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A 'republic of learning': Bulmer Hobson, nationalism and the printed word

Marnie Hay

It all began with a love of books. Bulmer Hobson (1883-1969), one of the earliest chairmen of the Whitechurch Library Committee, is best known for his career as an Irish advanced nationalist leader between 1900 and 1916. Hobson's lifelong love of books is a thread that links his early attraction to the nationalist movement to his future involvement with the Whitechurch Library and other activities related to the printed word. In addition to co-founding such advanced nationalist organisations as the Dungannon Clubs, Na Fianna Éireann and the Irish Volunteers, he was also a leading figure in the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and Sinn Féin. However, his disapproval of what he considered to be an untimely rebellion in 1916 and his evasion of arrest in the aftermath of the Easter Rising helped to scuttle what appeared to be a promising political career in an independent Ireland. After the Rising, Hobson worked in book publishing before becoming a civil servant. In his spare time he participated in efforts to build up the new state culturally and economically.

As such, Hobson was not only an advanced nationalist but also an inadvertent advocate of the early modern concept of a 'republic of learning', though with a nationalist twist in that his 'republic' was inwardly focused upon Ireland. 'Republic of learning' is a term that refers to a network of intellectuals sharing ideas and literature that transcend national boundaries. The term seems apt for an intellectual like Hobson who participated in various networks that shared ideas and literature about achieving and later governing [p.175] and further developing an independent Irish state. This

chapter will provide an overview of Hobson's life and career, highlighting the role of books and the printed word in both.

John Bulmer Hobson, who was known by his middle name 'Bulmer', was born on 14 January 1883 in Belfast to a prosperous Quaker family. At first glance he was an unlikely Irish republican nationalist. His father Benjamin Hobson Jr. was a commercial traveller and a Gladstonian home ruler from outside Lurgan, Co. Armagh, while his mother Mary Ann Bulmer was a women's rights activist and amateur archaeologist from Darlington in the north of England. The Hobson family resided at 6 Hopefield Avenue in north Belfast and the three Hobson children attended the Friends' School in Lisburn, a co-educational Quaker boarding school.

By the time Hobson left school in 1899, he was a committed nationalist. His parents and neighbours in north Belfast influenced the development of his political views and future activism. In the Hobson home everything was argued and discussed 'with good temper and no opinion was barred'. From his father he inherited what he described as 'a natural urge to take the weaker side in every quarrel and to resent injustice of every kind'. At the same time his mother's involvement in suffrage societies provided him with an early example of political activism.

Hobson's neighbours, the poets Alice Milligan and Anna Johnston, who wrote under the pseudonym Ethna Carbery, sparked Hobson's early interest in Irish nationalism by exposing him to the reverberations of the wider Irish cultural revival that were being felt in his native Ulster. He recalled:

As soon as I was old enough to take a serious interest in books, Alice Milligan ... loaned me several books by Standish O'Grady ... which opened up for me new ranges of hitherto unimagined beauty. My world of imagination became peopled with the heroic figures of a great literature.

Balor and Lugh and The Sons of Tuireann, Mananan and the De Danaan gods, Fergus MacRoy, [p. 176] Cuchulain and Ferdia became my constant companions and were to me far more real than the crude town in which I lived.

The contents of these books helped to inspire in the young Belfast boy a love of Ireland and its native literature.

Milligan and Johnston also provided him with nationalist reading material in their own newspaper, the *Shan Van Vocht*. In particular, the paper's coverage of the centenary of the 1798 rebellion inspired Hobson to study the lives and ideals of the United Irishmen. He noted: 'I found myself living in a city enriched by their associations. The result was that I decided to spend the succeeding years of my life trying to complete their task.'

