

Out of his Depth?

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Cathal Brugha, by Fergus O'Farrell, University College Dublin Press, 96 pp, €17, ISBN: 978-1910820278

Revisionism has long been a word with negative associations in this country. But it is an unsatisfactory term. Wherever there has been alleged revisionism in the writing of Irish history writing, other scholars have not been long in disputing its conclusions. History constantly moves; it is "revised" by new interpretations of well-known sources, the addition of newly uncovered sources and new theoretical methodology. All history is, in effect, a type of revisionism.

This book is case in point. Fergus O'Farrell seeks to "rehabilitate", or revise, the reputation of Irish revolutionary leader Cathal Brugha from what he describes in his conclusion as the "narrow intellectual framework through which historians have addressed the Irish revolution". The process of revising is normal. Sometimes it is transformative in terms of our understanding, and sometimes it is less so.

In this case I would dispute O'Farrell's idea that there has been a "narrow intellectual framework through which historians have addressed the Irish revolution". On the contrary, labour, social, feminist, theological, military, political and cultural historians from around the world have studied the Irish revolution, giving it a particularly broad intellectual framework.

Cathal Brugha (1874-1922) was born in Dublin and attended Belvedere College in the city centre, a generation or so before Joyce. Like many, he was initially attracted to the Gaelic League before joining first the Irish Republican Brotherhood and then the Volunteers. He was badly injured in the Easter Rising and subsequently became Sinn Féin TD for Waterford and minister for defence in the government of the first and second Dáils. He is probably best known for his tense relationship, if not enmity, with Michael Collins, and his refusal to surrender during the fighting in O'Connell Street in the early stages of the civil war. Brugha preferring to die fighting, charging his opponents head on.

O'Farrell argues that Brugha has for too long been wrongly characterised as a simple militarist without political inclinations. O'Farrell considers his efforts in the forming of the new Sinn Féin in 1917, his involvement with the setting up of the first Dáil, and most importantly his attempts to ensure that the IRA both recognised and answered to the authority of the Dáil government as evidence of a highly politically motivated man. He notes that Brugha was on the moderate political rather than the authoritarian militarist side of the anti-Treaty movement, and that he was always motivated by the belief that both physical force and politics had the potential to mutually ensure Irish Independence. O'Farrell memorably describes this process as a marriage.

O'Farrell's book is based on his MA thesis, it is the product of diligent research and he is to be congratulated for it and for having it published, as MA theses rarely are. His central argument is not without merit, is eloquently presented and well-argued, and though he clearly has sympathy for Brugha this never clouds his judgment. I would disagree with his conclusions but anyone interested in the Irish revolution should read this attractive and well-researched volume.

O'Farrell argues that Brugha was inherently political, but he never quite defines what he means by this. I will return to this question shortly.

Whatever else he may have been, Brugha was certainly a particularly ineffective politician. As minister, his influence over his brief of defence was more than wanting. Technically in control of the entire IRA between 1919 and 1921 his role in the conflict was less than minimal. Indeed when he attempted to exert greater influence over the IRA, notably during the truce of 1921 - when he had greater freedom to do so - his efforts were hamfisted and largely unpopular. He was perpetually overshadowed by more effective ministers such as WT Cosgrave, Austin Stack and Michael Collins.

The simple conclusion is that in his role as minister for defence he was in effect overtaken by more energetic, competent and aggressive men who were technically his subordinates: Michael Collins, Richard Mulcahy and Liam Lynch. These three attempted to control the 1919-21 conflict, and Brugha, though nominally their superior, played no real role in this other than complaining from the sidelines. He continued in his day job as manager of a factory that produced religious candles. Collins and Co, on the other hand, had long since given up even any pretence of having day jobs and were professional dedicated revolutionaries. Brugha is an important figure in the history of the revolution, but the fact is that in the years 1918 to 1922 he had the misfortune to be surrounded by people of greater drive, vision and, perhaps, intelligence.

