

A Definitive Political, Military And Cultural History Of Irish International Brigaders

In Spanish Trenches: The Minds and Deeds of the Irish Who Fought for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War, published this past December, is co-authored by Barry McLoughlin and Emmet O'Connor, and dedicated "In memory of our fathers: Captain James Joseph McLoughlin, Cavalry Corps, Irish Army; Sergeant Peter O'Connor, Abraham Lincoln Battalion, 15th International Brigade".

Drawing on Irish, British, German, Russian and Spanish archival sources, they sum up:

"Two hundred and forty-seven Irish-born men fought in the International Brigades. Only 62 went directly from Ireland and 134 went from Britain. The Irish contingent among the Canadian volunteers (31) is surprisingly high and the number travelling from the United States (12) relatively low."

And, indeed, their impressive use of Canadian records has brought many previously unrecorded Irish volunteers to light. The authors challenge the manner in which Irish academic historians have hitherto addressed, or not addressed, their subject matter:

"There was no escaping the Spanish question in Ireland between July 1936 and the summer of 1937. For decades the level of Irish engagement with Spain was a puzzle for Irish historians also. The conventional wisdom, and one happily endorsed by liberal elites, was that nationalism had condemned Ireland to centuries of isolation before the arrival of the European (Economic Community) enlightenment in 1973. Interest in the war was regarded as a relic of the ideological clash over the Anglo-Irish treaty, the only thing that seemed to explain the politics of Independent Ireland. In 1971 F.S.L. Lyons wrote of Blueshirts and republicans reprising the Irish Civil War in 'the will-o'-the-wisp of the Spanish Civil War... that had nothing to do with any of them'. (Ireland Since the Famine). Eighteen years later the most acclaimed study of twentieth century Ireland (J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*) made not a single mention of the Spanish situation. In reality... the contemporary Irish were more European than succeeding generations. Certainly, they were less American."

Europeans they most certainly were.

(see the June 2020 issue of *Irish Foreign Affairs* where I reviewed the 2019 book by Tim Fanning, *The Salamanca Diaries: Father McCabe and the Spanish Civil War*. The anti-Republican and pro-Franco Father Alexander McCabe, Rector of the Irish College in Spain, was an incessant diarist and an acute social observer. He was actually on holiday in Ireland when Franco commenced his revolt in July 1936, and did not return to Spain until that November.

In an October 1936 diary entry, McCabe provided sharp insights into some differences between Irish and Spanish society. On the eve of the Consecration of Mullingar Cathedral, he had overheard a conversation where one young man "said to another, 'The Spanish workers are putting up a great fight'. I heard a man repairing the road make a similar remark. But the workmen in Mullingar were all staunch Catholics. They were all talking about 'the big day tomorrow, the Consecration'." He ruminated that this showed a "spirit of compromise between religious and political views" sorely lacking in Spain.

McLoughlin and O'Connor write of how *The Enigma of Frank Ryan*, the 2012 Queen's University Belfast film made by Des Bell in collaboration with Fearghal McGarry, his fellow Queen's academic and author of *Frank Ryan* (2002), adopted an approach that sought to juxtapose and emphasise a contradiction between Socialism and Republicanism:

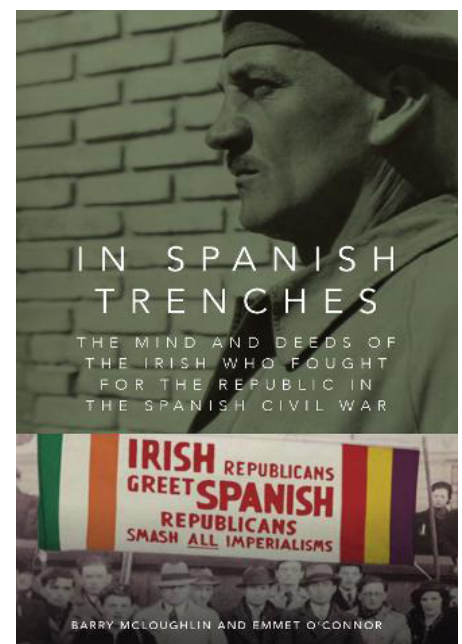
"Bell emphasised the Ryan who went to Nazi Germany after Spain... Publicity for the film included a lot of swastikas. It's a favourite criticism of anti-republicans. Republicanism's claim to be internationalist and socialist was a fraud, and Ryan exposed that in his decision to go with the Nazis. A popular twist on the theme is found in the novel and film *The Eagle Has Landed*, which features broth [sic] of a boy 'Liam Devlin', an IRA veteran captured by Spanish Falangists, who agrees to join a Nazi plot to kidnap Winston Churchill. The swastika will always stick to Ryan for the same reason that Adolf Hitler is rarely off our television screens and the Wehrmacht marches through our living rooms every evening. But Spain was a logical conclusion to the evolution of

