Eoin MacNeill – a family perspective

Delivered at NUI MacNeill Seminar 28th June 2016

Any examination of Eoin MacNeill's part in the events of 1916 must start with a close understanding of his background. Born in Glenarm in County Antrim in 1867, his Catholic parents lived in the Glens, an enclave in Protestant East Ulster. His father Archie, a tough local tradesman, was by times a shipwright, a baker, a builder and the proprietor of the local postal service in Glenarm, a mixed community. His mother Rosetta came from a more refined background. Archie was prosecuted and acquitted arising out of unrest during an Orange demonstration in Glenarm when Eoin was just five years old.

One of a family of eight, Eoin benefitted from a family determination to seek good education for the children. Unlike three of his brothers who were sent to Belvedere in Dublin, Eoin was sent to St. Malachy's in Belfast and obtained a scholarship to study in the Royal University where he graduated in politics and economics in 1888. The previous year he had obtained by examination a junior clerkship in the Accountant General's office in the Four Courts, becoming the first Catholic to have such an appointment which previously had been made on the basis of Dublin Castle patronage.

As an undergraduate, he had begun in 1887 to study the Irish language, which was virtually extinct in the Glenarm in his childhood. From basic learning of the spoken language (on grinds for which he spent a quarter of his small starting salary), he quickly graduated to the study of Old and Middle Irish, and quickly became an expert in matters Gaelic. Along with Douglas Hyde, he co-founded the Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaeilge), and started to develop a theory of Irish identity which was a blend of his political, linguistic and religious outlooks.

In his role as editor of the *Gaelic Journal*, as co-editor of *Fáinne An Lae* and first editor of *An Claidheamh Soluis*, he became a leading figure in the Irish language movement. It was in this context that he met and befriended the young Pádraig Pearse, a relationship which became of central importance to later events in 1916.

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries MacNeill became increasingly politically active and took a leading role in the debate on the University Question which led to the foundation of the National University of Ireland (NUI) in 1908. He was appointed Professor of Early Irish History in University College Dublin (UCD) in 1909.

The Volunteers

Four years later, in 1913, he wrote a leading article in *An Claidheamh Soluis* entitled 'The North Began', calling for nationalists in Ireland to consider establishing a Volunteer force to counterbalance the Ulster Volunteers of Edward Carson, and describing the Ulster Volunteers as a positive step towards national self-determination.

On foot of 'The North Began', MacNeill was approached by a number of figures in the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and some of their associates to ask him to lead the process of forming the Irish Volunteers. When John Redmond imposed himself on the Irish Volunteers, MacNeill at first cooperated but later, when Redmond pledged the Volunteers to the Great War effort, sided with Pearse, Tom Clarke, Thomas MacDonagh, Bulmer Hobson and others in the split between Redmond's 'National Volunteers' and the 'Irish Volunteers' of which MacNeill was president and commander-in-chief.

However, a further, largely unseen split was developing in the Irish Volunteers. A small IRB-based group including Pearse, Clarke and later MacDonagh formed a secret 'Military Council' within the IRB and spent 1915 secretly plotting to start an armed insurrection against British rule in Ireland while the Great War was in progress.

MacNeill's priority was to arm the Volunteers. With Roger Casement and others, he had planned the June 1914 Howth and Kilcoole gun-running operations which were modest in scale compared with the massive UVF importation at Larne in March of that year.

MacNeill and Hobson (who although an IRB member was unaware of the Military Council's plans) had a different view from that of Pearse, Clarke and MacDonagh of the legitimate use of force. The IRB's own constitution prohibited any armed insurrection which had not the backing of the Irish people. MacNeill categorically rejected any notion of any violent coup unless it had a reasonable prospect of military success. In particular MacNeill was wholly opposed to the notion of 'blood sacrifice' as a way of polarising or catalysing the Irish people into a political struggle with Britain.

MacNeill, aware of Pearse's romantic and idealistic notion that an insurrection would be justified as a blood sacrifice, struggled to persuade the Irish Volunteers' Executive that the use of force would only be justified (i) if the British attempted to disarm or suppress the Volunteers or (ii) if the Volunteers were in a position, in terms of arms and organisation, to use force successfully to end British rule in Ireland.

