

Kettle, Thomas Michael ('Tom')

by Donal Lowry

Kettle, Thomas Michael ('Tom') (1880–1916), parliamentarian, writer, and soldier, was born 9 February 1880 in Artane, Co. Dublin, seventh among twelve children of Andrew Kettle (qv), farmer and agrarian activist, and his wife, Margaret, daughter of Laurence McCourt, farmer, of St Margaret's, Co. Dublin. His father's record in nationalist politics and land agitation, including imprisonment in 1881, was a valuable political pedigree.

Education The family was prosperous. Thomas and his brothers attended Christian Brothers' O'Connell School in Richmond St., Dublin, before being sent to board at Clongowes Wood College, Co. Kildare. Popular, fiery, and something of a prankster, he soon proved to be an exceptional scholar and debater, as well as a keen athlete, cyclist, and cricketer. He enrolled in 1897 at University College, St Stephen's Green, his contemporaries including Patrick Pearse (qv), Oliver St John Gogarty (qv), and James Joyce (qv). Kettle thrived in student politics, where his rhetorical genius soon won him many admirers and was recognised in his election as auditor of the college's Literary and Historical Society. He also co-founded the Cui Bono Club. In 1899 he distributed pro-Boer propaganda and anti-recruitment leaflets, arguing that the British empire was based on theft, while becoming active in protests against the Irish Literary Theatre's staging of 'The countess Cathleen' by W. B. Yeats (qv). In 1900, however, he was prevented from taking his BA examinations due to a mysterious 'nervous condition' – very probably a nervous breakdown. Occasional references in his private diaries and notes suggest that he was prone to bouts of depression throughout his life. He spent the following two years touring in Europe, including a year at the University of Innsbruck, practising his French and German, before taking a BA in mental and moral science of the Royal University of Ireland in 1902. He continued to edit the college newspaper, remaining active in student politics. He participated, for example, in protests against the RUI's ceremonial playing of 'God save the king' at graduations as well as its senate's apparent support for government policy, threatening on one occasion to burn publicly his degree certificate.

Journalist and MP In 1903 Kettle was admitted to the Honourable Society of King's Inns to read law and was called to the bar two years later. Nonetheless, he soon decided on a career in political journalism. Like his father, he was a keen supporter of the Irish parliamentary party, and in 1904 was a co-founder of the resonantly titled Young Ireland Branch of the United Irish League. Here he came to the notice of John Redmond (qv), who offered him the prospect of a parliamentary seat, but Kettle chose instead to put his energies into editing the avowedly pro-Irish-party paper, *The Nationist*, in which he promised that a home rule administration would uphold women's rights, industrial self-sufficiency, and Gaelic

League control of Irish education. He hoped that the paper would offer a corrective alternative to *The Leader*, run by D. P. Moran (qv), but in 1905 he was compelled to resign the editorship due to an article thought to be anti-clerical. In July 1906 he was persuaded to stand in a by-election in Tyrone East, which he won with a margin of only eighteen votes. As one of the youngest and most talented men in an ageing party, he was already tipped as a potential future leader. His oratory was immediately put to good use by the party in a propaganda and fund-raising tour of the US, as well as on the floor of the house of commons, where his oratorical skills earned him a fearsome reputation. He firmly advocated higher education for catholics and the improvement of the Irish economy, while developing a close alliance with Joseph Devlin (qv) and the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

Kettle meanwhile made good use of his connections to Archbishop William Walsh (qv), the UCD Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Catholic Graduates and Undergraduates Association, as well as political support, to secure the professorship of national economics. T. P. Gill (qv), of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, exceptionally acted as Kettle's referee. His detractors regarded the appointment as a political sinecure and Kettle as a somewhat dilettantish 'professor of all things', who frequently neglected his academic duties. However, he took a keen interest in imperial and continental European economies. He did publish on fiscal policy, even if always taking a pragmatic interest in wider questions, greatly impressing a young Kevin O'Higgins (qv), later vice-president of the Irish Free State executive council, who would frequently quote him: 'The state is you and me and the man around the corner' (White, *O'Higgins*, 179). Kettle had little time for what he regarded as the abstract educational and economic idealism of D. P. Moran. He acknowledged that the 'Hungarian policy' of Arthur Griffith (qv) had contributed significantly to a necessary debate about the economy, but argued that the Irish were 'realists', that Ireland's natural resources ought to be scientifically measured, and that the imperial connection was crucial to Ireland's future development. The achievement of home rule would, he asserted, encourage a healthy self-reliance as opposed to naive belief in self-sufficiency.

