

**Letter from Michael
Joseph (The)
O'Rahilly,
13 February 1914**

O'Rahilly Papers,
UCD Archives, IE UCDA P102/300

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O’Rahilly and An Claidheamh Soluis

This month’s ‘from the archives’ document is perhaps unassuming at first glance. On the surface, it is a letter about the routine commercial considerations faced by a newspaper manager in early 1914 Ireland. However, the significance of this letter is that it represents a rare glimpse into an important chapter in the history of Irish radical print journalism before the revolution. Its author, Michael Joseph O’Rahilly, better known as ‘The O’Rahilly’, played a leading role in two organisations in this period – the Gaelic League and the Irish Volunteers – radicalising the former and helping to found the latter. Here we see him acting as temporary manager of the Gaelic League’s official newspaper, *An Claidheamh Soluis* (the Sword of Light), a bilingual weekly.

Ireland had a flourishing newspaper industry at the turn of the last century and, as historian Michael Wheatley has observed, virtually anyone in Ireland could set up a paper if they had an opinion and a few hundred pounds of start-up capital to back it up. The scale of this printing boom is underlined by D George Boyce, who pointed out that the number of newspapers in Ireland increased from 109 to 230 between 1853 and 1913.

O’Rahilly was tasked with taking over the management of the paper at the 1913 árd-fheis of the Gaelic League in an attempt to revamp it. From 1 November 1913 onwards, *An Claidheamh Soluis* adopted a radically different format in an effort to revive the fortunes of a paper that had begun to suffer from poor management, declining sales, and a low uptake by advertisers in a crowded and competitive radical newspaper market.

An article by The O’Rahilly in the paper on 13 September 1913 outlined his vision for a new format for *An Claidheamh Soluis*. Writing in English, O’Rahilly announced how

The CLAUDHEAMH will make its first appearance as a Gaelic weekly Illustrated NEWSpaper [sic]. It will contain, effectively and attractively displayed, all the week's news which is of national and international interest to warrant insertion.

On this promise, O'Rahilly's new format did not disappoint and, alongside 'superb illustrations', the bilingual weekly could be described as anything but provincial with articles that covered developments in Mexico, Russia, Japan, and the United States to name but a few. Significantly, there was a heavy focus on military affairs in these articles. On the domestic front, the paper used the ongoing lockout of Dublin's workers as a vehicle to discuss the government's policing, social, and economic policies in Ireland. Following the 'Continental method', O'Rahilly determined that every article would now bear the signature of its author. This was to prove crucial to the politicisation of the paper's content from November 1913 onwards.

Apart from more focussed news content, O'Rahilly promised that the paper would 'reproduce the wittiest and pithiest cartoon of the world' as well as a 'Children's Corner, the Athletes' Column, and the Chess Department.' Fusing fashion and nationalism, an ambitious O'Rahilly even promised a 'weekly illustrated Fashion Column [which] will keep the ladies informed as to the "dernier chic" in Irish toilettes.'

O'Rahilly's 13 September article is the public side of this story: an optimistic manifesto at the beginning of a long campaign to reform an ailing newspaper. However, as is often the case, there is a further layer to newspaper history – namely the story of their production. Traces of the editorial and commercial decisions taken by the staff of newspapers are rare and valuable glimpses into this world that are often lost to the modern researcher. The O'Rahilly's letter of 13 February 1914 allows the reader to get behind the scenes and to see how O'Rahilly's optimism and reforming zeal following the 1913 árd-fheis was ground down over the winter of 1913/14.

O'Rahilly's revamp of An Claidheamh Soluis forms part of a wider story: namely the politicisation of the Gaelic League in the advent of the 1916 Rising. The process culminated at the árd-fheis of the Gaelic League at Dundalk in 1915 when Douglas

Hyde resigned as the organisation's president. Hyde objected to a resolution passed at the convention which inserted a clause into the league's constitution stating that one of its objects was the pursuit of an independent Ireland.

This politicisation of the movement can also be viewed as a process of militarisation and O'Rahilly's early role in this was pivotal. O'Rahilly commissioned the 'signed articles' which formed part of the new departure when *An Claidheamh Soluis* was re-launched in November 1913. An Irish language editorial appeared each week on page 3 and an English language one appeared on page 6. The first two of page 6 articles were Eoin MacNeill's '[The North Began](#)' and Pádraic Pearse's 'The Coming Revolution'. Additionally, the new masthead of the paper unveiled in the 1 November edition struck a much more militaristic tone than the previous one. It also brought closer visual semblance to the name of the paper. *An Claidheamh Soluis*, the sword of light, now became [an actual sword](#) driven horizontally through the letters of the title.

If we are to get into the psyche of these radicalisers within the Irish language movement and to see how they saw language as a springboard to revolution, the words of Pearse are, as usual, more illustrative than the actions of O'Rahilly. In 8 November's edition Pearse stated as clearly as possible: '... we went to school to the Gaelic League. It was a good school ... but we do not propose to remain schoolboys forever.' Pearse continued:

... when the seven men met in O'Connell Street to found the Gaelic League, they were commencing ... not a revolt, but a revolution ...
To every generation its deed. The deed of the generation that has now reached middle life was the Gaelic League: the beginning of the Irish Revolution. Let our generation not shirk its deed, which is to accomplish the revolution.

