

IRISH COMMEMORATION OF BRIGADISTA GEORGE BROWN

(Introduction: The following is an address which I delivered on 25 June 2011, in my capacity as Ireland Secretary of the International Brigade Memorial Trust, in Woodstock Gardens, Inistioge, Co. Kilkenny. The occasion was the rededication of an olive grove in memory of four Kilkenny International Brigade volunteers, held during the Fourth Annual George Brown Commemoration, which also fell a week after the 90th anniversary of the Coolbawn ambush, the last military engagement of the War of Independence in Kilkenny.

See <http://irishvolunteers.org/2011/06/coolbawn-ambush/> for more on Colbawn, and see also www.irelandscw.com/docs-GB-MoR.htm for my inaugural lecture “George Brown and the Defence of the Spanish Republic”, which was delivered at the first commemoration on 27 June 2008, when the memorial to him was unveiled by Jack Jones, second husband of George’s widow Evelyn. See www.albavolunteer.org/2011/06/jack-jones-vindicated/ for “The Vindication of Jack James Larkin Jones”. **Manus O’Riordan)**

Comrades and friends: “DEMOCRACY REMEMBERS HER SONS”. This is the heading on the 1938 memorial banner honouring the Irish dead of the International Brigades. It had been unveiled by Father Michael O’Flanagan, that outstandingly courageous Republican priest who had delivered the invocation at the January 1919 opening of Dáil Éireann, Ireland’s first freely elected Parliament that ratified the Republic proclaimed by the 1916 Rising, as he was now defending the Spanish Republic. And the banner itself - which is on display at the National Museum in Collins Barracks, Dublin - with its twin Éire-Spain pillars, unites those two struggles in affirmation of the democratic will of both peoples – in defence of two Republics.

Next month marks the 75th anniversary of the commencement of the Spanish Civil War on 18 July 1936, when Franco staged his military rebellion against the democratically elected Popular Front government of February 1936, and for the next three years, aided by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, he waged that war to its bitter conclusion:

*'36 the year, defying fear, saw the Spanish people vote
A Republic for the Rights of Man, but Franco would revolt
Gernika ablaze from Hitler’s planes, the Republic overthrown
Despite the brave 15th Brigade and Kilkenny’s own George Brown*

Today we rededicate this olive grove, first unveiled by the Chairperson of the George Brown Commemoration Committee, Pádraig Ó Murchú, to the memory of those four Kilkenny men who volunteered to fight in defence of the Spanish Republic in the ranks of the 15th International Brigade, la Quince Brigada: two from this part of South Kilkenny – the brothers Michael and George Brown, sons of Mary Lackey of Ballyneale and Francis B of Inistioge; and two from North Kilkenny – the Castlecomer mineworkers, Michael Brennan and Sean Dowling.

These latter two had been nurtured by the struggles during the 1930s of the Castlecomer Mine & Quarry Union, founded and led by the War of Independence IRA veteran, Nixie Boran. It was an internationalist struggle. In October 1931 a solidarity meeting with the miners was held in Castlecomer Town Hall, addressed by the Indian revolutionary Shapurji Saklatvala, the first Communist to be elected to the British House of Commons, in 1922, and the only one of 615 MPs to stand by the Irish Republic and vote against the Free State Treaty.

The 15th Brigade's British Battalion, in which all four Kilkenny volunteers served, was initially named the Saklatvala Battalion, and it was in its ranks that George Brown gave his life on 7 July 1937, in the battle of Brunete. Democracy remembers her sons.

*We are proud of the British Battalion
And the stand for Madrid that they made,
For they fought like true sons of the people
As part of the 15th Brigade*

Moreover, that British Battalion was an anti-imperialist one. While it had many World War One veterans in its ranks, it held no Poppy Day commemorations of the Imperialist War. Its commemorations were anti-imperialist, in honour of James Connolly and Wolfe Tone, and held, not by its Irish volunteers in isolation, but by the British Battalion as a whole. Democracy remembers her sons. My late father, Micheál O'Riordan, also vividly recalled the June 1938 anti-imperialist solidarity visit, to that Battalion's Ebro front, of Indian National Congress leader Pandit Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi.

