

# Joseph MacBride 1860-1938

Anthony J. Jordan

Joseph MacBride was the eldest of five sons born at The Quay, Westport, to Captain Patrick MacBride of Glenshesk Co. Antrim and Honoria Gill of Islandmore. He was educated at the local Christian Brothers School and St. Malachy's College Belfast. After St Malachy's he worked in a bank. He was involved in the Gaelic League and politics and was harassed by the police. He emigrated to Australia for five years but returned to live in Westport where he became secretary to the Harbour Commissioners, a post he held to his death. All the MacBride brothers became members of the IRB (Irish Republican Brotherhood), with Joseph becoming Head Centre for Mayo.

A Police Report of 1896 gives his residence as Westport Quay. It reads "aged 36, height 5'7", fair hair tinged with grey and grey eyes. In 1882 McBride was appointed Clerk in the Ulster Bank, but was discharged in a short time for incompetency. In 1884 he commenced to deal in coal and grain, but shortly failed. He is said to have closed on money belonging to his creditors, and in order to evade payment went to Australia. In 1890 he returned and was appointed Secretary to the Harbour Commissioners at Westport. He is a brother of Dr. Anthony McBride of London and John McBride now of South Africa – vide papers 761 and 755 respectively. His mother Honoria McBride is a grocer and publican in the town of Westport, and also deals in dynamite detonators. She has a magazine at Westport Quay. Until recently McBride never took an active part in Secret Society work. He is now believed to be actively engaged in furthering the Irish National Alliance. Suspect FP Dineen of Ballylanders had several interviews with him during his visit to Westport towards the end of 1896, and information was shortly afterwards received from a reliable source that Dineen was conveying instructions to McBride as to the formation of branches of the Irish National Alliance. Since Dineen left the locality (Nov 1896) McBride has written to several well-known Secret Society leaders in Co. Mayo"<sup>1</sup>. [The Irish National Alliance was formed in 1895 in America as a secessionist group from the IRB.]

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<sup>1</sup> Clew Bay Heritage Centre.

The Cork born anti-clerical lawyer, Michael John Fitzgerald McCarthy, visited Westport researching for his book *Priests and People in Ireland*, published by Hodges Figgis in 1902. On page 183, he wrote of Major MacBride's involvement in the Boer War, continuing, "His mother lives at The Quay, and is a proprietor of the principal shop there, which is managed by his brother Mr. Patrick McBride, who is also chairman of the town commissioners of Westport. Another brother, Mr. Joseph McBride, is secretary to the harbour commissioners. They are both exceedingly smart men. In fact it would be hard for one to meet in a casual way two brighter, healthier, more intelligent, or better-looking men... I saw some land and cattle which attracted my attention by reason of the excellence of their condition, and I discovered that they were the property of Mr. Joseph McBride... Patrick McBride also informed me that he had another brother, who was a sheep farmer in Australia. In a word, the McBrides are like an oasis of energy in the midst of a desert of human hopelessness".

CUMANN LÚTHCHLEAS GAEL was born in Hayes' Hotel, Thurles on November 1st 1884. It was to take a further eighteen years, November 9th 1902, before the first Connacht Council of the GAA was set up. The GAA in all five Connacht counties was highly political, and clubs were recognised only in parishes that had a branch of the Irish National League, a movement that was growing like wildfire in an effort to secure Home Rule. Many clubs were also infiltrated by members of the IRB who saw them as a recruiting group for that organisation. The clergy were suspicious of the GAA due to its IRB links and were unhappy that the Association's games brought large crowds together and were often occasions of drink abuse, rough play and fighting- '*a desecration of the Lord's day*'. The founding fathers of the Connacht Council GAA met in Ryan's Hotel, Claremorris - now the town's AIB headquarters, on November 9th 1902 and elected their officers :- President: Joseph McBride (Westport), Secretary: Frank Dorr (Foxford), Treasurer: M C Sine (Tuam).

The Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 saw much support for the Boers in Ireland. This was of course linked to the fact that John MacBride, then resident in South Africa, organised and co-led an *Irish Transvaal Brigade*, which fought with the Boers against the British for one full year from October 1899. An *Irish Transvaal Committee* was set up in Dublin by Maud Gonne, John O'Leary, Willie Redmond M.P, T.D.O'Sullivan M.P. and Arthur Griffith to provide support to the *Irish Brigade*. A fund was opened and among the subscriptions were: Maud Gonne £5.0.0, Willie Redmond- £1, John Joyce £0.2.0, Michael

Davitt £2.2.0, John Dillon M.P.£ 2.2.0. Francis MacBride £1.1.0 (Australia), Anthony MacBride £1.1.0. Joseph MacBride £1.1.0.<sup>2</sup>

Among those who wrote to John MacBride during the military campaign in South Africa was the Northern poet Anna Johnston [*Ethna Carbery*], She was, with Alice Milligan, the founder of the *Shan Van Vocht* journal, and a nationalist activist with Maud Gonne. Her letters indicate that she was very fond of John. In one letter dated 21 February 1900 she wrote “ I wrote you some time ago and would have written again, but I fear you may be beyond reach of correspondence. Occasionally I hear of you from the Editor of the *United Irishman* and your brother, and every scrap of news is welcomed”<sup>3</sup>. When Anna Johnston died so tragically in April 1902 among those who sent wreaths were Major MacBride and Joseph MacBride.

When Major John MacBride came to Paris after the Irish Brigade was stood down in late 1900, among the people who had assembled to meet him there were Arthur Griffith, Maud Gonne, Dr. Mark Ryan, John O’Leary, Joseph MacBride and his mother Honoria. This may have been the first time that Joseph met his future wife Eileen Wilson, who lived in Paris with her half-sister Maud Gonne.

Major MacBride later agreed to marry Maud Gonne, thus ensuring the hatred of her long-time suitor W.B. Yeats. Maud visited the MacBride family in Westport during the summer of 1902. She wrote to W.B. Yeats about the visit, “Last night Joseph MacBride took me out conger eel fishing, and we didn’t get back till one o’clock-It was lovely among the islands in Clew Bay...It was the loveliest night I had ever seen. Joseph MacBride is very nice; he reads a great deal & knows all your books. By the way he told me to tell you that any time it suited you to come & spend a quiet time in the country”<sup>4</sup>.

The MacBride family were not happy that John was to marry Maud. Both John’s mother and Joseph wrote to him advising against marrying her. Mrs. MacBride said the marriage was not sensible. Though praising Maud as a brave and beautiful woman, she said she would not make John happy. Joseph wrote, “She is accustomed to money; you have none; she is used to

<sup>2</sup> *The Yeats Gonne MacBride Triangle*, Anthony J. Jordan, Westport Books 2000 p. 131

<sup>3</sup> *Boer War to Easter Rising*, Anthony J. Jordan, Westport books 2006 p. 68 & 167.

<sup>4</sup> *The Gonne-Yeats Letters 1893-1938*, Anna MacBride White & A. Norman Jeffares Eds. Pimlico 1993. Pp. 157-158.

going her own way and listening to no one... These are not good qualities for a wife”<sup>5</sup>.

The marriage went ahead in February 1903 and in January 1904 their son, Seán MacBride was born in Paris. The christening took place in Dublin that April with Mrs MacBride as Godmother and John O’Leary as Godfather. John was still unable to return to Ireland lest he be arrested and tried for treasonable offences connected to the Boer War. Instead he visited America at this time. The priest officiating at the baptism refused to allow John O’Leary act as Godfather since he was a well-know agnostic. So it was Joseph MacBride who actually made the promises on behalf of the baby. Jenny Wyse-Power was a guest at the reception at Maud’s house on Coulson Avenue, Rathgar. She wrote, “I was present at the christening and on that occasion I met Joseph MacBride and the lady to whom he was about to be married, Miss Eileen Wilson”<sup>6</sup>. Anna MacBride White writes “Eileen Wilson, who had been engaged to Joseph MacBride for some time, was married on 3 August at St. Etheldred’s Church, Ely Place, London, and went to live in Westport”<sup>7</sup>. Maud presented the bride with a trousseau<sup>8</sup>. The wedding was a quiet affair with few present, as Eileen’s paternity was a matter of great embarrassment to Maud.