left republicanism, and the Connolly Column saw it as an extension of battles in Ireland rather than a new departure. Ryan and Peadar O'Donnell (whose 1937 book, *SALUD! An Irishman in Spain* was reviewed in this magazine's February issue, M. O'R.) had led the development of left republicanism since the 1920s."

In Spanish Trenches leaves it until the Epilogue for the authors to offer their own antidote to Bell and McGarry. Over the course of its 400 pages, this comprehensive history provides a warts and all narrative. The authors wear their ideological biases on their sleeves, but this does not impede their presentation of the facts of International Brigades history.

It is particularly welcome that an issue with a 2014 book by Barry McLoughlin, *Fighting for Republican Spain 1936-38*, has now been resolved. In my January 2015 review for the magazine of the International Brigade Memorial Trust, I objected to the charge that the August 1938 execution of Maurice Emmett Ryan by British Battalion commander Sam Wild, for drunkenly firing his machine gun in the direction of his own side, was an example of "sinister assassination" and "a semi-judicial murder". This book by McLoughlin and O'Connor makes no such charge of "murder", and the authors provide a balanced presentation:

"Emmett Ryan could hardly plead extenuating circumstances, before officers he had provoked time and again, and it seems certain that he was blind drunk during the action, either asleep or firing the Maxim inaccurately, possibly in the wrong direction. In any case, as a sergeant, he was in charge of the gun. The incident happened during the assaults on Hill 481."



The authors add:

"If a soldier, drunk on duty, fired on his comrades, there is every likelihood that he would have been shot out of hand by an officer in the Allied armies in both world wars. Swift retribution to 'steady the troops' had to be seen to be done."

In Spanish Trenches not only deals with the military and political aspects of Irish involvement in the International Brigades, but also the cultural backdrop of solidarity, primarily driven by a radical Irish Republicanism, inclusive of its communist component. Peadar O'Donnell's *SALUD!* is, of course, cited and quoted. But particular light is also shone on the work of Leslie Daiken:

"A fine example of the uniquely Irish combination of republicanism and the popular front spirit is Good-Bye, Twilight: Songs of Struggle in Ireland, compiled by Leslie Daiken in 1936 and illustrated with woodcuts by Harry Kernoff, a fellow Dublin Jew and member of Friends of Soviet Russia... Daiken, or 'Yod' to his friends, was born Yodaiken in Dublin's 'Little Jerusalem' in 1912, and joined the CPI in 1934... Daiken sourced Twilight in James Connolly's recognition of Fenian ballads as weapons of revolution... Revolutionary art was emerging from the bourgeois self-indulgence of the Celtic twilight and the Yeatsian cynicism that followed. Daiken's introduction defied the trajectory of the intellectuals he had known at Trinity and UCD and anticipated the caricature of the 1930s by future liberals. Attributing 'almost every anomaly in recent Irish social events... to the betrayal of the national aspirations by the Treaty of 1921 [his emphasis]', he delineated two main tendencies in Irish poetry: 'modernist' and 'traditionalist'... Daiken saw himself and his fellow republicans as 'authenticists'. In other words, he was rejecting the idea that Irish culture was backward and needed cosmopolitanism, and arguing that the key to revolution in Ireland was to be found in its republican heritage."

Daiken denounced several leading Irish writers for retreating into modernism:

"Futility, or more often an inconsequential groping in the dark for a new bourgeois aesthetic, drove the more sensitive poets away from 'politics' (i.e. Ireland: and all its problems) to Paris, where the soul of Joyce ever presides as a source of inspiration to all thorough-going isolationists. Thither, with Thomas MacGreevy as a vanguard, trekked younger men like Samuel Beckett, Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey; driven by the psychology of escape, then become a cult, across the wastelands of interiorisation, and technical experiment, they eventually found a mecca in a sort of essentially-celtic surrealism — as far from Ireland as they could get, in art. 'For I prefer a grand-piano to a harp!'"

