

## Childers, (Robert) Erskine by M. A. Hopkinson

Childers, (Robert) Erskine (1870–1922), British civil servant, author, and Sinn Féin propagandist, was born 25 June 1870 in London, second son among five children of Robert Caesar Childers, private secretary to the governor of Ceylon and scholar of Buddhism, and Anna Henrietta Childers (née Barton). The Childers family had long been prominent in political and clerical circles: Hugh Culling Eardley Childers, Erskine Childers's first cousin, had been in some of Gladstone's cabinets, and a distant ancestor had been lord chancellor. The Bartons were an Anglo-Irish ascendancy family owning a 2,000-acre estate at Glendalough, Co. Wicklow. His father died when Childers was six, and he moved to live with the Barton family at Glendalough. His mother died in 1883. Educated at Bengeo preparatory school and at Haileybury School (renowned for its imperialist values), he then took classics and law at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he edited the *Cambridge Review* and took a first in law in June 1893. He briefly studied for the bar in 1893 before coming third in the civil service entrance examinations the following year; he was appointed joint assistant clerk at the house of commons in January 1895.

Childers volunteered for the Boer war in 1899, serving as an artillery driver. He was lifted out of the predictability of a conventional upper-middle-class career by the publication of his Boer war memories, *In the ranks of the C.I.V.* [City of London Imperial Volunteers] (1900), but more dramatically by the huge success of his *The riddle of the sands* (1903). This book was the first example of twentieth-century spy thrillers, written in the context of German threats to British naval security and benefiting from Childers's sailing experience and his training in English Victorian values. With its heavy use of factual detail, Childers was keen that it should not be known as a novel. *The riddle of the sands* went through many editions, remaining in print into the twenty-first century; an audiobook version was published in 2002. Among his other publications, Childers wrote the fifth volume of *The Times history of the South African war* (1907).

During a visit to Massachusetts (1903) Childers met Mary ('Molly') Osgood, the attractive, intellectually gifted, disabled daughter of a leading Boston family, long associated with anti-imperialism. They married on 5 January 1904. Their marriage was intense and close, and Molly had a major, but often exaggerated, influence on Childers. They had three sons, one of whom died in infancy.

At the height of the political battle over Lloyd George's budget in 1909/10, Childers switched his attention from the German threat to support for Irish home rule. He resigned his senior clerkship to the house of commons in October 1910, with a view to gaining a parliamentary seat. In 1911 he published a pamphlet, *The framework of home rule*, and was involved in the establishment in England of the Home Rule League. Childers was adopted as prospective Liberal candidate for Devonport (1912) but soon abandoned that, partly because of his preoccupation with the Irish question. He was alarmed by the failure of the

Liberal government to prevent the unionist gun-running at Larne, and was the mastermind behind the committee that organised the shipment of arms from Germany to Howth in July 1914. His yacht, the *Asgard*, was used for the arms smuggling, and his mastery of detail and maritime experience proved invaluable in the project.

Childers's expertise was utilised at the start of the first world war when he served in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, as a member of the Royal Naval Air Service. As an intelligence officer, he was involved in planning raids on the German coast and his advice was sought over the Dardanelles expedition. Back in England from 1915, he was assigned to intelligence duties in the air department and supervised the building of torpedo boats in 1916. In April 1917 he was awarded the DSC. In July of that year he was given leave from his military duties to become assistant secretary to the Irish convention. By that time he favoured dominion home rule for Ireland, and he felt that the collapse of the convention in early 1918 represented the death knell of nineteenth-century liberalism. Such an outlook was intensified by his opposition to government plans for the extension of conscription to Ireland. Towards the end of the war, as an intelligence officer in the newly formed RAF, Childers was involved in plans for strategic bombing, including a proposed raid on Berlin, abandoned due to the cessation of hostilities.