Eileen Wilson was the daughter born to Margaret Wilson and Colonel Tommy Gonne on 17 July 1886, shortly before his death later that same year. She was baptised at St Matthias’ church in Dublin<sup>9</sup>. Maud was apprised of this fact and organised a post of governess to the family of Ignatiev Platonovich Zakrevsky in Russia, whom she had met in 1892, for Margaret Wilson. Maud’s retired nurse, Mary Ann Meridith, called Bowie, looked after Eileen in Farnborough. When Bowie died in 1902 Eileen came to live in Paris with Maud<sup>10</sup>.

Some months later, as predicted, the marriage of John MacBride to Maud Gonne was in the process of disintegration. They had agreed to part but could not agree on the custody and future of their baby. After losing an earlier baby boy to meningitis, Maud saw her new baby as his reincarnation and could not

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5 *Willie Yeats & The Gonne-MacBrides*, Anthony J. Jordan, Westport Books 1997 p. 84.

6 *Yeats Gonne Triangle* op. cit. p. 86.

7 *Gonne-Yeats Letters* op. cit. p. 181

8 *ibid* .p 86.

9 *Boer War to Easter Rising* op. cit. p.175.

10 *Gonne-Yeats Letters* op. cit. p. 488.

part with him. In order to force John to capitulate Maud began to make third party allegations against John. She went to London to consult her solicitor. She then sought a meeting with Dr. Anthony MacBride, a brother of her husband, then working in London. She made allegations against John and presented a statement she wished John to sign acknowledging offences, give her full control of their baby and agree to emigrate permanently to America. Failure to comply would result in court action for criminal assault. Anthony contacted Joseph in Westport asking him to meet Anthony's wife in Dublin the next day with a view to informing John [then back in Dublin] of the allegations. As it happened Joseph and Anthony's wife met John by chance on O'Connell Bridge the following morning. John refused to capitulate to his wife's demands and she sued for divorce. Joseph and Eileen both attended the Parisian court proceedings in 1905 where Eileen contradicted her half-sisters allegations against John. Maud wrote to W.B. Yeats, with whom she had remained on very close terms despite her marriage, that Joseph MacBride declared that all those who slandered his wife were vile women in the pay of the vilest creature upon earth"<sup>11</sup>. John had instituted a libel action against the *Irish Independent* for the way it reported the divorce proceedings. It took place in 1906 and among the witnesses were Mr and Mrs Joseph MacBride<sup>12</sup>.

After the 1916 Rising and the execution of Major John MacBride there was shock in Westport. The local *Irish Volunteer Company* undertook a route march 'to show the flag'. Subsequently the RIC, backed up by 120 soldiers, arrested 33 men and despatched them by rail to Dublin and internment in Britain. Among the last of the group to be released just before Xmas were Joe Ring, Charles Hughes, Joe Gill, Owen Hughes, Darrell Figgis, John Berry, Manus Keane, PJ Doris, Pat Tunney and Joseph MacBride<sup>13</sup>. Sinn Fein was reorganised during 1917 and Joseph MacBride became the local President.

Maud Gonne wrote to Willie Yeats in April 1917:

*Joseph MacBride has again been arrested, though he has taken no part in politics his wife said since he returned home at Xmas after his 9 month imprisonment in England - No reason was given for his re-arrest & deportation - he was first sent to Oxford, where having some introduction to the Jesuit Fathers he succeeded in getting work in the Bodlean Library - most necessary for him, as he has no means and a wife & 5 little children dependent on him - some two*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p. 216.

<sup>12</sup> *Yeats Gonne MacBride Triangle*, *op. cit.* p. 103.

<sup>13</sup> *Frongoch 1916*, Harry Hughes 1995.

months later, again without any alleged reason being formulated he & 10 other deported Irishmen who were living at Oxford, were arrested and conducted to a little village in Gloucestershire & left there without any provision being made for them, with the orders that they were not to move out of a five mile radius. Of course in that village there was no means of getting employment. I have always heard that the Germans provide board for the deported people, though the French & English press complain that it is scanty<sup>14</sup>.

