Introduction

By Rev. Professor F.X. Martin, O.S.A.

THE HOWTH gun-running was a dramatic Irish episode set against a bizarre English background. It was important in its immediate consequences, but more important still because it made the Rising of Easter Week 1916 possible.

The background to the gun-running was the struggle for power in the British Parliament between the Liberals and the Conservatives. The immediate issue at stake was whether the Liberal government under Asquith could succeed in enacting and enforcing a Home Rule Bill to give Ireland a measure of self-government. The campaign was not altogether a crusade on Asquith's part; he and the Liberals were being kept in power by the eighty-four Irish Nationalist M.P.s led by John Redmond and pledged to Home Rule. The alliance represented hard bargaining but not sharp practice. Asquith and Redmond were both gentlemen of the Old School, who believed in playing the parliamentary game of cards according to the rules. And on the run of the play, with a solid majority of Liberal-Labour and Irish M.P.s in the House of Commons, there seemed no doubt that the Home Rule prize was about to be carried off by Redmond and Asquith.

Then the unpardonable was committed. The Conservatives cheated. They first triumphantly produced 'the Orange card' as their trump, but when they found that their bluff was being challenged they produced the gun. The Orangemen in Ulster, led by 'King' Carson, raised the cry

of 'Home Rule is Rome Rule' and prepared for civil war in Ireland and armed resistance to His Majesty's government. The Orangemen were encouraged by the Conservatives and by a substantial body of opinion in the British Army. It could be argued that English Conservative honour was still unsullied. Bonar Law, leader of the Conservative Party, was a Canadian of an Ulster Presbyterian father; Carson was an Irishman, and a Southern Irishman to boot; Sir Henry Wilson, in this affair as confirmed an intriguer as had ever worn the King's uniform, was also a Southern Irishman; two of his principal supporters, Field Marshal Roberts and Lord Kitchener, were also of Anglo-Irish Southern stock. But the sins of the Conservative Party could not be laid solely on these audacious scapegoats, nor were they mere cat's-paws.

Bonar Law and Carson were members of the English Privy Council; Wilson was Director of Military Intelligence in the War Office; Roberts and Kitchener were two of the leading British soldiers. All five spoke and acted with the weight, prestige and influence of the Conservative Party behind them. Bonar Law did not mince his words. He declared to an enthusiastic audience of Conservatives at Bristol in January 1914, 'We are drifting inevitably to civil war...It is the determination of the people of Ulster to resist by force if necessary the imposition of this [Home Rule] Bill… We have given a pledge that if Ulster resists we will support her in her resistance.'

For Asquith and the Liberal government, as for Redmond and the Nationalist M.P.s, it was an incredible situation. Asquith, now shaken from his serene optimism, described with pain and indignation the statements of the Conservatives and Orangemen as furnishing 'a complete grammar of anarchy', but only aroused chuckles of sardonic glee from his opponents. The Ulster Volunteers continued to drill and organize; by March 1914 their number had risen to 84,540; high-ranking British officers came to advise and train them; arms were being

imported; a Provisional Government of Ulster—illegal, of course—was formed in September 1913. A chasm yawned at Asquith's feet when the 'Curragh Mutiny' of March 1914 showed that the government could not depend on the army to enforce its will in Ulster. Not since the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 had the army displayed this mutinous mood, and it was an ominous reminder that Ulster Protestants had played their part in overthrowing the English government of that time.

Ugly disorder showed itself even within the walls of parliament. Asquith tried unsuccessfully to deliver a speech for three-quarters of an hour under volleys of hoots, jeers, and cries of 'Traitor!' from the Conservative benches. Never before in the history of parliament had a prime minister been refused a hearing. On another occasion Winston Churchill, then a Liberal, and Sir John Seely, Secretary of State for War, were leaving the Chamber amid Conservative cries of 'Rats! Rats!' when Ronald McNeill, an Ulster Unionist M.P., was carried away in his fury and threw a volume of the Orders at Churchill, striking him on the forehead. Churchill started angrily towards McNeill but was restrained by two members. Meantime the supposedly turbulent Irish Nationalist M.P.s looked on with wry amusement at these displays of passion.