Daiken himself would also emigrate. But, in Daiken's case, it was for reasons that were both economic—to find employment as a journalist—and political, to immerse himself in the work of the London branch of the Irish Republican Congress. His fellow poet and Republican Congress comrade, Charlie Donnelly, would later follow suit.

It is not widely realised that the second book from internationally acclaimed novelist Joseph O'Connor was not a novel, but a 1992 biography, *Even the Olives are Bleeding: The Life and Times of Charles Donnelly*. O'Connor related how, disowned by his family, and after a month of extreme isolation while imprisoned in Mountjoy Gaol, having been convicted on a charge of illegal picketing during an industrial dispute, Donnelly left for London in February 1935:

"It is perhaps important to point out that he did not leave for the reasons that have led countless Irish writers into exile. He did not discover, like Joyce, that the shortest way to Tara was via Holyhead. All Holyhead offered to Charles Donnelly is what it offers to most people. A train to a place where they can survive. He could not afford the luxury of the exiled artist's pose."

In London, Donnelly immediately plunged into political activity. Beginning with the March 1935 issue, Daiken and Donnelly co-edited 23 issues of *Irish Front* as the voice of the Republican Congress's London branch. Their October 1936 editorial, "*They Did Not Pass*", rejoiced in the victory over the British Union of Fascists in the battle of Cable Street:

"On Sunday, October 4th, the London working class dealt a blow to the aspirations of Fascism. Thousands of Jewish, Irish and English workers in the East End of London came together and by their united efforts prevented Sir Oswald Mosley and his Fascist army from staging a provocative march through the Jewish quarters" (file://localhost/x-apple-data-detectors/::0On Sunday, October 4file://localhost/x-apple-data-detectors/::0th).

Indeed, in his autobiography, *Our Flag Stays Red*, Phil Piratin — who would be Communist MP for Stepney (Mile End) from 1945 to 1950 — described a scene where bearded Orthodox Jews linked arms with Irish Catholic dockers in order to prevent Fascism's march through the East End.

"*Long Live the Spanish Revolution!*" was the heading of the *Irish Front* editorial for January 1937. It is therefore fitting that the imaginative cover of *In Spanish Trenches* features both a photo of Frank

Ryan as an International Brigade officer imprisoned by the Fascists in San Pedro concentration camp, and a photo of Leslie Daiken, standing second from right, on a Republican Congress demonstration he had organised in London, with its banner boldly proclaiming

IRISH REPUBLICANS GREET
SPANISH REPUBLICANS.
SMASH ALL IMPERIALISMS.

Manus O'Riordan

(To be continued)

For more on related topics, see the Facebook pages of "*The International Brigades Remembered*", "*International Brigade Memorial Trust*" and "FFALB" FRIENDS AND FAMILY OF THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN BRIGADE, as well as posts on the Facebook Page of Manus O'Riordan himself.

See also www.international-brigades.org.uk/ where, in the News section, a January 19 Blog has reposted his review of *The International Brigades* by Giles Tremlett carried in this January's *Irish Political Review*.

The Document Signed in London in December 1921

It was not a Treaty.

It was not "*ratified*" by Dail Eireann, the elected Parliament of Ireland.

It was discussed by the *rum* "Parliament" of "Southern Ireland" in January 1922 at its only meeting.

It was earlier discussed in Dail Eireann (a body unqualified to ratify it by *British Law*) and the first *Teachta Dala* called on to consent to it was the TD from Armagh.

When the *rum* Parliament met, there were no "*Members of Parliament*" from Armagh, Antrim, Down, Fermanagh, "Londonderry" or Tyrone present.

But the *Teachta Dala* for Armagh had also been elected TD for a Cork Constituency. So, under the guise of an MP in the Parliament of Southern Ireland, he went through the charade of "*Ratifying*" the "*Treaty*".

Griffith's Biographer, Pdraig Colum, wrote that there was more Irish on that one quorate meeting of that 'Parliament' as on any day In Dail Eireann.

Perhaps you've seen John Ford's *Quiet Man* and remember Mary Kate