A self-confessed 'disciple' of Theobald Wolfe Tone, a leader of the United Irishmen, Hobson espoused a combination of separatism, republicanism and non-sectarianism. He looked to James Fintan Lalor, a writer associated with the Young Ireland movement of the mid-nineteenth century, for a two-pronged approach to defeating British rule in Ireland. The first prong was a policy of passive resistance similar to Arthur Griffith's later Sinn Féin (ourselves) policy of national self-reliance. Hobson may have been attracted to this policy as a result of his own Quaker upbringing. The second prong was to employ tactics that would later be labelled as guerrilla warfare. Hobson's acceptance of such tactics indicates his divergence from the Quaker tradition of pacifism. The writings of Giuseppe Mazzini, a republican nationalist leader of the Risorgimento, the nineteenth-century movement to unify Italy, may also have provided Hobson with a blueprint for action, but as Sean Worgan has

argued, the young Ulster protestant was reluctant to acknowledge such influence for fear of alienating Catholics who found Mazzini's secularism offensive.

From early on Hobson became involved in a string of nationalist organisations, while attempting to pursue a career in the printing trade. In 1900 he launched his first propagandist organisation at the precocious age of seventeen with the foundation of the Ulster Debating Club for boys. Through the establishment of groups such as the Ulster [p. 177] Literary Theatre and the Protestant National Society, he sought to bring the north more fully into the Irish literary revival and convert young Ulster protestants to the nationalist cause. It was through the Gaelic League that he met Denis McCullough, a young Catholic from the Falls Road area; the pair soon became partners in nationalism. McCullough, who grew up steeped in Fenian tradition, introduced Hobson to the IRB in 1904. The IRB was a secret society committed to the establishment of an independent Irish republic through the use of physical force if necessary. Together McCullough and Hobson worked to revive the organisation in Ulster. In 1905 they formed the Dungannon Clubs, which promoted the Sinn Féin message of national self-reliance in Ulster and beyond. Hobson became so prominent as a Sinn Féin propagandist that he, rather than the movement's founder Arthur Griffith, was invited to undertake a speaking tour of the United States in 1907.

Hobson's nationalist activism made it difficult for him to find steady employment in the north of Ireland, so he moved to Dublin in 1908. There, while eking out a precarious living as a journalist, he rose through the IRB ranks to become a member of its governing body, the Supreme Council. He also co-founded the nationalist youth group Na Fianna Éireann with Countess Constance Markievicz in 1909 and helped to establish the Irish Volunteers in November 1913.

The formation of the Irish Volunteers was a nationalist response to the establishment of the Ulster Volunteer Force to defend Ulster against Home Rule by force of arms if necessary. In 1912 the Liberal government had been induced to introduce the third Home Rule Bill because it was dependent on the support of the [p. 178] Irish Parliamentary Party to stay in power. Due to the abolition of the veto power of the House of Lords, the bill was likely to pass this time. In response, unionists in Ireland and Britain mobilised against it.

Like many others both inside and outside the IRB, Hobson saw the formation of the Ulster Volunteers as an opportunity to start a similar nationalist Volunteer movement. According to Hobson, the IRB decided that it should take the initiative in starting a Volunteer movement before someone else did and deputed Hobson to act on its behalf. The first challenge was to find a respected but politically non-controversial figure to serve as a focal point for the movement. The IRB hit upon Eoin MacNeill, Gaelic League founder and professor of Early and Medieval Irish History at University College Dublin, who had advocated the formation of an Irish Volunteer force in 'The North Began', an article published in *An Claidheamh Soluis* on 1 November 1913. Hobson contacted MacNeill through the conduit of the paper's manager Michael O'Rahilly (known as The O'Rahilly) and soon plans were underway to set up a paramilitary force that proposed to serve broad Irish national interests, as opposed to narrow party interests. There does not seem to have been any agreement, however, on what Ireland's broad national interests actually were.

Hobson's rising star within the IRB began to descend in June 1914 when he went against an IRB decision and voted, for tactical reasons, to accept the Irish Parliamentary Party leader John Redmond's nominees onto the governing committee of the Irish Volunteers. The IRB was opposed to the acceptance of Redmond's

nominees because they would upset the balance of different shades of nationalism represented on the committee. By this time tensions were already evident between Hobson and his fellow members of the IRB Supreme Council and future insurrectionists Tom Clarke and Sean MacDermott. The trio had once been close, with Clarke serving as a father-figure to Hobson and MacDermott, but over time diverging views drove them apart.