It is through this prism that O'Rahilly's efforts to revive the fortunes of *An Claidheamh Soluis* must be viewed. It is true that the decision was partially commercial, that many of O'Rahilly's interests outside the political began to filter into the paper – his obsession with motor cars and aeroplanes being a large part of this – but given the wider political context and the ongoing campaign between 1913 and 1915 to radicalise the Gaelic League and to prepare a section of Irish men and women for revolution, this seemingly mundane letter about typewriters and

subscription competitions actually constitutes a rare and fragmentary trace of an important episode in the history of the Irish revolution.

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Further reading

Regina Uí Chollatáin, *An Claidheamh Soluis agus Fáinne an Lae 1899-1932: anailís ar phríomhnuachtán Gaeilge ré na hAthbheochana* (Dublin, 2004)

Virginia E. Glandon, *Arthur Griffith and the advanced-nationalist press: Ireland, 1900-1922* (New York, 1985)

F.X. Martin (ed.), *The Irish Volunteers 1913-1915: Recollections and Documents* (new ed., Dublin, 2013)

National Library of Ireland, 'Douglas Hyde, Eoin MacNeill, and the Gaelic League' in *The 1916 Rising: personalities and perspectives, an online exhibition* (available [here](#))

Aodogán O'Rahilly, *Winding the clock: O'Rahilly and the 1916 rising* (Dublin, 1991)

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CELTIC AN CHLAIDHEAMH SOLUIS
FEABHRA 13, 1914.

A Chara,

According to the most careful estimate of income and expenditure that I have been able to make, the CLALDHEAMH should have paid its way and made some surplus during each of the past two weeks (Nos. 828 & 829).

Having done my best to show the lines on which the paper might in my opinion be made a success it will not be necessary or possible for me to give it my constant attention in future, and the time has probably come when the regular Staff ought to continue the work of putting it on a secure and assured selfsupporting basis. To accomplish this will need a great deal of strenuous and very hard work, infinitely harder work than has been hitherto accepted as the standard.

Our efforts so far have been greatly handicapped by an entire absence of co-operation from many sources whence we had expected to receive it. The extent of this apathy can only be understood by a reference to it in detail, and the following are some of the details.

The largest advertiser we have is Hopkins & Hopkins who refuses to pay his account because a very much larger account is due to him by the Gaelic League since 1911. The same situation exists with Page & Co., who refuses to pay for their ad. or to renew it.

The Foley Typewriting Co. have had for about five years an ad. in the CLALDHEAMH reading "Any make of Typewriter repaired." Above this ad. we inserted as a filler the words "Patronise our advertisers" and below it another filler reading "Support the firms that support us." There is also a rule in the League not to place orders with any non-advertiser when an advertiser is available. Notwithstanding this the Foley Co. tell us that one of the Gaelic League Office typewriters was recently sent to the Remington Co. for repairs and several pounds spent on it. The Foley Co. have consequently cancelled their advt.

No regular notices or reports of Language meetings &c. have been furnished to us, either by the Organisers or by any body else. For news of such we search through the provincial press and it is not remarkable that an occasional one escapes us.

We offered as many sample copies GRATIS to any teacher or Organiser as they would apply for and distribute free. Philip Waldron was the only organiser who applied and only two out of all the teachers in Ireland applied for free copies.

We offered every organiser and mainteoir taidil 20% commission on any subscriptions or advts. he sent us. Only seven did any work and five of these have taken less than 10/- gross in five months.

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From all the officials, employees and adherents of the Gaelic League we didn't get six inches of advertising except by the regular commercial process of canvassing for it. The one exception being Sean O Cuill who sent in £35 worth as the result of one week's voluntary and unsolicited work.

We offered a three guinea Kodak and 40 other prizes for competition to those who secured new subscribers. There were three competitors.

We have now a similar competition with the following prizes: First, a 1914 Lucania Bicycle; 2nd, a Kodak Camera; 3rd, an aeroplane; 4th, the Opera Muirghéis; and 46 other different prizes. This has been open six weeks and up to now there is NO competitor at all.

That apathy also prevails in our own office is shown by incidents like these. A teacher in Kerry who has been selling 24 copies a week writes this week to say he got no receipt for his last remittance of 12/-. He is not taking any more copies.

The CLAUDHEAMH was late and missed some deliveries this week which the printers say was due to Editor's proofs not being passed for Press on Tuesday according to our agreement.

The Post Office again refused to accept our Parcels this week and we had to pay letter rate for them. In fighting the Post Office on this point we are not helped by the fact that the parcels from the General Office of the Gaelic League are usually addressed in English.

These things do not prove that the work of making the CLAUDHEAMH a great and influential Irish journal is impossible, but they prove conclusively that the work is not being done. They prove that the vast majority of Gaelic Leaguers, Gaelic speakers, Irish Irelanders and even those who have made a business of their devotion to "The Grand Old Tongue" are not willing to lend a hand to the work of saving it. It is time that this was thoroughly understood.

Mise UA RATHGHAILLE.