When the British ‘discovered a *German Plot*’ in Ireland in May 1918, they arrested most of the leading figures within Sinn Fein, including Arthur Griffith, Éamon de Valera and Joseph MacBride. A letter written by Arthur Griffith from Gloucester Jail on 16 July 1918, states;

“Letters sent by prisoners are being refused by British Government and returned to prisoners one to two weeks later. The Governor of the prison is quite blameless in the matter. I should of course very much like to see Maud. [Griffith’s wife] I am quite well and the general health of my colleagues is good. Mr. MacBride, however, brother of Major MacBride, who has been for this time within two years, arrested, deported, and imprisoned, without “trial” of any kind, is not in good health. He is the oldest of the prisoners here and the confinement is visibly affecting him”<sup>15</sup>.

Joseph MacBride was the unanimous choice to stand for Sinn Féin in the post-war General Election in December 1918. When his mother died on 8 February 1919, he got compassionate leave to attend her funeral. He was finally released on 15 March 1919. He became an unopposed Sinn Féin member of the First Dáil from 1919-1921 for Mayo West and again for the Second Dáil from 1921-1922 for Mayo North & West. As a member of *Cumann na nGaedheal*, he was re-elected to the Dáil for Mayo South for the period 1923-1927. He was defeated in the June 1927 General Election. His profession was Secretary of Westport Harbour Commissioners.

On 14 September 1921 Joseph seconded Éamon DeValera’s proposal to send a delegation to London for negotiations. During the debate on the Treaty he intervened on Thurs 15 Dec 1921 on a point of order. He said, “I was fully under the impression that the representatives who went to London were appointed with full powers from the Dail. They went to London and made a

14 *Gonne-Yeats Letters* op. cit. p. 389.

15 National library Ireland. Ms. 5943.

treaty and they...” He was then interrupted by Speaker who said this was not a point of order, but Joseph added “At the present moment you impugn the honour of the delegates and two of them...” when he was again Interrupted. He contributed to the Treaty Debates on Monday 19 December, saying:

*I am standing in support of the ratification of the Treaty brought home from London by the plenipotentiaries of Ireland. I support it because I consider it will be for the best interests of this country. I support the ratification because I know the people demand its ratification. I support the ratification of it because I know that the ideals for which I have worked, and for which others who are listening to me worked through many long and weary years, will be quicker attained by ratification of this Treaty than otherwise. I have the honour to know a number of men who suffered and laboured not only in this generation but in other generations, and I know it would be the last thing that they should wish that their labours and their sufferings should be used in order to press an argument in a controversy such as this. Their labours and their sufferings piled high on their country's altar will be as a beacon to the generations that are to come. Unity seems to be a fetish with some people in this assembly. They fear a split. I don't. Probably they have in their minds the foul implications and the degradation of the Parnell split. But cannot we agree to differ? I know nothing about the President except what the public know, but I would be grievously surprised if he carried on any controversy that should arise out of our differences here in any other than in a dignified and courteous manner. Arthur Griffith I know for a good number of years. I know how hard he worked and of his unselfishness. I am aware of his erudition and of his consistent line in the political movement in Ireland, and I know that he would not stoop to anything undignified. Who did you send to London?—a bevy of foolish children without sense of responsibility? Who did you send to London? Men of honesty and of ability, men of affairs, honourable men. You entrusted your honour to them and they did not betray it. They went to London with thorough and complete powers to make a Treaty. They arrived at a Treaty, an honourable Treaty, and that Treaty I am prepared to vote for, because I know in voting for its ratification I am serving the best interests of this country and of my own people<sup>16</sup>.*

In February 1923 Joseph MacBride visited Achill, which was a dangerous exercise for a Cumann na nGaedheal TD. There were still pockets of IRA activity around Mayo. As he left the station at Achill Sound and was about to cross the bridge, he was challenged by an armed IRA man. When it was

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<sup>16</sup> Dail Debates

discovered that he was carrying a gun, Joseph was taken to the old RIC station and interrogated. When his identity was established, he was brought further into the island to Keem. The IRA men, who were not locals, awaited orders. The local priest, Fr. Prendergast, got permission to invite Joseph to his house for a meal. As news spread about the prisoner a crowd gathered at the priest's house demanding his release. Both the priest and Joseph spoke to calm the crowd and he was able to slip away quietly to safety. As Vincent Keane writes "Joe MacBride was a lucky man"<sup>17</sup>.