In March 1919 Childers made the decision to move to Ireland and to use his literary skills and journalistic contacts to aid Sinn Féin propaganda. He went to Paris in July to help publicise their cause internationally, and later in that year began work on the *Irish Bulletin*. His family left their comfortable world in Chelsea at the end of 1919 to live more precariously with him in Dublin. For the rest of his life, Childers was to concentrate exclusively on Irish affairs and become ever more virulent in his nationalist beliefs. The effect of reprisals by British forces, together with the imprisonment on two occasions of his cousin Robert Barton (qv), heightened Childers's republicanism. This was well illustrated by his pamphlet *Military rule in Ireland*.

Childers was particularly close to Éamon de Valera (qv) and his ideas appear to have had a heavy influence on the dáil president. He was not, however, trusted by many; Arthur Griffith (qv) called him a 'damned Englishman'. Remembering his British intelligence associations, many suspected him of being a spy. In February 1921, following the arrest of Desmond FitzGerald (qv), Childers became director of propaganda, stressing the need for the IRA to be regarded as a legitimate dáil-approved force. After the May 1921 election he became a Sinn Féin TD.

Childers accompanied de Valera to London for the early stages of negotiations and was appointed one of the secretaries to the treaty conference. During the conference he reported back to de Valera independently on developments, and had increasingly strained relations with Michael Collins (qv) and Griffith. The

British delegation also regarded Childers as a harmful influence during the negotiations, and set up private meetings with Griffith and Collins to bypass him. In the dramatic last hours before the signing of the treaty on 6 December, Childers used his family connections in an abortive attempt to discourage Barton from signing the document.

Childers became one of the fiercest public opponents of the treaty, concentrating during the dáil treaty debates especially on the defence clauses. With de Valera, though, he became more and more of a marginal figure as the military opposition to the treaty came to dominate the political. He had to flee Dublin in the early weeks of the civil war, leaving his family and adopting a peripatetic secret role, striving to keep his republican publicity sheets going. Because of his age and the general lack of trust in him as an outsider, he was not accepted by the columns of the Cork and Kerry IRA. Meanwhile he was suspected in British government and Irish provisional government circles of being responsible for the republican military struggle. It was rumoured that Liam Lynch (qv), the republican chief of staff, wished Childers to replace de Valera as leader of the republican party.

After an arduous escape from the hilly fastnesses of the south-west with his confidant David Robinson (qv), Childers was arrested at Glendalough House on 10 November 1922 and charged with possession of a small pistol, actually given to him as a keepsake by Michael Collins. At this time, comments by Kevin O'Higgins (qv) and Winston Churchill in their respective parliaments demonstrated the depth of personal animosity to Childers and exhibited the problems of coming to terms with the 'zeal of the convert'. On 24 November 1922 Childers was duly executed by firing squad. The execution was justified as coming under the terms of the public safety act.

Childers's last reflections suggest that the underlying motivation for his actions was a determination to reconcile Britain with Ireland. The latter part of his life, however, achieved precisely the opposite. By staying in Ireland and contributing both to the Free State and Republic, the Childers family did much to reconcile Free Stater with republican. Childers's eldest son, Erskine Hamilton Childers (qv), was elected president in 1973. An obsessive man, Robert Erskine Childers had been distrusted on all sides. In explaining his switch from English Edwardian respectability to hard-line Irish republicanism, too much responsibility has been attached to his wife's influence and not enough to his psyche and the tensions inherent in his Anglo-Irish identity.

---

Tom Cox, *Damned Englishman* (1975); Andrew Boyle, *The riddle of Erskine Childers* (1977); Burke Wilkinson, *The zeal of the convert* (1978); Michael Hopkinson, *Green against green: the Irish civil war* (1988); Jim Ring, *Erskine Childers* (1996).

M. A. Hopkinson, 'Childers, Robert (Erskine)', *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), vol 2, pp 496–497.

The Royal Irish Academy's *Dictionary of Irish Biography* is published online at <http://dib.cambridge.org>. To subscribe, email [onlinepublications@cambridge.org](mailto:onlinepublications@cambridge.org); for further information see [www.dib.ie](http://www.dib.ie).