Eoin MacNeill: Scholar and Revivalist

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In his letter in *Féil-sgríbhinn Eoin Mhic Néill* on 14 October 1938, Douglas Hyde simply but generously described Eoin MacNeill’s contribution to Irish cultural life and scholarship:

You were the historian who shed the most light on the old state of this country, you were the adviser whose advice on Gaelic League affairs was never without benefit, you were the worker who worked night and day for this country, and today you are one of the world’s great scholars.

(Ba thú an stairidhe is mó leig an solus isteach ar shean-stáid na tire seo, ba tú an cómhairleóir nach raibh a chómhairle i gcúrsaí Connartha na Gaedhilge riamh gan tairbhe, ba tú an t-oibhrighteóir d’oibrigh de ló agus d’oidhche ar son na tire seo, agus indiú tá tú ar mhór-sgoiláiribh an Domhain).

Hyde addresses MacNeill as both friend of the Irish people, (‘a chara na nGaedheal’), and as faithful master, (‘a Mhaighistir dhílis’), and signed the letter ‘your old friend’ (‘do shean-chara’). The friendship, mutual respect, and shared scholarly interests of Hyde and MacNeill are indicative of what formed the basis for much of the scholarly ideology which prevailed in the Revival period, particularly in the early years of the twentieth century. This letter was penned shortly after Hyde’s inauguration as President of Ireland, and his reference to MacNeill’s work for ‘our people’ (‘ár ndaoine’), indicates his recognition of the part MacNeill played in reaching that significant milestone in Irish history. The content of the *Féil-sgríbhinn* is testament to the esteem in which MacNeill was held with contributions from over fifty world renowned scholars in areas ranging from Celtic languages, Archaeology and Pre History, Early and Medieval Irish History, Folklore, and a significant number of Genealogical Tables, with articles covering many languages.

MacNeill’s publications are listed, but there is very little reference, if any, to his journalistic exploits as an editor of scholarly journals and as a journalistic writer. To some extent this is understood by  Hyde’s acknowledgement of MacNeill’s quest for the truth, and his incessant pursuit of bringing districts in Ireland, which had remained in the darkness of subservience and poverty for too long, into the light:
You never stopped working for the language and you did more than anyone else to show light on the dark places which were plentiful in the history of the island. You were usually in the pursuit of truth, and you didn’t allow anything, good or bad, to stand between you and it.

(Níor staon tú d’obair ar son na teangan agus do rinne tú níos mó ná aon duine eile chum solais do leigean ar na h-áiteachaibh dorcha do bhí go flúirseach i stair an oileáin. Ar tóir na fhirinne do bhí tú de ghnáth, agus ní thug tú cead do aon rud, olc nó maith, seasamh eadrad agus í.)

This quest for shedding light on many ‘dark places’ in Ireland influenced MacNeill in his work on language revival, seeking to bring the impoverished Irish-speaking districts into the light of the twentieth century. Hyde’s retrospective acknowledgement of MacNeill’s work is a reminder of the initial interaction between them which was the result of their joint vision for the Gaelic Revival Movement. Part of the speech which Hyde delivered to the New York Cumann na Gaeilge on 16 June 1891 reached the Irish papers and, after reading these, MacNeill was moved to start thinking of ways he could support the Irish language and what it stood for. This prompted him to write an article entitled ‘Why and How the Irish Language is to be preserved’ in the Irish Ecclesiastical Record in December 1891. This is basically a treatise on his vision for the progression of the Language Movement with some practical recommendations for same. He compares the energetic advancement of Irish language among the Irish in America, Australia and England to that of the Irish at home who ‘seem to lie under a spell of impenetrable apathy.’

Father Eoghan O’Growth then asked MacNeill to write a more defined article on ways in which Irish language could be preserved and revived, which was published in Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge / The Gaelic Journal in March 1892. An Irish and English version was published, entitled ‘Toghairm agus Gleus Oibre chum Gluasachta na Gaedhilge do chur ar aghaidh I nÉirinn’ / ‘A Plea and a Plan for the Extension of the Movement to Preserve and Spread the Gaelic Language in Ireland’. This thirteen point article stated that ‘No language has ever been kept alive by mere book-teaching. ... The language cannot live at all that does not live in the homes of the people. ... Whatever is worth doing is worth doing speedily.’
As a result of the response to MacNeill’s article, and to Hyde’s speech, ‘The Necessity for De-anglicising Ireland’, from the literary elite of Ireland and others at the time, it was clear that it was the right time to form a progressive organisation for Irish language revival. This fusion of minds, energy, and action was to be the catalyst which enabled the vision to become a reality. Acting on the correspondence that the article generated, both J.H. Lloyd and MacNeill took it upon themselves to contact a number of prominent people whom it was deemed, might be interested in founding such a movement. When this group came together on 31 July 1893, the foundation of Conradh na Gaeilge / the Gaelic League ensued with MacNeill as honorary secretary. Furthermore, following MacNeill’s earlier criticism in the article in the Ecclesiastical Record, of the failure of the Irish at home to ‘decently support a quarterly journal devoted to the culture of Irish’, he was now provided with a forum to address this issue. When the Gaelic League took over Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge / The Gaelic Journal he took on the role of editor from September 1894 to 1899, ensuring the smooth transition of the management of the journal to that of the Gaelic League. Subsequently he also took responsibility on a voluntary basis, for the first editorship of the League’s first Irish language newspaper, An Claidheamh Soluis from March 1899 to September 1901.

In his editorials in An Claidheamh Soluis, MacNeill often wrote about his belief in the role that the Gaelic League had to play, not only in cultural and language revival, but in economic survival. To demonstrate this he sometimes used examples of material prosperity in other countries where language revival had taken place, mentioning Greece, Finland, Bohemia, Hungary, and East Prussia among the examples where this was evident. These claims seemed to be based more on speculation than on any hard evidence and more than anything else, are testament perhaps, to the loose journalistic practice which formed the basis for much of the propaganda of the Gaelic League. The significance of his journalistic exploits have however borne the test of time with his famous article ‘The North Began’in An Claidheamh Soluis on 1 November 1913. It would be a pity however if MacNeill’s journalistic legacy were based on that one article alone as he clearly had an aptitude for delivering the messages of the Revival. In an editorial in An Claidheamh Soluis on 31 March 1900, he acknowledges the role of the Gaelic League as one of many movements actively engaged in the promotion of the understanding of nationality. In doing so, he perhaps sums up his own
role as editor of its organ, as being necessary, but only as part of a greater ideal and belief system, a belief system which was apparently still firmly rooted in the Catholic church which he claimed in 1891, would be responsible for the saving of the language. While some individuals of the ‘Catholic priesthood’ he referred to at that time, did play significant roles, the Church was also only a ‘cog wheel in the great machine’, and not always an active one where Irish language revival was concerned, highlighting the need for masters and leaders like MacNeill and his contemporaries:

The League, unlike other organisations has never claimed for itself that it is the sole depository of ‘Nationality’; its position is that it is a big and necessary cog wheel in the great machine. No people are more conscious than we, that when all of us speak Irish, bread will still remain the staff of life and that the Irish speaking children of the future will be born in original sin.

The attributes which MacNeill brought to his scholarship were enhanced significantly as a result of this innate quest for truth, and his role in a cultural revival movement which owes much of its success to his endeavours and integrity in collaborating with others in an emerging scholarly environment within the new National University of Ireland. As a modern twentieth-century scholar his contribution surpasses many boundaries, boundaries which he, more than many of his contemporaries understood, and may well have fashioned his scholarly approach and subsequent results. As Hyde’s letter demonstrates he was always the friend but remained the master.