Redmond's propensity to dictate policy without prior consultation eventually led [p. 179] to the split in the Volunteers that Hobson had hoped to delay. Redmond's address to a Volunteer parade at Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow, on 20 September 1914 precipitated the split. Redmond announced that it was the duty of the Irish Volunteers to enlist in the British army in order to fight in the First World War which had broken out in the previous month. The Irish Volunteers had been founded to provide Ireland with a national defence force, not as a recruiting ground for British troops. In response to Redmond's announcement, 20 out of the 27 original members of the Provisional Committee, including Hobson, signed a manifesto on 24 September 1914 ousting Redmond's nominees. Redmond and his supporters started a rival organisation, the National Volunteers, which the majority of Volunteers joined. Its numbers began to dwindle, however, as its members headed off to fight in the war and the prospect of Home Rule drifted further into the future.

The historian F.X. Martin has argued that Hobson and MacNeill had 'acted wisely' in accepting Redmond's nominees: 'To have withstood Redmond at the height of his popularity in June 1914 would have been to court disaster for the Volunteers.' Due to the maintenance of outward unity within the Volunteer organisation at this critical time, the Howth and Kilcoole gun-running plans, which provided essential arms for the 1916 Rising, were a success. When the split in the

Volunteer movement finally came in September 1914, it was over a more fundamental issue: whether or not the Volunteers would fight for Britain in the war. Splitting over this issue served to strengthen the Irish Volunteers by purging the moderate nationalists and leaving a concentration of advanced nationalists.

A difference of opinion arose amongst the minority group who remained loyal to MacNeill. Some asserted that the Irish Volunteers should remain, as their constitution stated, purely defensive, while others believed that they should become an instrument for insurrection. Hobson and MacNeill advocated the former view while Clarke and MacDermott were determined that the latter view would prevail.

Shortly after the outbreak of the First World War the IRB decided to stage a rising while Britain was preoccupied in continental Europe. The IRB's Military Council planned [p. 180] the rising for Easter 1916, but kept its exact plans a secret from everyone except a select few. The idea was that Sunday manoeuvres by the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army would be the cover for the launch of a rebellion. The Military Council decided to kidnap Hobson before the outbreak of the rising because its members recognised that Hobson, as quartermaster general and secretary of the Irish Volunteers and chairman of the Dublin Centres Board of the IRB, was the one man who possessed the influence and knowledge to scuttle their plans. MacNeill could be hoodwinked – at least for a little while – but Hobson was so important that he had to be taken out of commission until the Rising was underway.

Despite his IRB membership, Hobson was one of the moderates within the Volunteer leadership. Although he was amenable to a rebellion with significant and decisive support from Germany, he refused to support an insurrection that had little chance of military success. Instead he favoured a policy of guerrilla warfare should

the British government attempt to disarm the Volunteers or pursue a policy of conscription in Ireland.

Some commentators, such as Des Gunning, have suggested that Hobson's advocacy of a defensive military policy and his opposition to the Easter Rising were a result of latent Quakerism, even though he had resigned from the Society of Friends in 1915. Hobson, however, by his own admission, placed more importance on achieving Irish independence than on adhering to Quaker principles. Even MacNeill, a Catholic, shared Hobson's support for a defensive military policy. MacNeill deemed military action without 'a reasonably calculated or estimated prospect of success, in the military sense' as morally wrong. Their concern with military success as opposed to heroic futility may have been a way of trying to reconcile the military use of violence in a just war with a regard for human life.

