

Conor Mulvagh & Emer Purcell (editors) 'Eoin MacNéill – the Pen and the Sword' (Cork, 2022), Cork University Press, 444pp, €39.

This fine collection of essays might better be called 'The Pen and the Scabbard' because Eoin MacNéill never drew the sword, though he approved of its use in certain circumstances and not in others and his decisions in that regard have defined his place in history. He is best remembered as the leader of the Irish Volunteers who countermanded the order for the 1916 Easter Rising, with disastrous results, an episode that he never really lived down. However, as this book makes clear, it would be grossly unfair to assess his public life solely on that basis. Perhaps his most sustained and long-lasting contribution was his co-founding and leading role in Conradh na Gaeilge, the Gaelic League and his scholarship as an historian. This less well known aspect of his life is very well covered here.

MacNéill was an Irish nationalist and a democrat, but in a narrow parliamentary sense. He appears to have given little thought to social and economic matters. For example, you will search the index in vain for any reference to Jim Larkin or the 1913 Lockout. That was the year MacNéill entered the political sphere directly when he became founding President of the Irish Volunteers. His most interesting contribution in that role was as editor and lead writer in the weekly *Irish Volunteer* paper from 1914 to 1916. This receives little attention in the book which is a pity since it showed him to be an astute and readable political commentator.

In his chapter Michael Laffan patiently and clearly traces the complex comings and goings – physical and mental - of MacNéill and his circle before and during Easter Week 1916. MacNéill's relative, Senator Michael McDowell, writes approvingly of his wrestling match with his conscience at that time but he pays far less attention to MacNéill's full approval – with apparently few qualms of conscience - of the reprisal executions of Republicans by the 1922-'23 Free State Cabinet of which he was a member. His own son Brian was among the slain, though Eoin appears to have believed the Free State Army version of events that he was killed in a fair fight. It is widely accepted today that Brian and his five comrades were shot after capture by Free State forces on the Ben Bulbin mountains in Sligo.

MacNéill went on to represent the Free State government on the Boundary Commission 1924-'25. The handling of this on the Free State side was disastrous. In essence the British government and the Unionists rang rings around MacNéill. To hold him entirely responsible would be to absolve his Cabinet colleagues who were equally culpable. The end result was the abandonment of nationalists and republicans in the Six Counties as Partition was entrenched and James Connolly's prophesied 'carnival of reaction' went into full swing. This also brought an end to MacNéill's political career.

*Review by Councillor Mícheál Mac Donncha*