Hobson, (John) Bulmer

by Patrick Maume

Hobson, (John) Bulmer (1883–1969), nationalist, was born 14 January 1883 at 5 Magdala Street, Belfast, the son of Benjamin Hobson, a grocer who was from a Quaker family established in Ireland since the time of Cromwell, and his wife, Mary Ann Bulmer, a Yorkshire radical.

**Family influences and early life** Hobson’s father was a Gladstonian home ruler. His mother was active in the Belfast Naturalists' Field Club (lecturing on archaeology) and the suffragette movement. Her friends included Ada MacNeill, a member of the Gaelic League, who maintained a lifelong connection with Hobson. (He later mistakenly claimed that MacNeill was the fiancée of Roger Casement (qv)). Mary Ann Hobson belonged to the Irishwomen's Association organised by Alice Milligan (qv) and ‘Ethna Carbery’ (Anna Johnston (qv)); Milligan acquainted Bulmer with the works of Standish James O'Grady (qv), which ‘opened up . . . new ranges of hitherto unimagined beauty’. The ancient heroes ‘became my constant companions . . . far more real than the crude town in which I lived’ (Hobson, 1). Hobson subscribed to Milligan's and Carbery's separatist monthly, *Shan Van Vocht* (1895–8). The 1898 centenary of the rebellion of the United Irishmen added them to his pantheon, and he became a republican. He soon also joined the artistic and antiquarian circle around F. J. Bigger (qv).

Hobson was educated at the Friends' school, Lisburn. After leaving school at the age of sixteen, Hobson supported himself through haphazard clerical jobs. In 1900 he founded the Ulster Debating Club for boys. In 1901–2 he was secretary of the Belfast Tír na nÓg branch of the Gaelic League. As secretary of the first Antrim county board of the GAA, he successfully resisted proposals that policemen should be permitted to join, though he resigned over the GAA's reluctance to encourage youth clubs. In 1902 he founded a boys' group, Fianna Éireann, which was soon crippled by financial problems and Hobson's other commitments. At the first Glens of Antrim feis in 1904 Hobson befriended Casement and they corresponded regularly. Casement saw Hobson as a substitute son; Hobson admired Casement's idealism, anger at injustice, and financial sacrifices for cultural and political nationalism. They shared a love for the Glens of Antrim, where they often hiked and camped; in later life Hobson recalled these excursions as proof of Casement's heterosexuality, on the grounds that Casement had never taken advantage of this close proximity to make advances to him.

In 1901–3 he trained as a printer, and he retained a lifelong interest in publishing and fine printing. In 1902 he and David Parkhill (qv) decided: 'Damn Yeats, we'll write our own plays!' (Hanna Bell, 1), and in 1904 they co-founded the 'Ulster branch of the Irish Literary Theatre'; it had to be renamed the Ulster Literary Theatre, after
the Abbey Theatre in Dublin (which had developed out of the Irish Literary Theatre, founded by W. B. Yeats (qv) and his associates) refused responsibility for it. Its first production was Hobson's historical drama Brian of Banba, inspired by a poem by Milligan offering the apparently hopeless struggle of the young Brian Bórama (qv) as a model for modern separatists. The theatre was associated with a literary magazine, Uladh (1904–5), the contributors to which included Joseph Campbell (qv). Because of his political commitments Hobson drifted away from the group, which survived into the 1930s, its programme dominated by kitchen comedies.

Membership of the IRB From 1901 Hobson belonged to Cumann na nGaedheal, a front organisation for the IRB, and in 1904 was sworn into the IRB by Denis McCullough (qv); they joined other young men (including Sean MacDermott (qv) and Patrick McCartan (qv)) in displacing the older Belfast leadership of the brotherhood. In 1906 they founded the Dungannon Clubs, another front organisation for the IRB, which maintained republican separatism against the dual-monarchist ‘Hungarian policy’ of Arthur Griffith (qv). Its mouthpiece was The Republic, a Belfast weekly established by Hobson in December 1906, which published several writers associated with Bigger and the Ulster theatre. He also debated with home rulers at public meetings in Ulster and Scotland. Hobson's working life was precarious: he lost one job because of his membership of the Gaelic League and another through his anti-recruiting activities. He visited America early in 1907, where he met IRB veterans and established contact with John Devoy (qv), becoming Irish correspondent for Devoy's Gaelic American.