Hobson was waiting for MacNeill to come into the Volunteer office on Good Friday when he was invited to an IRB meeting. Hobson later claimed that he was reluctant to attend because he could not see what possible purpose it would serve, unless it was a [p. 181] ruse to obstruct his actions. When he arrived at the alleged meeting at Martin Conlon's house at 76 Cabra Park in Phibsborough, four or five IRB men produced guns and told him that he was under arrest. He later recalled: 'I laughed and said, "You are a lot of damn fools". There was nothing I could do, so I sat back and accepted the situation. I felt I had done my best to stop the rising.' Meanwhile Hobson's 'strikingly handsome' fiancée and secretary, Claire Gregan, rushed around Dublin trying to ascertain his whereabouts and secure his release, fearing that his kidnappers would shoot him. The Military Council had no such plans, however. As Éamonn Ceannt explained to fellow IRB man Seamus O'Connor, 'Hobson has been

an obstacle in our path. He is opposed to an insurrection. He is perfectly honest, he is not a traitor, but it would be better if he were as then we could shoot him.’

Once the Rising was underway, Hobson’s captors were frustrated that their assignment was confining them to the sidelines. His guards contemplated executing him and dumping his body on the railway line that ran behind the house, but Conlon convinced them to await their orders regarding the prisoner’s fate. Persuaded by The O’Rahilly and Piaras Béaslaí that Hobson was no longer a threat, MacDermott dispatched Seán T. O’Kelly with the order for his release on the evening of Easter Monday. O’Kelly found Hobson ensconced in an armchair with a book in his hands, while his guard Maurice Collins sat by the door with a gun in his hand. On the way into the city centre O’Kelly urged Hobson to accompany him to the rebellion’s headquarters at the General Post Office on O’Connell Street, but Hobson refused. O’Kelly pointed out that as the Rising was already underway, they should both play their part, especially as Hobson had devoted so much of his life to this cause. Hobson gave O’Kelly evasive answers, hoping to shake him off and find MacNeill.

Hobson chose not to participate in the insurrection because he ‘was convinced that the thing was wrong, that it was a blunder which I had honestly attempted to prevent, and to join up and add to the victims I felt would be a mistake’. Perhaps he thought that [p. 182] he would be in a position to pick up the pieces after the insurrection failed. In any case, he refused to be driven against his judgement by a *fait accompli*.

The day after Hobson’s release he and Gregan walked out to the MacNeill home at Woodtown Park in Rathfarnham, where they spent the remainder of Easter Week. The artist Cesca Chenevix Trench visited the house during that time and found that the circle gathered there were ‘furious’ with the insurrectionists and harboured

‘the most gloomy views’ of the situation. In her diary she quoted Hobson as saying: ‘If by a miracle they succeeded, of course, I suppose they’d be justified; but if we’d shot a few of them, I’d have saved the country.’

Shortly after the surrender MacNeill asked Hobson to sign a letter to General Sir John Grenfell Maxwell, the army officer responsible for the suppression of the rising, suggesting a meeting aimed at stopping more violence. Hobson refused to sign the letter on the grounds that it would reveal their whereabouts to Maxwell, who would have them arrested. MacNeill pointed out that they would have no political future if they were not arrested. Hobson, who had enjoyed playing a cat-and-mouse game with the authorities for years as a result of his membership in the IRB and activities as a republican propagandist, ‘replied that while I probably would be arrested, I was not going to ask for it’. The letter to Maxwell did lead to MacNeill’s arrest, court martial and imprisonment, thus facilitating the continuance of his political career (at least until the Boundary Commission in 1925).

William Glynn, a Quaker, viewed Hobson’s refusal to participate in the Rising or to court arrest in order to preserve his political influence as examples of a Quaker-influenced [p. 183] ‘moral courage to act in accordance with his convictions’. Glynn mused: ‘Had [Hobson] been less inflexible he might well have become a minister in the subsequent Irish Free State.’ Glynn also wondered if there was ‘too much of the Quaker’ in Hobson ‘to make a successful politician’.

