

## McGilligan, Patrick

by David Harkness

McGilligan, Patrick (1889–1979), politician, academic, and lawyer, was born 12 April 1889. His family home was at Hanover Place, Coleraine, Co. Londonderry, and he was the second child and second son among the eight sons and four daughters of Patrick McGilligan, businessman and MP (anti-Parnellite nationalist member for Fermanagh South, 1892–5) and his wife Catherine (née O'Farrell). He began his education at Mrs Craig's school 'for young ladies and polite young gentlemen' at the age of four; moved five years later to St Columb's College, Derry, as a boarder, his family having moved to Castlerock; and completed his schooling at Clongowes Wood College (1904–6). Once his study of the classics had commenced he was the recipient of medals and prizes in Latin and Greek throughout his school career. Matriculating at the Royal University, which he entered in 1906, he graduated BA in classics from the newly created National University (UCD) in 1910. A near-photographic memory assisted him to further scholarships and medals, but he also played soccer for his college, and developed skills in both golf and tennis despite ill-health which interrupted his studies for a year (spent in sanatoria near Warrenpoint, Co. Down, and Petworth, Sussex, England).

On graduating he embarked on a teaching career, taking an MA in the theory and practice of education and also the higher diploma, while teaching at St Mary's College, Tallaght, Co. Dublin. He gained the gold medal in oratory at the university's Literary and Historical Society (1911–12), and moved to teach in Rochestown College, Co. Cork (1913–14), and then, more happily, to St Patrick's College, Armagh (1915–17). Appointed assistant to the professor of Latin at UCD in 1918, he moved his family to Dublin, his father having died the previous year, and his elder brother having embarked on a career in the Indian civil service. At the same time he began, part-time, to study law at the King's Inns, being called to the bar in 1921 after gaining the barrister-at-law degree and Victoria prizes in his first and final years. He had also become increasingly involved in the national struggle, standing unsuccessfully as a Sinn Féin candidate for Londonderry North in 1918 and 1919, while his home in Lower Leeson St. was used frequently as a meeting-place and safe house for more militant activists.

Early evidence of a parallel interest in economics was his appointment as secretary to the committee on economic relations, established in 1921 in connection with the Anglo–Irish negotiations, and his membership of the economic commission. He withdrew from his university position at this time, becoming a civil servant, acting as a government press censor and occasional advocate before his appointment, in the autumn of 1922, as secretary to Kevin O'Higgins (qv), minister for home affairs. In March 1923 he was appointed secretary to James McNeill (qv), Irish Free State high commissioner in London. From this vantage point he was able to attend some

of that autumn's imperial conference meetings as a substitute for James's brother Eoin MacNeill (qv), minister for education and nominal leader of the Irish delegation. Given that it had been a third brother that McGilligan had replaced as Latin assistant at UCD, he could reflect later on the extraordinary influence of the family on his career; an influence that was to be increased when John MacNeill, having won two seats in the 1923 general election, gave up his UCD seat and encouraged McGilligan to contest the ensuing by-election. Resigning from his brief civil-service career, McGilligan contested and won the seat in November 1923. He was to hold it until its abolition in 1937, when he moved to Dublin North-West until 1948, and thence to Dublin North-Central until defeat and retirement in 1965.

W. T. Cosgrave (qv) welcomed this able recruit to his party's ranks, and, after the sudden resignation of Joseph McGrath (qv) precipitated by the 'army mutiny' in April 1924, appointed him to the vacant post of minister for industry and commerce, a post he was to retain until the government's defeat in 1932. As minister he took over and successfully implemented the daring Shannon hydro-electric scheme, along with the institution of a national grid and the founding of the Electricity Supply Board (1927), the first and most successful of the pioneering semi-state bodies created to manage essential services. These vital matters were at a crucial stage when the murder of Kevin O'Higgins occurred in July 1927. The most obvious successor to him as minister for external affairs, the ablest, and the man closest to him in friendship and sympathy, was McGilligan. He took on External Affairs from October 1927 while continuing to hold Industry and Commerce. The years 1927–32, therefore, mark the apogee of his political career and of his huge contribution to the development of his country both domestically and internationally. At home, power and light were brought to factory and cottage as the country emerged from the neglect of centuries and the ravages of recent civil war; abroad, at the League of Nations, and within the comity of an emerging Commonwealth of Nations, Ireland's status and international identity was assured and enhanced.

The highlights of the pursuit of sovereignty in this period include the statute of Westminster (1931), which secured in fact the autonomous status declared for dominions at the 1926 imperial conference, and which was negotiated in the 1929 conference on the operation of dominion legislation, and agreed at the 1930 imperial conference, at both of which McGilligan took a leading role. Indeed, of the constitutional conclusions of the 1930 conference, journalist R. M. Smyllie (qv), no particular friend of the administration, could still observe that 'the fine Italian hand of P. J. McGilligan [the 'J.' was Smyllie's invention] will be traced on every line' (*Ir. Times*, 23 Oct. 1930). He was also instrumental in securing Ireland's own great seal (1931) to validate its international agreements, and the sole right of the Irish government to advise the crown in matters relating exclusively to Ireland. It was in this period, too, that Ireland's diplomatic service was slowly expanded, with legations established in France, Germany, and the Holy See (1929), and new consular offices in New York and Boston (1930). Its active role at the League of

Nations was crowned by a successful bid for a non-permanent seat on the League council in 1930.

