THOMAS MacDONAGH

Charm offensive

Thomas MacDonagh's intense political nationalism was the backdrop to him leading 150 men to seize the Jacob's biscuit factory in 1916, writes Catherine Wilson.

“I know this is a lazy job, but you’re doing your duty — I do not hold this against you.”

These are the words of the poet-patriot Thomas MacDonagh standing before the nervous firing squad tasked with his execution. During that tense moment, the 12 young Sherwood Foresters may well have reminded him of his own students at St Enda’s or UCD. In a final display of characteristic generosity, the revolutionary leader offered them his cigarettes. Those last moments lay testament not only to the strength of character recalled by those who knew him, but also to his great ability to connect with people as a friend, leader, teacher, poet or playwright.

Ireland was closely linked to the next generation of Irish men and women, who would keep revolutionary ideals alive. In this poem, Thomas MacDonagh commemorates the birth of his son by meditating on his own hopes for the future. This vision is dominated by love, which both binds father and child together and shapes how human meaning is created here.

MacDonagh wishes that his son be ‘good and free’, linking morality with ambition. Here, as elsewhere in his work, he reveals the tension between individual and collective viewpoints — a tension which fundamentally shapes how freedom itself can be understood. Idealism lies at the heart of this poem, but it is a different kind of idealism to that contemplated by Pearse or Plunkett. Though MacDonagh invokes the ‘martyr’s blood’, he recognises that violent enmity is at odds with religious feeling. He chooses instead to highlight the role of redemption; the long and patient quest for lasting freedom. The poem moves from larger, abstract aims, to the simplest of wishes for the child: that he will grow naturally in ‘courage, innocence and truth’.

SNAPSHOT

THOMAS MacDONAGH

Born: 1 February 1878, Cloughjordan, Co Tipperary
Educated: Rockwell College
Affiliation: Irish Volunteers, IRB
Career: Teacher, St Enda’s; lecturer, UCD
Died: 3 May 1916, Kilmainham Jail

MacDonagh played an important role in the Howth gun-running during which rifles and ammunition were smuggled in from Germany. Making their way back from Howth, the Volunteers were apprehended at Fairview by the British Army and the Dublin Metropolitan Police. Though a brief scuffle broke out, the leaders managed to prevent the standoff from escalating. While Figgis and the ever-talkative MacDonagh engaged the assistant commissioner of the DMP — William Vesey Harrell — in a prolonged argument, Hobson dispersed the volunteers.

March 1915 saw MacDonagh sworn into the Irish Republican Brotherhood and appointed Commandant of the 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade. However, it wasn’t until April 1916 that he became the seventh member of the Military Council, which had been established the previous year and included Pearse, Plunkett, Éamon de Valera, Sean MacDiarmada, Thomas Clarke and James Connolly.

MacDonagh was Director of Equipment but was not informed about the plans for the rising until just before Easter week. In the week leading up to the Rising, MacDonagh played an important role as intermediary between the Council and his colleague at UCD, Eoin MacNeill, who was opposed to the Volunteers engaging in offensive force. Once MacNeill was made aware of the plans for a rising, MacDonagh was tasked with persuading him to pledge his support. Believing that a British attack was imminent and that a German ship would soon deliver arms in Kerry, MacNeill briefly backed the insurrection. However, the interception of the ship by the British Navy prompted him to issue a countermanding order on the eve of Easter Sunday. That same day the leaders convened and planned a Monday rising instead. In an effort to divert attention from the revised plan, MacDonagh visited MacNeill at home to deliver Pearse's
confirmation of the countermand. That would be the last time MacNeill would see his friend.

At noon on Easter Monday the 2nd Battalion of the Dublin Brigade convened at St Stephen’s Green Park where they were joined by members of Cumann na mBan and Na Fianna Eireann. The last minute arrival of Major John MacBride meant that Michael O’Hanrahan was replaced as second-in-command owing to MacBride’s superior military experience. MacDonagh found that he had 150 men at his disposal, fewer than half of what he could have expected had the Rising taken place the previous day as planned. This meant that he would have to forgo plans to take Trinity College and concentrate efforts on seizing Jacob’s Factory and establishing outposts in the area. The strategic importance of the factory lay in its proximity to Dublin Castle and to Richmond and Portobello Barracks. The position allowed the volunteers to hinder British access to the city from the South.

Relative to the fighting that took place at the GPO and the Four Courts, however, they saw little action. Heavily fortified, with snipers positioned in the towers relentlessly harassing the British forces, Jacob’s Factory was a difficult target for an all-out attack. The disruption brought angry civilian mobs to the gates of the factory. The garrison prompting MacDonagh to order rebels to fire blanks to disperse the crowd. As a leader he was reported to have been indecisive and confusing in his orders. Nevertheless, his sense of humour and good nature helped to reassure the volunteers as they waited in anticipation of British attack. During the week the brigade ambushed 30 British soldiers, a plain-clothes DMP officer reporting on activities at the factory was shot, and six others captured. At Davy’s pub an opportunity to attack a troop of British soldiers was lost, precipitating the fall of the outpost. Initially, MacDonagh opposed Pearse’s order to surrender until he confirmed the legitimacy of the order with Ceannt. On April 30 he accepted surrender and ordered his brigade to stand down. The first of the leaders to be tried and executed, the British officer-in-command remarked: “They all died nobly, but MacDonagh died like a prince.”

In the week leading up to the Rising, MacDonagh played an important role as intermediary between the Council and his colleague at UCD, Eoin MacNeill, who was opposed to the Volunteers engaging in physical force. MacBride assumed a leading role. Nevertheless, his sense of humour and good nature helped to reassure the volunteers as they waited in anticipation of British attack. During the week the brigade ambushed 30 British soldiers, a plain-clothes DMP officer reporting on activities at the factory was shot, and six others captured. At Davy’s pub an opportunity to attack a troop of British soldiers was lost, precipitating the fall of the outpost. Initially, MacDonagh opposed Pearse’s order to surrender until he confirmed the legitimacy of the order with Ceannt. On April 30 he accepted surrender and ordered his brigade to stand down. The first of the leaders to be tried and executed, the British officer-in-command remarked: “They all died nobly, but MacDonagh died like a prince.”

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