

## John MacBride

John MacBride, an accidental participant in the Easter Rising, was born in Westport, Co. Mayo, on 8 May 1868. His father, Patrick, was an Ulster-Scots Protestant. MacBride was an impressionable young man, attended a meeting presided by Charles Stewart Parnell, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster. Parnell spoke about the tenant farmers' rights which made an impression on the young MacBride because at 15 he writes 'I took an oath to do my best to establish a free and independent Irish nation.'

Following his move to Dublin, MacBride's involvement with the nationalist movement intensified. He attended meetings of nationalist debating clubs, including the Young Ireland Society and the Leinster Literary Society, where he met poet W. B. Yeats, the Fenian John O'Leary and the young political activist Arthur Griffith. MacBride travelled to Chicago to attend the Irish National Alliance Convention as an Irish delegate and a member of the IRB. On his return, MacBride described himself as 'the most protected man in Ireland' as everywhere he was followed by detectives tracking his movements.

Meanwhile events that occurred thousands of miles away in South Africa would bring MacBride national prominence in Ireland. Tensions existed between the British living in Cape Colony and the Boers (old Dutch settlers) living in Transvaal. When in 1895, a colonial politician Dr. Jameson led a group of 800 mounted policemen in a raid on the Transvaal, which ended in disaster when the Boers ambushed the raiders. The incident caused international outrage. According to MacBride, it prompted him to leave Ireland:

"Shortly after the Jameson Raid I resolved to go to the South African Republic, as I knew then England had her mind made up to take the country, and I wanted to organize my countrymen there so as to be in position to strike a blow at England's power abroad when we could not unfortunately do so at home."

In anticipation of the outbreak of war, MacBride helped raise an Irish brigade of 300 men to fight with the Boers against the British Army in South Africa. In 1899 MacBride was made second-in-command of the newly formed brigade and given the title of major. The Irish brigade endured fierce fighting in the second Boer war in October 1899. The Irish men fought bravely and MacBride later recorded that 'the conduct of the brigade that day won the admiration of the whole Boer army'.

After the defeat of the Boers, MacBride arrived in Paris in early 1900 where he was welcomed by Arthur Griffith and Maud Gonne, a wealthy heiress of English parents who spent much of her childhood in Ireland. Her father served in the British Army. She adopted many Irish nationalist causes and was a prominent member of the Irish Transvaal Committee. At this time, MacBride was unable to return to Ireland for fear of arrest and, in need of an income, he decided to embark on a speaking tour of the USA. However, he was not a natural public speaker and shortly after his arrival in New York he wrote to Maud Gonne, requesting that she accompany him on the rest of the tour. She tutored him on how to address the large audiences that turned out to hear him speak.

Maud Gonne and John MacBride were an unlikely pairing. Her upbringing was one of wealth and privilege, while he came from a modest background and had no steady income following his return from the USA. Gonne was renowned for her beauty and elegance; by contrast, MacBride, a short man with red hair and a long nose, looked worn after his adventure with the Boers War. They were married in Paris and had a son named Sean.

Their marriage showed signs of strain from the time of their honeymoon and the couple divorced in 1905. Their divorce was played out in the newspapers and was the talk around Ireland. MacBride returned to Dublin in 1906 and got temporary work as a journalist publishing articles about his experiences in the Boer War. He at times was forced to keep a low profile in Fenian circles because of his damaged public image. However, MacBride's reputation as a Boer War hero was sufficiently intact for him to be elected to the Supreme Council of the IRB in 1911, but was soon replaced by Sean Mac Diarmada, who was seen as part of a younger generation leading the IRB in a more radical direction.

MacBride had many opportunities for speaking engagements. To name a couple: in 1912 at Patrick Pearse's school about the Boer war; in 1914 Cork he spoke out against John Redmond's efforts to encourage the Irish Volunteers to join the British Army and fight in the war against Germany. But it was the accidental circumstances in April 1916 that changed John MacBride's future when he became involved in the Easter Rising. Here is MacBride in a statement made during his court martial following the rebellion:

"On the morning of Easter Monday, I left my home at Glenageary with the intention of going to meet my brother who was coming to Dublin to get married. In waiting around town I went up as far as Stephen's Green and there I saw a band of Irish Volunteers. I knew some of the members personally and the commander [Thomas MacDonagh] told me that an Irish Republic was virtually proclaimed. As he knew my rather advanced opinions and although I had no previous connections with the Irish Volunteers I considered it my duty to join them. I knew there was no chance of success, and I never advised nor influenced any other person to join. I did not even know the positions they were about to take up. I marched with them to Jacob's Factory."

Therefore, it is evident that MacBride was not involved in the planning of the Rising and that the rebellion probably came as a surprise to him. He certainly stood out from the Volunteers assembled at St. Stephen's Green, looking dapper in his blue suit for his brother's wedding and carrying a 'walking cane and smoking a cigar'. He was appointed second-in-command by Thomas MacDonagh and marched with the men the short distance to Jacob's biscuit factory.

Elizabeth O'Farrell arrived at Jacob's, bringing with her the order from Pearse to surrender. MacBride suggested to the men and women that they should take the opportunity to escape. However, he remained with the garrison and stood alongside MacDonagh as they marched the men to the surrender point at St. Patrick's Park.

MacBride's court martial took place on May 4, 1916. General Blackader, who presided at MacBride's court martial, and General Maxwell who confirmed his death, had served during the Boer War. Although it cannot be proven decisively, these men may have harboured some resentment towards MacBride for fighting with the Boers, and that possibility influenced their decisions.

MacBride was transferred to Kilmainham Gaol at 2a.m. the morning of May 5<sup>th</sup>. Standing before the firing squad, MacBride turned to Fr. Augustine and said 'You know Fr. I've often looked down their guns before.' Major John MacBride was executed at 3:47 a.m. on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1916.