

Books: Cathal Brugha and the plot to kill British ministers in House of Commons

In the first English-language biography of 1916 rebel and republican leader Cathal Brugha, historian Fergus O'Farrell writes of an extraordinary plan to assassinate members of the British government inside the Commons chamber



Cathal Brugha sat in the public gallery of the House of Commons with a gun under his coat, poised to assassinate ministers, according to historian Fergus O'Farrell

Fergus O'Farrell

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BORN to a Catholic mother and Protestant father in Dublin in 1874, Charles William St John Burgess's decision to join the Gaelic League in 1899 had a transformative effect on his life.

Through contacts he made in the league, he became influenced by radical republican politics. He changed his name to Cathal Brugha, stopped playing 'foreign' sports – including cricket, at which he had excelled – to focus on Gaelic games, quit drinking so that he would not have to contribute taxation to the British treasury and joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

Brugha worked as a travelling salesman, selling ecclesiastical goods around Ireland, often mixing IRB work with his travels, making contact with like-minded rebels. He joined the Irish Volunteers at their inaugural meeting in 1913. Though not involved in planning the 1916 Rising, he was briefed about the plans and relayed important IRB messages to rebels.

During the rising he served as vice commandant to Eamonn Ceannt. Their unit, the 4th Battalion of the Dublin Brigade, took over the South Dublin Union on Easter Monday morning. The Union was Ireland's largest poorhouse, with 3,000 inmates, churches and two hospitals with full staff.

Fighting began on Monday afternoon as the British tried to dislodge the rebels. One British soldier wrote that "everything was bizarre... for we advanced through a convent where nuns were praying and expecting to be shot, poor creatures, then through the wards of imbeciles shrieking – and through one of poor old people".

By Thursday, the Volunteers were surrounded in their HQ in the Nurses Home. The British peppered the building with machine-gun fire; a grenade exploded directly in front of Brugha.

His comrades thought he couldn't have survived and retreated, assuming him dead. As they knelt for a decade of the rosary before what they feared would be the final British assault, they began to hear Brugha's voice, goading the enemy: "Come on you cowards, 'til I get one shot before I die."

Ceannt led a rescue and retrieved Brugha. Comrades dressed his wounds, reporting to Ceannt that he had 25 injuries: "His left foot, hip and leg were practically one mess of wounds."

The next day he was carried to a medical ward in the Union and later to the Dublin Castle Hospital under, as the rebels surrendered, British guard.

Army doctors thought Brugha had no chance of surviving and he was allowed to remain in hospital where he was expected to die. However, they underestimated his resolve; as his health improved, he was moved to Richmond Hospital; from his bed he began to reorganise the Irish Volunteers, now decimated by arrests, executions, deportations and deaths.

Although the wounds Brugha sustained during Easter week meant he was to walk with a limp for the rest of his life (he was killed during the Civil War), by the time of the conscription crisis of 1918 he was sufficiently recovered to head a team of IRA assassins to London. They planned to shoot the British government if they announced that they were going to begin conscripting Irishmen.

The cabinet assassination plan is rarely mentioned by historians; source material relating to it can be found in the Bureau of Military History

archive, established to record the experiences of those who played a role in the events which brought about independence in the south.

Brugha used to sit in the viewing gallery of the House of Commons, with a gun under his coat, waiting to strike. He later told his friend, the writer and republican leader Sceilg (John Joseph O'Kelly) that he "went up day after day to the House of Commons and chose a place where he had good elbow room.

"The police and everybody helped him as he entered and left. They seemed to think he was a wounded soldier back from Flanders, and he told me they did everything they could to help him."

He remained in the British capital for months, only leaving when the tide of the First World War had turned in favour of the British and the threat of conscription had passed.

In 1919, Brugha presided over the first meeting of Dáil Éireann, and served as minister for defence during the War of Independence. He revived the cabinet assassination plot in 1920 and 1921, but he never travelled to London to carry it out.

In 1921 he recruited the IRA commander Sean MacKeon as an assassin and explained his reasoning to him at a meeting in Dublin: "If you wiped out every Black and Tan in Ireland tomorrow, you'd have shiploads of them pouring in again, the day after.

"And if you wiped every soul of them out, double as many shiploads would come in, the day after that... To save Ireland, you have got to wipe out the guilty ones who sent the Black and Tans here. We have got to wipe out every member of the British Cabinet."

MacKeon was captured and imprisoned; the Truce began a few months later and so assassination plan was once again shelved.