

O'Flanagan, Michael

by Patrick Maume

O'Flanagan, Michael (1876–1942), catholic priest and republican activist, was born 13 August 1876 at Kilkeevan, near Castlerea, Co. Roscommon, the eldest son of Edward Flanagan, small farmer, and his wife, Mary (née Crawley). O'Flanagan's parents were bilingual in English and Irish and his mother was a native speaker of Irish. Both parents' families were active in the Fenian movement and the Land League. O'Flanagan was educated at Cloonboniffe national school, Summerhill College, Sligo (1890–94), and St Patrick's College, Maynooth (1894–1900). His academic record was distinguished: he won prizes in theology, scripture, canon law, Irish, elocution, and natural science – in later life he patented several inventions, including protective goggles and methods for insulating houses. He was ordained for the diocese of Elphin on 15 August 1900.

Between 1900 and 1912 O'Flanagan was professor of Irish at Summerhill; he was active in the Gaelic League and helped to organise the annual Sligo feis. His involvement with Irish culture led him to spell his name 'O'Flanagan' (and he also used the Irish form: Micheál Ó Flannagáin). He established a considerable reputation as an eloquent preacher (enhanced by his great height), and in 1912 and 1914 he was invited to preach at various churches in Rome. From 1904 O'Flanagan made several lengthy tours of the USA to raise money for local industrial projects, often undertaken by religious orders. This was done at the behest of Bishop John Clancy (qv) of Elphin, who was closely associated with the project of agricultural and industrial development launched by Sir Horace Plunkett (qv). O'Flanagan was a life-long advocate of agricultural cooperation; he was elected to the committee of Plunkett's Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS), and became one of its vice-presidents in 1919. He was almost continuously in the USA between 1906 and 1910. In August 1910 he was elected to the Gaelic League executive, and soon thereafter returned to America with Fionán MacColuim (1875–1966) on a fund-raising tour for the league. (He subsequently served on its standing committee in 1913–15 and 1917–19, and he was its vice-president in 1920.) He already held separatist views, and from 1911 he was a member of the executive committee of Sinn Féin. On returning to Ireland in 1912 O'Flanagan was appointed to a curacy in Roscommon town, where he was relatively politically quiescent (though his parish priest, Canon Cummins, was involved in local agitation for land redistribution). Some of O'Flanagan's later problems appear to have stemmed from the death in October 1912 of Bishop Clancy; his relations with Bernard Coyne (1854–1926), the new bishop of Elphin (1913–26), were less happy.

In August 1914 O'Flanagan was transferred to the Sligo parish of Cliffoney and Grange. Here he repeatedly called on the government to engage in land redistribution (suspended because of wartime cutbacks) to increase food production,

denounced the exportation of food from Ireland owing to the risk of a new famine, and led a local protest which secured his parishioners' rights to cut turf on the local bogs. These activities had a barely concealed separatist sub-text; he lamented in the separatist weekly *The Spark* that, while Belgians had learned to hate foreign rule in one year, the Irish had not learned their lesson after centuries of oppression. In October 1915 O'Flanagan was transferred to Crossna, Co. Roscommon, despite local protests at Cliffoney. He preached and prayed at the funeral of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa (qv) (28 July–1 August 1915). After speaking at a separatist-inclined protest meeting against war taxation in January 1916 he was ordered not to address public meetings again without his bishop's written permission; he then expressed his views in articles for *The Leader*, which was owned and edited by D. P. Moran (qv).

After the Easter rising O'Flanagan was one of the few separatists to support a partitionist compromise; he argued that Ulster unionists had excluded themselves from the Irish nation by their free choice and it was inconsistent to denounce British coercion of Ireland while endeavouring to 'compel Antrim and Down to love us by force'. (He may have been influenced by the partitionist views of Arthur Clery (qv), who later defended himself by pointing to 'the Swift of Crossna'.) From mid-1917 O'Flanagan openly disobeyed his bishop's prohibition on addressing public meetings, while Coyne accused him of adopting 'modernist' views. In October 1917 he helped to broker a compromise over Sinn Féin's policy on republicanism, and was elected joint vice-president of the newly consolidated party. Although O'Flanagan repeatedly accused Redmondite bishops and priests of abusing religion for political ends, and stated that political matters should be debated in terms of secular rationality, his priesthood contributed significantly to his political status (though it excluded him from elected office since the law excluded episcopally ordained clerics from parliament). Admirers compared him to the persecuted priests of penal days, and John Dillon (qv) was accused of anti-clericalism for remarking that he did not know whether his electioneering opponent should be described as 'Father Michael O'Flanagan' or as 'Michael O'Flanagan, Esquire'.