Kettle was encouraged by the heightened atmosphere of the constitutional crisis over the 1909 Lloyd George budget, culminating in the removal of the house of lords veto, which had been an obstacle to home rule. He was also a supporter of women's enfranchisement, while stressing that the suffragist cause should not delay or deflect attention from the struggle for home rule. He held his Tyrone East seat in January 1910, but decided not to stand at the general election in December of the same year. Returning to an essentially journalistic career, he published a collection of essays outlining his constitutional nationalist position. He opposed suffragette attacks on private property, but, in contrast, he supported the Dublin strikers in 1913, highlighting their harsh working and living conditions. He tried without success to broker an agreement between employers and workers though a peace committee he had formed, on which his colleagues included Joseph Plunkett (qv) and Thomas P. Dillon (qv). His efforts were not assisted, however, by an inebriated appearance

at a crucial meeting. Indeed, by this time his alcoholic excesses were widely known, forcing him to attend a private hospital in Kent.

Volunteer; war In spite of deteriorating health, he became deeply involved in the Irish Volunteers formed in November 1913 to oppose the Ulster Volunteer Force. His appraisal of Ulster unionism was somewhat short-sighted, dismissing it as being 'not a party [but] merely an appetite' (Lyons, *Enigma of Tom Kettle*, 113), and calling for the police to stand aside and allow the nationalists to deal with unionists, whose leaders should be shot, hanged, or imprisoned (Maume, *Long gestation*, 131). These attitudes were mixed in with a developing liberal brand of imperialism based on dominion federalism and devolution, warmly welcoming a pro-home-rule speech by Winston Churchill with a St Patrick's day toast to 'a national day and an empire day' (*Freeman's Journal*, 18 Mar. 1914). Nevertheless, he used his extensive language skills and wide experience of Europe to procure arms for the Irish Volunteers. He was in Belgium when the Germans invaded, and the arms he procured were confiscated by the Belgian authorities, to whom they were donated by Redmond on the outbreak of war. On his return to Dublin, Kettle followed Redmond's exhortation to support the war effort. He was refused an immediate commission on health grounds, but was eventually granted the rank of lieutenant, with responsibilities for recruitment in Ireland and England. He made further enemies among the advanced nationalists of Sinn Féin, taunting the party for its posturing and cowardly refusal to confront Ulster unionists, the British army, and German invaders alike. Coming from a staunchly Parnellite tradition, he was no clericalist, yet (as highlighted by Senia Paseta) he was a devout if liberal catholic, imbued by his Jesuit schooling with a cosmopolitan admiration for European civilisation which had been reinforced by his European travels, and in particular had been outraged by the German destruction of the ancient university library of Louvain. Despite a youthful flirtation with the philosophy of Nietzsche, he came to regard 'Prussianism' as the deadliest enemy of European civilisation and the culture of the Ten Commandments, there not being 'room on earth for the two' (*Ways of war* (1917), 223). He increasingly thought that the German threat was so great that Irish farmers' sons ought to be conscripted to defend Ireland. He also thought that considerable good might come out of the conflict, exhorting voters in Galway East to support what was practically a future home rule prime minister, cabinet, and Irish army corps (*Connaught Tribune*, 7 Nov. 1914). He unsuccessfully sought nomination as nationalist candidate in the Galway East by-election in December 1914. Nevertheless, he continued to work tirelessly on behalf of the party, publishing reviews, translations, and treatises widely in such journals as the *Freeman's Journal*, the *Fortnightly Review*, and the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*.

As a recruiting officer based far from the fighting, Kettle was stung by accusations of cowardice from advanced nationalists. He had tried repeatedly to secure a front-line position, but was rejected, effectively because of his alcoholism. He was appalled by trench conditions and the prolongation of the war, a disillusionment further encouraged by the Easter rising, in which his brother-in-law, Francis

Sheehy-Skeffington (qv), was murdered by a deranged Anglo-Irish officer, J. C. Bowen-Colthurst (qv). He sensed that opinion in Ireland was changing, anticipating that the Easter insurgents would 'go down in history as heroes and martyrs', while he would go down, if at all, as 'a bloody British officer' (Lyons, *The enigma of Tom Kettle*, 293). Nevertheless, he regarded the cause of European civilisation as greater than that of Ireland, remaining as determined as ever to secure a combat role. Despite his own poor health and the continuing intensity of the Somme campaign, he insisted on returning to his unit, the 9th Bn, Royal Dublin Fusiliers.