In May 1907 The Republic merged with the Dublin journal The Peasant, edited by W. P. Ryan (qv) with Hobson as deputy editor. When the Dungannon Clubs merged with Griffith's Sinn Féin shortly afterwards Hobson became vice-president of the merged organisation. From 1907 younger IRB men associated with the Belfast group (including Hobson) and the veteran former prisoners Tom Clarke (qv) and John Daly (qv) challenged the IRB leadership in Dublin, which was finally deposed in 1911. Hobson moved to the capital in 1908, and became 'centre' of the Teeling circle of the IRB; in 1911 he was elected chairman of the Dublin centre's board and the Leinster board, and a member of the IRB supreme council. He was a particular friend of Clarke, who idealised him as a new John Mitchel (qv) and hoped that he could one day win over Ulster protestants to separatism. In 1909 The Peasant became the Irish Nation and the Peasant, remaining under Ryan's editorship with major contributions by Hobson.

In August 1909 Hobson and Constance Markievicz (qv) co-founded a republican boy scout movement, Fianna Éireann, which borrowed its name and some characteristics from Hobson's Belfast youth club but was more explicitly military in its orientation. Hobson was its first president, though Markievicz later replaced him. Hobson and Markievicz briefly shared a large house in Co. Dublin, combining Fianna duties with an unsuccessful horticultural enterprise, which gave rise to some tension with Markievicz's husband. (Hobson's son later interpreted some of his father's
descriptions of eccentric behaviour by the countess as indicating sexual advances that Hobson was too idealistic and sexually naïve to recognise or reciprocate; Hobson himself did not regard them in this light.) In 1912 Hobson founded an IRB circle for Fianna members.

**Nationalist power struggles** After reading the writings on popular resistance by James Fintan Lalor (qv) in 1901, Hobson had begun to advocate this form of action; in 1909 his handbook, *Defensive warfare*, was published by the west Belfast branch of Sinn Féin. But the following year Hobson and his allies resigned from Sinn Féin over policy differences with Griffith, and founded a monthly journal of their own, *Irish Freedom* (edited by Hobson), and several Freedom clubs.

In July 1913 Hobson organised drilling for members of the IRB in Dublin in preparation for the founding of a volunteer force, and he was one of the IRB group that persuaded Eoin MacNeill (qv) to found the Irish Volunteers, against the advice of MacNeill's old friend and Gaelic League associate P. H. Pearse (qv), who warned him against such extremists as Hobson. Hobson became secretary of the Volunteer executive in December 1913, to the disquiet of the Clarke–MacDermott group within the IRB, who were alarmed at Hobson's assumption of such a prominent position. Hobson believed that once the Volunteers had been founded, IRB members should regard non-IRB Volunteers as colleagues and work with them on equal terms within a broad group encompassing nationalists of different opinions. By contrast Clarke and MacDermott and their associates believed that the IRB should be controlled by a tight-knit internal caucus, which could manipulate the Volunteers as a whole and use non-IRB members of the leadership for its own ends while keeping them ignorant of its true strategy.

These tensions were compounded by Hobson's arrogant air: he was acutely conscious that he had already been a separatist when MacDermott was a member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and he later claimed that MacDermott had never quite shaken off the Hibernians' fondness for wire-pulling and intrigue. Hobson was also compromised by his friendship with Casement, whose eccentricities and government service aroused suspicions that he was a government spy. Hobson used *Irish Freedom* to promote Casement's view that Ireland's best interests lay in forming an alliance with Germany against Britain; during an American speaking tour in March 1914 Hobson passed a message to this effect from Casement to Devoy for transmission to the German ambassador.