The 1916 Memorandum

His Memorandum on this issue (the '1916 Memorandum'), written in February 1916, was a forceful and convincing exposition of his views. He suspected but was not definitively aware, however, that Pearse and Clarke had already decided to stage an insurrection 'come what may', and did not suspect that they were willing to use any means, including deception, to bring about a 'rising'.

This memorandum lay unpublished until 1961 when Professor F.X. Martin revealed it in *Irish Historical Studies* in an article entitled 'Eoin MacNeill and the 1916 Rising'. Martin's article is easily available on the internet and makes compelling reading even today.

In 1961, F.X. Martin's article ran counter to the then prevalent 'national myth' of 1916 which had relegated MacNeill to the status of an indecisive, incompetent academic 'bit player' who had somehow brought about by his indecision the military failure of the Rising.

Hobson, though an IRB man, had attempted to alert MacNeill to the secret plotting for a rising. He and MacNeill believed that the Volunteers should not stage a rising during the Great War but should wait for its end, a scenario in which regardless of the outcome of the war, there would be an influx of returning Irish soldiers to strengthen the Volunteers. In the meantime, MacNeill and Hobson argued that the greatest priority was to secure arms for the Volunteers. If the Volunteers were to be outlawed, they believed that a guerrilla type campaign would be more successful (a view which Michael Collins was later to adopt and implement).

Compounding this dispute within the Volunteers was the determination of James Connolly to stage a violent socialist revolution through the involvement of the Irish Citizen Army, a group which had emerged in the context of the 1913 Lockout.

Because Connolly's Citizen Army revolution had no prospect of success, the Volunteers were naturally convinced that it would almost certainly be used by Dublin Castle as a pretext to disarm and suppress the Irish Volunteers. MacNeill, at the request of Pearse, met with Connolly to dissuade him from starting any armed conflict. Pearse was present at this meeting and later informed MacNeill that Connolly had been persuaded by MacNeill's argument to abandon any thought of unilateral action by the Citizen Army. But, in reality, Pearse had secretly assured Connolly that an early rising was being planned in which he and the Citizen Army could take part.

It was in that context that MacNeill wrote and circulated the 1916 Memorandum. It was discussed at a day-long meeting at MacNeill's residence in Woodtown Park in Rathfarnham during which Pearse expressly disavowed any plan for armed insurrection.

In the opening words of the 1916 Memorandum, MacNeill stated:

The only reason that could justify general action – military measures as distinct from military preparations – on the part of Irish nationalists would be a reasonably calculated or estimate prospect of success.

Without that prospect, military action (not military preparation) would in the first place be morally wrong – and that consideration to my mind is final and conclusive.

To enter deliberately on a course of action which is morally wrong is to incur the guilt not only of that action itself but of all its direct consequences.

For example to kill any person in carrying out such a course of action is murder. The guilt of murder in that case falls on those who have planned and ordered the general course of action on the party which makes such course of action inevitable.

The success which is calculated or estimated must be success in the operation itself, not merely some further moral or political advantage which may be hoped for as the result of non-success.

The memorandum goes on to dismiss any policy based on 'feelings' or 'instincts' and pleas for reason to prevail. He argued strongly against any premature use of force with no prospect of military success and against any rising simply based on 'striking' while the Great War was in progress on the claim that 'Ireland has always struck too late'.

He said: ‘We must listen to nothing except proper preparation and proper calculation.’

On Pearse’s notion of a blood sacrifice, MacNeill’s memorandum had this to say, clearly directed personally at Pearse:

There is a feeling in some minds that action is necessary, that lives must be sacrificed, in order to produce an ultimate effect on the national mind. As a principle of action, I have heard that feeling disclaimed, but I did not fully accept the disclaimer. In fact, it is a sounder principle than any of the others I have dealt with.

If the destruction of our nationality was in sight, and we came to the conclusion that at best the vital principle of nationality was to be saved by laying down our lives, then we should make that sacrifice without hesitation. It would not be a military act in any sense, and it does not come within the scope of our military counsels.

This passage clearly demonstrates that MacNeill understood and was partly sympathetic with Pearse’s fervour, but also underlines his conviction that it was morally wrong to drag other innocent people into a futile self-sacrifice or to kill others in pursuit of self-sacrifice. He was simply not willing to sacrifice the Irish Volunteers as a movement and all the inevitable victims of an early insurrection to ‘produce an ultimate effect on the national mind’. This, then, was the line of intellectual and moral cleavage between the patriots who met that day in March 1916 at Woodtown Park in Rathfarnham.