Death His writings demonstrate the mortal danger he was placing himself in, evident not least in his frequently quoted poem, 'To my daughter, Betty, the gift of God', as well as letters settling debts, apologising for old offences, and providing for his family – his wealth at death being less than £200. He had no death wish, wearing body armour frequently, but as Patrick Maume notes, 'As with Pearse, there is some self-conscious collusion with the hoped-for cult' (*Long gestation*, 185). He was killed on 9 September 1916 during the Irish assault on German positions at Ginchy.

He married (8 September 1909) Mary Sheehy (b. 1884), alumna of UCD, student activist, suffragist, daughter of nationalist MP David Sheehy (qv), and sister-in-law of his friend Francis Sheehy Skeffington. In 1913 the couple had a daughter, Elizabeth ('Betty').

Published works His published works included 'Would the Hungarian policy work?', *New Ireland Review*, February 1905, pp 321–8; *The philosophy of politics* (Dublin, 1906); 'A note on Sinn Féin in Ireland', *North American Review*, clxxxvii (1908), 46–59; *The money argument for home rule* (1908?); *The day's burden: studies, literary, political and miscellaneous essays* (London, 1910, with introduction by J. Meenan, Dublin, 1968); *Home rule finance: an experiment in justice* (Dublin, 1911); introduction to Daniel Halevy, *The life of Frederich Nietzsche*, trans. J. M. Hone (London, 1911); *The open secret of Ireland*, with an introduction by J. E. Redmond ([London, 1912]; 'An examination of the Belgian evidence', *Bristol Magazine*, viii (1914); *An open letter to the man on the land in Ireland* (Athlone, 1915); and *Ways of war* (London, 1917). He also published, with R. J. Sheehy, *The old age pensions act, 1908: a popular handbook* (Dublin, 1908). His widow compiled *An Irishman's calendar: a quotation from the works of T. M. Kettle for every day of the year* (Dublin, 1938?), with a foreword by Robert Lynd (qv).

Kettle is commemorated by a bust in St Stephen's Green, Dublin, and in the house of commons war memorial in London. He was a man of great passions and proven courage. AE (qv) put his sacrifice on a par with Thomas MacDonagh (qv) and the Easter insurgents:

You proved by death as true as they, In mightier conflicts played your part, Equal your sacrifice may weigh, Dear Kettle, of the generous heart (quoted in Summerfield, *The myriad minded man*, 187).

UCD Archives, T. M. Kettle papers; A. E. Clery, 'Thomas Kettle: essayist', *Studies*, xx (1931), 598–610; D. Ryan, *Remembering Sion* (1934); M. J. MacManus, 'Tom Kettle', Francis MacManus (ed.), *Adventures of an Irish bookman* (1952), 142–6; Roger McHugh, 'Thomas Kettle and Francis Sheehy-Skeffington', Conor Cruise O'Brien (ed.), *The shaping of modern Ireland* (1960), 124–39; Denis Gwynn, 'Thomas Kettle', *Studies*, lv (1966), 384–91; Bonnie K. Scott, 'Thomas Kettle: an appraisal', *Journal of Irish Literature*, ii, no. 2 (May 1974), 75–91; Henry Summerfield, *The myriad minded man: a biography of George William Russell, 'AE', 1867–1935* (1975); R. S. Sutherland, 'The life and times of Thomas Kettle' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Dublin, 1980); J. B. Lyons, *The enigma of Tom Kettle: Irish patriot, essayist, poet, British soldier* (1983); Terence de Vere White, Kevin O'Higgins (1986 ed.); Philip Bull, 'Land and politics, 1879–1903', D. G. Boyce (ed.), *The revolution in Ireland, 1879–1923* (1988); Thomas Hennessy, *Dividing Ireland: World War I and partition* (1998); Patrick Maume, *The long gestation: Irish nationalist life, 1891–1918* (1999); Senia Paseta, *Before the revolution: nationalism, social change and Ireland's catholic elite, 1879–1922* (1999); Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War* (2000); Senia Paseta, 'Thomas Kettle: "an Irish soldier in the army of Europe"?', Adrian Gregory and Senia Paseta (ed.), *Ireland and the Great War: 'a war to unite us all'?* (2002); ead., article in *ODNB*