In the first half of 1914 Hobson drew closer to MacNeill, becoming his principal adviser. In June, when John Redmond (qv) threatened to set up his own volunteer organisation if he was not allowed to nominate half of the Volunteers' executive committee, most of the IRB element in the Volunteer leadership favoured refusal. Hobson, however, persuaded MacNeill and the executive majority to accept Redmond's nominees, thereby avoiding a crippling split. Clarke, suffering from the after-effects of long imprisonment and the tensions of his political activity, interpreted
Hobson’s actions as treason: he accused Hobson of selling himself to Dublin Castle and they never spoke to each other again. Pearse, whom Hobson had sworn into the IRB, was now allied with the intransigents, but he accepted Hobson’s good faith and interceded when Devoy sacked Hobson from the *Gaelic American*. Rather than split the IRB, Hobson left the supreme council and the editorship of *Irish Freedom*, but he retained his other IRB positions and remained active in the brotherhood, helping to organise the Howth/Kilcoole gunrunning in July 1914. At this time he also resigned from the Society of Friends, having long abandoned Quaker pacifism; he remained a non-denominational Protestant, and later had difficulty obtaining a dispensation to marry a Catholic.

**The Easter rising and its aftermath** After the outbreak of the First World War and the split between Redmondite and MacNeillite Volunteers, Hobson became the driving force of the MacNeill group, which favoured a defensive strategy and guerrilla warfare. When he discovered that the Pearse group was actively preparing a pre-emptive rising, in March 1916 Hobson urged MacNeill to confront them, but MacNeill refused to press the issue after receiving assurances from Pearse. On the Thursday of Holy Week 1916 Hobson learned of the impending insurrection and notified MacNeill; they confronted Pearse but MacNeill failed to act decisively against the plotters, and on the evening of Good Friday Hobson was lured to a meeting and detained until the outbreak of the rising.

Believing that the rebels had wrecked Ireland’s hopes, Hobson took no part in the fighting; unlike MacNeill (who was more receptive to political symbolism and less unbending) he evaded arrest. Thereafter he was excluded from mainstream Irish nationalist politics: he was barred from the meeting at the Mansion House in 1917, when the second Sinn Féin party was founded, and ostracised by many former friends. He continued to believe in the efficacy of guerrilla warfare and held its effectiveness during the war of Independence vindicated his original strategy. In 1918 he published the first volume of *A Short History of the Irish Volunteers* (no more appeared) followed by an abridged edition of the life of Wolfe Tone (qv), and in 1921 a selection of Tone's letters.

**Later career** On 19 June 1916 Hobson married (Mary) Clare Gregan, formerly a secretary in the Irish Volunteer offices; they had a daughter and a son. On the foundation of the Irish Free State, Hobson became deputy director of the stamping department in the office of the revenue commissioners; he held this position until his retirement in 1948. In 1929 he edited *A Book of Dublin* for Dublin corporation and in 1932 edited the *Saorstát Éireann Official Handbook*, a multi-author account of Irish life and culture commissioned by the government of W. T. Cosgrave (qv). He took a strong interest in the Gate Theatre during its early period, helping to recruit support for it at the time of its foundation; he edited and published in 1934 the *Book of the Gate Theatre*. He also took an interest in Esperanto.
Hobson detested the cautious economic policies of post-independence Irish governments, describing them as ‘economic unionists’. From 1923 he advocated reafforestation, believing that spin-off industries would end rural depopulation and stabilise the Gaeltacht. His position as a civil servant obliged him to publish much of his writing on such matters anonymously, as, for example, *The new querist* (1933), whose authorship Hobson acknowledged only when he reprinted it in his memoir of 1968. In 1935 he founded a monthly journal, *Prosperity* (which became *Social Justice* in 1936 and folded in 1937), advocating the proto-Keynesian social credit theories of Major C. H. Douglas; these argued that economic growth could be secured by printing extra money to finance public works while controlling the speculative activities of the banks. Hobson joined the catholic social activists Father Edward Cahill (qv) SJ and Mrs Berthon Waters in the League Against Poverty. In 1936 they founded a monetary reform group, the League for Social Justice; they drafted the minority report of the banking commission (1938) equating monetary reform with the social doctrine of the papal encyclicals. Orthodox economists, including George O'Brien (qv), were utterly dismissive of Hobson and his associates. Although monetary reform had cranky, far-right overtones, it was a serious, if underdeveloped, response to the deflation of the 1930s. Many poets and artists advocated social credit in the 1930s and several prominent British adherents of this policy were lapsed Quakers. Hobson's former Volunteer associate Eimar O'Duffy (qv) (whose satirical *King Goshawk* trilogy was published under Hobson's ‘Martin Lester’ imprint from the late 1920s), was also a monetary reformer. After his retirement Hobson informally advised Clann na Poblachta on such matters as reafforestation and breaking the link with sterling; his criticisms of the banks' dominance of the Irish economy were occasionally quoted by the Irish Green Party in the 1990s.

