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Frederick Ryan

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# THE IRISH REVIEW

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*MAY, 1913*

## FREDERICK RYAN

*By F. SHEEHY SKEFFINGTON*

**T**HE school of Irish democratic Nationalists that includes Wolfe Tone, Fintan Lalor, and Michael Davitt, has lost its ablest contemporary representative. Frederick Ryan, who died on April 7th, was worthy to rank with these great men. Like them, he lived a Nationalism that was no empty phrase, but had a full content of social justice. None of his contemporaries so entirely deserved the appellation of a patriot; because he knew how to fit patriotism in its true place in the scheme of the universe. None gave so stainless an example of public service and private rectitude. None can stand higher in the judgment of the tribunal of history, which ranks as the greatest virtue that devotion to the welfare of mankind which increasingly inspired him.

Thirty-nine years old when he died, he had given to his country

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and to the world more than twenty years of selfless activity. As a mere boy, he impressed experienced listeners as the clearest and most convincing advocate of Socialism in Ireland; and such he remained. Clear and convincing, whatever the subject of his advocacy, he never failed to be. His mind was a model of lucidity, and the orderly march of his thought tracked down remorselessly every lurking fallacy, every vague substitution of words for ideas. Those who knew him best came to look on him as an infallible touchstone of genuineness, and learned not to assent to any specious programme until it had been submitted to his searching analysis. He pricked the bubble of the Gaelic League: none better than he have exposed the folly of linking Irish Nationalism with the resurrection of an obsolete dead language. The charlatanism of "Industrial Revival," with its specious appeals to Irish workers to accept low wages in the name of patriotism; the charlatanism of Plunkett House; the charlatanism of Sinn Fein, met with as little mercy at his hands as the more easily recognisable charlatanisms of official and entrenched hierarchies, political and theological.

That relentless logic, that calm, incisive reasoning — never excited, never abusive, varying from its limpid coldness only to indulge in satire or badinage equally effective—recalled the French Encyclopaedists of the Eighteenth Century, whose philosophical descendant he was. A journalist whose clear and forceful style made his writings a model both of exposition and of controversy, he was never able to make a living by journalism in Ireland. And the reason is plain. He never wrote a line which he did not believe; and his beliefs were not those popular with the dictators of Irish journalistic expression. The severest condemnation of Irish journalism to-day is, that there was no place in it for Fred Ryan.

He gave his best, ungrudgingly, for years to struggling movements and struggling newspapers. The old Celtic Literary Society, out of which grew the Sinn Fein movement, had him as one of its active members. The editor of *Sinn Fein* has thought fit to say that Fred Ryan was not a Nationalist. But for those who hold to the essence of Nationalism and not to its accidentals, it will be enough

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to know that Ryan was an advocate of Ireland's complete political independence. From this, as an ultimate aspiration, he never wavered; and he held in scorn the servile truckling to British Imperialism, which our modern "leaders" of "Nationalism" offer in return for the Asquithian mess of pottage. Whenever a protest was to be made against lowering the National ideal, during Royal visits or other times of trial for weaker vessels, Fred Ryan was always to be found unflinchingly on the side of the people. Only a narrow mind, identifying Nationalism with its own particular tabernacle, could deny him the title of Nationalist.

No man took a broader view of the National life, or endeavoured more conscientiously to grasp it as a whole. To every movement that seemed to tend in the direction of his ideal—in the direction of "maximising life"—he lent his aid, however imperfect its mechanism. A friend of Mr. F. J. Fay, he helped in the founding of the Irish National Theatre, and was its secretary for some years, undertaking much of the drudgery of its organisation in the years before the Abbey was, while the Fays still "produced" in small halls in dingy Dublin back-streets. He acted himself—I remember vividly his appearance as a monk in *The King's Threshold*. He wrote a play, *The Laying of the Foundations*, which appears to be lost. It was never printed, and the manuscript cannot now be found. If any reader of these lines should happen to know anything that may lead to the discovery of its whereabouts, I hope he will make it known. For, though Ryan himself afterwards came to regard *The Laying of the Foundations* as a somewhat crude production, its complete loss would be historically regrettable. Ireland to-day took little heed of Fred Ryan; but to the Ireland of the future, which will look back to him as one of the pioneers of its religion and its social organisation, every scrap relating to him will be as precious as it is to those who personally knew and loved him in his lifetime.

*Dana*, the monthly review which he and "John Eglinton" founded in 1904, and which ran for twelve months, contains some of Ryan's most characteristic work. Three of the strongest essays from it were reprinted in *Criticism and Courage*, his one book. Here he

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developed in particular his attack on the dominant theology. He had little respect for the mere anti-cleric, who criticises clerical aggression without ever examining the intellectual foundations on which all clericalism is based. His intellectual position was that of agnosticism, his creed that of the Rationalist Press Association. His fearless preaching of this creed earned for him the enmity of the churches; and a noted Canon is said to have declared him to be the most dangerous man in Ireland. So, from the canonical point of view, he was. Passionate truth-lovers—and the love of truth was Fred Ryan's dominating impulse—are always dangerous to established hypocrisies.

Theosophy, Spiritualism, Christian Science, and the like, earned from him even a deeper scorn than that with which he visited orthodox Christianity. He was not of those weak minds who, having broken the fetters of authority, cannot proceed without a crutch; he stood erect in the native strength of the human mind. Perhaps most of all did he despise Modernism—that vacillating attempt, represented by Father Tyrrell among Catholics, by Rev. R. J. Campbell among Protestants, to be in and out of the Church at the same time. I remember his almost enthusiastic praise of the argument of Pius X.'s Encyclical against the Modernists. In the relentless papal logic he found a spirit akin to his own, though hostile; in the feeble inconsistencies of the Modernists he found nothing to grasp, nothing but a bog in which the intellect floundered.