As I have already said, this olive grove memorial unites both South and North Kilkenny, as South Kilkenny had also been united with Castlecomer in one of the last military engagements of Ireland's War of Independence. Last Saturday was the 90th anniversary of the deaths, on 18 June 1921, of Nick Mullins from Thomastown and Seán Hartley from Glenmore. They had been killed in action in the Coolbawn ambush near the Castlecomer coalfields, in one of the last actions of the 20th century's first war for democracy – defending that Dáil freely elected in December 1918 and the Irish Republic it had ratified. My wife Annette's grandfather – Martin Hennessy from Glensensaw, a few miles down river from here – was a cousin of Nick Mullins and soldiered shoulder to shoulder with him in that same War of Independence. Democracy remembers her sons.

There should be no doubt about the democratic character of that struggle, as the following report from the *Irish Times* on 18 December 1920 makes crystal clear: "Richard O'Keefe of Woodstock, Co. Kilkenny, was charged before a court martial. The evidence showed that outside the house of the accused was found a notebook, containing the oath of allegiance to Dáil Éireann. The accused was sentenced to imprisonment for six months." Democracy remembers her sons.

As we proudly continue to commemorate both the Spanish Anti-Fascist War and our own War of Independence, assorted scribes - mainly to be found in this country in the stables of Sir Anthony O'Reilly's *Independent* newspaper chain – can be expected to intensify

their campaigns of denigration and character assassination against those who fought for both the Spanish and Irish Republics. One of them has regurgitated the sneering slander of the Irish International Brigade leader, Frank Ryan, as “Republican Saint / Nazi collaborator”, while another penned a cowardly and vicious attack upon the death of brigadista Bob Doyle before his family even had a chance to hold his funeral. Thinking he had a good stick to beat Bob with – who had endured real fascist beatings and Gestapo interrogations in a Spanish concentration camp – he invoked the three Irish victims of the Soviet Gulag. But he received a fitting response, not only from the huge turnout to process with Bob’s ashes from the Garden of Remembrance, but especially from the daughter and granddaughter of Gulag victim Patrick Breslin who came to pay their own tribute to Bob. And the same shameless pair of Sindo/Indo columnists have continued give a non-stop Royal Command Performance that portrays the War of Independence, not as the war for democracy it most assuredly was, but slanders it as some supposed sectarian war against Southern Protestants. Indeed, the experience of Protestants under the democratic rule of the Irish Republic’s Dáil has been obscenely compared to the ultimately genocidal fate awaiting Jews at the hands of that Nazi German client state, Vichy France.

Let me nail that sectarian slander by reference to the struggle here in Kilkenny itself. In July 1921 a house was burned down near Castlecomer and its female owner banished into exile to England. Revisionists would have us believe that this was because the lady in question was a Protestant, but nothing could be further from the truth. That woman had, in fact, gotten off lightly, for she had the blood of Nick Mullins and Seán Hartley on her hands. Far from having any sectarian inclinations, when the Army of Dáil Éireann lay in wait, 90 years ago last week, to ambush the British Army of Occupation at Coolbawn, a Protestant workman came across the ambush party and was about to be detained until after it was scheduled to take place. But the IRA felt sorry for that Protestant worker’s pleas that he would be sacked by his employer if he did not show up for work, and they let him go. She, nonetheless, insisted that he explain why he had been at all late, and he was bullied into telling her of the Republican roadblock. No blame was ever visited on him for blurting out that information. She alone was held to be the villain of the treachery to the forces of the democratically elected government that followed. She immediately set off for Castlecomer barracks to inform the forces of the Crown of what was afoot. They, in turn, were enabled to strike first with a surprise ambush of their own, killing Mullins and Hartley. It was in tribute to the integrity and bravery of Nick Mullins, and the high esteem in which he was held by adherents of all creeds in this county, that the daughter of a local (Anglican/Episcopalian) Church of Ireland clergyman presented the Mullins family – in memory of Nick - with her own father’s original copy of John Mitchel’s “Jail Journal”.