A major preoccupation of Hobson's later career was his support for Roger Casement and his denial of Casement's homosexuality. He denounced the accusation as despicable propaganda, a charge that was foreshadowed in 1908, when, in the *Gaelic American*, Hobson had publicised the Irish crown jewels scandal, with its homosexual overtones, as evidence of British degeneracy; he expanded on this in his 1968 memoir. Hobson and McCartan encouraged W. J. Maloney (who was based in America) to write *The forged Casement diaries* (1937), which advanced the now exploded theory that the diaries were Casement's transcription of material written by a Peruvian criminal. Hobson became Maloney's Dublin research assistant and oversaw the publication.

**Last years and assessment** On his retirement from the staff of the revenue commissioners in 1948, Hobson moved from Dublin to Roundstone, Co. Galway. He was frequently consulted by scholars about the Volunteers and the events of 1916, and significantly influenced scholarly reassessments of the Easter rising. In retrospect Hobson criticised Pearse as a ‘sentimental egotist’ with a ‘strain of abnormality’ whose financial irresponsibility inflicted severe damage on vulnerable creditors (Edwards, 157, 337–8). Shortly before his death Hobson published a
fragmentary memoir, *Ireland yesterday and tomorrow* (1968). Increasingly blind, he spent his last years with his daughter in Castleconnell, Co. Limerick, where he died on 8 August 1969.

Hobson’s was a life of achievement, though the potential greatness once seen in him never came to fruition. His expectations were arrogantly high, his disappointment and frustration profound. ‘The Phoenix of our youth has fluttered to earth such a miserable old hen’, he lamented in 1953 (Dudgeon, 16). Many, like Sean O’Casey (qv), thought Hobson vain and manipulative; others, like MacNeill, revered his quiet determination and selflessness. MacNeill’s nephew, the novelist Brian Moore (qv), who chose to have his ashes scattered at the Connemara graveyard where Hobson is buried, wrote: ‘his body lay here in this small Connemara field, facing the ocean, under a simple marker was somehow emblematic of his life’ (Patricia Craig, *Brian Moore* (2002)).

Hobson’s papers are in the NLI, including his copy of the *Irish Freedom* anthology, *The Voice of Freedom*, annotated with the authors of the anonymously published articles. The Maloney Papers in the New York Public Library have his extensive correspondence with Maloney in connection with *The forged Casement diaries*. UCD holds letters to Denis McCullough (qv) (McCullough Papers, UCD Archives Department, P120) and Desmond Ryan (qv) (Ryan Papers, UCD Archives Department, LA10). Police reports on Hobson’s separatist activities are in the NAI. A few items of correspondence may be found in the *New Statesman* archive at the University of Sussex Library.

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(2002); Marnie Hay, ‘Bulmer Hobson: the rise and fall of an Irish nationalist’ (Ph.D., UCD, 2004); local history newscuttings, Belfast Central Library collection