

The truth about Frank Ryan

Frank Ryan (Life and Times Series)

By Fearghal McGarry
(UCD Press / Irish
Historical Association,
€17.00).

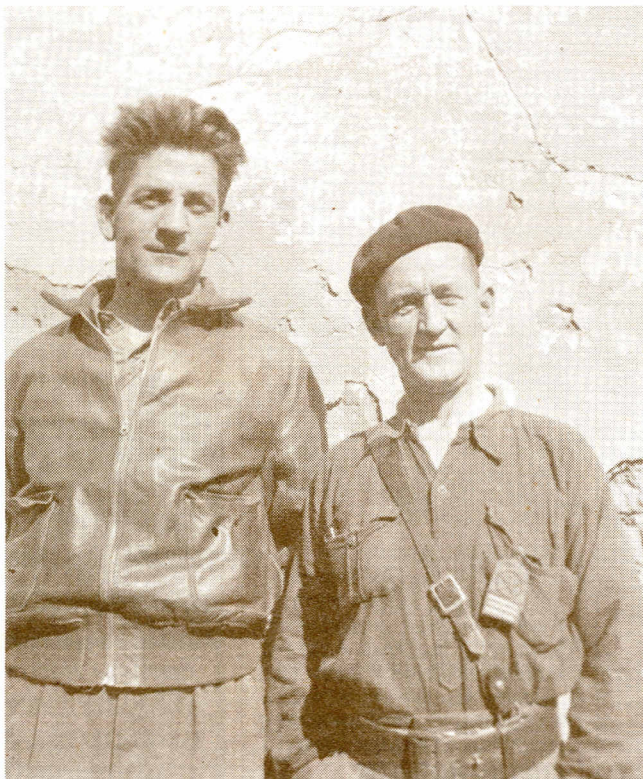
J. Anthony Gaughan

FRANK Ryan is an icon of left-wing Republicanism. He was born near Knocklong, County Limerick in 1902. Both his parents were teachers. He was educated at the Holy Ghost Fathers' Rockwell College and St Colman's College in Fermoy. With the aid of a county council scholarship he attended UCD and graduated in 1925.

Readers of these pages will recall that he had a relationship with Rosamund Jacob, whose diary of Ireland's troubled times and her no less troubled life was reviewed last week. The author of this book, Fearghal McGarry, teaches history at Queen's University Belfast. He is the author of several books on 20th Century Irish history including *Eoin o'Duffy: A Self-Made Hero* (Oxford University Press, €9.05 pb)

Frank Ryan was not involved in the war of independence. However, when Sinn Fein and the IRA split following the Anglo-Irish Treaty, he joined the Anti-Treatyites. In September 1922 after an engagement with Free State soldiers he was wounded, captured and sent to Limerick jail.

Released a year later, he concluded his studies at UCD and secured a teaching post at Mountjoy school. At this time also he worked as a



Frank Ryan (left) with his friend John Robinson in Spain.

journalist, editor and printer of radical newspapers. By virtue of his charismatic personality and organisational and literary skills, he quickly rose in the ranks of the IRA.

He also acquired a high-profile both within and beyond the organisation as a result of his leadership of the Anti-Imperialist League which organised counter-demonstrations to those of British loyalists and ex-soldiers on Armistice Day.

From 1929 to 1933 he was editor of *An Phoblacht*, where he made it clear that he was not prepared to concede freedom of speech to opponents. In 1931, he co-

founded Saor Eire, a left-wing party. Following internal disagreements, three years later, with other left-wing Republicans he left the IRA to establish the more radical Republican Congress. In the meantime he had been a prominent figure in the IRA campaign to disrupt public meetings organised by the Blueshirts.

When the Spanish Civil War began in 1936 Ryan led a contingent of Irishmen to fight in the International Brigades. He exhibited first heroism and later military ineptitude in the two major incidents in which he was involved in that conflict. In

1938 he was captured by Italian forces and imprisoned in Burgos.

In 1940 General Franco facilitated his release to German military intelligence. With a view to the initiation of a campaign of sabotage against British forces in Ireland, Ryan and Sean Russell, the IRA chief of staff, were brought to the Irish coast by U-boat. However, Russell died on board and Ryan refused to go ashore and returned to Germany.

From 1940 to 1944 Ryan collaborated with the Nazi regime, acting as an 'adviser on Irish affairs'. His handler was SS Colonel Dr Edmund Veessenmayer who was Gauleiter of Hungary and later served six years of a Nuremberg-life-sentence for his role in the Holocaust.

For a number of years Ryan's health was in decline and after a lingering illness, which, according to the German authorities, was caused mainly by a syphilitic condition, he died on June 10, 1944.

Because of his involvement with the International Brigades, his left-wing friends and admirers were remarkably successful in portraying him as a heroic figure. In 1979 to much press acclaim his remains were re-interred from a grave near Dresden to the Republican plot in Glasnevin.

Fearghal McGarry's painstakingly accurate and brutally honest biography is a welcome antidote to the romantic nonsense and humbug which still surrounds the public perception of Frank Ryan.