

Patrick Joseph O'Regan 1869-1947

A Life of Advocacy

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On 13 December 1921, P. J. O'Regan began to keep a diary. It was something he had often contemplated but had found no time to pursue. A large family and a thriving legal career competed for his attention with the political causes he held dear—Irish self-determination, left-wing politics, electoral and land-value taxation reform. Though it had taken over fifty years to commence, O'Regan kept the diary faithfully, filling it in from memory whenever legal business took him away from home. Frequently he dwelt on incidents in his own life and from these often colourful entries it is possible to sketch an outline of his career.

Born in Charleston on the West Coast in 1869, O'Regan spent his youth on a small bush farm in the Inangahua Valley where his Irish immigrant parents had settled. The nearest school was twenty miles away and Patrick did not set foot inside it until he was fourteen years old. His early education was conducted at home, with a brief spell in Father Rolland's school at Ahaura. Bush-felling, fencing, milking, pit-sawing and carpentering were his daily occupations. Any spare hours he had were spent reading every book that came to hand.

The first of his many contributions to the local newspapers was a defence of striking quarrymen at Cape Foulwind in 1889. The identity of the anonymous writer who called himself 'Horny Hand' was soon an open secret in the locality and won the young man considerable popularity. In 1891 he took on the editorship of the *Reefton Guardian*, moving on shortly afterwards to the *Inangahua Times*. The step into political life was predictable, though events conspired to hurry O'Regan's stride. A by-election in Inangahua in 1893 saw O'Regan give Robert Stout a scare before losing by six hundred votes in a poll of about two thousand three hundred. His vigorous campaign made Stout reconsider his decision not to revisit the electorate and even to summon the persuasive power of Richard Seddon, Arthur Guinness, and E. J. O'Connor on his behalf. O'Regan's strong showing helped him to win the seat in the general election held in November 1893, with Stout moving on to contest Wellington North. At twenty-four, O'Regan had become the youngest member of the House of Representatives.

O'Regan's Milesian fluency and his natural debating ability marked him out for parliamentary success. In its review of the session the *Evening Post* gave a special note of praise to its choice as the best of the parliamentary freshmen, including F. H. D. Bell, W. F. Massey, and P. J. O'Regan.¹ The twin causes of proportional representation and