

Robinson, Joseph

by Eamon Murphy

Robinson, Joseph (1887–1955), republican, was born 21 April 1887 at Sevastopol Street, Belfast, first of two sons and one daughter of James Robinson, industrial-mould maker, and his wife, Sarah Jane (née Black), wool weaver. His parents, the children of exiled Fenians, were both born in France but moved to Ireland during the Franco–Prussian War. They were home rule nationalists who supported the Irish parliamentary party of Charles Stewart Parnell (qv). Joseph was educated in Belfast at Dominican Convent, Falls Road; St Mary's CBS, Divis Street; and later at De La Salle Brothers, Clonard. He left school around 1900 and began an apprenticeship as a house furnisher. He became interested in republicanism and nationalism in 1898 during the 1798 centenary commemorations, and was 'determined to devote his life to the Fenian ideal' (S. Robinson, BMH WS 1,721).

In 1902, at the age of 15, Joseph, and his younger brother Séamus (qv), both joined Na Fianna Éireann, established by Bulmer Hobson (qv) to provide Irish cultural and sporting activities for young nationalist men in Belfast. The Robinson boys were among his first recruits, and Joseph became organiser of the Fianna hurling league in Belfast. However, the organisation's initial period of popularity did not last, and within a year or two the Belfast Fianna had ceased to exist; nonetheless, its demise did not dampen Robinson's national spirit.

In 1903 the Robinson family moved to Glasgow, where Joseph joined the local branch of the Gaelic League. However, within a few years he was back in Ireland, leaving his family behind in Scotland. In 1909 an attempt to launch a new Fianna group was undertaken by Bulmer Hobson and Constance Markievicz (qv) in Dublin. It was to be somewhat different to the previous model, with more of an emphasis on scouting activities such as drilling and camping; however, the cultural and language aspects were still important. Robinson, who had remained friends with Hobson, assisted in establishing the new organisation, called Na Fianna Éireann. He was at the inaugural meeting in Lower Camden Street, Dublin, on 16 August 1909, and was elected to the first committee as treasurer and national organiser. In 1910 he was sent to Dundalk and Belfast to establish branches of the Fianna scouts; this he achieved with great success. Afterwards, he went to Glasgow, where his family were still residing, to promote and organise new units, and was appointed officer commanding of the Glasgow Fianna. He remained on the Fianna national executive council (ard choiste) back in Ireland as Belfast representative, and in 1911 became national vice-president of Na Fianna Éireann.

A member from 1911 of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in Ireland, in 1913 he was instructed by the IRB to establish a local unit of the recently founded Irish Volunteers organisation in Glasgow, and became captain of the first Irish Volunteer

company in Scotland. When the split with the Redmondite National Volunteers came in 1914, three out of the four companies of the Scottish Battalion went with Redmond (qv); however, Robinson's company sided with the Irish Volunteers of Eoin MacNeill (qv), for which he set about recruiting. On his regular visits to Dublin, he attended senior Fianna and Irish Volunteer meetings and usually stayed at Surrey House in Rathmines, the home of his close friend Constance Markievicz. He was a key participant in the Howth gun-running of 26 July 1914, and he was prominent in the Glasgow IRB, becoming centre of the local IRB circle.

Acting under orders from Dublin, he began to train Volunteers for the upcoming rebellion. In Glasgow, Robinson and his band of Fianna scouts and Irish Volunteers started to raid for arms, ammunition and explosives from surrounding munition factories and local mines for distribution to Ireland. In January 1916 he received orders from the IRB to send twenty-eight of his best men to Kimmage in Dublin for further training. He was due to leave for Dublin to prepare for events, but on 20 January, along with Seamus Reader, he was arrested by local detectives, acting on a tip-off from Dublin police. He was sent to Duke Street prison in Glasgow on charges of burglary of 500 pounds of explosives, raiding admiralty works and importing arms from Germany, which were all destined for Ireland. He was then transferred to Edinburgh Castle, and remained there until after the Dublin rising in April 1916, when he was sent to Reading jail in England, where many of the more extremist rebels were housed.

