

Eoin MacNeill the Historian

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'Neither apathy nor antipathy can ever bring out the truth of history'

(Eoin MacNeill, Phases of Irish History)

In 1909 Eoin MacNeill was appointed as the first professor to the Chair of Early (including Medieval) Irish History in University College, Dublin. No scholar more richly deserved this honour. MacNeill had shone the light of academic enquiry upon the earliest centuries of Irish history, cutting through thick mists of Celtic Twilight. Yet, MacNeill's scholarly career, a career which was foundational for the field of early Irish history, has been overshadowed by his political activities. For many, his very name conjures up images of advance nationalism—of 1916 and all that. These images are inextricably part of MacNeill's life; however, his scholarship is just as important. Moreover, it is arguable that his legacy as a historian is what ultimately defines him.

There can be no doubt that MacNeill's background in the Gaelic revival spurred his historical interests. These were generously nurtured by his political commitment to an independent Ireland. For MacNeill this independence was historicist, originating in the ancient past of the Irish nation and grounded through centuries of institutional evolution. However, MacNeill was no mere propagandist; his instincts as a scholar frequently trumped political exigency, leading him to reject the notions of antiquarians who, fed on an overly rich diet of myth and legend, traced the genesis of the Irish back to the beginning of time. These instincts inspired him to acquire those skills that are now expected of all early Irish historians, ones grounded in rigorous empirical training. Thus, while MacNeill had no formal degree in history he served an exhaustive apprenticeship, working with the likes of Fr Edmund Hogan S.J., mastering medieval Irish and palaeography. His linguistic competence was such that, although not a trained linguist, he was comfortable working in all periods of the Irish language. This gave him the key to unlocking the formidable number of sources which have survived from Gaelic Ireland.

Eoin MacNeill was a pioneer. History, as an academic discipline, was in its infancy. To put things in perspective, MacNeill was born in 1867. Leopold von Ranke, regarded by many as the first recognisably professional historian in the modern sense, died in 1886. The Rankean revolution, which emphasized the importance of primary sources and the

absolute centrality of archival research, was not even a generation old when MacNeill embarked on his scholarly journey. MacNeill, by the standards of his day, was remarkably cutting-edge, using empirical techniques and applying perspectives that were grounded in historical best practice. Even more remarkably, much of his multi-faceted work remains of value. MacNeill contributed enormously to our understandings of early Irish institutions, politics, genealogies and ideologies. His analysis of *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, popularly known as *The Book of Invasions*, is one representative example. MacNeill separated out history from fiction, recognizing the text for what it is, a complex evolving pseudo-history that tells far more about its writers and compilers than it does about the eras which it purports to describe. MacNeill, unlike the antiquarians of former generations, no longer located the Irish past in Biblical history. Instead, he situated it, as far as possible, within historical and archaeological realities. In some respects, of course, his analysis is dated. He gave far too much credence to the supposed historicity of the Ulster Cycle of tales. It is possible that his own background as an Ulster Catholic played a role here. His work on St Patrick had a confessional hue and failed to distinguish the legendary saint from the real man, something typical of the time. However, it is important to understand the limitations that MacNeill faced. Few Irish manuscripts had been satisfactorily edited. Moreover, Irish archaeology, like history, was only beginning to struggle towards professional legitimacy. MacNeill simply did not have the resources which contemporary scholars take for granted. Indeed, he was responsible for creating some of them: his indispensable work on Irish population groups is a case in point.

Taken in isolation, MacNeill's scholarly writings could be criticized for exhibiting political bias. His emphasis on the ancient credentials of the Irish state is clearly anachronistic; he seems concerned to prove that the Irish deserve freedom from Britain because of their achievements in the past. However, it must be remembered that MacNeill was frequently responding to a disparaging rhetoric which explicitly portrayed the early Irish as savage and nomadic. This was a deeply colonialist discourse, heavy with racist overtones. According to the famous historian Goddard Henry Orpen, for instance, the civilized Anglo-Normans brought salvation to the barbaric Irish who had proven incapable of governing themselves. The early Irish past proved fraught for scholars, precisely because the Irish had ruled the island during this period. It was an inevitable magnet for politicization. MacNeill, in fact, is remarkably restrained

compared to some of his contemporaries. He rightly emphasized that the study of history had to be free from nationalist assumptions and the evils of racial essentialism. His dictum that there was no such thing as an Irish race bears repeating to this day; it contrasts with the unthinking racism characteristic of much writing before the Second World War.

MacNeill's achievements as a scholar were manifold. He firmly established early Irish history as a discipline. Moreover, he expended what political capital he had, both as Minister for Education, and as an academic, to help ensure its future. Of particular note was the foundation of the Irish Manuscripts Commission in 1928, for which he was largely responsible. Since its inception the Commission has been active in making Irish primary sources available through scholarly editions and, more recently, in digital format. MacNeill's commitment to the primary source has no more fitting legacy. Moreover, MacNeill was passionately devoted to bringing history to the wider public. Books such as *Phases of Irish History* (1919) and *Celtic Ireland* (1921) are still worth reading. Elegantly written and analytical, they gave the Irish public a taste for a history sharply distinguished from misguided mythologies. Throughout his career Eoin MacNeill dragged early Irish history into the mainstream, eschewing antiquarianism, exoticism and romanticism. Above all, he gave the past a present.