

Brugha, Cathal

by James Quinn

Brugha, Cathal (1874–1922), revolutionary, was born Charles William St John Burgess 18 July 1874 at 13 Richmond Avenue, Fairview, Dublin, tenth among fourteen children (four sons and ten daughters) of Thomas Burgess (d. 1899), art dealer and native of Carlow, and Maryanne Burgess (née Flynn). Thomas Burgess was a protestant but his wife was a catholic, and the children were raised as catholics; young Charles was particularly devout in his religious observances. The home was strongly nationalist: Thomas Burgess was a fervent Parnellite and may have been a Fenian. Charles received his primary education at the Colmkille Schools, Dominick St., and entered Belvedere College in 1888. He intended to study medicine but his schooling was cut short in 1890 when his father's business failed. He started work as a clerk in Hayes & Finch, a church supplies firm, later becoming a travelling salesman.

Although small in height, he was strong and wiry and a fine all-round athlete, excelling at boxing, swimming, cycling, gymnastics, cricket, and rugby. He had an austere and determined manner, and did not smoke, drink, or swear. He joined the Gaelic League in 1899, and soon became a fluent Irish-speaker, changing his name to 'Cathal Brugha' and concentrating on Gaelic culture and sports. In 1908 he was elected president of the League's Keating branch (to 1922), which was a hotbed of separatism, and he was closely involved in campaigning for compulsory Irish in the NUI. At a Gaelic League meeting in 1909 in Birr, King's Co. (Offaly), he met Kathleen Kingston (1879–1959) and they married in Dublin on 8 February 1912. Because of misgivings about working for an English-owned business, in 1909 he and two fellow employees, Anthony and Vincent Lalor, founded Lalor Ltd, a candlemaking firm based at 14 Lower Ormond Quay; Brugha became a director and travelling salesman. Joining the IRB in 1908, he used contacts made on his travels to recruit into the movement. He was elected first lieutenant in C company, 4th Dublin battalion of the Irish Volunteers in November 1913, and by spring 1914 he was battalion adjutant. He led the advance column of Volunteers that landed arms at Howth, Co. Dublin, on 26 July 1914.

During the 1916 rising, the 4th battalion held the South Dublin Union and Brugha was vice-commandant to Eamonn Ceannt (qv). In fierce fighting at the Union complex on Thursday 27 April Brugha was badly wounded and became separated from his unit, but managed single-handed to hold off a large body of British troops despite multiple bullet and shrapnel wounds. Ceannt found him propped against a wall in a pool of his own blood clutching a pistol as he defiantly sang 'God save Ireland' and taunted the attacking troops. On Friday he seemed close to death and was moved to the Union hospital. He was later treated in Dublin Castle and George V hospitals and was so badly wounded that he was discharged in August 1916 as

incurable, by which time his detention order had expired. After a long convalescence he made a partial recovery, but he continued to suffer great pain from his wounds, was badly lamed, and generally moved around by bicycle.

In November 1916 he began efforts to revive the Volunteers, presiding over a conference in Dublin of about fifty members. He was arrested and briefly imprisoned when he addressed a public demonstration (10 June 1917) demanding the immediate release of all political prisoners. A fervent republican, he was elected to the party executive at the Sinn Féin convention in October 1917 and argued successfully for the adoption of a republican constitution. He saw himself primarily as a soldier and was suspicious of politics: he rarely attended Sinn Féin meetings and concentrated on arming and reorganising the Irish Volunteers, serving as their chief of staff (October 1917–April 1919). During the conscription crisis of spring 1918 he strongly opposed Sinn Féin's cooperation with the Irish parliamentary party, and resigned from the party executive in April 1918. He travelled to London with a party of twelve Volunteers intent on assassinating British government ministers if conscription were imposed on Ireland; organising an attack on the British cabinet remained his pet project throughout the war of independence.

He was elected TD for Waterford in December 1918. In the absence of the imprisoned Éamon de Valera (qv) and Arthur Griffith (qv) he was elected acting president (*príomh-aire*) of the first dáil (22 January 1919), but resigned the presidency in de Valera's favour 1 April 1919 and was appointed minister for defence. One of the few leading separatists to remain at large throughout 1918–21, he was often on the run, but for much of the time he continued to work as a travelling salesman for Lalor's, and remitted his ministerial salary to his assistant Richard Mulcahy (qv), preferring that his dáil work should be unpaid. Close friends spoke of his courtesy and kindness, but to others he often seemed stern and aloof; he did not encourage discussion and gave his opinions with directness and finality. A strict disciplinarian, he strongly disapproved of independent actions by Volunteers without dáil approval, and often insisted that those involved be punished. He was particularly anxious to avoid civilian casualties, and only reluctantly gave way to the shooting of police detectives and intelligence officers. However, his contact with active Volunteers was limited and some considered him 'hopelessly out of touch' (Béaslaí, ii, 99) with the IRA campaign on the ground. The decentralised nature of the IRA, the independence of local commanders, and the influence of other general staff officers – particularly Michael Collins (qv) – meant that Brugha's control of the army was always problematic. On 20 August 1919 he proposed that Volunteers and dáil deputies should take an oath of allegiance to the Irish republic and its government, Dáil Éireann; while many individuals and units took the oath, the proposal was never formally approved by the IRA. One notable occasion when he asserted his authority was before 'Bloody Sunday' (21 November 1920), when he removed several names from Collins's assassination list, claiming there was insufficient information against them.

