

MacEntee, Sean (John) Francis

by Deirdre McMahon

MacEntee, Sean (John) Francis (1889–1984), revolutionary, politician, and engineer, was born 1 January 1889 at Mill St., Belfast, eldest among seven children of James MacEntee, publican, and Mary MacEntee (née Owens), who both came from Co. Monaghan. James MacEntee owned three public houses in Belfast, and had been a member of the IRB and a supporter of Charles Stewart Parnell (qv). Sean MacEntee was educated at St Malachy's College and went on to study electrical engineering at the Belfast Municipal College of Technology. His daughter, Máire Cruise O'Brien, observed that although he was always bitter at being denied a university education, engineering was his proper bent as he was 'thoroughly a man of the twentieth century' (O'Brien, *Same age as the state*, 33). However, he was also interested in cultural nationalism and joined the Gaelic League and the Ulster Literary Theatre. A volume of his poetry was published in 1917 and some of his poems were also included in the anthology *Poets of the insurrection* (1918). In 1914 he was appointed assistant chief engineer at the Dundalk electricity works.

Radical politics and war MacEntee's interest in politics had been stimulated by James Connolly (qv) and in 1910 he joined Connolly's Socialist Party of Ireland. In his memoir *Episode at Easter* (1966) MacEntee explained how he had been radicalised by the challenge of the Ulster unionist leader, Edward Carson (qv): 'he not only preached rebellion, he openly armed and prepared for it. And he did so with impunity.' MacEntee joined the Dundalk corps of the Irish Volunteers in January 1914. At the end of that year he was planning to leave Ireland but decided to stay, and after the split in the Volunteers in the summer of 1914 he joined the wing led by Eoin MacNeill (qv). By 1915 the Dundalk corps numbered only 120 men. When the Easter rising started on 24 April 1916, MacNeill's countermanding order caused considerable confusion. The Dundalk Volunteers had mobilised on Easter Sunday and marched to Slane in Co. Meath to wait for orders which never came. MacEntee eventually made his way to Dublin, but on the journey an affray occurred at Castlebellingham in which an RIC constable was killed. MacEntee was later charged with his murder. In *Episode at Easter* MacEntee wrote a vivid account of the last days and hours in the GPO with incisive portraits of the leaders, Patrick Pearse (qv), Connolly, Thomas MacDonagh (qv) and Éamonn Ceannt (qv). In a 1972 interview MacEntee recalled how he felt after the failure of the rising: 'It had been in every sense of the word, an adventure. People felt toughened and hardened by the fact that they had ran so close and not to be pushed over [*sic*]' (UCDA, MacEntee papers P67/776 (11); interview for BBC, Nov. 1972).

MacEntee was sentenced to death for his role in the events at Castlebellingham but was reprieved. He was imprisoned at Dartmoor, Lewes, and Portland but was released in June 1917. Later that year he was elected to the Volunteer national

executive. In May 1918 he was rearrested after the discovery of the alleged 'German plot'. During his imprisonment at Gloucester jail he started to write a narrative of the rising in Louth which was the basis for *Episode at Easter*, although it was not published for another fifty years. In December 1918 he was elected Sinn Féin MP for Monaghan South and was returned unopposed in May 1921. In the same election he also stood for Belfast West in a deal brokered by the northern nationalist MP Joseph Devlin (qv), but he was unsuccessful. He was vice-brigadier and then brigadier of the IRA's Belfast Brigade (1919–21), in what was some of the most hostile terrain of the war of independence.

He married (May 1921) Margaret Browne, whom he had first met in 1917 at a ceilidh for released prisoners. The Brownes were a prominent republican family from Co. Tipperary. Margaret's brothers were Mgr Pádraig de Brún (qv), president of UCG, Maurice Browne (qv), priest and novelist, and Michael (David) Browne (qv), Dominican friar and cardinal. Margaret took a double first in Irish and modern languages at UCD and was awarded an MA in 1917. She had joined Cumann na mBan before the Easter rising and had acted as a courier for Liam Mellows (qv) in Galway. She worked for the Sinn Féin election campaign in 1918 and then for the Belfast boycott in 1920–22.