O'Flanagan's clerical status exempted him from the May 1918 round-up of Sinn Féin leaders, and in the second half of 1918 he operated as virtual acting leader of Sinn Féin's political activities. In May–June 1918 he was formally suspended by Bishop Coyne for addressing meetings in Cavan without the permission of the local parish priests; O'Flanagan and his sympathisers maintained that his disobedience was justified on the grounds that a Sinn Féin victory in Cavan East was necessary in order to save Ireland from conscription and mass slaughter. Miraculous cures were attributed to him. During the 1918 general election campaign O'Flanagan was put in charge of Sinn Féin publicity, and travelled and spoke extensively throughout Ireland. (He privately expressed doubts about the nomination of female candidates.) He allegedly remarked after the election: 'The people have voted Sinn Féin. Now we have to explain to them what Sinn Féin is'. This was the high point of his influence: as the political wing of Sinn Féin was sidelined by government repression and

guerrilla conflict, his significance declined, and he expressed moral qualms about 'terrorist acts' by IRA members.

When the dáil was formed in January 1919 O'Flanagan became its chaplain. Late in that year he was reinstated by his bishop and appointed to a curacy in Roscommon town; however, he remained active on the Sinn Féin executive, served on dáil subcommittees dealing with propaganda and agriculture, and helped to organise a Roscommon county land board (aimed at channelling and containing land agitation). His life was repeatedly threatened by crown forces. In December 1920, having become acting president of Sinn Féin, O'Flanagan made unilateral public peace approaches to the British government, which led to meetings with the prime minister, Lloyd George, and Edward Carson (qv) in January 1921, at which O'Flanagan showed some willingness to consider a dominion settlement in Ireland. The talks bore little fruit (since it was clear that he spoke only for himself) and were subsequently criticised as 'the white flag of 1920' for unintentionally giving the impression that Sinn Féin was weakening. O'Flanagan campaigned for Sinn Féin candidates in the Northern Ireland election in May 1921. In November that year he was sent to North America on a fund-raising tour for the party, and he stayed away from Ireland until April 1925. He opposed the treaty and campaigned against it. On a visit to Australia in 1923 he was welcomed by Daniel Mannix (qv) but criticised by other catholic spokesmen and eventually arrested, imprisoned, and deported.

On his return to Ireland he was again suspended by Bishop Coyne; although the suspension lapsed with Coyne's death in July 1926 (allowing O'Flanagan to say mass in private), he was excluded from ecclesiastical office. For the remainder of his career he was frequently critical of the Vatican and the catholic hierarchy as supporters of privilege and British rule; his references to the pope as 'an enemy of Ireland' were criticised even by some republicans (notably Brian O'Higgins (qv)). He is alleged to have been linked to abortive attempts to set up a schismatic Irish national church in Ireland and America, though little is known of this episode. He also displayed sympathy for James Larkin (qv) and various left-wing causes (though he avoided formal membership of left-wing organisations).

In 1926 O'Flanagan opposed the suggestion made by Éamon de Valera (qv) that republicans might enter the dáil if the oath were abolished; he moved the resolution which led to the secession from Sinn Féin of those who founded Fianna Fáil. He visited the United States several times between 1927 and 1931 to raise funds for Sinn Féin (and for himself, as his economic circumstances were now severely reduced). In October 1933 he was elected president of Sinn Féin. This led to controversy because of his acceptance of a commission from the Fianna Fáil government to write Irish-language county histories for use in school; five of these were eventually published and five more were completed but remained unpublished. (He had earlier overseen the transcription and typing of the ordnance survey notebooks in 1927–8.) Several members, including O'Higgins and Mary MacSwiney (qv), resigned from the party in protest at his elevation to the party presidency.

O'Flanagan was expelled from Sinn Féin in January 1936 for participating in a re-enactment of the opening of the first dáil on the state-run radio service; however, he renewed connections with the party in later years. In 1935 he supported the Italian invasion of Abyssinia as a justified response to British dominance of the Mediterranean; however, he was an outspoken supporter of the republican side in the Spanish civil war, giving widely publicised speeches on the subject in Ireland and America.

O'Flanagan's faculties were restored on 3 April 1939 after negotiations with the bishop of Elphin, and this allowed him to support himself during his last years by acting as chaplain to two Dublin convents and a hospital. He died 7 August 1942 of stomach cancer in a Dublin nursing home. Michael O'Flanagan unquestionably possessed great abilities, genuine concern for the poor, and a dislike of patronage and injustice; he was also profoundly arrogant and egotistical. He can be seen both as a pioneer of catholic social doctrine and as an incorrigible maverick. There is no collection of O'Flanagan papers but material relating to him can be found in the archives of other prominent republicans, including Mary MacSwiney (UCD Archives) and J. J. O'Kelly (private ownership).

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*Beathaisnéis 1882–1982*, iv; Denis Carroll, *They have fooled you again: Michael O'Flanagan (1876–1942): priest, republican, social critic* (1993); Patrick Maume, *The long gestation: Irish nationalist life, 1891–1918* (1999); *The last days of Dublin Castle: the diaries of Mark Sturgis*, ed. Michael Hopkinson (1999); Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin Party, 1916–1923* (1999)