

John Redmond to Tom Kettle, 25 August 1914

Tom Kettle papers, UCD Archives,
IE UCDA LA35/135

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This month's 'From the Archives' document is a brief, functional, but extremely important letter sent from John Redmond, chairman of the Irish Parliamentary Party and leader of nationalist Ireland to his trusted agent, Tom Kettle, who was then travelling between England and Belgium attempting to procure arms for the Irish Volunteers.

John Redmond was an incredibly important figure in the history of Irish politics and Irish nationalism and his story and legacy have been the subject of intense revision and counter-revision from the 1990s up to the present day. This is true both in the academic and political arenas. He has been the subject of at least six full-length biographies since his death and yet he is still lamented by some to be one of the forgotten figures of Irish history. Those who argue Redmond has been forgotten may be right, his recognisability in popular culture is still arguably far lower than that of figures who found renewed heroisation in the mid-twentieth century such as Padraig Pearse and James Connolly.

Among Redmond's admirers, he has been cast as the champion of conciliation, moderation, and constitutionalism. What this month's document does, more so than arguably any other surviving letter in John Redmond's hand, is to put his fingerprints on gun-running and to reveal a less often discussed side to his legacy, one that is highly significant and pivotal to understanding the wider politics of Ireland and beyond in the late-summer of 1914. John Redmond's involvement in arms importation does not negate his legacy as a constitutionalist – indeed for the vast majority of the 18 years he spent as chairman of the united Irish Parliamentary Party, he was highly constitutional in his methods. However, to fully understand John Redmond, the darker, more opportunistic, and even more Machiavellian aspects of his legacy must be encountered and grappled with. Historians must ask: why is it that, during 1914, John Redmond descended from the moral high ground and emulated Edward Carson, first in taking control of a private paramilitary army, secondly in

participating in arming that army, and finally in moving towards the use, or threat of, violence at home and abroad in the fulfilment of policy objectives?

The background to John Redmond and gun running can be traced to the fact that nationalist Ireland was crying out for rifles during the summer of 1914. Padraig Pearse had famously asserted that ‘the Orangeman with a rifle a much less ridiculous figure than the Nationalist without a rifle.’ Successive crises popularised this attitude. In March, the threatened refusal of British army officers stationed at the Curragh Camp, county Kildare meant that the army could not be relied upon to impose the rule of law in Ireland when it came to Home Rule. In April, the Ulster Volunteer Force had conducted a mass arms importation by sea. Seemingly at the brink of legislative independence, nationalist Ireland now stood not only unprotected but also unarmed.

In July, an independent venture spearheaded by advanced nationalists and republicans including Roger Casement, Darrel Figgis, and Erskine Childers successfully landed a consignment of 1,500 rifles and 45,000 rounds of ammunition at Howth and Kilcoole in two separate gun runnings on 26 July and 1 August respectively. Since Redmond had forced his nominees onto the committee of the Irish Volunteers in June of 1914, there had been two distinct camps within the rapidly growing movement. The Redmondites had been embarrassed significantly by the success of the more radical faction in successfully obtaining a cache of 1,500 rifles and 45,000 rounds of ammunition from Germany. However, something that has been largely forgotten in recent commemorations is that, simultaneous to the efforts of Casement, Childers and their cohort to obtain arms, Redmond and certain of his closest colleagues were working towards their own importation of weapons for the Irish Volunteers.

As Michael Joseph O’Rahilly hinted at in his *Secret History of the Irish Volunteers* in 1915, the Asgard and its companion ship the Kelpie were not the only vessels skirting the coasts of Belgium, Britain, and Ireland with guns in the summer of 1914. O’Rahilly mentioned another cargo which he believed to have been a pure invention. The ship in question, *L’Avenir*, was apparently racing to Ireland at the same time as the Asgard. O’Rahilly mockingly noted how: ‘Mr Redmond’s boat ... was called “*L’Avenir*,” which means in French “The Future,” and it was a singularly appropriate title, because she never came.’

Going through letters in the Redmond papers in the National Library on Kildare Street, it transpires that *L'Avenir* did in fact exist and, in the story of this ship and its cargo, Redmond's fingerprints turn up on a surprisingly detailed paper trail of this clandestine venture. These documents include receipts, instructions, and importation papers for large quantities of rifles and other matériel travelling from Belgium to Ireland.

As already mentioned, Redmond's primary agent in Belgium was the former MP for North Tyrone and soon-to-be British army officer, Tom Kettle. At this point, Kettle was Professor of National Economics at UCD and an active member of the provisional committee of the Irish Volunteers. Working under the alias of 'Kershaw', Kettle travelled between Ostend, Antwerp, and London between late July and the end of August 1914. An undated note on headed notepaper from the station hotel at Ostend shows that Kettle had indeed chartered a boat called *L'Avenir*, including crew and petrol, for the sum of £8 per day and had persuaded its owners to sail for Ireland after giving a guarantee of the absence of Royal Navy gunboats *en route*.