O'Farrell devotes considerable attention to the IRB. Collins, Mulcahy and Lynch, and perhaps the other most effective revolutionary leader, Harry Boland, were all members of the clandestine Irish Republican Brotherhood. Brugha was particularly concerned that all IRB members swore an oath of allegiance to the Supreme Council, feeling that this oath trumped their loyalty to the Dáil government and the IRA.

Brugha had left the IRB after 1916, as he believed that as the Republic was declared it no longer had relevance. He worked to ensure all IRA men swore allegiance to the Dáil, and tried to limit IRB influence. In this he can be viewed as a democrat, protecting the state from secret societies. His position was not without logic as trouble with the IRB haunted the new Free State up until 1924, with the army mutiny, which resulted in Mulcahy's subsequent resignation as minister for defence.

Still the idea of Brugha as a good liberal politician fighting a secretive militarism is reductive. O'Farrell describes him as political, and not simply a physical force republican, but this definition seems incomplete. The idea that Ireland can be separated entirely from British influence through physical force is inherently political. Brugha's politics do not seem to have ever amounted to more than that rather direct reading. He disliked the fraternal or secretive aspects of the IRB, but that does not mean he was not, in large measure, a militarist.

Two aspects of his life support this view. Between 1918 and 1921 he made continual efforts to organise the assassination of the entire British cabinet. O'Farrell argues that this was a political decision based on the fact that ultimately responsibility for British actions in Ireland rested with the British cabinet. This is of course true, but what political benefit would have come from their murder? On one level it would have helped enforce the British position that the IRA were a gang of criminals. It would also have drastically undermined Sinn Féin's position internationally, leaving the party and the IRA open to the charge that they were assaulting democratic institutions. One could of course in response point to the British suppression of the democratically elected Dáil, but it would hardly have been fitting for the oppressed to act like their oppressors. If Brugha was political, he did not have much political nous or foresight, particularly given the hard work carried out by the Dáil government to promote the republic abroad and make it effective at home. The assassination of the British cabinet would only have brought about unprecedented oppression.

O'Farrell writes that political assassination was a "feature of international politics", pointing to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by the Greater Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip. But were Princip's actions beneficial in the long run? Did Serbia benefit from them? Similarly O'Farrell cites the Provisional IRA's murder of Lord Mountbatten in 1979 as an example of political assassination - an action that was widely condemned and only helped to further damage that organisation's reputation. Political assassination is a feature of a type of secretive conspiratorial militarism rather than of open political action and the distinction here is important and should continue to be made.

O'Farrell notes that Brugha himself wanted to lead the attack on the British cabinet, and that he expected to be killed as a result. Indeed his actions in 1916, his apparent desire to get into a shootout with crown forces in 1920-21 that would result in his death, and his eventual violent death in the civil war suggest a man who seemed to crave martyrdom.

O'Farrell notes that Brugha left little in terms of a paper trail. This is a pity: it would have been interesting to see if he eulogised heroic death in letters or diaries. O'Farrell writes that he never sought the limelight, and believed in the marriage of politics and physical force. However, his apparent desire for martyrdom shows a man who sought notoriety. Martyrdom can create political benefits but it is intrinsically linked to the elevation of personalities into martial heroic status. Indeed, for many Brugha is a republican icon. In this his perspectives may have been similar to those of the Serbian Black Hand, who believed in the politics of the

deed and sacrificial nationalism. He did admittedly believe in the supremacy of the Dáil, and unlike many of his anti-Treaty colleagues believed that the people should have their say on the Treaty. However, he still fought against their decision.

O'Farrell recognises Brugha's faults, describing him as obstinate and sometimes vindictive. His book is well-researched. While I would disagree with the analysis the book still has much to recommend it. The handling of the sources and historiography is to be applauded. Some small errors exist though; Dan Hogan not Dan Horgan was the O/C of the Fourth Northern Division, and Ernie O'Malley was not part of the O'Connell Street fighting in the opening stages of the civil war.

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