MacNeill’s memorandum had spelt out at length the inevitability of a military defeat for any rising and pointed out to the conspirators that the Volunteers’ state of preparation outside Dublin was negligible.

But he wrote:

… [W]hereas in my conscientious judgment an armed revolt at present would be wrong and unpatriotic and criminal, it is quite a different case with regard to the possession and retention of our arms. I have not the slightest doubt on the point that we are morally and in every way justified in keeping by all necessary force such arms as we have got or can get. I hold myself entitled to resist to the death any attempt to deprive me of my arms or ammunition or other military articles that I have or can protect for myself or the Irish Volunteers. If in such resistance, any man meets his death through my act or counsel or command, I shall have no guilt on my conscience.

The Castle Document

The Pearse, Clarke and MacDonagh faction affected to accept MacNeill’s argument at the Woodtown Park meeting, but secretly they decided to subvert it by composing a forged document purporting to be a Dublin Castle decision to disarm, arrest and suppress the Irish Volunteers. Knowing that MacNeill would authorise the use of violence in such a scenario, all they had to do was to produce false but convincing evidence – and that is why they concocted the famous ‘Castle document’.

As F.X. Martin put it:

In the light of MacNeill's attitude it is obvious that the 'Castle document' was 'a most opportune document' for the members of the IRB who were trying to manoeuvre MacNeill to support for an armed rebellion. It was the news on Holy Friday morning of the expected arrival of the Aud with arms for the Volunteers which decided him to support the plan for gun-running at Fenit, and thereby risk an almost inevitable collision with the British forces.

The great historical value of MacNeill's memorandum of March 1916 is that it was written *before* the Rising and is therefore completely devoid of post factum justification or reasoning.

In a second Memorandum (the '1917 Memorandum') written in the latter half of 1917 at the request of Hobson, MacNeill, who had been released from a life sentence imposed on him by a General Court Martial in 1916 for his part in the Rising, set out at length his account of what happened in the period November 1915 to April 1916.

The 1917 Memorandum makes compelling reading too. It is also available online. It shows how the Pearse, Clarke and MacDonagh plan was concealed from MacNeill and how they forged the 'Castle document' to win him over to armed action. It gives a very vivid account of MacNeill's journey from Woodtown Park in Rathfarnham to St. Enda's in Rathfarnham on Holy Thursday 1916 where MacNeill confronted Pearse with his knowledge of their plan for a rising.

MacNeill's account shows him as having been resigned to a rising up until midday on Easter Saturday when the O'Rahilly and Seán Fitzgibbon came to Woodtown Park and revealed to MacNeill that orders for a rising had been issued on the false basis that they were authorised by MacNeill, and crucially that the 'Castle document' was a forgery designed to bring him over to the planned Rising.

It was in that context that MacNeill at last countermanded the Rising – an order that was largely effective except in Dublin where the Rising's planners were in control of the Volunteers.

MacNeill states:

It is also untrue that I changed my mind several times. For a few hours I was convinced that all was over with our movement and nothing left for us except to sell our lives as dearly as possible. When The O'Rahilly and Fitzgibbon came to me on Holy Saturday, we agreed that the situation was by no means so desperate and that the rising ought to be prevented. The O'Rahilly gave me more help than any other person to prevent it.

But Pearse, while assuring MacNeill in a written message as late as Easter Saturday that the countermanding order would be implemented, was in reality busily re-scheduling the Rising for Easter Monday.

F.X. Martin, commenting on the two memoranda which were published for the first time in 1961, said:

Perhaps the most noticeable characteristic of both memoranda is their dispassionate line. MacNeill condemns nobody, though he might have considered himself to have reasonable grounds for resentment.

Pearse, in his last dispatch from the GPO, on Friday 28th April, declared that 'Both Eoin MacNeill and we have acted in the best interests of Ireland', and MacNeill was no less courteous during his court martial to the revolutionary leaders.

MacNeill actually remained unaware that a 'Military Council of Four' within the IRB had pre-determined on a rising until he met with Mrs. Tom Clarke in the aftermath of his release from prison in 1917 while assisting Éamon de Valera in his campaign for the Clare East by-election.

