The Scholar Revolutionary, Eoin MacNeill

— A Review Article

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To hear Professor Eoin MacNeill lecture on early Irish history was an inspiring experience. I heard him once. The occasion was a public one in the Physics Theatre of University College, Dublin, more than thirty years ago. MacNeill had retired from his university chair a few years before. Within a short time he was to die. Many points which were made in that lecture remain with me still and many of them, too, I pass on to my students. More important, however, than the actual content of the discourse, than the brilliant insights into bygone ages, was the way in which MacNeill carried his audience with him in the quest for understanding of the past. MacNeill, the historian, will always hold an honoured place among Irish writers and his memory is assured by the originality of his work. Up to his time professional historians of Ireland had largely confined their researches to periods subsequent to the Norman invasion. Professor Francis J. Byrne, who fills the chair once held by MacNeill in University College, Dublin, states that “To MacNeill belongs the credit of having dragged Celtic Ireland practically single-handed from the antiquarian mists into the light of history.”

This claim on behalf of MacNeill is made in a volume of essays edited by Rev. Professor F. X. Martin and his colleague, Professor Byrne.* The essays were obviously inspired by the centenary of MacNeill’s birth in 1967, but they took some time to produce. Certainly they have been worth the waiting; they provide valuable assessments by the best of modern scholars of MacNeill’s work.

It was a remarkable achievement for a man so bound up in a cultural revival and in its revolutionary political consequences to be able to take the appraising look at history which MacNeill did. Probably he was assisted by the fact that his field was the early period rather than the later one. Most of all he owed his skill to the basic training which he undertook in old and middle Irish. Nevertheless, as Professor D. A. Binehy points out in his essay on MacNeill’s study of the ancient laws of Ireland, while he could be objective, clear-sighted and original, MacNeill reacted emotionally when he thought he detected prejudices, conscious or unconscious, in the treatment of early Irish civilization by previous scholars.

MacNeill was not only a scholar—he was also an administrator in the field of research. His last great achievement in this field was the establishment of the Irish Manuscripts Commission of which he was first chairman. Dr. E. A. MacLysaght, in whose honour this volume of The North Munster Antiquarian Journ I is being published, worked as an Inspector for the Commission during the 1930s and was one of MacNeill’s successors in the post of chairman from 1956 to 1973. Historians are deeply indebted to both for the many texts made available to them through the publications of this commission, and it is to be regretted that the flow of publications under its auspices has falen off. Let us hope the present intermission in publications does not last long.


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The breadth of MacNeill’s interests is clearly shown in the full bibliography of his writings compiled by Professor F. X. Martin. They range from an article printed in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* in 1891 entitled “Why and how the Irish language is to be preserved” to the edition of a match-making rhyme from Glenarm, Co. Antrim, in the last year of his life, 1944; there were, of course, posthumous works, too. Through his working life MacNeill roamed widely through folklore, philology, topography, early Irish law, Irish language and history in his writings, and he added something to our knowledge in each of these spheres. Apart, however, from these activities, MacNeill found time for involvement in the whole political movement which arose out of the Gaelic League of which he was a founder. He became, as a number of members of his generation did, a politician by accident, and it is his career as a politician that is the subject of most discussion among modern historians. Indeed, it is an aspect of MacNeill’s life which brought him into close association with north Munster, as he represented Clare in Dáil Éireann from 1923 to 1927.

The present volume is not a biography but a series of essays. The most complete survey of MacNeill’s political career is given by Mr. Brian Farrell who sums up his impression of the professor: “an indispensable moderate often supported, even promoted, by more extreme and effective leaders for their own ends”. There may be an element of truth in this, but it argues a synicism in political relationships which is difficult to accept as being the norm of the Irish political groups among whom MacNeill found himself. Indeed, it suggests a *névété* on MacNeill’s part which amounts to almost childlike innocence. Yet MacNeill looked upon himself, as he said in the Treaty debate, as an opportunist.

MacNeill was no innocent abroad among politicians, although, however, he did act with a surprising lack of judgment on occasions. He undertook tasks for which he often lacked the push to carry through. His attendance at the Gaelic League executive meetings had by 1910 become very poor indeed, but perhaps this was no more than a reflection of a change in interest on his part. The debates on the Treaty were delayed to await the chairman’s arrival and his chairmanship became suspect in the heated atmosphere when he made, from the chair, a speech which was considered to be partisan. It is surprising that no mention is made in this book of MacNeill’s central role in these debates.

