

## O'Brien, Francis Cruise

by Aideen Foley and Lawrence William White

O'Brien, Francis Cruise (1885–1927), journalist, author, and cooperationist, was born 18 November 1885, at 6 Grantham St., Dublin, one of two children of John Cruise O'Brien, a law clerk, and Mary Cruise O'Brien (née Lally); his sister, Cathleen, married the novelist Eimar O'Duffy (qv). His father moved from his native Ennistymon, Co. Clare, where the family were long-established landowners, to Dublin, where he trained and entered a large law firm; by the 1890s his alcoholism was sapping the family finances. His mother claimed kinship with Thomas Arthur Lally de Tollendal (1702–66), a senior army officer in the French service. Born prematurely, physically frail and sickly, Francis received primary education at home from a tutor, and secondary education from the Christian Brothers at Synge St. and North Richmond St. After performing brilliantly in the intermediate examinations, he matriculated (1903) at University College, the Jesuit institution on St Stephen's Green, where he emerged as one of the leading figures in an outstanding generation of students that produced the political, professional, and cultural elite of early twentieth-century Ireland. Orphaned by the deaths of both parents, during his college years he lived with his sister on Leeson St. His college nickname, 'Crusoe', signified his individualist character and thinking. Joining the staff of the college's outspoken student magazine, *St Stephen's*, in 1906 he was the periodical's sixth and last editor, producing just two issues before the magazine's suppression for its caustic criticisms of college authorities and the senate of the Royal University of Ireland (RUI). An outstanding public speaker and debater, he was elected (1905) to the executive committee of the Literary and Historical Society (L and H), and as auditor for the 1906–7 session. A ringleader of student protests against the playing of 'God save the king' during the annual conferral of degrees by the RUI, in October 1906 he led the L and H in a vote of censure against the college president, William Delany (qv), SJ (whom he famously described as a 'decaying old whig'), for calling in police to prevent a protest meeting on the college steps, resulting in his rustication from college for twelve months, and exclusion from all college societies. Repudiating the authority of the college council to remove an officer or expel a member, he continued as auditor of an *extra muros* L and H, causing a split in the society. Returning to college, he graduated BA (1908) and MA (1909).

A militant, but constitutional, nationalist, O'Brien was active politically from his college years in the Young Ireland Branch (YIB) of the United Irish League (UIL). As branch president in 1909 he attended the UIL national convention (the so-called 'baton convention'), where he moved a resolution that the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) concentrate entirely on home rule to the exclusion of ameliorative issues, and obstruct any British government that refused or postponed the granting of home rule; engendering fevered debate with this frontal attack on the party's alliance with the Liberals, he was among several YIBs shouted down from the convention floor and

physically attacked. During the debate on the 1912 home rule bill he denounced the Ancient Order of Hibernians as representing 'green Orangeism', and predicted that home rule would undermine clerical influence in Irish public life.

An anonymous contributor to *The Leader* of D. P. Moran (qv) (c.1906–c.1910), Cruise O'Brien became editor of the *Wexford People* (early 1910s). He married (7 October 1911) Kathleen (qv) (under O'Brien), daughter of the prominent nationalist MP David Sheehy (qv), after overcoming her family's strong objections to the match, owing to his religious agnosticism, precarious journalistic career, and outspoken advocacy of 'advanced nationalism'. Shortly after the marriage, he was sacked by the owner of the *People* for refusing to publish an intemperate article on freemasonry that he regarded as an incitement to religious hatred. Returning to Dublin, he did freelance work for several newspapers, including the *Freeman's Journal*, which eventually took him on as a leader writer. He supported the IPP's endorsement of the British first world war effort, and co-wrote the *Freeman's Journal* leaders in response to the 1916 Easter rising, condemning the insurrection but opposing the executions of the leaders, and insisting that the rising would not have occurred had home rule been implemented in 1914. Becoming private secretary to Sir Horace Plunkett (qv) in the offices of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) at 84 Merrion Sq., he was employed there in a range of capacities, including that of librarian of the Cooperative Reference Library. He wrote a report on the Irish rural library service that became the basis for a reform of the Carnegie library system (of which Plunkett was Irish trustee). He served in the secretariat of the Irish Convention (July 1917–April 1918), chaired by Plunkett, and co-authored one of the seven plans for the future government of Ireland considered by the convention, conceiving dominion self-government within the British empire, and two provincial councils (one for the historic province of Ulster, and one for the rest of the country) with veto power over enactments of a home-rule parliament of Ireland. He was deputy editor of the *Irish Statesman* (June 1919–June 1920), the organ of Plunkett's Irish Dominion League.

Cruise O'Brien co-edited, with W. E. G. Lloyd, reissues of two works by the historian W. E. H. Lecky (qv): *History of the rise and influence of the spirit of rationalism in Europe* (1910), and *Clerical influences* (1911); in their introduction to the latter, they argued that a home rule government, in which catholic nationalists and protestant unionists would be obliged to collaborate, would be the surest instrument for overcoming sectarian hatreds in Ireland. He collaborated with Lionel Smith-Gordon (1889?–1971) on two pamphlets, *Ireland's food in wartime* (1914) and *Starvation in Ireland* (1917), ascribing widespread malnutrition to unemployment, low wages, and large families. For the Cooperative Union of England he wrote two short histories, of the cooperative movements in Ireland and in Denmark. He wrote a play, 'Candidates' (1914), first performed at the United Arts Club (of which he was a founding and active member), before moving to the Abbey. On the cessation of the *Freeman's Journal* (December 1924), he worked for the *Irish Independent*, writing leaders and obituaries. A small, sickly man, thin to the verge of emaciation,

he nonetheless was high-spirited and assertive, with a quick wit and acerbic tongue, and, in the words of his son, 'the gift – traditionally esteemed and feared in Ireland – of saying wounding things in a memorable manner' (Cruise O'Brien, 13–14). In his later years he tempered his manner, becoming less cruelly satiric; an excellent mimic, with an impish sense of humour, he was well liked within a varied circle of friends. He and his wife had one son, Conor Cruise O'Brien (b. 3 November 1917), the noted politician, diplomat, and man of letters. They resided at 44 Leinster Rd, Rathmines. Ill with tuberculosis, Cruise O'Brien collapsed suddenly and died in his home while playing with his son on Christmas morning, 25 December 1927 .

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NUI archive; GRO, Dublin (birth cert.); *Ir. Independent*, 26–7 Dec. 1927 (photo.); *Ir. Times*, 27 Dec. 1927 (photo.); James Meenan (ed.), *Centenary history of the Literary and Historical Society of University College Dublin 1855–1955* [(1955)]; Burke, *IFR* (1976), 1,020; Thomas J. Morrissey, *Towards a national university: William Delany, SJ (1835–1924): an era of initiative in Irish education* (1983); Patricia Boylan, *All cultivated people: a history of the United Arts Club* (1988); Donald Harman Akenson, *Conor: a biography of Conor Cruise O'Brien, i: Narrative* (1994); Frank Callanan, *T. M. Healy* (1996); Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Memoir: my life and themes* (1998); Patrick Maume, *The long gestation: Irish nationalist life 1891–1918* (1999); Donal McCartney, *UCD: a national idea* (1999)