



NEWS FOCUS -Son of unionist clergyman who fought to halt decline of the Irish language

Historian Gordon Lucy explores the life of Douglas Hyde, the co-founder of the Gaelic League in 1893.

Douglas Hyde was born on January 17, 1860. He was the third son of the Rev Arthur Hyde, a Church of Ireland clergyman who in 1867 became rector of Frenchpark, Co Roscommon, and Elizabeth Oldfield, daughter of the Archdeacon of Elphin.

He was sent to a boarding school at Kingstown at the age of 13 but contracted measles almost immediately. He was brought home to convalesce but never returned to school, being home-educated by his father.

His highly successful performance in the Trinity College entrance examination is testimony to the excellence of his father's tuition.



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By virtue of growing up in rural Roscommon, he encountered the last generation of native Irish speakers in the county and was fascinated by the sound of the language. With the help of Seamus Hart, Lord de Freyne's gamekeeper, and Mrs William Connolly, the wife of a farmhand, he began to study the language and to collect fragments of oral tradition.

Entering TCD in 1880, he graduated (with a gold medal) in modern literature in 1884. In 1885 he was awarded a first in the final divinity examination and the following year he won a special theology prize.

August 1, 2018

Rejecting family pressure to enter the Church of Ireland ministry, he contemplated a career in medicine or in law. He ostensibly opted for the latter and went on to acquire a LL.D in 1888, collecting the vice-chancellor's prize for English verse in 1885, for prose in 1886, and both prizes in 1887.

Arthur Hyde was 'thoroughly unionist and inalterably opposed to Home Rule', but his son rejected his father's politics as well as choice of career for him.

Douglas was fiercely anti-English and this is clearly evidenced in his diaries and notebooks. He also favoured violent insurrection to overthrow 'English rule'. His friend and neighbour John Lavin was a Fenian and conversation invariably turned to politics.

A Fenian meeting in Frenchpark on February 25, 1877 was recorded as 'a great success'. 'The Irishman' of April 10, 1880 published a toast in verse by Douglas to O'Donovan Rossa. (Thirty-five years later Patrick Pearse would deliver his fiery panegyric at O'Donovan Rossa's funeral in Glasnevin Cemetery).

In the mid 1880s Hyde was articulating his nationalist world view in the pages of the 'Dublin University Review'. On May 8, 1885 he was introduced to John O'Leary, another Fenian figure. On December 5, 1885 O'Leary told him that there were eight Fenians in the last parliament and 18 or 25 in the new parliament.

Around 1880 Hyde joined the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language. Between 1879 and 1884 he

August 1, 2018

published more than a hundred pieces of Irish verse using the pseudonym 'An Craoibhín Aoibhinn' ('The Pleasant Little Branch').

On November 25, 1892 Hyde delivered his celebrated presidential address to the National Literary Society in Dublin entitled 'On the necessity of de-Anglicising the Irish people'. He called for action to halt the decline of the Irish language and deplored the imitation of English manners.

Hyde's address is often described as apolitical and to some extent it all depends on what is meant by political. It certainly was not party political but it was implicitly political.

Brian Murphy in 'Forgotten Patriot: Douglas Hyde and the Foundation of the Irish Presidency' (Hyde became the first president of Ireland under the terms of de Valera's 1937 Constitution) is not overstating his case in observing that Hyde was opposed to the proposition that the population of Ireland 'ought to be content as an integral part of the United Kingdom because we have lost the notes of nationality, our language and customs' and he sought to 'create a strong feeling against West-Britonism'. Furthermore Murphy contended that Hyde's 'cultural proselytising precipitated the political revolution from which Irish sovereignty flowed'.

The following year – on July 31 – Hyde co-founded the Gaelic League with Eoin MacNéill, a young Dublin clerk and language enthusiast from the Glens of Antrim, and Father Eugene Downey, a professor at Maynooth and the author of 'Simple Lessons in Irish', and became its first president.

August 1, 2018

Of the three, Professor F X Martin OSA contended that Eoin MacNéill contributed most to the success of the movement. MacNéill was the first secretary of the organisation, the editor of the Gaelic Journal (1894-99), and of An Claidheamh Soluis (1899-1901). Martin has also claimed that MacNéill was responsible for the lion's share of 'Simple Lessons in Irish'. Be that as it may, Hyde conferred scholarly prestige on the organisation and public profile.

There was a well-established tradition of antiquarian and scholarly interest in the written language but the Gaelic League was breaking new ground in that it sought to revive Irish as a spoken language.

Canon J O Hannay (better known as the novelist George Birmingham) warned Hyde in 1907: 'I take the Sinn Fein position to be the natural and inevitable development of the League principles.'

In February 1914 Patrick Pearse claimed: 'The Gaelic League will be recognised in history as the most revolutionary influence that has ever come into Ireland. The Irish Revolution really began when the seven proto-Gaelic Leaguers met in O'Connell St ... the germ of all future history was in that back room.'

F X Martin echoed these sentiments in observing that 'the Gaelic League was the greatest single force in propagating the Irish separatist ideal during the 20 years before the rising'.

Hyde resigned as president of the Gaelic League in 1915 because of ill health and its alleged politicisation. His real

August 1, 2018

problem was that the political nature of the league was being made increasingly explicit whereas he wished it to remain formally non-political and implicit.

While the Gaelic League has achieved an undeniable measure of political success, it has failed to de-Anglicise Ireland linguistically.

According to the 2016 (Irish) census only 73,803 – 4.2% of the population – used it daily outside of the education system.

Culturally, Hyde and his successors have also failed to stem what some nationalists refer to as ‘the filthy Anglo-American tide’. Ireland is still Anglophone.

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August 1, 2018

August 1, 2018

August 1, 2018

August 1, 2018

August 1, 2018

August 1, 2018

August 1, 2018