

# The North Began

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In one (narrow) sense the Irish Revolution began when Eoin MacNeill wrote 'The North Began'. His article, published in *An Claidheamh Soluis* on 1 November 1913, triggered the foundation of the Irish Volunteers and precipitated the militarisation of nationalist Ireland.

Until then he had been known as a distinguished historian, as the professor of Early Irish History in UCD, and as a joint founder and a vice-president of the Gaelic League. He supported the demand for Home Rule. Like many Irish nationalists he was concerned when the Ulster unionists resorted to arms and threatened rebellion if the Liberal government implemented its plans for a devolved parliament in Ireland. But he also saw their challenge to London as an opportunity that nationalists should seize, and in this respect (if in few others) he shared the views of radicals who wanted to stage an insurrection against British rule.

By undermining constitutional nationalism the Ulster Volunteer Force strengthened its rivals who believed in extreme aims and methods. Tom Clarke, Sean MacDermott and Bulmer Hobson were busily reviving the Irish Republican Brotherhood, which had been moribund for many years. Several of its members were impressed by the ability of the Ulster unionists to form a paramilitary force and to defy the government. They wanted to establish a similar body, but they realized that it should be associated with 'respectable' or 'establishment' figures. Only then could it appeal to moderates who would be horrified by any links with the IRB. MacNeill would be a perfect front man.

*An Claidheamh Soluis* invited him to submit a lengthy article on a general or a national topic, and he chose to write about his native province. His article opened with the words 'a wonderful state of things has come to pass in Ulster', and he admired the Ulster Volunteers as a union of different elements – Orange industrial workers (largely Church of Ireland), the Presbyterian rural community, and remnants of the feudal aristocracy. The unionists' intention was to block Home Rule, but MacNeill dismissed this as unimportant. What mattered, he wrote, 'is *by whom* Ireland is held', and Irish people were now taking the initiative by defying their British rulers. If one group could assert its rights in arms, another could do likewise; where the four unionist counties of North-

East Ulster had led, the remaining twenty-eight nationalist counties (including Fermanagh and Tyrone) could follow.

Hobson used the publication of this article as the occasion for taking action – although it is almost certain that, if necessary, the IRB would have found another pretext. MacNeill was persuaded to chair a committee that would begin implementing his idea of a nationalist Volunteer Force. Such a body could be – and as things turned out, would be – influenced and manipulated by the IRB. It could be used for purposes different from MacNeill's moderate objectives of reviving national sentiment and self-confidence and of overcoming the threat to Home Rule.

Things moved quickly, and within a month he presided over the formation of an Irish Volunteer force, modelled on its Ulster counterpart but with diametrically opposed objectives. Hitherto a desk-bound scholar, he became the leader of a movement that grew rapidly in numbers and enthusiasm after the shocks of the Larne gun-running and the Curragh mutiny. It may be significant that until November 1913 the British government took no action to prevent the activities of the Ulster Volunteers, even though they had threatened rebellion, and it was only after the formation of a rival nationalist force that it banned the importation of arms to Ireland.

The Irish Volunteers split in September 1914 when John Redmond encouraged them to enlist in the British army, and only a small minority remained faithful to MacNeill and the other founding members. He distrusted several of his colleagues who, he suspected quite accurately, had different aims from his own. He even anticipated – and rejected – the sort of blood sacrifice that took place in Easter Week. In the end he was deceived and outmanoeuvred. Many Volunteers under his nominal command were used by elements in the IRB to stage a rebellion. He was dismayed when he learned of these plans and did his best to stop the rising from taking place – without, of course, informing the British authorities.

'The North Began' is important because it precipitated the formation of the Irish Volunteers. But it is also significant in another respect. Although MacNeill came from Antrim, he completely underestimated the depth of many Ulster Protestants' hostility to

Catholicism and to Irish nationalism. He wrote that 'history shows and observation confirms that the Orange democracy and the Presbyterian rural party are home rulers in principle and essence'. His argument that no part of Ireland should interfere with the liberty of any other part might seem to signify his acquiescence in partition, but elsewhere in the article he dismissed the prospect. He believed it would be impossible to separate St Patrick's city, or his tomb and those of Brigid and Columba, from the rest of Ireland. Dead saints mattered more, or were more real, than living unionists.

He shared this blindness with most members of the Home Rule party and with its various Sinn Féin successors. P. H. Pearse also applauded the formation of the Ulster Volunteers, welcoming the prospect of rule by Edward Carson rather than by the mild and progressive Liberal government. MacNeill's preference for abstractions (the geographical unit of the island, or the image of the noble Ulster Protestant who was duped by the British but was a home ruler at heart) was representative of most Irish nationalists, at the time and for long afterwards. In reality, what he described as 'the most decisive move towards Irish autonomy that has been made since O'Connell invented constitutional agitation' was a movement that consolidated partition. He was naïve, both in his wishful image of the Ulster Volunteers and in his failure to prevent the Irish Volunteers he had inspired and led from being used in 1916 for purposes that he deplored. He should have stuck to writing history.