MacEntee opposed the 1921 Anglo–Irish treaty and made the most forceful and prophetic denunciations of its Ulster clauses, which, he argued, would make partition permanent. He remained a consistent critic of southern nationalism's failure to appreciate the depth of Ulster unionist feeling. In 1922 he set up a short-lived consulting engineering firm but this collapsed after the start of the civil war in 1922. MacEntee was interned at Kilmainham and Gormanston and was released at Christmas 1923. Their daughter Máire was born in April 1922, and during his internment Margaret worked long hours teaching and continued to pay the rent for her husband's engineering office. MacEntee was released from prison because he had been engaged to work on the street lighting for Wexford, and the mayor of Wexford refused to pay the contractors until he was released. He resumed his engineering career while Margaret, who had lost her job at Rathmines technical school because she refused to make a declaration of loyalty, joined the teaching staff of Alexandra College, whose headmistress merely asked her to keep her political views from the parents. The couple had two more children, Séamus (b. 1924) and Barbara (b. 1928). Margaret remained at Alexandra until the early 1930s, when she was appointed to a lectureship in Irish at UCD.

Return to the dáil; minister for finance MacEntee contested the Co. Dublin constituency for Sinn Féin in 1923 and 1924 but was unsuccessful. When asked why he returned to politics when Fianna Fáil was founded in 1926, MacEntee replied: 'Just the determination not to be beaten. It wasn't a case of going out of politics. In internment, you're in politics. You're surrounded by politicians' (ibid.). In the split with Sinn Féin, he was typically trenchant on the question of Ulster: for Sinn Féin to argue that the new policy of Éamon de Valera (qv) made partition permanent

was nonsense, he argued, as republican policy generally had achieved this since 1922. MacEntee was elected to the dáil for Co. Dublin in June 1927 and, with the other Fianna Fáil TDs, took the oath of allegiance and became part of the official opposition. He was reelected in September in the second general election of 1927. The leaders of the new party criss-crossed the country, setting up new cumainn and building up a formidable political machine: 'For more than five years', MacEntee later recalled, 'hardly any of us were at home for a single night or any weekend. Lemass (qv) bought up four or five "old bangers" and with them we toured every parish in the country founding Fianna Fáil branches on the solid basis of Old IRA and Sinn Féin members. They were all marvellous people' (McInerney, *Ir. Times*, 22–5 July 1974). MacEntee was one of the party's treasurers and was elected to the party's national executive, on which he served until he retired from politics in 1969.

When Fianna Fáil won the general election in February 1932, fears of political and social revolution were rife. De Valera's decision to make MacEntee minister for finance was intended as a reassuring appointment. There was considerable pressure from the Fianna Fáil grassroots to purge the civil service of officials who were considered disloyal, but MacEntee refused. He had last met the secretary of his new department, James McElligott (qv), when they were both escaping from the GPO in 1916, but apart from this bond they both espoused conservative fiscal, social, and administrative policies, opposing increased taxation and demands for state provision of social services. In 1934 MacEntee appointed a commission to examine banking, currency and credit in the Irish Free State. Given the conservative composition of the commission, the conclusions of its report in 1938 were unsurprising: it criticised the government's social programmes, particularly housing, and also the sharp increase in the national debt. It also concluded that the banking system was adequate. MacEntee had been against the establishment of a central bank in 1933, but he accepted the commission's recommendation that one should be set up, which happened in 1942.

MacEntee played an important role in the events that led to the passing of the external relations act in December 1936, following the abdication of King Edward VIII. He urged de Valera to take advantage of the abdication to remove the British crown from the internal and external affairs of the Irish state. However, other aspects of de Valera's constitutional policy were more controversial within the MacEntee household: Margaret MacEntee was vehemently opposed to the clauses of the 1937 constitution on the place of women in the home. During the six-year economic war with Britain (1932–8) MacEntee consistently pressed de Valera to reach a settlement, and a memorandum he wrote in November 1937 spurred de Valera to open negotiations with the British government, which started in January 1938. During the four-month-long talks, MacEntee frequently vented his exasperation about de Valera's negotiating strategy in letters to his wife. He wanted to conclude the finance, trade, and defence agreements and thought it hopeless to hold out for concessions on partition, as de Valera wanted.