Hobson remained in Dublin for several months, taking precautions to avoid arrest. He and Gregan were ‘secretly’ married on 19 June 1916 in the sacristy at St Mary’s Roman Catholic Church in Rathfarnham. Later that day Hobson, perhaps fearing that their nuptials might betray his whereabouts, went to stay with Mary Hutton, a translator of the *Táin Bó Cúailgne*, at Palmerston Lodge in Dartry. A few

weeks later a priest gave Hobson a lift on a motorbike to his parents' new home in Hollywood, Co. Down. Gregan joined him there until the amnesty in June 1917. Hobson's disappearance was so complete that in August 1916 General Maxwell reported to Prime Minister Herbert Asquith 'an unconfirmed rumour' that the IRB had shot Hobson as a traitor during Easter Week.

Scurrilous tales about Hobson's alleged treachery and cowardice abounded after the Rising. By late May 1916 Hobson's disappearance had fuelled suggestions that he had betrayed the cause. After he came out of hiding he found that many of his old friends and colleagues in the nationalist movement 'would not notice or come near him'. This ostracism resulted from a misinterpretation of his actions and a determination to punish him. His Quaker background may have given some people the impression that he was a crypto-pacifist who had misled his associates in the IRB and the Irish Volunteers about his true intentions. In addition, some may have feared that Hobson, with his sixteen distinguished years of nationalist experience, would usurp their newly won power and positions within the nationalist movement. Frozen out, he refused to force himself upon his former associates.

Instead, Hobson hoped to salvage his reputation with a book. While on the run he had begun writing *A short history of the Irish Volunteers*, only the first volume of which was completed and then published by the Candle Press in 1918. He was extremely [p. 184] disappointed with the introduction to the book written by MacNeill because it did not defend individuals like him who had joined MacNeill in opposing the 1916 Rising. In a draft letter to MacNeill dated 3 June 1918, he wrote:

You may possibly think that I attach too much importance to my personal position in the matter but it should be remembered that I have been denied any opportunity to have things cleared up in any other way – first by your

failure to summon the old General Council [of the Irish Volunteers] last year and then by the refusal of [Eamon] de Valera to admit the members of the executive to the Volunteer Convention [in October 1917]. In consequence my book is the only means left to me to clear up a matter of which I cannot take the detached view so easy for those who are not concerned.

Hobson wanted it made plain that he and those of his colleagues who had not participated in the Rising had been supporting ‘honor against deceit’. On 8 June 1918 MacNeill countered that it was ‘not the time for clearing up that situation’, and that Hobson should disregard ‘slander and injustice for the time’. In any case the book did not succeed in salvaging Hobson’s reputation, which may be why he did not finish the planned subsequent volumes.

Hobson, either through exclusion or choice, did not participate in the nationalist organisations to which he had belonged prior to the Easter Rising and played no part in the subsequent events that preceded the formation of what he later referred to as ‘the so-called Free State’. His choice of adjective reveals his ambivalent attitude toward the independent state that was created in 26 counties. His political career sidelined, Hobson went on to lead a full – but very different – life after the Rising.

Upon his return to Dublin, Hobson built on his previous employment experience as a printer and journalist by working in book publishing as co-director of the Candle Press [p. 185] and Martin Lester Ltd., which published books of Irish interest by such writers (and former nationalist associates) as Alice Milligan, Eimar O’Duffy and Rosamond Jacob. As a director Hobson was involved in the commissioning, editing, promotion and distribution of both companies’ books. While

Candle Press had published Hobson's history of the Volunteers, Martin Lester Ltd. published two books edited by him: *The life of Wolfe Tone* (1919), which included Wolfe Tone's autobiographical writings and extracts of his political works, and *The letters of Wolfe Tone* (1920), a selection of letters by Wolfe Tone, his widow and his son, which Hobson had found 'scattered among several collections of old papers'. Such work enabled Hobson not only to promote modern Irish literature, but to bring to a new audience the inspirational ideas of his heroes.