When Cumann na nGaedheal lost office (March 1932), McGilligan, still a TD, turned to the bar to preserve his income. He was not unsuccessful at this time and later, but he found that starting late, behind less able contemporaries, it was never entirely to his taste. In 1934, therefore, when opportunity arose, he applied for and obtained the chair of constitutional law, international law, and criminal law and procedure at UCD, including among his referees not only the president of the college, and Ireland's chief justice, but two prime ministers, R. B. Bennett of Canada and J. B. M. Herzog of South Africa.

Professor, TD, and barrister (called to the inner bar 1946), he remained politically active from 1932 to 1948, dealing with industry and commerce, external affairs, and, increasingly, finance from the opposition front bench. His opposition was genuine and deep-rooted, and he withheld longer than most the hand of friendship from those who had refused to accept the treaty and whose actions had added to the difficulties of state-building. His tongue could be vitriolic and he did not suffer fools gladly. It was during this period, however, that his university recognised the range of his versatility and his change of focus by conferring upon him the degree of doctor of economic science, *h.c.* (1940).

The unwillingness of Cosgrave to deal with economic matters and the defeat of Ernest Blythe (qv) in the 1933 general election had left McGilligan to respond to Fianna Fáil budgets; and it was his success here, the evolution of his Keynesian thinking, and the evidence of his growing social concern that led to his nomination, supported by Labour, as minister for finance in the first inter-party government (1948–51). He had been one of the foremost pushing for such a government, to break Fianna Fáil's sixteen-year rule; during its three fruitful years of office he introduced the state's first capital budget (1950), and, through courageous financial management which included borrowing for development, he contributed much to the expansion of house-building and land-renovation and to the taming of the scourge of tuberculosis, these being among the principal successes of the period. In 1951, after the 'mother-and-child' débâcle and the defeat of the government, he returned to bar work. When the political tide turned once more in 1954 he was content, at the age of 65, to accept the offer of the post of attorney general in the second inter-party administration, rather than Finance, though on reflection he probably felt he could have avoided some of the mistakes made in that department had he returned to its management. After the government's defeat in 1957, he continued to make an impact in the courts, notably in *O'Donovan v. A.G.* in 1961 (protecting the proportional representation voting system) and *Ryan v. A.G.* in 1965 (court protection of individual rights). It was in the 1965 general election, however, that he lost his dáil seat, and he retired from politics and from his UCD chair.

After so long and active a career a short retirement might have seemed likely, but for a further fourteen years he remained a lively observer of all aspects of life, political, social, and sporting, and in the latter not least the weekly doings of Tottenham Hotspur, a club he had begun to follow during his convalescence in 1907. One of his last public acts was to present his extensive papers to the UCD archives department (1974) and he reflected then, as he did often, that he had had great good fortune in the timing of his career. He had owed much early on to the brilliance of Tommy McLaughlin (qv), the brains behind the Shannon scheme, for example, and had been presented with great opportunities by League and commonwealth as they developed towards maturity; and he had benefited much from the support of his university, politically as well as academically, throughout his long association.

He was fortunate too in his family life, as he also noted. On 3 April 1929 he had married Ann Conolly, fourth of five lively daughters, and one son, of Thomas Conolly, Glasnevin builder and businessman, and his wife Teresa (née McQuaid). The marriage of Patrick and Ann was long and fulfilling, and it is the measure of their joint sense of humour that they shared with others the comment recorded by the German envoy to Ireland in 1930 in his despatch to headquarters evaluating the Irish governing élite. Discovered in the archives after the second world war, his comment on McGilligan was: 'a very able man, but completely dominated by his headstrong wife'. To their growing satisfaction, their daughter Evanna and sons Paddy, Kevin, and John grew up to reflect their parents' talents, choosing to pursue their own careers within easy reach of the family home at 58 Lansdowne Rd: a strong, warm, and expanding family to bring great satisfaction to old age.

Patrick McGilligan died on Thursday 15 November 1979 at Our Lady's Manor nursing home, Dalkey, and was buried in Glasnevin cemetery on 17 November, in the presence of representatives of government and judiciary, dáil and university, and not least the ESB, as well as numerous family and friends. His strong convictions had helped him to consolidate the independence of the fledgling Free State; his loyalty to country and to church had been steadfast; and his charm and courtesy to those close to him retained their affection to the end. He was the last of the founders of the state to die; his constructive contribution to his country remains incalculable.

---

D. W. Harkness, *The restless dominion: the Irish Free State and the British Commonwealth of Nations, 1921–31* (1969); David Harkness, 'Patrick McGilligan: man of Commonwealth', Norman Hillmer and Philip Wigley (ed.) *The first British Commonwealth: essays in honour of Nicholas Mansergh* (1980), 117–35 (also in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, viii, no. 1 (1979), 117–35); Maurice Manning and Moore McDowell, *Electricity supply in Ireland: the history of the ESB* (1984); and many interviews, and also much assistance from his family

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 100.103.238.216 on Mon Jan 18 13:09:56 UTC 2021 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2021 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.