Ireland grew sceptical when it remembered Redmond's confident declaration at Dublin in March 1912, 'Trust the Old Party, and Home Rule next year'. The example of the Orangemen was infectious, and without Redmond's consent a new military organization, the Irish Volunteers, sprang into existence in Dublin on 25 November 1913. It was led by Professor Eoin MacNeill, a figure of national repute, supported by the bulk of the people, and backed by the secret oath-bound society, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B.). The manifesto issued on 25 November made plain that the Volunteers were not founded in opposition to the Orangemen but 'to secure and maintain the rights and liberties common to all the people of Ireland.'

The Liberal government had let the Ulster Volunteer Force grow unchecked; now at the sight of the Irish Volunteers it took fright, and on 4 December 1913 issued a proclamation against the importation of arms and ammunition into Ireland. Still the Irish Volunteers grew and multiplied, and as they did their clamour for arms increased. Here was a national military force, drilling with wooden guns, pikes and broom handles. The implied insult could not be borne for long. Although the Ulster Volunteer Force had been importing and smuggling quantities of arms and ammunition they too felt the need for a full-scale arming of their soldiers.

Both the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Irish Volunteers saw there was one solution—gun-running. No major difficulty confronted the Orangemen; they already had a defence fund of £1,000,000, a highly efficient organization, and the connivance of public officials in England and northern Ireland. They proved they were in earnest. A cargo of 20,000 rifles and over 3,000,000 rounds of ammunition was sailed in to Larne on the night of 24 April 1914, with a flourish of secrecy. Police, coastguards and soldiers slept the sleep of the just while a cavalcade of 700 motor vehicles converged on Larne, the countryside made bright as day from the glare of their headlights.

The example of the Orangemen stimulated the Irish Volunteers. Their clamour for arms grew more insistent, but they were a poor man's organization, they were menaced by the proclamation prohibiting the importation of arms, and, outside of Ulster, Dublin Castle had a firm grip on the country through its civil servants, the R.I.C., and the Army. The I.R.B. fumed at its own inability to do more than buy guns singly, while MacNeill and his followers fared little better. Nor was any lead given by the Irish Nationalist M.P.s at Westminster; Redmond was an eagle caged in his eyrie under Big Ben.

Help came from an unexpected quarter, from a number of English and Anglo-Irish Liberals who were growing alarmed at Asquith's inability to reduce the Orangemen to order and to withstand the Conservative

onslaught on the safeguards of the English Constitution. Sir Roger Casement, burning with indignation and energy, arrived in London, urging that talk cease and action be taken. An Anglo-Irish committee was privately formed in London, with Mrs Alice Stopford Green as chairman, and Mrs Erskine Childers as secretary. Mrs Green was Irish by birth, and widow of the distinguished English historian, E. R. Green. She was an engaging personality and an historian of considerable achievement in her own right. Mrs Childers was an American, one of the Osgoods of Boston. She was a woman of remarkable character; although a semi-invalid due to an accident in her early teens she overcame this disability sufficiently to lead an active life. Her husband, Erskine Childers, had served as a British officer in the Boer War, and attained some fame by his books on military affairs and his enlightening novel, *The Riddle of the Sands*. His Irish nationalist sympathies had become evident in 1911 with the publication of his *Framework of Home Rule.*

The committee was an informal circle of friends. On it, or associated with it, were Sir Roger Casement, Lord Ashbourne, Sir Alexander Lawrence, Lady Alice Young, Captain George Fitz Hardinge Berkeley, Min Ryan then in London and secretary of Cumann-na-mBan, the Honourable Mary Spring Rice, and her cousins, Conor and Hugh O'Brien.