History may more often than not repeat itself as either tragedy or farce. But it can also be capable of happier forms of repetition, as this morning the George Brown commemoration was welcomed to St. Mary’s Church of Ireland here in Inistioge by its newly appointed rector, the Reverend Martin Hilliard. Democracy does indeed remember her sons, for he, in turn, is the nephew of the Reverend Robert Martin Hilliard, who

soldiered in defence of both the Irish and Spanish Republics, and who gave his life in February 1937 in the battle of Jarama. To quote Christy Moore's song:

*Bob Hilliard was a Church of Ireland pastor
From Killarney across the Pyrenees he came.
From Derry came a brave young Christian Brother
Side by side they fought and died in Spain.
Viva la Quince Brigada!
"No pasaran!" the pledge that made them fight.
"Adelante!" was the cry around the hillside.
Let us all remember them tonight.*

I should also refer to a second house burning in this county, in July 1922, that of Woodstock House, alongside us here in this Republican olive grove. But it was not burned because the Tighe family had lived there. They, in fact, had left it unoccupied for several years before the War of Independence, when it was taken over as the British Auxiliaries Headquarters for the whole South East region of Kilkenny, Wexford, Waterford and Tipperary. It quickly became a house of horrors and torture. For what else could be its role? As one writer went on to reflect in 1932: "The British Government of 1920-21, as dictatorial, and therefore as nearly Fascist, as any British Government is ever likely to be, failed completely in its attempt on Irish democracy", and he further condemned what he called "this intolerable fascism". Out of the horse's mouth. For the writer was none other than Frank Crozier, the Auxiliaries' own first commander-in-chief, who was to resign in disgust at the increasingly vicious war he was being asked to wage against Irish democracy.

With the Auxies gone, Free State troops took over Woodstock House, and in July 1922 Irish Republicans burned it down to prevent it serving as a house of horrors yet again during our own Civil War. For horrors there were. In Kilkenny Jail, that same month, where Martin Hennessy was also incarcerated, the Waterford Republican prisoner Jack Edwards was brutally murdered in his prison cell. His brother, Frank Edwards, would be one of the earliest Irish International Brigade volunteers to go out with Frank Ryan in December 1936 to fight in defence of the Spanish Republic.

Here in Woodstock Gardens, in the shadow of the ruins of what the Auxies' own first commander-in-chief described as "the rule of intolerable Fascism" in Ireland, we commemorate the four Kilkenny volunteers who fought against Fascism in Spain. We in the International Brigade Memorial Trust also remember our member veterans of the Spanish War who have passed on during the past year: brigadista Bernard Knox from Bradford; our IBMT chairperson, brigadista Sam Lesser, brigadista Joseph Kahn and nurse Penny Feiwei, all from London; Liverpool brigadista Jackie Edwards and militiaman Roma Marquez Santo of Barcelona – these latter two being the very last veterans to address public meetings in Dublin two years ago in July 2009; and the very last Irish participant in that War, ambulanceman Paddy Cochrane, whose first experience of the horrors of war came at the age of 7, when he saw his father murdered in their own Dublin backyard by Britain's Black and Tans in 1920.

I will add one more name for remembrance at today's commemoration, not of a Spanish War veteran, but of one of the most incisive and honest chroniclers of the history of International Brigaders. An outstanding journalist, he would put the opinionated columnists of today to shame. I am aware that more than 50 years ago he had been the dear friend and comrade-in-arms of Pádraig Ó Murchú and Seán Garland, present with us at this commemoration. Notwithstanding political differences, he and I also maintained a firm and warm friendship for over 30 years as on both sides of the Atlantic we strove to tell the truth about the Spanish Anti-Fascist War. I therefore honour here today the memory of Seán Cronin from Kerry's Ballinaskelligs who passed away in Washington this past March. The historical record owes a debt of gratitude to Seán Garland and Repsol Publications for having published, in 1980, Seán Cronin's biographical tour-de-force, entitled "Frank Ryan: the Search for the Republic". For that indeed was a well named sub-title, for Seán had left not a single fact undescribed or unexamined in chronicling Frank Ryan's struggles in defence of both Republics, Irish and Spanish, and his biography still serves to give the lie to the character assassins of today. As President Éamon de Valera declared: "This great Irishman Frank Ryan always put Ireland first in everything he did or said, at home or abroad. He has earned his place in history."

In conclusion, as we here rededicate this olive grove to the memory of those four Kilkenny International Brigade volunteers, especially George Brown who gave his life in defence of the Spanish Republic 74 years ago next month, we also honour all those others I have mentioned, and in particular those two Kilkenny volunteers, Nick Mullins and Seán Hartley, who gave their lives in defence of the Irish Republic 90 years ago last Saturday. An Phoblacht abú! Viva la República! Democracy remembers her sons!

Manus O'Riordan