Brugha was particularly anxious to counteract the IRB's influence over the IRA. After 1916 he quit the IRB, believing that the conflict of authority between the IRB military council and Volunteer leadership had sabotaged the rising, and that as republicanism became a mass movement there was no need for a secret organisation. His suspicions of the IRB were aggravated by the fact that Collins was its head. Brugha had long resented the power that Collins – a fellow cabinet member but nominal military subordinate – had over defence matters. Given Collins's positions as IRA adjutant general and director of intelligence, his activities extended into many areas that Brugha considered his domain. The situation was further complicated when, after the arrest of acting president Griffith in November 1920, Brugha declined the presidency and it was assumed by Collins. Although he had reasonable cause for complaint that Collins was usurping some of his department's functions, Brugha also harboured a strong personal resentment of Collins's popularity and mystique. With ample scope for conflicts of authority, an ill-concealed antagonism simmered on between them throughout the war of independence and beyond.

Brugha strongly declined membership of the delegation selected to negotiate with the British government in September 1921, preferring to remain unknown should the talks fail and fighting recommence. While the negotiations proceeded, de Valera attempted to bring republican hardliners such as Brugha and Austin Stack (qv) around to his concept of 'external association' with the British commonwealth, which Brugha was grudgingly prepared to tolerate. He strongly opposed the treaty and spoke passionately against it in the dáil (7 January 1922). He claimed that the treaty was 'national suicide' since it meant surrendering the independent republic declared in 1916 and ratified in 1919. Stung by claims that Collins was 'the man who won the war', Brugha made a bitter personal attack on him. He questioned whether Collins had ever fired a shot for Ireland and implied that he was a publicity seeker whose reputation had been inflated by sensationalist newspapers. He described him as 'merely a subordinate in the department of defence' and remarked that in dealing mainly with Griffith and Collins 'the British government selected its men . . . because they knew they were the two weakest men we had on the team' (*Debate*, 326, 333). Even many anti-treatyites were appalled by this attack, which damaged Brugha's reputation far more than Collins's.

After the dáil approved the treaty, Brugha was replaced as minister for defence by Mulcahy. In March 1922 he became a vice-president of the anti-treaty Cumann na Poblachta, and in these months often restrained extreme republicans. At the anti-treaty IRA conference of 26–7 March he opposed proposals to stage an immediate military coup and to attack British soldiers who had not yet evacuated, but he later argued at a public meeting in Navan in April that the army was bound by its oath to the republic and was justified in temporarily assuming the functions of government. He took no part in negotiating the electoral pact of 20 May, claiming that by this stage he was 'sick of politics', and wished only to see both sides unite and mount an expedition to defend embattled northern nationalists. On 16 June he was elected

TD for Waterford–Tipperary East, coming third in a five-seat constituency. When the shelling of the Four Courts started the civil war (28 June), he reported for duty to the Hammam hotel in Upper O'Connell St., which with the Gresham and Granville hotels had been taken over by anti-treatyites. The hotels soon came under heavy fire and by 5 July were untenable. Most of the defenders surrendered, but Brugha fought on. With the Granville ablaze, he charged into the street that now bears his name, firing a pistol, and was shot in the thigh and seriously wounded. He died 7 July 1922 in the Mater hospital, Dublin, and was buried in the republican plot in Glasnevin cemetery.

He was survived by his wife, Caitlín Brugha, who was elected Sinn Féin TD for Waterford (1923–7), five daughters, and a son, Ruairí (b. 1917), who became Fianna Fáil TD for South Co. Dublin (1973–7) and married Máire, daughter of Terence MacSwiney (qv).

Even in a movement of zealous men and women, Brugha's zeal was exceptional. Immovable on points of principle, he was fixated on the idea of the republic. Many of the tributes paid to him after his death reflected a mixture of admiration for his tenacity and exasperation at his intransigence. Piaras Béaslaí (qv), once a close friend, noted that 'his leonine courage was accompanied by an almost taurine obstinacy' (Béaslaí, i, 79). Collins was deeply moved by his death and reflected: 'Because of his sincerity, I would forgive him anything. At worst he was a fanatic though in what has been a noble cause. At best I number him among the very few who have given their all . . . that this country should have its freedom. When many of us are forgotten, Cathal Brugha will be remembered' (quoted in Taylor, 236).

Debate on the treaty between Great Britain and Ireland signed in London on 6 December 1921 (1922); Seán Ó Ceallaigh, 'Cathal Brugha – as I knew him', *Catholic Bulletin*, 12 (1922), 485–96; id. (Sceilg), *Cathal Brugha* (1942); id., *A trinity of martyrs* (1947); Piaras Beaslaí, *Michael Collins and the making of a new Ireland* (2 vols, 1926), i, 78–9, 157, 270; ii, 99, 336–8, 408; Frank Pakenham, *Peace by ordeal* (1935); Rex Taylor, *Michael Collins* (1958); Dorothy Macardle, *The Irish republic* (1968); Tomás Ó Dochartaigh, *Cathal Brugha, a shaol is a thréithe* (1969); Ernie O'Malley, *The singing flame* (1978); Micheál Ó Cillín, 'Cathal Brugha, 1874–1922', *Dublin Hist. Rec.*, xxxviii, no. 4 (1985), 141–9; *Beathaisnéis*, v; Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin party 1916–23* (1999), 118, 138, 271, 267, 282, 382, 405; Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish war of independence* (2002)