*Mallow Cottage, home of Joseph MacBride and family.*

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<sup>17</sup> *Cathair na Mart*, 2004-5. Vincent Keane pp. 73-77.



A poignant letter responding to a request by Joseph MacBride issued from Army Headquarters in August 1922 reads:

OGLAIGH NA H-EIREANN

General Headquarters,  
Dublin.  
21<sup>st</sup> August, 1922,  
11-50 a.m.

To:

Acting Chairman

The following is an extract from a letter written by Mr. Joseph MacBride, T.D., Mallow Cottage, Westport:-

“There is just one thing I would suggest that you do, and that is to write a letter of appreciation, to the Harbour Commissioners, of the services of MICHAEL GRADY, the Engine Driver on the Harbour Dredger, and of JAMES BOURKE, his assistant. To those two men is due the expeditious landing of the Armoured Car, and certainly they were unsparing in their exertions to help while the MINEVIA was at Westport. If you do send them some momento(sic) I’m sure it will be appreciated”.

In accordance with Mr. MacBride’s wish I think you ought to send the necessary letter of thanks.

M. O’Coileain/GENERAL.  
COMMANDING-IN-CHIEF

Michael Collins’ signature was probably pre-signed or signed by an official on his behalf, as on that day Collins was in Cork and about to meet his fate on the following day.

There is a letter from Joseph MacBride in the National Library of Ireland dated 1925:

*Mallow Cottage*

*Westport 12<sup>th</sup> April 1925*

*Chrissie Byrne*

*My Dear Chrissie,*

*I hope you have sent out the circulars for the meeting of the Arthur Griffith Memorial. I enclose a note I had from Fawsitt but perhaps he had better wait until a later meeting. Wishing you many happy returns of the Easter time.*

*Yours very sincerely*

*Joseph MacBride<sup>18</sup>.*

Paul Durcan described his grandmother (Eileen MacBride) as akin to an Englishwoman and a French woman, in whose home the memory of Major John MacBride was revered. Paul describes his grandfather as an antiquarian with a huge library.

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18 NLI. Call No. lolb 163 (15).

Joseph died on 7 March 1938 aged 77 years. The *Mayo News* of 12 March carried a report which said, "In his capacity as secretary of the Harbour Commissioners he was an obliging and genial official. He was prominent in local politics as far back as the Parnell period. Always tending to an extreme view in politics he took a prominent part in the organising of the Volunteers in 1914 and became one of its first officers in Mayo...In 1920 he spent his third time as an inmate of a British prison. Among his friends were Arthur Griffith, Seán MacDermott, and Dr. Mark Ryan....He was Chair of the local *Gaelic League Branch* and was one of the original founders of *Tourmakeady Irish College*. He was interested in Irish folklore and archaeology and was an authority on the history of West Mayo, particularly Westport district. He leaves a widow and five children; Clohra & Sheila MacBride are solicitors, Miss Cliona MacBride is secretary of the Irish Sewing Company. Miss Una MacBride recently became a novice in a religious order in Dublin. His only son, Erc, is engaged in business in England. Large crowds accompanied the funeral to Aughavale cemetery. The old IRA, Cumann na mBan and other old Nationalists were present. Seventeen priests officiated. Among the relations present were MacBrides, Gills, O'Dowds, Egan, Gallagher, Sheridan<sup>19</sup>.

**Anthony J. Jordan** is a native of Ballyhaunis, now living in Dublin. He has written biographies of Major John MacBride, Séan MacBride, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Winston Churchill, Christy Brown, W.B. Yeats, John A. Costello and Éamon DeValera. He has also written two studies of the Yeats/Gonne/MacBride Triangle and edited a collection of the writings of John MacBride, titled *Boer War to Easter Rising*.

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<sup>19</sup> *Mayo News* 12 March 1938.