By 1920 Hobson and his wife Claire had set up home in Mill House, a three-storey Georgian property on Whitechurch Road in Rathfarnham, where they raised their children Declan and Camilla. The couple had met at the Volunteer Aid Association office at 44 Dawson Street, where she had worked as a secretary. The Aid Association was formed in the summer of 1914 to raise money for the Irish Volunteers. When its office closed, Hobson offered his future wife a job as his personal typist at Volunteer headquarters down the road at 2 Dawson Street. In addition to their involvement in the advanced nationalist movement, the Hobsons shared an interest in literature and theatre. They were known for hosting gatherings at which 'the most diffident artists' were encouraged 'to express themselves'. They also shared a concern for social issues. For instance, Claire Hobson gave evidence on behalf of Saor an Leabhbh (the Irish Save the Children Fund) to the Committee on [p. 186] the Criminal Law Amendment Acts and Juvenile Prostitution (otherwise known as the Carrigan committee) (1930–31).

Perhaps because he had found that book publishing did not provide a reliable enough income to support his young family, especially during the troubled years of the Irish War of Independence (1919-21) and the Civil War (1922-23), Hobson sought employment in the civil service of the new Irish Free State established in December

1922. He was initially hired in August 1923 as Temporary Technical Clerk in the Stationery Office at a salary of £250 per annum. He moved up to a permanent, pensionable position in October 1924 after he successfully interviewed for the post of Deputy Director of Stamping in the Office of the Revenue Commissioners. The creation of this new position may have been a result of the Minister and Secretaries Act of 1924, which led to the increased formalisation of staffing of the civil service and of the titles of individual civil servants. The job initially came with a salary scale of £350-£500 per annum plus bonus.

Ironically, Hobson was based in Dublin Castle, the former bastion of British authority in Ireland. He managed the printing section of the Stamping Department in the Office of the Revenue Commissioners, which was responsible for all of the government's 'secure' printing needs, such as postage stamps, pension books, licenses and various government forms. By the late 1940s he had about sixty people working under his supervision.

Outside of his day job, Hobson found time for voluntary work that reflected not only his desire to contribute to the building up of the new state but also his love of books. In his local community in Rathfarnham he served as an early chairman of the Whitechurch Library Committee. As few records survive, it is difficult to pinpoint when Hobson joined the committee. An extant minute book, which begins in mid-1926, indicates that he was chairman of the committee in 1926-27, but only nominally so in 1928. During the period covered by the minute book he did not regularly attend the meetings. For instance, between 9 July 1926 and 2 December 1927 he only attended and chaired six out of 22 normal monthly meetings and special meetings of the library committee. His absences [p.187] may have been due to his work commitments at the Revenue.

The library committee was responsible for overseeing the running and general upkeep of the library. At a typical monthly meeting the committee would receive the honorary secretary's report on the numbers of borrowers and books loaned, decide on applications to rent the Library Hall for events such as dances or whist drives, and sign off on the payment of operating expenses, such as coal for heating, piano tuning, and the salaries of the secretary, librarian, cleaner and caretaker. Issues regarding policies, procedures, staffing and repair work might also be discussed and decided upon.

Hobson's involvement with the library coincided with the implementation of the Local Government Act of 1925, which made counties the new unit of rural library administration, with the county council as the controlling authority. Under this act, South Dublin Rural District Council was given the power to appoint committees to manage the libraries in its area. It appears that existing library committees were permitted to remain in place. The minutes of the Whitechurch Library Committee reflected tensions that arose due to changes in policies and procedures imposed by the local authority as the new legislation was implemented.

As a result of the 1925 act, libraries and their committees found themselves under increased scrutiny and direction from their local authorities. In the case of Whitechurch Library, such scrutiny and direction came in the person of County Librarian Roisín Walsh, whom Hobson may have known in his Belfast days. Walsh requested that a special meeting of the library committee be held on 9 February 1927, so that the committee [p. 188] members could meet her and two other representatives from the County Council to discuss the 'general efficient working of Library and re-organizing of same – its officers, Committee and premises'. Notice of this meeting was so short that only Hobson and two other committee members could attend.

