

the taxation of the unimproved value of land had found an able advocate in the member for Inangahua. In 1896 O'Regan prepared and introduced a proportional representation bill, the second reading of which was defeated by seven votes only. In 1899 he managed to coax it past the second reading. For the rest of his life he worked tirelessly for what he saw as this most vital of reforms. After his defeat in the 1899 elections, he was reluctant to stand again for Parliament until the first past the post system had been abolished.

Defeat allowed O'Regan to launch a new career as a barrister and solicitor. Years of financial stringency and hard work were rewarded in 1908 with his admission to the bar. His legal ability and practical experience were well attuned to cope with a growing case load under the Workers' Compensation Act, and O'Regan quickly built a solid reputation as a 'working man's lawyer'. The inevitable compromises of political life had disappointed O'Regan. Moreover, he felt that his Catholicism and his advocacy of the causes of the Single Tax and of proportional representation had cost him advancement and influence in the eyes of the party politicians. Henceforth his political sympathies were with the emergent Labour Party. He defended the leaders of what became the New Zealand Labour Party on charges of sedition during the war, campaigned for its leaders, Holland, Fraser and Semple in their bids for Parliament, and was a frequent and severe critic of the Massey Government in the columns of the daily press.

His correspondence files from the period 1912-23 make fascinating reading. When the letters cease, the diaries commence. There is much of the politician *manqué* about O'Regan in his acerbic comments on the public figures of his day. The Liberals under T. M. Wilford were 'a scrubby lot of hypocrites'; Wellington Lawyer C. Skerrett was 'a conceited little Jingo snob'; and of his co-religionist, Sir Joseph Ward, he wrote, 'in connection with all things that really matter he is quite reactionary—he favours compulsory military training, he is deeply committed to the present suicidal land policy, he is up to the neck in tariff-mongering'.<sup>2</sup>

O'Regan's passion for politics leaps from the page, as does his love of his parents' homeland. His meeting with the Labour leader and Irish M. P., Michael Davitt, on the latter's visit to New Zealand in 1895, had encouraged an abiding interest in the cause of Irish freedom.<sup>3</sup> After the death of Martin Kennedy in 1916, O'Regan became the most prominent lay spokesman for Ireland's cause in New Zealand. In August 1921 he was elected as President of the newly-founded Irish Self-Determination League of New Zealand. From public platform and in the papers he argued the case for Ireland's national rights. When the Catholic Coadjutor Bishop of Auckland, James Liston, was charged with sedition for his alleged remarks in connection with Irish politics, O'Regan was a natural choice as defence counsel.