Interestingly, accompanying documentation shows that Redmond's guns were imported a significant time after the Howth and Kilcoole gun-runnings. In the tense months of July and August, a day could make quite a difference. The passage of several weeks between the arrival of the *Asgard* at Howth and the arrival of Redmond's guns had a critical bearing on the legalities of this latter importation. Arms had been landed illegally at Howth owing to a government restriction on the importation of arms issued back in December 1913. However, this had been lifted almost immediately after Britain entered the war on 4 August. In light of this, technically, Erskine Childers was breaking the law when he landed arms on 26 July whereas Kettle, Redmond and the rest of the team involved in the later landings were not. Additionally, there is an implicit difference in intent in the importation of arms for Irish nationalists after 3 August 1914 when, the day before Britain's formal declaration of war on Germany, Redmond had pledged the Irish Volunteers to the coastal defence of Ireland in support of the British war effort. By 20 September, he would convert to a policy of full overseas participation in the imperial war effort. Guns put in the hands of Irish nationalists before 3 August were clearly intended to point at one of two targets, Ulster unionists or British soldiers and police standing in

the way. A rifle put in an Irish Volunteer's hand after 3 August, however, was more likely to point out to sea rather than towards Belfast or Dublin Castle. However, the evidence strongly suggests that Redmond and Kettle fully intended to import arms illegally and that some unknown hitch or postponement, either on the quayside at Ostend or at sea as O'Rahilly suggested, saved them from going down in history as illegal arms smugglers.

Kettle's undated note, now among Redmond's papers at the National Library of Ireland, contains two key pieces of information which provide additional details about the chronology and extent of the movement of Redmond's rifles. Firstly, Kettle notes that a cargo of rifles was actually loaded onto *L'Avenir*, at the cost of three or four rifles packed loose on deck which fell overboard. Although it is not stated whether the ship actually set sail and then returned to Belgium as O'Rahilly indicated, a subsequent memorandum of payment in Redmond's papers lists £30 as having been paid to Janssens & Mestdagh, the owners of *L'Avenir* for 'demurrage', namely time in excess of laytime (in this case loading) which the vessel stayed in possession of the charterer (Kettle). The second crucial piece of information in Kettle's undated note is that he concludes by stating 'Have had to practically guarantee no gunboats'. The fact that the crew of *L'Avenir* were seeking assurances from Kettle that they would not encounter Royal Navy patrols is a clear indicator that the ship was loaded and Kettle's note written prior to the change of legal and international circumstances on 4 August.

Whatever the occluded circumstances that forced *L'Avenir* to return or remain in Ostend prior to 4 August, the expedition was cancelled and the rifles in question were put in storage in Belgian warehouses. In total, 5,900 rifles belonging to the Irish Volunteers were put in storage between Ostend and Antwerp. Unsurprisingly given the subsequent course of events in Belgium, a telegram from Redmond to the British Ambassador at Brussels on 13 August records that the Belgian government had by then requisitioned 2,800 of these rifles which were stored at Ostend for their own use in defending their country from the invading Germans. Redmond requested that all rifles belonging to the Irish Volunteers be transported immediately to Ireland, justifying the exportation of arms from the crisis-stricken Belgians by explaining:

Importation of rifles into Ireland is now legal and they are required urgently for Irish Volunteers who will set free Imperial troops for service where required.

Please urge Belgian Government to allow rifles to be exported without delay.

Ultimately, twenty tons and ten hundredweight of rifles along with 3 cases of bayonets (the precise number of units is not known) were dispatched over land via Folkstone and arrived at the North Wall in Dublin at the end of August 1914. This month's 'From the Archives' document is the lynchpin of the paper trail linking Redmond to rifles. Written on House of Commons notepaper, signed, and in his hand, this document more than any other puts Redmond firmly in control of the rifles and cements his directorial role over their importation.

After congratulating Kettle on the importation, Redmond issues the clear and direct order to 'store them all at the North Wall in my name with instructions to deliver them only to my written order.' Alongside Irish politicians from the time of era of Wolfe Tone to the Northern Irish Troubles, with this act, John Redmond earned himself the title of gun-runner, in an act that was more representative of the tumultuous mood of 1914 than it was of Redmond's normal behaviour or attitudes.

Although legal, this importation raises two substantial issues that dent the reputation of Redmond. Firstly, if Kettle's undated note about the loading of *L'Avenir* was written prior to 4 August, and it seems conclusive that it was, then both Redmond and Kettle knowingly planned an illegal importation and either aborted or failed in their mission to ship this illegal cargo to Ireland by sea. Secondly, after the war had broken out and conscious of the Belgian government's need for rifles, John Redmond, the champion of poor Catholic Belgium, was actively working to take rifles out of Belgium in the misguided belief that they would better serve the Belgian people if they were in the hands of Irish rather than Belgian volunteers.

In 1914, firepower superseded diplomacy as the means by which European statesmen got things done. Ireland had been a powder-keg on the western periphery of Europe since 1913. However, in 1914, the crisis in the east averted civil war in the west. This

month's document is a testament to how John Redmond made this transition from words to warfare during a summer that would change Europe forever.

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T.M. Kettle Esq.

My dear Kettle,

I congratulate you on the success of your efforts to obtain the rifles.

Please store them all at the North Wall in my name with instructions to deliver them only to my written order.

Very truly yours,

J.E. Redmond
25 Aug. 1914

J. M. Kettle Esq



My dear Kettle

I congratulate you on the
success of your efforts to
obtain the rifles.

Please store them all at
the South Wall in my name
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Very truly yrs

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<http://www.ucd.ie/archives/html/collections/kettle-tom.htm>