



The O'Rahilly (left) and his burnt-out De Dion Bouton in the aftermath of the Rising. Right: Leanne Blaney



## THE O'RAHILLY

# A true driving force

Leanne Blaney on the wealthy Kerryman who 'wound the clock' on the Rising and heard it strike

**W**RITING to his teenage son in 1893, Richard Rahilly, a prosperous Kerry businessman urged him to remember that 'it is only those who do, and are determined to do, all they can, in whatever position in life they are placed, that will succeed in that position or rise out of the bulk'. Few could have imagined how those words would resonate with the actions of his son Michael Joseph during Easter week 1916.

As the third child and only son born to Richard and his wife Ellen (née Mangan), Michael had enjoyed a privileged childhood and education. After completing his studies at Clongowes Wood, he enrolled to study medicine at UCD in 1894. However a bout of tuberculosis and the sudden death of his father in 1896 meant that he abandoned his studies and returned home to Ballylongford, to take over running the family business.

Enraptured by a young Irish-American heiress named Nancy Brown, whom he had first met during the summer of 1893, Michael, a keen writer, would maintain regular correspondence with her until news arrived in 1898 that she was engaged to be married. Determined to prevent the nuptials, Michael sold the family business and travelled to America, where he presented Nancy with a £100 diamond ring and convinced her to marry him. The union was a happy one, albeit marred by the death of their eldest child, Robert, aged 3.

A financial settlement provided the family with an enviable yearly income of £450, enabling him to live like a 'licensed loafer'. He and Nancy, along with their remaining children, travelled extensively, before settling in Ballsbridge in 1909. Having lived in Philadelphia for five years, where motor transport was plentiful, Michael was eager to purchase a new car on his return to Ireland. By 1910 he had persuaded his sister Anna Humphries and her family to jointly purchase a green four-seater De Dion Bouton motorcar. Though initially a rather poor driver, who infamously crashed into the Chapelizod gate in Phoenix Park, over the next six years both Michael and the car would contribute greatly to the cause by transporting various nationalists (as well as smuggled arms and ammunition), throughout Ireland.

Michael's interest in nationalism had been sparked as a child thanks to a love of Irish and local history. In adulthood, his nationalist beliefs gained momentum. By 1904 he was regularly contributing articles to Arthur Griffith's nationalist

newspaper, *United Irishman*. While abroad, he retained his interest in nationalism and often saved clippings from the Philadelphia press describing developments within Irish nationalist circles, such as the foundation of Arthur Griffith's political party, Sinn Féin, in 1905. Unsurprisingly, when he returned to Ireland, Michael quickly became an active member, subscribing £100 and working as a journalist for its short-lived daily newspaper, *Sinn Féin*. In October 1910, having joined the party executive, he orchestrated opposition campaigns ahead of the 1911 royal visit by when 'The O'Rahilly' (as he was now styled) was arguably Ireland's most famous Sinn Féin activist, second only to Griffith.

His involvement with the Gaelic League, initiated due to his passion for the language, was solidified when he was elected to its executive committee in 1912. O'Rahilly relished devising schemes aimed at raising the Gaelic League's profile amongst the wider Irish public. As Patrick Maume noted in his *Dictionary of Irish Biography* entry on O'Rahilly, this included organising the translation of Dublin street names into Irish and campaigns to coerce the post office to accept post addressed in Irish. Utilising his flair for journalism as well as his address book, O'Rahilly revamped the Gaelic League's official paper *An Claidreamh Soluis* in 1913 and began publishing regular contributions from Eoin MacNeill and Patrick Pearse.

Convinced that Britain would not relinquish control of Ireland until

compelled to do so by physical force, O'Rahilly encouraged and supported the formation of the Irish Volunteers in November 1913. As its treasurer, O'Rahilly played a key role in recruiting men and gathering arms for the militia. Owing to his personal opposition to secret societies, O'Rahilly never belonged to the Irish Republican Brotherhood and was ignorant of the planned uprising until Good Friday.

Keen to avoid bloodshed, O'Rahilly took orders from MacNeill to deliver his countermand to Irish Volunteer factions preparing for the Rising in Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary on the Saturday night. Due to illness, O'Rahilly chose to travel by taxi rather than in his own car. When he returned to Dublin on the Sunday and learned that the Rising was now due to begin on Easter Monday, O'Rahilly chose to participate declaring, "Well I've helped to wind up the clock – I might as well hear it strike!"

Having fought in the GPO, O'Rahilly was fatally shot by a British machine gun on Thursday 27 April when leading a charge against a military barricade on Moore Street. Retreating to a doorway on Moore Lane, he scribbled one final letter to his wife, pronouncing the Rising 'a good fight', before dying of dehydration and blood loss on Friday 28 April.

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