The minutes of this special meeting provide some sense of the Whitechurch Library's local constituency and the purposes for which the building was used. Hobson was quick to assure Walsh 'that there was no foundation for rumours that Library premises were used as "dancing saloons"' (this was probably intended as a joke). After Walsh outlined plans for the renovation and repair of the library, which would include the construction of a new reading room, Hobson explained that the local population 'were not used to reading and that the Library premises were used more or less as a meeting place and for games'. In his opinion, a reading room 'would not be extensively cultivated'. The committee then discussed the possibility of organising 'useful classes' in subjects such as cookery and carpentry to be held in the library premises.

Controversy arose over this special meeting. At the next monthly meeting in March 1927, from which Hobson was absent, the committee refused to sign the minutes from the special meeting because so few members had been able to attend and thus had not had 'an ample opportunity for discussing the business conducted'. The committee also directed the honorary secretary to write to Walsh to clarify what powers local library committees now had with regard to the recommendation and appointment of library secretaries and librarians.

At the usual monthly meeting in May 1927 two members of the committee commented on Hobson's prolonged absence. Although 'it was urged that three consecutive absences automatically causes [the] resignation of [the] absenting member ... this was not proposed formally'. Hobson attended the next meeting in June and then another in November, but did not attend any library committee meetings in 1928. At the November 1928 monthly meeting, the honorary secretary

was instructed to write to ‘Chairman Mr B. Hobson’ [p. 189] in order to inform him of ‘the Committee’s rule governing absences of members’ and ‘to ascertain his intentions regarding further attendance.’ At the following meeting in December, the committee accepted Hobson’s letter of resignation ‘with regret’. The vice chairman Lady Elizabeth Irwin succeeded him as chairman.

It is unclear why Hobson stopped attending committee meetings. Did work or family commitments make it difficult to attend? Were there tensions between himself and other committee members because of his handling of the controversial special meeting or his connection to County Librarian Roisín Walsh? After he resigned from the library committee, he continued to work with Walsh on at least two other endeavours.

In any case, Hobson’s voluntary efforts appear to have shifted from the library to the stage in 1928 when he and his wife joined a committee to organise the business side of the new Gate Theatre. A shareholding scheme, a limited company, a board of directors and a list of possible premises emerged out of a series of meetings. The Hobsons also helped actor Micheál Mac Liammóir research famous episodes in Dublin history for a pageant in honour of the city’s annual civic week in September 1929. *The ford of the hurdles* was a historical epic covering the period from the Viking invasion to the Easter Rising.

Despite the responsibilities of a civil service job and a young family, Hobson also managed to complete three major editing projects in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Dublin Corporation commissioned him to edit *A book of Dublin* (1929-30). Billed as an ‘official handbook’, this illustrated volume aimed at tourists presented the city of Dublin as historically and culturally significant and economically thriving. Under the direction of a committee appointed by the Minister for Industry and

Commerce, Patrick McGilligan, Hobson also edited the *Saorstát Éireann Official Handbook* (1932), to which Roisín Walsh contributed a chapter on libraries. The handbook aimed ‘to give an account of the Irish Free State as it is to-day’, providing the historical background necessary for understanding modern Ireland. Two years later, he edited *The Gate Theatre* (1934), a beautifully illustrated book that summarised the company’s first six years of existence and served as a fundraiser [p. 190] for future productions. All of these editing projects were designed to promote aspects of a newly independent Ireland.

Hobson soon became frustrated that successive Irish governments did not institute ‘a bold national policy’ of economic reconstruction that would undo the effects of the Union between Britain and Ireland. In his view the political separatists who came to power became ‘economic unionists with few ideas except to copy British practice, and with little vision of the future of Ireland save as a supplier of cheap food and cheap labour to England’. He saw a strong economy as the key to the eventual reunification of Ireland, believing that the best way to bring unity was ‘to make an Ireland so prosperous that Ulster cannot afford to stay out of it’.