Mrs. Clarke, Countess Markievicz and Helena Molony had previously bitterly attacked MacNeill at the Sinn Féin convention in 1917 for his action in countermanding the Rising. The great majority however vigorously defended MacNeill. In the result, MacNeill topped the poll in the election for the Sinn Féin Ard-Chomhairle leaving his critics far behind him in terms of votes.

Also elected on that occasion with the narrowest of margins was a young 1916 veteran called Michael Collins. Collins never doubted MacNeill's sincerity or integrity. Indeed, in 1922 when asked by an American journalist Hayden Talbot to comment on MacNeill's decision to countermand the Rising, Collins told Talbot that he had never discussed the issue with MacNeill, and urged him to interview MacNeill on the matter. Talbot did so and Collins, on learning of the account given by MacNeill in the interview, accepted MacNeill's explanation.

MacNeill was quoted by Talbot as having described the executed 1916 leaders as 'patriots' motivated by 'pure martyrdom'. He ascribed the result of their execution as their 'fondest dreams' being 'exceeded'.

Furthermore, he is quoted by Talbot as saying that if it were argued that their pre-vision was good and his bad, he could make no comment except that even if he had known fully of their plan, he would still have countermanded the Rising. He believed it was the madness of British reactive violence in suppressing the Rising and executing its leaders that created the conditions for Irish independence.

It is also notable that MacNeill unreservedly backed the War of Independence. His three eldest sons became active members and officers in the 6th Battalion of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in South Dublin.

During the War of Independence his home at Netley in Booterstown was raided and searched on a number of occasions. MacNeill and members of his family were arrested. But none of the searches ever revealed the secret compartment specially built in the ground floor of the house which was the arms dump for the 6th Battalion. By using his home in this way MacNeill was again putting his life on the line for Irish freedom.

An indication of MacNeill's personal commitment to the morality of the War of Independence can be gleaned from a letter that he sent to the Archbishop of Tuam on 22 July 1920, in a context that the Archbishop was reported as saying that the shooting of two Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) men near Tuam, although a 'dastardly crime' could not justify the subsequent sacking of the town by Black and Tans in reprisal.

MacNeill, a devout Catholic, wrote to the Archbishop:

Either we Irishmen are morally entitled to carry arms or we are not. If we are, we are entitled to defend our right and if the so-called 'police', who are well known to Your Grace to be no police but a mere branch of the British military forces, endanger our lives in the exercise of that right, Your Grace can define the extent of resistance that is morally justifiable.

It is surely not a case for vagueness, and till we know our rights supposing the present belief of the people in general and their present conscientious conviction to be mistaken – we are justified in protesting against your Lordship's use of the term 'murder' even without the qualifying adjective.

If on the other hand we have no right to bear arms, surely Your Grace ought to say so, for undoubtedly the bearing of arms, being the occasion of shooting on sight by those in command of the so-called police, will also be the occasion of the so-called police being shot at sight.

For my part I have not the slightest doubt that I am entitled to bear arms in defence of Ireland against the British forces, and that I am also entitled to resist being disarmed to the same degree as I may resist an attempt to destroy my house or my life or the lives of my family.

I am not bound to put up my hands when ordered to do so by any subordinate of the British Government. I have the clearest evidence therefore that my life and the rights I am entitled to defend unto death are <u>always</u> threatened by the so-called 'police'. Does Your Grace really believe that this state of mind implies that I am at heart and in conscience a murderer, not to say a dastard.

I am, my Lord Archbishop,

Your Grace's faithful servant

Eoin MacNeill

The echoes of his 1916 Memorandum are striking.

One can only assume that MacNeill had believed in 1920-22 (and rightly as it turned out) that the War of Independence had a good 'calculation of success', while in March to April 1916 he judged that a rising had none.

For a man who two years later, on 20 September 1922, to lose his second son Brian to an on-the-spot execution by his own Irish Free State forces on the slopes of Ben Bulben, the moral complexities of Eoin MacNeill's views on the use of force are striking.

So, too, was his defence of the notorious summary Mountjoy executions on 8 December 1922, in reprisal for the shooting of two pro-Treaty TDs. On that occasion he informed the Dáil that it was a case of clear legal and moral justification and invited anyone to prosecute him for murder.

These events show that MacNeill's views on the morality of the use of force were based always on deep subjective conviction tempered by his strong sense of principle.

For all these and many other reasons, MacNeill deserves close and detached study; his influence on Irish history is significant. In more than one sense he was a foremost author of Irish history.