Relations with Lemass MacEntee served in all of de Valera's administrations until 1959, but his relations with his colleagues were often difficult. There are six letters of resignation in his papers, dating from the late 1930s to the early 1950s, none of which, however, actually resulted in his resignation. He displayed a certain obtuseness in suggesting several times to de Valera that he take over the external affairs portfolio, which was firmly rejected by the taoiseach. He also took a combative approach to journalists and pursued a number of successful libel cases, despite advice from colleagues not to do so. But it was the political rivalry between MacEntee and Seán Lemass which was to be a dominant theme in Fianna Fáil politics from 1932 to 1959. However, while they certainly differed on economic and financial policy, they were closer on other issues. As Dublin TDs they were consistently critical about the deficiencies of Irish agriculture. They were also united in their opposition to the report of the commission on vocational organisation, which was published in 1944. When the second world war broke out in September 1939, Lemass was given the new Department of Supplies, which had the task of ensuring the country's economic survival during the conflict. To achieve this, he had no intention of being constrained by the conservatism of the Department of Finance, and MacEntee was moved first to Industry and Commerce (1939–41) and then to Local Government and Public Health (1941–6).

MacEntee loved cinema, theatre, and jazz. He gave up poetry in the late 1920s but maintained an interest in literature; he was particularly proud of his eldest daughter's career as a poet. In 1942 he pressed de Valera to give a subsidy to *The Bell*, the journal of Sean O'Faolain (qv). In 1946 he took up the cudgels on behalf of one of his officials, Brian O'Nolan (qv) (alias 'Flann O'Brien' and 'Myles na Gopaleen'), when the Department of Finance refused to sanction his promotion because of his journalism. The refusal was 'nothing short of victimization', he protested to the minister for finance (UCDA, MacEntee papers, P67/281).

MacEntee was always a voracious reader and his papers testify to the wide range of journals and newspapers which he read from all over the world, copies of which he frequently sent to reluctant cabinet colleagues. During the Emergency he became increasingly concerned by the encroachment of the state, and this reached a pitch after the publication (1942) of the Beveridge report on social insurance in Britain. The report received wide coverage in Ireland, and MacEntee feared that this would produce unrealistic expectations of similar provisions by the Irish government. He bombarded his colleagues with a flood of articles and newspaper reports attacking state socialism. Despite this, the government introduced children's allowances in 1944 and MacEntee himself was largely responsible for drafting the 1947 health act, which introduced extensive reforms in the Irish health service.

In the 1948 elections MacEntee was returned for the new Dublin South-East constituency but Fianna Fáil was defeated. His fellow constituency TDs included the new taoiseach, John A. Costello (qv), and the new minister for health, Dr Noel Browne (qv). MacEntee was friendly with Costello and other opposition politicians,

including Desmond FitzGerald (qv) and Michael Hayes (qv), but he was scathing about Browne and remained so. MacEntee refused to participate in the all-party anti-partition campaign which started later in 1948, arguing that once again southern nationalism was displaying its ignorance of Ulster unionism.

The 1950s and 1960s When Fianna Fáil returned to power in 1951 MacEntee returned to the Department of Finance, a sign that Lemass's dominant role during the war and the postwar years was waning. His influence with the trade unions was also declining, and for the first time commentators began to express doubts about Lemass's assumed succession to de Valera. MacEntee was in the ascendant, but this did not survive his 1952 budget, which was called the 'famine budget'. When he returned to Finance in 1951 there was a trade deficit of £123 million, and to rectify this the budget included increases in income tax and in the cost of petrol, tobacco, spirits, ale, stout, tea, and sugar. MacEntee and Lemass agreed that Irish external assets should not be frittered away on imported goods for domestic consumption. But while the budget was successful to the extent that the trade deficit declined sharply, industrial production was lower and unemployment rose. This bore particularly on the urban workers who were Lemass's constituents in Dublin. MacEntee later wrote that Lemass had 'a strong bias in favour of the worker and of organised labour. If he had a weakness in his approach to such matters, it was for the more spectacular solution, and this, when I was minister for finance, sometimes set us at variance with each other. Which, given our respective responsibilities and personal dispositions, was unavoidable' (obituary of Lemass, *Irish Press*, 12 May 1971).