In the 1930s Hobson resuscitated his propagandist career by turning his pen to economic issues. As a civil servant, however, he was not permitted to make political comments in the public arena. Instead, he wrote and edited anonymously or under pseudonyms numerous pamphlets and two periodicals entitled *Prosperity* and *Social Justice*. The latter periodical was published by the League for Social Justice, which was ‘composed of people of all parties, or none, who wish to see the social and economic teaching of the papal encyclicals, given practical effect in Saorstát Éireann’. Roisín Walsh was a member of its council. In light of the poor economic conditions of the time, his employment in the Revenue, and his earlier writings on economic

nationalism in advanced nationalist newspapers like the *Republic* and the *Peasant*, Hobson's interest and energy in raising awareness about ways to combat poverty, unemployment and emigration are not surprising. [p. 191]

Press coverage of a 1938 public meeting of the Catholic social action group An Ríoghacht, at which Hobson suggested ways of alleviating slum housing, got him into hot water at work. Minister for Finance Seán MacEntee demanded an explanation and an apology from the rogue civil servant. Hobson initially defended his conduct, but at the minister's insistence later gave 'an unqualified undertaking' that he would not publicly comment on politics in future. This episode, combined with Hobson's failing eyesight and little public interest in his ideas, eventually contributed to the end of his activities as a part-time economic propagandist.

Hobson served as Deputy Director of Stamping until his retirement in January 1948, even though his increasingly poor eyesight eventually made it difficult for him to supervise the output of the printing presses. In anticipation of his retirement, he had a house built overlooking the sea in Roundstone, Connemara, because he wanted 'to start a new life, away from the city' in a place where he could swim daily. He moved to Roundstone in 1948, but did not sell his Rathfarnham residence until 1955. Writing to its future owners, F.X. Martin wondered whether 'the spirit of Revolution lingers over Mill House'.

A young visitor to Hobson's Roundstone home was struck by the notion that a man who was nearly blind could possess so many books. Although a doctor had told him around 1946 that it would be impossible for him to continue reading, Hobson took pleasure in proving the physician wrong. To help himself to read, Hobson rigged up a table-top contraption with a large magnifying glass.

Hobson spent most of his retirement living alone, his marriage, forged so romantically while on the run in 1916, having ended in separation circa 1940-41. He lived in Roundstone until about 1963-64 when ill health forced him to move in with his daughter Camilla Mitchell and her family in Castleconnell, Co. Limerick. Encouraged by media interest in 1916 survivors and F.X. Martin's re-assessment of the Easter Rising, Hobson published his final book, *Ireland yesterday and tomorrow*, in 1968. It included his witness statements to the government-sponsored Bureau of Military History and some of his economic [p. 192] writings from the 1930s, a juxtaposition that suggests he considered both periods of his life equally significant. In January 1969 he quipped to his son Declan that 'I have laughed at life and am ready to laugh at death.' He died in August of that year, the same month in which rioting broke out on the streets of Derry and his native Belfast.

In the years after the Easter Rising – the great tragedy of his life – Hobson was for some people 'a national leader *manqué*'. For others he was a republican has-been who had failed to make the grade when the fight for Irish independence stopped being a war of words. Until the 1960s he disappeared from public view as if he had been executed along with the rebellion's leaders, but without the benefit of their subsequent spin doctors.

Yet Hobson continued to live a full and varied life after 1916, helping to build up the new state through his involvement in such endeavours as the Whitechurch Library. A love of books not only sparked his early attraction to the nationalist movement, but also provided him with an initial refuge after he lost his position in that movement. A passion for the printed word and participation in networks of like-minded individuals remained a constant throughout the life of this voracious reader, political propagandist, theatre supporter and professional writer, editor and printer.

Both before and after the Easter Rising, Bulmer Hobson actively promoted a ‘republic of learning’ in Ireland. [p. 193]

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Archival source:

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