Released on 24 December 1916, he resumed his Fianna and Volunteer activities in Scotland, reorganising local units, and was again appointed OC of the Irish Volunteers in Scotland. Arrested on 3 December 1917 on a charge of having sent explosive substances to Ireland and of directing two boys to move the said explosives, he was sentenced to ten years' penal servitude on 1 February 1918. While held in Peterhead Convict Prison in Aberdeenshire, he was selected as Sinn Féin candidate for Mid Down in the 1918 general election, but lost to unionist Sir James Craig (qv). Released in March 1922, he announced his opposition to the Anglo-Irish treaty, and a month later was appointed divisional commander of the Scottish IRA by Rory O'Connor (qv), acting on behalf of the executive of the anti-treaty IRA. Éamon de Valera (qv) also appointed him as political organiser for the anti-treaty side in Scotland, and he published a short-lived weekly newspaper entitled the *Republic of Ireland*. In late June 1922 he met O'Connor in the Four Courts in Dublin, just hours before it came under attack from Free State forces, beginning the civil war. Robinson managed to make his way back to Scotland but was again a marked man, this time by both the Free State and British governments. He was arrested by Scottish police on 13 January 1923 but released without charge. In March 1923 he was apprehended again and deported to Ireland, spending eleven weeks in Mountjoy jail until his release in June.

After the civil war he ceased his revolutionary activities, and on 10 October 1923 married a Glasgow-born Cumann na mBan activist, Hannah 'Pidge' Duggan, at

St Charles church in Glasgow. In 1927 the Robinsons moved to the USA, but returned to Ireland in 1934. For a period they lived in the former residence of the late Constance Markievicz, at Frankfort House, Dartry Road, Dublin, but eventually settled in Bray, Co. Wicklow. Throughout his eventful life, Robinson worked as a house painter and at various times owned painting and decorating companies employing several people.

Robinson was one of the pioneers of the Irish independence movement, his involvement being lengthy and distinguished. Apart from Hobson, he was the only link between the original Na Fianna Éireann of 1902 and its later re-emergence in 1909, and he went on to play a vital and significant role in the growth of the Fianna and Irish Volunteer organisations, in both Ireland and Scotland. He died in Bray, Co. Wicklow, on 14 May 1955, and was buried in Glasnevin cemetery. A portrait of Joseph Robinson by artist S. Cashin was presented to the National Museum of Ireland in 1956.

NAI, Census of Ireland, 1901, www.census.nationalarchives.ie; Military Archives, www.militaryarchives.ie, Military Service Pensions Collection, Pensions and Awards file, Joseph Robinson (MSP 34 REF 298); Military Archives, Military Service Pensions Collection: Organisation and Membership files, Scottish Brigade (MA/MSPC/RO/603); BMH, www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie, witness statements: Seamus Robinson (WS 156, WS 1,721); Seamus Reader (WS 627, WS 1,767); Michael O'Flanagan (WS 800); Ina Heron (WS 919); *Bean na hEireann*, July 1910; *Freeman's Journal*, 26 Jan. 1912; Pádraig O'Riain, 'The part the Fianna played at Howth', *Nodlaig na bhFiann* (Dec. 1914); *Hamilton Advertiser*, 22 Jan. 1916; *Nationality*, 29 Jan. 1916; *Gaelic American*, 12 May 1917; *Midland Daily Telegraph*, 1 Feb. 1918; *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 2 Feb. 1918; *Dundee Courier*, 16 Jan. 1923; *Ir. Press*, 3 Dec. 1935; *Ir. Independent*, 16 May 1955; Jacqueline Van Voris, *Constance de Markievicz: in the cause of Ireland* (1967); Bulmer Hobson, *Ireland: yesterday and tomorrow* (1968); Uinseann MacEoin (ed.), *Survivors: the story of Ireland's struggle* (1980); J. Anthony Gaughan, *Scouting in Ireland* (2006); Máirtín Ó Catháin, "'A land beyond the sea": Irish and Scottish republicans in Dublin, 1916' in Ruan O'Donnell (ed.), *The impact of the 1916 rising: among the nations* (2008); Ann Matthews, *The Kimmage garrison, 1916: making billy-can bombs at Larkfield* (2010)