An indefatigable contributor to periodicals, both Irish and English, whether under his own name or under the pseudonyms of "Irial" and "Finian," Ryan's work covers a wide range of subjects and is scattered in many magazines, dead and alive. A good deal of his writing is to be found in the *New Age*, at the time when it was edited by Mr. John M. Robertson; once he edited this paper, as Mr. Robertson's deputy, for a few weeks. All this, like the rest of his political and social activity, was done while he was earning his living in an accountant's office in Dublin, and devoting his scanty leisure and holidays to public work and journalism.

In 1905, he contributed to the *Nationist*, when Mr. T. M. Kettle

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edited it, some admirable essays; I remember specially one crushing indictment of the entire legal system of these countries, as utterly useless for the prevention of crime, and even dangerous. It was at this time that I became personally acquainted with him—though his name was familiar to me long previously. Thus I have personal knowledge only of the last seven or eight years of his life. In this period, however, we were very much together; we grew intimate speedily, and remained in the closest political, intellectual and personal relationships till his death, even when we were far apart physically.

Democratic Nationalism was in the air in 1906. The triumphs of the British Labour Party—the rise of Lindsay Crawford—Davitt's last battle with clericalism—these things stirred many hearts. A few of us, discontented with the orthodox Nationalist attitude towards democracy, planned an organisation to link these two essentially kindred ideals. Fred Ryan was the originator of the idea, and the inspirer of the group; other members were Kettle, Maloney, and Maurice Joy. We designed a "National Democratic Committee," and projected a handbook setting out a programme of Democratic Nationalism. Michael Davitt was to be asked to be our Chairman. One night, after talking over the project in Ryan's rooms, we all went across, before dispersing, to the private hospital in Mount Street where Davitt lay ill, to inquire for him. The news we heard gravely disquieted us; we had not previously known that his condition was so serious.

Davitt never recovered; and the "National Democratic Committee" never emerged from the stage of a project. Ryan's next activity was in the formation of the Dublin Philosophical Society, which met throughout the winter of 1906-7 for the discussion of fundamental problems of thought, and arranged two public lectures, in furtherance of Rationalist propaganda, by Mr. Joseph McCabe and Mr. John M. Robertson. Early in 1907 he founded the *National Democrat*, a penny monthly, continuing, in another shape, the work for which the "National Democratic Committee" had been intended. I helped him with this paper, during the seven months of its exist-

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ence, after which we dropped it. On these ventures Ryan not only expended time and labour, but money, which he could ill spare, as well. Though for the *National Democrat* help was obtained from the late Mr. Alfred Webb and others, Ryan was considerably out of pocket in the result.

Meantime his friend, Mr. Wm. Maloney (to whom I introduced him one evening at a meeting of the Young Ireland Branch, in the United Irish League rooms in O'Connell Street), who had been his chief fellow-worker in the Philosophical Society, had gone to Cairo and became editor of the *Egyptian Standard*. At the end of 1907, he asked Ryan to come out as assistant-editor; and thus the possibility of a journalistic career, with some of the rewards due to his talents and public spirit, at last opened out before him. The collapse of the *Standard* brought him back to Dublin in 1909; but he kept up his connection with Egyptian Nationalism, and when, in 1911, Mr. Wilfrid Blunt founded *Egypt* to be the organ of that cause in London, Ryan was the obvious man for the editorship—a position which he held till his early and wholly unexpected death a few weeks ago.

His last two years in Dublin (1909-1911) coincided with a period of democratic activity in which Fred Ryan found himself very much at home. He wrote frequently for the *Irish Nation* during its gallant struggle against repressive orthodoxy. He was the leading spirit in the reorganisation of the Dublin Socialist Party, of which he had been a member for many years; he was the first secretary of the reorganised Party, and worked vigorously to establish it firmly and to spread the Socialist propaganda in Dublin. He also joined the Young Ireland Branch of the U.I.L., then in its hey-day of revolt against the party machine; he soon became a member of its Committee, and was its secretary for some months prior to leaving Dublin in 1911. While in Dublin, he contributed to keeping it clear of the influx of Whiggery, which afterwards engulfed it. He also lent active aid to the new militant suffragist movement in Ireland, and was a frequent speaker at its meetings as well as a worker for it in many other ways; though

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it should be added that, with his temperamental shrinking from violence, he disliked some recent phases of militancy. With all these movements he kept in touch, even after his removal to London; every holiday-time was devoted by him to a round of lecturing and speaking for all the Dublin societies in which he was interested. In London he was equally active. The last time he and I worked together was in aid of George Lansbury at the Bow and Bromley election.

One of Fred Ryan's favourite themes was the needlessness of any religious sanction to produce the highest type of character, as exemplified by the noble lives of the great infidels. Of this truth he himself was an outstanding illustration. He might well be called the Saint of Irish Rationalism. Despite the uncompromising courage with which he engaged in controversy, he made no personal enemies; he was, indeed, a man singularly lovable and beloved. Despite his high intellectual attainments, he was free from the least trace of intellectual snobbery. Nothing petty, or mean, or selfish, or malicious ever entered into his thoughts. He loved truth, justice, liberty; he spent himself on behalf of high ideals; and in his life, as in his thought, he set a high standard for those who follow.

We are yet too near his life, and his death, to appreciate what he has accomplished or what we have lost. But the Ireland of to-morrow will reverence him as one of those who laid its foundations.