500 people between 1907 and 1912, when the Titanic was completed. The linen industry was also mainly northern-based. From the late 1700s to 1914 it was Ireland's premier industry and primary industrial export. In 1907, it employed 71,761. Food production included bacon

curing, grain-milling and biscuits. There were about six biscuit factories in the country, where up to 9,500 people were employed. Jacob's in Dublin was by far the largest, employing more than 3,000 in 1907.

The output from brewing trebled between the 1850s and 1914, of which about 40% went abroad. Guinness was the largest brewery in the world by 1914 and accounted for about two-thirds of all Irish output. The combined output of Cork-based Murphy's, and Beamish and Crawford, was only one-eighth of Guinness. More than 20 other breweries supplied mainly to local markets.

In October 1915, a newspaper article headlined: 'A New Industry for Dublin', announced "a new and important industry for Dublin. Messrs Pigott and Co, of Grafton street... have informed the Gaelic League that their firm is about to establish a piano-making industry in Dublin. The war has stopped the importation of pianos from Germany."

MONEY TALK: POUNDS, SHILLINGS, FARTHINGS AND HALF-CROWNS...

THE Irish pound was abolished in 1826 and replaced with sterling (symbolised by £.s.d, pounds, shillings, pence). The £ derived from the first letter of libra, the Latin for pound weight, as 240 coins could be minted from a pound of silver. The s. and d. also have Latin origins – s from solidus, and d from denarius, both Roman coins.

One pound was divided into

20 shillings, and each shilling into 12 pence, making 240 pence to the pound. Coins in circulation were: farthing (quarter penny); halfpenny; penny; threepence, sixpence, shilling, florin (two shillings), half-crown (2s 6d) and ten shillings.

They were written as a mixed sum, such as 3s.6d, or 3/6 (three shillings and six pence), and spoken as "three

and six". In slang, a pound was called a quid, a shilling was called a bob, thrupence or thrupenny bit (3d), and a tanner (6d).

The Free State government tasked a committee, headed by WB Yeats, to design new coins which featured animals, such as a hare (3d), wolfhound (6d) and horse (half-crown), and were introduced in 1928.