The differences between MacEntee and Lemass continued when Fianna Fáil left office again in 1954. In 1955–6 Lemass made important speeches on full employment and the need for foreign investment. When another general election was called in early 1957 the outgoing taoiseach, Costello, highlighted the economic disagreements between MacEntee and Lemass. But with the return of Fianna Fáil to power in 1957, the supporters of financial orthodoxy lost ground as the government gradually dismantled protection, liberalised external trade, and actively promoted foreign investment. In 1959 de Valera retired as taoiseach to make way for Lemass and to stand for the presidency. Despite the past tensions between them, Lemass appointed MacEntee tánaiste, a position he held until 1965. MacEntee wanted the external affairs portfolio, but this remained with Frank Aiken (qv). MacEntee later wrote that, like de Valera, Lemass had the ability to pick a good team although he had a more difficult job as he had a wider choice of able young men eager for promotion. Explaining why he promoted MacEntee, Lemass wrote that 'it would have seemed a rebuke to him if I did not appoint him as tánaiste so I did appoint him. It is far more important to maintain goodwill and harmony than seek a more effective distribution of responsibility' (Quoted in Brian Farrell, *Seán Lemass* (1991), 101). MacEntee combined the health and social welfare portfolios until 1965. One of the most contentious pieces of legislation passed during his tenure was the Health (Fluoridation of Water Supplies) Act, which introduced mandatory fluoridation of

drinking water (Ireland was the first country in Europe to implement this in 1964). The act was challenged in the supreme court in *Ryan v. Attorney General* (1965), but the court held that the act did not infringe the plaintiff's right to bodily integrity.

Final years Relations between MacEntee and Lemass deteriorated after the 1965 election. MacEntee had planned to retire but his constituency organisation put pressure on him to stand again – which he did, much to Lemass's annoyance. But MacEntee was vitriolic when Lemass decided to retire in October 1966, declaring that Lemass was ten years younger than he was and had 'let us all down', squandering de Valera's 'great heritage' (UCD, MacEntee papers, P67/734). He was clearly unaware of the toll that the strain of office was taking on Lemass's health. MacEntee finally retired from politics in 1969. When the northern troubles erupted that year he urged the taoiseach, Jack Lynch (qv), to take a new approach to Northern Ireland, stating that 'the hard fact [is] that the Unionist party does represent the traditions and deeply-held convictions of a large majority of the people in that area' (ibid., P67/520; letter from MacEntee to Lynch, 6 November 1969). He gave unstinting support to Lynch in 1970 when the latter dismissed Charles Haughey (1925–2006) and Neil Blaney (qv) from his government after an attempt to import arms for northern republicans.

Lemass died in 1971 and de Valera four years later. The obituary of Lemass which MacEntee wrote for the *Irish Press* was generous, perceptive, and testified to the comradeship that lay beneath their long and often difficult working relationship. After de Valera's death in August 1975 he wrote to de Valera's son Vivion (qv) that he looked back on his years working for de Valera 'with pride, but also with awe' (ibid., P67/479 (13); MacEntee to Vivion de Valera, 30 August 1975). Margaret MacEntee died in September 1976. MacEntee remained active until his last illness at the end of 1983. His kidneys failed but he refused dialysis and insisted on going home to die. He died 12 January 1984.

UCDA, Sean MacEntee papers; *The poems of J. F. MacEntee* (1917); Sean MacEntee, *Episode at Easter* (1966); id., 'Sean Lemass', *Ir. Press*, 12 May 1971; Michael McInerney, 'Sean MacEntee', *Ir. Times*, 22–5 July 1974; Máire Cruise O'Brien, *The same age as the state* (2003)