A meeting of some of the committee was held in Mrs Green's house in Grosvenor Road, Westminster, on 8 May. Eoin MacNeill, head of the Irish Volunteers, was over in London to see John Redmond and attended the meeting. It was quickly agreed that guns was the one essential the Volunteers lacked, and there was spontaneous consent that the guns must be secured from the continent. But money was needed for guns, and equally important was how the guns were to be bought and put into the hands of the Volunteers despite the proclamation of 4 December 1913. These were the problems which still remained to be solved after the meeting.

Then Mary Spring Rice had her flash of inspiration. She went to her friends, the Childers, and suggested that guns be bought on the continent and smuggled to Ireland in a fishing smack, the *Santa Cruz,* which was then engaged in trade on the Lower Shannon and was based on Foynes, near her home, Mount Trenchard. She asked Erskine Childers to skipper the ship and he readily agreed, on condition that it was capable of the task. He travelled over to Ireland in mid-May 1914 and down to Foynes, where he inspected the smack with O'Brien and Mary Spring Rice. While these two believed that it should be bought, repaired and equipped for the gun-running he remained unconvinced that this was a practicable proposition. He went to Dublin and raised the question with MacNeill who gladly jumped at this opportunity of arming the Volunteers. The difficulty of transporting the guns to Ireland remained Childers's problem.

In Dublin the project was a secret between MacNeill, The O'Rahilly and Bulmer Hobson; Sir Roger Casement was chosen as their liaison officer with the committee in London. O'Rahilly, as Director of Arms for the Volunteers, travelled over to London several times to discuss plans with the committee. Childers finally decided that both his own yacht, *Asgard,* then laid up at Conway in Wales, and O'Brien's yacht, *Kelpie,* should be used for the gun-running.

Meantime, money was collected from the members of the committee, with Fitz Hardinge Berkeley and Mrs Green contributing the major share. Childers went to Conway in mid-June to inspect his yacht, and continued on to Dublin. A final plan was then agreed upon, known in its entirety only to Childers, MacNeill, Casement, and Hobson. It was set in three logical stages; the guns were to be bought as unobtrusively as possible on the continent; shipped secretly to the Irish coast; landed without hindrance in Ireland and distributed to the Volunteers.

The first part of the plan was entrusted principally to Darrell Figgis, an Anglo-Irishman of some literary repute who had become interested in

the Volunteer movement. He was widely travelled, and spoke German and French. He accompanied Childers to Hamburg during the last week of May 1914, where they succeeded in purchasing 1,500 rifles and 45,000 rounds of ammunition from the firm of Moritz Magnus to which O'Rahilly had directed them. The guns were second-hand Mauser rifles, discarded by the German Army but effective nevertheless. Figgis had to arrange for the transport of the guns and ammunition by tug from Hamburg to the Roetigen lightship off the Belgian coast. This he did quite satisfactorily, with a typical measure of self-confidence and stage-play.

The second part of the plan devolved mainly on Childers and involved three yachts. The tug was to be met by the *Asgard* under Childers, and the *Kelpie* under Conor O'Brien. Childers would take 750 rifles and half of the ammunition. The other half of the cargo was to be shipped by O'Brien, but since he was well known as an Irish nationalist and a yachtsman, and in the suspicious atmosphere of the time might well be suspected of gun-running, he was to transfer his cargo at sea off the Welsh coast to Sir Thomas Myles's steam-yacht, *Chotah.*

The final stage of the plan, in so far as it concerned Howth, was daring in its concept. It had been proposed by Hobson to Childers, and it was left to Hobson to see it through. Myles was to land his cargo on an unfrequented beach at Kilcoole, county Wicklow, on the night of Saturday-Sunday, 25-26 July, where it would be met by a small contingent of Volunteers under the supervision of Seán Fitzgibbon, a Volunteer officer and a trusted friend of Hobson. Next day Volunteers would occupy Howth Harbour in time for Childers to sail in with his consignment of rifles and ammunition to the east pier. Other Volunteers and the Fianna under Pádraig Ó Riain would unload the arms, distribute them to the Volunteers and march back openly to Dublin. The Howth landing was intended to take Dublin Castle unawares, to give publicity and encouragement to the Volunteers, and to solve by a simple method

the unloading and distribution of the arms. In the ultimate analysis it would make the Volunteers an effective military force.

