

Ó Briain, Liam

by Paul Rouse

Ó Briain, Liam (1888–1974), republican, scholar of Romance languages, and Irish-language enthusiast, was born 16 September 1888 at 10 Church St., North Wall, Dublin, seventh child of Arthur O'Brien, clerk, and Mary O'Brien (née Christie), who was from Co. Meath. He was christened William, and attended the Christian Brothers' O'Connell Schools. He began learning Irish by himself from a grammar book, as it was not encouraged by his teachers nor spoken by his parents. He started to call himself 'Liam Ó Briain' and was involved in the Lorcan O'Toole branch of the Gaelic League until his parents and teachers insisted that it would be better if he concentrated on his homework in the evenings.

He won a scholarship to UCD, and in 1909 was awarded a first-class honours degree in French, English, and Irish. He was awarded an MA in French the following year. In 1911 he received the first travelling scholarship awarded by the NUI, and studied Irish literature and language in Berlin, Bonn, and Freiburg under Kuno Meyer (qv) and Rudolf Thurneysen (qv). After his return to Ireland (1914), he joined the Volunteers, wrote for *An Claidheamh Soluis*, and was elected to the executive of the Gaelic League. He was appointed an assistant in the French department in UCD (October 1914). In the home of another member of that department, Mary Ryan (qv), he met Seán T. O'Kelly (qv), who swore him into the IRB in 1915. He was later best man at O'Kelly's wedding. He helped print the proclamation of the republic in Liberty Hall in the days before the 1916 rising. In the confusion of that Easter weekend, Ó Briain served under Michael Mallin (qv) of the Citizens' Army in St Stephen's Green and the Royal College of Surgeons during the rising, rather than with the Volunteers. Afterwards he was imprisoned in Wandsworth prison in London, where he spent two months. He was then interned for six months in Frongoch camp, north Wales, before being released and returned to Ireland before Christmas 1916. His recollections of the rising are published in *Cuimhní cinn* (1951).

By the time of his release he had lost his position at UCD for being absent from his duties, but in 1917 he was made professor of Romance languages at UCG, where he was to work for the following forty-two years. A member of Sinn Féin, he stood for that party in Mid Armagh in the 1918 general election and received 5,689 votes as against 8,431 won by the unionist candidate. His attempts to mobilise nationalists in the Armagh area to support the National Loan initiative of Michael Collins (qv) led to his arrest and to three months in jail in Belfast in 1919–20. On his release he was appointed (1920) a judge of the republican courts in Galway. At the behest of Collins, he travelled to France and Italy to arrange arms shipments, but in November 1920 he was arrested in the UCG dining-room by Black and Tans, and was imprisoned for thirteen months, first in Galway and then in the Curragh camp

in Co. Kildare. He supported the Anglo-Irish treaty and stood unsuccessfully for the senate in 1925, thereafter giving up political ambitions.

A founder member with Micheál MacLiammóir (qv) of Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe, an Irish-language theatre, he was its secretary (1928–38) and often acted in its plays. He offered the young Orson Welles £4 a week to learn Irish and join the group, but Welles instead made his acting debut at the Gate Theatre in Dublin. Ó Briain resigned from Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe in 1938, due to ideological differences. He believed the aim of the theatre should be to produce the best European dramas in Irish translation, but opponents on the board asserted their view that the paramount aim was to promote the Irish language, and that only plays written in Irish should be performed. Ó Briain's many translations of plays and books from English, French, and Spanish into Irish included *Deirdre of the sorrows* by J. M. Synge (qv) as *Déirdre an bhróin* (1932) and Molière's *Le dépit amoureux* as *Grádh cásmhar* (1937). His most cherished hope was that the Irish language would be revived; somewhat unusually, he held the view that a knowledge of modern European languages and openness to new ideas and European culture would lead to a de-anglicisation of Ireland. He also worked to set up Galway's first Irish-language primary school.

Ó Briain was one of the most familiar figures in Irish cultural life in the 1940s and 1950s; it was noted that he attended more meetings of more organisations than almost anyone in the country. He appeared frequently on radio and later on television; he was a wonderful storyteller and conversationalist, and was on the panel of the first 'Late Late Show', broadcast on Irish television on 6 July 1962. He was a member of the governing body of UCG, where he was also dean of the faculty of arts for twenty years, and was a member of the senate of the NUI. However, he failed in an attempt to be elected president of UCG in 1945, losing to Pádraig de Brún (qv), who had government support. Ó Briain also served for many years on the Censorship of Publications Appeals board, the board of the Abbey Theatre, the advisory committee for Radio Éireann, and the committee of the Military History Society of Ireland. The French government made him a *chevalier de la légion d'honneur* in 1951 to mark his services in the cause of good relations between France and Ireland. His students appreciated his 'creative humanism' (Foley, 380), and he was the mainstay of the UCG conference of St Vincent de Paul, visiting and assisting elderly and impoverished townfolk.

From his retirement (1959) he lived at Dublin. In 1974 the NUI conferred an honorary doctorate on him. He died 12 August 1974 at St Gabriel's Hospital, Cabinteely, Co. Dublin. His funeral to Glasnevin was almost a state occasion, with a huge attendance of public figures, and a military firing party at the graveside, where the oration was given by Micheál MacLiammóir and a lesson was read by Siobhán McKenna (qv). For days after his death, the newspapers carried tributes to his many-sided career and personality, and on the hundredth anniversary of his birth Proinsias Mac Aonghusa (qv) and Art Ó Beoláin wrote commemorative articles in *Feasta*.

He married (1 September 1921) Helen Lawlor, of Dublin, who died two years before him; they had one daughter, Eileen, who as Eileen O'Brien (qv) was a journalist on the *Irish Times* and other periodicals.

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*Ir. Times*, 16 Apr. 1935, 12, 14, 15, 20 Aug. 1974; *Comhar*, Mar. 1944, Dec. 1963; Liam Ó Briain, *Cuimhní cinn* (1951); F. X. Martin (ed.), *The Easter rising, 1916, and University College, Dublin* (1966); *Studia Hib.*, vii (1967), 99; *ITWW*; *Ir. Press*, 12 Aug. 1985; Boylan; *Feasta*, Sept. 1988; *Beatháisnéis 1882–1982*, iii, 65; Tadhg Foley (ed.), *From Queen's College to National University* (1999), 376–84