

## **Bulmer Hobson**

Annina Cavelti Kee (University of Aberdeen)

A review of

**Marnie Hay**, *Bulmer Hobson and the nationalist movement in twentieth-century Ireland* (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 2009) ISBN 978-0-7190-7987-0, Paperback, 275pp. £18.99.

This study of Bulmer Hobson and his role in the struggle for an independent Ireland is a comprehensive examination of an individual whose role within the Irish nationalist movement has long been forgotten.

Marnie Hay guides the reader through Bulmer Hobson's story with great detail and gives differentiated information on his life and his impact on Ireland.

The book starts with Bulmer Hobson's middle-class upbringing in a Quaker family in Belfast. Even in his early life, his political mind was influenced by nationalist thinking. His father was a supporter of Gladstone's Home Rule, and his English mother was a member of suffrage societies. Additionally, Hobson came in contact with his neighbours, the poets Alice Milligan and Anna Johnson, who not only introduced him to nationalist reading material but also encouraged him to join the Gaelic League - which he did in 1901. His extensive reading of Irish history also introduced him to the United Irishmen, to the ideas of Wolfe Tone and Tone's non-sectarian and separatist republican ideology - thoughts Hobson shared. Furthermore, Hobson was heavily influenced by James Fintan Lalor, who had connections to the Young Ireland movement, and who advocated for a policy of passive resistance and guerrilla warfare tactics. Hobson followed this policy during his entire political life.

Hay then focuses on Bulmer Hobson's first steps within the nationalist society in Belfast. Hobson was – amongst many other activities - the co-founder of the Ulster Literary Theatre and of Na Fianna Éireann. Hay focuses on Hobson's involvement in political nationalism, his introduction to the IRB and his increasing frustration with the slow speed within the then existing nationalist movements. All throughout this time Hobson wrote and edited many articles to topics which advocated Irish nationalism. However, Ulster where he then lived, did not provide him with a sufficient platform, and hence Dublin beckoned.

Marnie Hay describes Hobson as a very gifted propagandist. However, she also points out that he was not himself the developer of ideas, but was rather the one who could sell old ideas anew in a manner which attracted the young. These first three chapters provide the reader with a very good knowledge about who Bulmer Hobson was. Hay then goes on to focus on Hobson's role within Sinn Fein and his difficult relationship with Arthur Griffith. Although Hobson was chosen to go to America for a promotion tour of Sinn Fein, in the end he could not win a struggle against Griffith for the leadership within the organisation. Hay points out that for many he was too radical, too young and was involved in too many different organisations and societies; the latter, in particular, was an accusation which persisted throughout his whole political career. Eventually Hobson left Sinn Fein although he and his allies won a discussion on the continuation of the abstentionist policy. Hay convincingly

explains Hobson's withdrawal from Sinn Fein, his return to Belfast, and Hobson's own impression that he was more useful within the IRB; whose influence seemed to be raising rather than with Sinn Fein whose significance he thought to be diminishing.

In the following chapter Hay focuses on Hobson's role in the IRB. Hobson became increasingly involved in the organisation and his influence within the IRB grew. Here, Hay draws the reader's attention to the developing friendship with Thomas Clarke after Clarke's release from prison. Hobson benefitted greatly from the support of his older friend. Hobson became editor of the newspaper Irish Freedom and a member of the Supreme Council. He was also heavily involved in the formation of the Irish Volunteers and took a great interest in this organisation. However, according to Hay not everyone was in favour of Bulmer Hobson and even Clarke had his difficulties with Hobson's self-assuredness in his own judgement and unwillingness to hear other opinions. This, so concludes Hay, led eventually to his downfall within the IRB.

Hay persuasively demonstrates this character trait when she discusses the political power struggle within the Irish Volunteers between Redmond and the more radical members, such as Hobson and Clarke. Hobson, much to everyone's surprise, decided to vote for a compromise with Redmond who wanted to bring his own supporters as representatives to the Provisional Committee. By granting Redmond's wish Hobson hoped to avoid a split of the organisation. However, many of his colleagues were not willing to accept this suggestion. Hobson and his allies won their argument. And although the split eventually occurred, Hobson remained convinced that his compromise gave the Irish Volunteers enough time to gather the strength so that the split no longer jeopardised the organisation. But this victory came at a cost – he not only lost the support Thomas Clarke but also of the IRB leadership.

The end of Bulmer Hobson's career as a nationalist came with the Easter Rising and his strong conviction that a rising would not only be against the IRB constitution of 1873 but that it would also bring about the end of IRB. Despite the fact that the majority within the Supreme Council (of which Hobson at that time was no longer a part) was in favour of the rising, he stood by his opinion. Hobson's stubbornness eventually led to his kidnapping for the days of the Easter Rising by members of the IRB. Hay concludes that this action might have come as a relief to him as it put Hobson into a position where he could no longer do anything to prevent the events from unfolding.

Hay notes that Hobson's opposition to the Easter Rising and the fact that he was not arrested in the events following the rising led to a loss of credibility amongst his colleagues. And although Hobson remained interested in Irish politics and, in his position as a civil servant, made several suggestions how to improve the economy, he had lost his influence.

At the end of the book Hay reflects back on Bulmer Hobson's loss of support and recognition due to his role in the Easter Rising. She shows very convincingly how Hobson must have suffered from being misunderstood not only by his contemporaries but also by later generations. It was not until the fifty years celebrations of the Easter Rising that he came forward and explained his view of things.

This book is clearly a gain for nationalist history of twentieth-century Ireland. The biography of Bulmer Hobson not only offers a very detailed insight in a very complex character, it also presents an alternative view on the developments up to the Easter Rising and the Easter Rising itself, and shows a side which seemed to have been forgotten. If there is one thing to criticise about the book then it is the occasionally slightly confusing non-chronological transition between the chapters. However, this is a minor quibble in what is truly a win for the research of the nationalist movement in twentieth-century Ireland.