The plan in its three stages was so finely balanced and neatly timed that any mishap at any point could have meant the failure of the whole scheme. *Asgard* and *Kelpie* were sailing boats, at the mercy of wind and wave. There was no direct wireless or telephonic communication between the principal figures in the drama, so that Figgis, Childers, O'Brien, Myles and Hobson had each to work his part of the scheme as best he could, but be prepared to improvise a radical change in case of a mishap. Threats dogged the scheme from the time Figgis had to cope with customs' clearance at Hamburg until the Volunteers returning from Howth with the rifles found their path barred by military and police. One of the most serious accidents to the Kilcoole consignment occurred when the mainsail of the *Chotah* split and made it impossible for the yacht to reach the Wicklow coast on Saturday night.

The *Asgard* had no easy voyage to Howth. On Friday night and Saturday morning the yacht was caught in one of the worst storms off Dublin since 1882 but Childers kept a masterful hand on the helm. Then the whole expedition was jeopardized, literally at the last hour. It had been agreed that the *Asgard* would lie off Lambay Island on Sunday morning, waiting for Figgis to appear in a motor boat at ten o'clock at the mouth of Howth Harbour as a sign that all was clear. If he did not make an appearance it was to be assumed that the British had discovered what was afoot. There would be no Volunteers at Howth and the Hobson plan was to be abandoned. Childers was to take to sea again, and make off around the southern coast to the mouth of the Shannon.

When that Sunday dawned and the forenoon wore on with no sign of Figgis the crew of the *Asgard* endured two hours of anxiety, doubt, then agony. It was a question of then or never. The *Asgard* had to get in to Howth and out on the one high tide in order to unload its cargo. Its arrival had also to coincide with the appearance of the Volunteer columns

on the quayside. In these circumstances there was only one hour in one day in the year which would suit, since the *Asgard* needed a Spring tide, about midday, on a Sunday, in summertime. Childers, his face white with anxiety, made a snap decision and sailed in to Howth, arriving precisely at the agreed time, to find the first file of Volunteers led by Cathal Brugha marching down the pier to meet the yacht.

Erskine Childers was the hero of the Howth gun-running. In many qualities he bore a striking resemblance to a contemporary of his, Lawrence of Arabia, also of Anglo-Irish parentage. History may be studied as a pattern of 'movements', but the role of the individual remains of supreme importance for it is the individual who at a crucial moment deflects or thwarts a movement or carries it forward to victory. Childers, from the hour he accepted Mary Spring Rice's invitation to run the guns to Ireland until he warped the boat in beside the pier at Howth, showed a mastery of practical detail, persistent courage, and a visionary sense of the ultimate achievement. The guns from Hamburg were to be of greater importance than he could then foresee. The foundation of the Irish Volunteers in November 1913, the landing of the guns at Howth and Kilcoole, the Rising in 1916, were three steps which led logically but not inevitably one to the other. From the Easter Rising came the Declaration of Independence by Dáil Éireann on 21 January 1919 and the emergence of a separate Irish State in 1922.

The immediate effect of the Howth gun-running was the powerful fillip it gave to the Irish Volunteers. Their numbers increased rapidly; they now marched with a defiant step, confident that they were no longer playing at being soldiers. Lack of money had hitherto hamstrung all their efforts; funds were now sent with an open hand from all parts of Ireland, and even more generously from America. Since Redmond had nominally a major say in directing the Volunteers the gun-running strengthened his hand in dealing with Carson and Asquith, but paradoxically among Irish

nationalists his control of affairs was weakened since they were aware that he had no part in the venture.

