

Plunkett, Count George Noble

by D. R. O'Connor Lysaght

Plunkett, Count George Noble (1851–1948), scholar and revolutionary, was born 3 December 1851 at 1 Aungier Street, Dublin, the youngest and only survivor from infancy of the three children of Patrick Joseph Plunkett (1817–1918), builder and politician, and his wife, Elizabeth, née Noble. The Plunketts were catholic, claiming collateral descent from Archbishop Oliver Plunkett (qv), and nationalist: the two drummers from the republican army at Vinegar Hill in 1798 visited George's cradle.

Plunkett was educated expensively: at a primary school in Nice, making him fluent in French and Italian, then at Mount Street, Clongowes Wood College, and, from 1872, at Dublin University, where his generous allowance let him study renaissance and medieval art; he enrolled at King's Inns in 1870 and the Middle Temple in 1874, but was not called to the bar until 1886. While there he befriended Oscar Wilde (qv) and Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa (qv). In 1877 he endowed a university gold medal for Irish speakers and published a book of poems, *God's chosen festival*, and the following year he issued a pamphlet, *The early life of Henry Grattan*. He also wrote articles for magazines, editing a short-lived one, *Hibernia*, for eighteen months from 1882. In 1883 he donated funds and property to the nursing order of the Little Company of Mary (Blue Sisters), and on 4 April 1884 Pope Leo XIII made him a count.

On 26 June 1884 Plunkett married Mary Josephine Cranny (1858–1944). The couple had seven children: Philomena (Mimi) (b. 1886), Joseph Mary (qv) (b. 1887), Mary Josephine (Moya) (b. 1889), Geraldine (b. 1891), George Oliver (qv) (b. 1894), Fiona (b. 1896), and Eoin (Jack) (b. 1897).

Plunkett surprised many in 1890 by declaring for Charles Stewart Parnell (qv) against the catholic hierarchy. In the 1892 general election he was Parnellite candidate for Mid-Tyrone but withdrew from a potential three-cornered fight lest he let in the unionist. He was sole nationalist candidate for Dublin (St Stephen's Green) in the 1895 general election, and at an 1898 by-election there he cut the unionist majority to 138 votes; the reunited Irish Party won the seat in 1900.

In 1894 Plunkett had part-edited Charles O'Kelly's (qv) memoir *The Jacobite war in Ireland*. By 1900, when he published the standard biography *Sandro Botticelli*, he was supplementing his income by renewed artistic studies, which until 1923 financed his lease of Kiltarnan Abbey, Co. Dublin. His *Pinelli* (1908) was followed by *Architecture of Dublin*, and, in 1911, by his revised edition of Margaret McNair Stokes's (qv) *Early Christian art in Ireland*. In 1907 he became director of the National Museum of Ireland, where he increased annual visits from 100 to 3,000.

Joseph Plunkett swore his father into the IRB in April 1916, sending him secretly to seek German aid and a papal blessing for the projected Easter rising. After its defeat, Plunkett was sacked by the NMI and deported with the countess to Oxford, and the following January he was expelled by the Royal Dublin Society. This earned him nomination as the surviving rebels' candidate in the Roscommon North by-election: he returned to Ireland illegally on 31 January 1917 and won the seat easily three days later. Pledging abstention from attendance at Westminster in accordance with Sinn Féin policy, he initiated a Republican Liberty League, which coalesced with similar groups such as Sinn Féin. In October this front became the new Sinn Féin, committed to Plunkett's republic rather than to the 'king, lords and commons' of Arthur Griffith (qv). Plunkett and Griffith became the new party's vice-presidents, under Éamon de Valera (qv).

On 18 May 1918 Plunkett was interned again. Released after Sinn Féin's general election landslide (in which he was returned unopposed), he presided, Sinn Féin's oldest MP, at the planning meeting for Dáil Éireann on 17 January 1919 and at its opening session on 21 January. On the 22nd he was made foreign affairs minister by Cathal Brugha (qv), an appointment reaffirmed by de Valera on 10 April. Plunkett criticised his president for advocating a continuing Irish external relationship with Britain, and failed to organise an Irish foreign service. In February 1921 de Valera made Robert Brennan (qv) his departmental secretary and a ministry took shape, while Plunkett published a book of poems, *Ariel*. After uncontested 'southern Irish' elections to the second dáil, de Valera moved his implacable foreign minister from the cabinet to a tailor-made portfolio of fine arts. Plunkett's Dante sexcentenary commemoration was overshadowed by news of the Anglo-Irish treaty. Opposing this, Plunkett cited his oath to the republic and its martyrs including his son. He left his ministry on 9 January 1922.

Plunkett chaired the anti-treaty Cumann na Poblachta, which lost the June general election, though he was returned again unopposed. In the civil war the treatyites interned him and the republicans appointed him to their council of state. In the August 1923 general election, his first electoral contest since 1917, the interned count topped the poll in Co. Roscommon. He was released in December.

When de Valera formed Fianna Fáil in 1926, Plunkett stayed with Sinn Féin, and lost his deposit in the June 1927 general election. A year later he published his last poetry collection, *Eros*. He ran for a new Cumann Poblachta na hÉireann in a Co. Galway by-election in 1936, but lost his deposit again. On 8 December 1938, with the other six surviving abstentionist second dáil TDs, he transferred republican sovereignty to the IRA army council.

Plunkett was a big man with a black beard which whitened steadily after his fiftieth birthday. He was always formally pleasant and courteous. His oratory was described by M. J. MacManus (qv) as 'level, cultured tones . . . [more] used to addressing the members of a learned society than to the rough and tumble of the hustings' (*Irish*

Press, 15 Mar. 1948). Theoretically and practically, he was more scholar than politician. His portrait is on display at the RSAI.

He died from cancer on 12 March 1948 and was buried in Glasnevin cemetery, survived by his children Geraldine (wife of Thomas Dillon (qv)), Fiona, and Jack. His grandson Joseph (1928–66), son of George Oliver Plunkett (d. 1944), inherited the title.

Freeman's Journal, 27 June 1884; Whitaker, *Almanac*, 1893–9; Dáil Éireann, *Minutes of proceedings* (1919–21) and *Official reports* (1921–2); *Irish Independent*, 10 June 1927; *Wolfe Tone Weekly*, 17 Dec. 1938; *Irish Press*, 7 Mar. 1944; obituaries, *Irish Press* and *Irish Independent*, 13 Mar. 1948; Labhrás Breatnach, *An Pluintheadach* (1971); Desmond Murphy, *Derry, Donegal and modern Ulster, 1790–1921* (1981); Moira Laffan, *Count Plunkett and his times* (1992); Arthur Mitchell, *Revolutionary government in Ireland* (1993); Ronan Fanning et al (ed.), *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, i (1998); Kenneth Ferguson, *King's Inns barristers 1868–2004* (2005); private information