In politics MacNeill came close to declining into obscurity on more than one occasion. Perhaps the most notable and most widely discussed incident in his career is his countermanding of the 1916 Rising. It is as easy to see the difficulty of MacNeill’s position at the time as it is to understand the widespread and often ill-informed criticism which grew around it. Many who did not know the full truth were to be his colleagues in Dartmoor and in Lewes jails, and it was here that the keenest of his critics met him for the first time after the Rising. To suggest that he was protected from their anger simply for their own ends by other leaders would be an unjust insinuation. Yet it was in prison and among those colleagues that MacNeill’s reputation was saved and de Valera’s advice to his fellow-prisoners in March 1917, as they went on strike was important:

“As long as Eoin MacNeill is here the committee should *always* consult with him. He will be an ideal spokesman for you and think twice before you undertake anything to which his judgment is opposed!”

It is clear that MacNeill had not been accepted in full authority over the prisoners, but also that there was to be a significant recognition of him.

The extension of this recognition was to come on the release of the prisoners and on the opening of the campaign for the East-Clare by-election in July 1917. De Valera
took MacNeill with him to Clare for that campaign, and so set the scene for the position at the head of the poll achieved by MacNeill in the election of the executive of the new Sinn Féin at the Ard Fheis of 1917.

The stature of MacNeill grew. He was a member of the cabinet of the first Dáil with the rather unlikely portfolio of finance and, after the trauma of the split and Civil War in which he lost a son fighting on the anti-Treaty side, he was to become the first president of the newly formed pro-Treaty party, Cumann na nGaedheal. As a cabinet minister, as the president of the government party, and as an Ulsterman who had written on the question of partition, MacNeill would appear to have been the obvious Irish Free State representative on the Boundary Commission. Professor Geoffrey Hand presents in this volume the most complete assessment of MacNeill's part in the failure of that Commission on which so many hopes rested. However, he shows a sensitivity in regard to suspected slurs on MacNeill which on occasions blurs his vision. One of these occasions relates to MacNeill's candidature in Clare in 1923.

Professor Hand, in discussing the reasons why MacNeill was selected as the Free State nominee to the commission, bristles somewhat at the "insinuation" in Dorothy Macardle's Irish Republic that the choice was affected by the impending contest with de Valera in Clare. In fact, on reading Macardle I cannot see any suggestion that the decision to contest in Clare had been taken at the time the commissioner was named. Rather it appears that his appointment spurred some Clare priests to initiate a move to have him as a candidate. This happened over a week after W. T. Cosgrave had named him as commissioner. Of course he would be a strong candidate in an attractive contest of two heavyweights—the President of Cumann na nGaedheal versus the President of Sinn Féin. Indeed, W. T. Cosgrave was anxious to put ministers into the ring against leading opponents. The newspapers were explicit about this in the case of Joe McGrath's opposition to P. J. Rutledge in Mayo.

There is no need to seek very far for reasons why MacNeill was chosen by Cosgrave to represent his government, and Professor Hand's discussion of the possibility that Patrick McGilligan might have been an alternative on the Boundary Commission would seem to have arisen more out of hindsight than out of the contemporary realities. McGilligan's standing in 1923 was small—he was a civil servant and secretary to the High Commissioner in London, and not even a candidate for election until later in the year. His entry into government was fortuitous in 1924, arising as it did out of the army mutiny crisis. This is not to gainsay the ability of McGilligan, but rather to point out that in July 1923 he could not have been selected to the commission without grave difficulties. What Professor Hand appears to suggest is that in 1924 there may have been a serious move to replace MacNeill as commissioner. Such action, too, would have been a grave reversal of a previously announced decision.

Whatever the reality of such a debate in 1924, subsequent discussion over the selection of MacNeill will last for as long as history is written. One has only to read Hand's account to see the impossible problems which faced MacNeill, and at the same time the inability of the victim to escape from them. MacNeill had inherited the mantles of Griffith and Collins as negotiators. Perhaps the whole discussion of their right in 1921 not to refer back to their Dublin colleagues coloured both Cosgrave's non-interference with MacNeill and MacNeill's decision not to divulge much to the cabinet in Dublin.

Eoin MacNeill goes down in history books not only as a scholar, an historian, and a revolutionary, but also as a part of history itself.