One central issue should not be overlooked. The gravest of crises had overtaken the Volunteers in June 1914 when Redmond, indignant that he had been excluded from control of this new national body, demanded that twenty-five of his nominees be co-opted on to the provisional committee of the Volunteers, to counter-balance the existing thirty who already included some of his followers. A minority group of nine, led by MacDiarmada and Pearse, refused Redmond's ultimatum and a split was threatened within the organization. The majority of the committee, led by Hobson, MacNeill and Casement, convinced that Redmond would shatter the Volunteer movement if he were not placated, were willing to accept his demand under duress, and eventually the minority group also accepted under protest. Had the committee split in June 1914 there would have been no Howth gun-running, as there would have been no united body of Volunteers to meet the *Asgard*. MacNeill was head of the Volunteers, and Hobson the organizer of the landing of the guns. Childers, at this stage, was a believer in Redmond and Home Rule, not in revolution and a republic. Without Howth and Kilcoole there could hardly have been a rising in 1916.

The guns arrived in the nick of time. Within a week of Howth and Kilcoole the European war broke out and any further gun-running by men such as Childers, O'Brien and Myles was out of the question. All three served with the British forces during the war.

A survey of the group who organized the gun-running reveals that on the whole they were Anglo-Irish, Liberal, Protestant, Home Rulers, and of the upper and professional classes. Their mutual bonds were as much social and personal as political. In many ways the gun-running had a family air about it. Mrs Stopford Green was chairman of the Anglo-Irish committee in London. She was a relative of Lady Alice Young, one of the eleven subscribers to the gun-running fund; Lady Alice was Irish,

a Kennedy from Belgard, county Dublin, and widow of Sir Alexander Hutchinson Lawrence. His nephew, Sir Alexander Waldemar Lawrence, was also associated with the committee. Diarmuid Coffey, one of the crew of the *Kelpie*, was a cousin of the Lawrences and a friend of Conor O'Brien.

Mrs Green and Sir Roger Casement had become fast friends early in the century due to their mutual Irish nationalist interests, and he acted as the liaison between the Volunteers in Dublin and the committee in London. Childers was a friend of Sir George and Lady Alice Young, and Casement visited them on several occasions in their home at Cookham, Berkshire. Both Mrs Green and Casement were friends of Francis J. Bigger, the generous patron of the Irish cultural revival in Belfast. It was through Bigger that Patrick McGinley and Charles Duggan, two fishermen from Gola Island, county Donegal, were secured for the *Asgard.* Bulmer Hobson, who was given charge of the Irish end of the gun-running, was a personal friend of Casement since 1904.

Mary Spring Rice, who first suggested how the guns should be run to Ireland for the Volunteers, was daughter of Lord Monteagle, and like Casement and the Childers had come to know Mrs Green through Liberalism and the Irish cultural revival. She brought her cousins, Conor O'Brien and Hugh Vere O'Brien, in on the gun-running scheme. It was in the topsy-turvy nature of Anglo-Irish politics of this time that her first cousin, Sir Cecil Arthur Spring Rice, was then British ambassador at Washington and a member of the English Privy Council. Conor O'Brien's crew on the *Kelpie* consisted of his sister, Kitty, Diarmuid Coffey, and two sailors from Foynes, George Cahill and Thomas Fitzsimons.

The Childers, who played an essential part in the whole episode, had long been friends with Mrs Green, the O'Briens and the Spring Rices. Sir Thomas Myles, whose yacht *Chotah* carried the guns on the last stage of the journey to Kilcoole, was well-acquainted with Childers and Conor O'Brien. Yachting, Home Rule, and Liberalism were their

common interests. Captain Gordon Shephard, who sailed on the *Asgard*, was a close friend of the Childers; he had been attracted to them through admiration for Erskine Childers as a yachtsman. Captain George Fitz Hardinge Berkeley, a generous subscriber to the gun-running fund, was Irish by birth, a friend of the Childers and a Liberal in politics. James Creed Meredith and Hervey de Montmorency, who saw the guns safely to Kilcoole on the *Chotah,* were Home Rulers and Liberals, friends of Conor O'Brien.

