

ON THE BRINK

The Politics of Conflict 1914-1916 Project

PRO / ANTI HOME RULE

EASTER RISING & BATTLE OF THE SOMME

EOIN MACNEILL

Eoin MacNeill was born in Glenarm in 1867. MacNeill studied at St Malachy's College, Belfast, and the Royal University of Ireland before starting work as a clerk in Dublin in 1887. He also had a keen interest in the Irish language, history and culture and developed a theory of Irish identity which stressed culture over politics.

In 1913, MacNeill published an article, 'The North Began'. He praised the Ulster Volunteers and called for the formation of Irish Volunteers on the same model. Members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) approached MacNeill and asked him to help organise a Volunteer movement. The Irish Volunteers were founded in Dublin in 1913, with Eoin MacNeill as Chief of Staff. Their numbers quickly reached 170,000 and, similarly to the UVF, the Irish Volunteers armed themselves during July 1914, landing 900 rifles at Howth.

The purpose of the Volunteers was declared as:
'to secure and maintain the rights and liberties common to all the people of Ireland.'

The First World War led to a split in Irish nationalism. After Home Rule for Ireland was passed in September 1914, John Redmond, leader of the Irish Nationalist Party, encouraged Irish Volunteers to fight on the British side. Although, the majority of volunteers agreed with Redmond, a minority, including Eoin MacNeill refused to support Britain and split with the rest of the movement. Those that sided with Redmond became known as the National Volunteers, while those that opposed him retained the name Irish Volunteers.

Unbeknownst to Eoin MacNeill, the military council of the IRB began drawing up plans for an insurrection against British rule in Ireland. They planned to organize Irish Volunteer manoeuvres in Dublin for Easter Sunday 1916 as cover for the rebellion. Learning of this on Easter Thursday, MacNeill told Pearse that he could not allow a half-armed force to be called out. Pearse told him that a German ship bearing arms was landing at Kerry. But when MacNeill heard that the ship had sunk on Saturday evening he countermanded the order for manoeuvres. Although MacNeill took no part in the Rising, he was court-martialled and sentenced to life imprisonment after its suppression. He was released in June 1917 under the general amnesty.

When serving as Speaker of Dail Eireann in 1921, MacNeill told of the circumstances that led to his countermand. He also stated:

'Much was going forward that I knew nothing of, determined at secret meetings at which I was not present. Not until after it was all over did I come to learn the momentous decision reached by seven men who signed and published declaration of the Irish Republic.'