England at this time was convulsed by the suffragette movement. Women asserted themselves in Irish affairs by the prominent part they played in the gun-running. Mrs Stopford Green was chairman of the committee in London; Mary Spring Rice suggested a practical plan and sailed on the *Asgard;* Mrs Erskine Childers was secretary of the committee, and despite being a semi-invalid took a full part in the voyage of the *Asgard*; Kitty O'Brien was one of the crew of the *Kelpie*; Lady Alice Young and Min Ryan were among the eleven subscribers to the gun-running fund.

The I.R.B., which ultimately, in Easter Week 1916, was to gain most by the gun-running, played a subsidiary role in July 1914. Its connection with Howth and Kilcoole was through Bulmer Hobson. Many of the I.R.B. had no knowledge that a gun-running was planned; some of them, such as Con Colbert and Piaras Béaslaí, were at the Gaelic League Oireachtas in Killarney when the *Asgard* sailed into Howth. Hobson, as a controlling figure in the Irish Volunteers, was a natural agent to arrange for the landing of the guns. As a member of the Supreme Council of the I.R.B. and Chairman of its Dublin Centre's Board he secured the co-operation of Tom Clarke, Seán MacDiarmada, Cathal Brugha and the I.R.B. in general. As a principal founder of the Fianna scouts he was able to bring that disciplined organization into full use at Howth.

The gun-running at Howth taught Irish nationalists one bitter lesson—there was one law for Orangemen, another for the rest of Ireland. During the weeks previous to the Howth gun-running the

Orange Order in Dublin was discreetly importing rifles, revolvers and ammunition with the connivance of the government authorities and drilling its members in the Fowler Hall, Rutland Square, Dublin.[2] The largest consignment of arms, 600 rifles and 300 revolvers, was brought over on the mailboat from England with the knowledge of its captain, Burchill, and stored in Dublin. On Saturday, 25 July, 1914, five thousand members of the Ulster Volunteer Force paraded through Belfast, armed with rifles, and even accompanied by machine guns. They were neither challenged nor molested by the British authorities. The following day the Irish Volunteers returning with nine hundred rifles from Howth were confronted by police and soldiers. Worse still, an unarmed crowd which was jeering and pelting the soldiers at Bachelor's Walk was fired upon without warning, three civilians (one of them a woman) were killed and thirty-five wounded; five boys and six women were among the wounded; two of the victims, a man and a woman, were bayoneted not shot.

Years previously in the House of Commons when an Irish Nationalist M.P. made an ardent appeal for justice for Ireland he was dismissed by Balfour with the arrogant remark, "There isn't enough justice to go round.' On 31 August 1913 during the Great Lock-Out in Dublin the police savagely attacked and batoned an unarmed gathering of strikers and bystanders in Sackville Street; four hundred civilians were treated for injuries. Nothing similar had happened when an alarming series of strikes in England, Wales and Belfast threatened the economic stability of Great Britain during 1911 and 1912. Balfour's view was further confirmed in unforgettable terms when the King's Own Scottish Borderers fired on the crowd at Bachelor's Walk. These incidents, which Augustine Birrell was later to describe ruefully as 'the hoarded passions' of 1913 and Bachelor's Walk, festered in the people's memory. They help to explain why Easter Week 1916 saw the Irish Citizen Army and a section of the Irish

2 For information on this little-known aspect of the problem see the statements of Mr Knollys Stokes, Miss Ruby Stokes, Mr Patrick J. Coyne, Mr F. W. Gumley and Mr John Kerr, in *Irish Times*, 31 July 1964, p. 1; 5 August 1964, pp. 4, 7; 12 August 1964, p. 7; 25 August, 26 August 1964, p. 7.

Volunteers, with their Howth rifles, banded together in revolution, and why their bloody protest was made in the heart of Dublin, in Sackville Street and along Bachelor's Walk.

Balfour's remark is the epitaph of British rule in Ireland.