

CATHAL BRUGHA

A very *complex* patriot

Fergus O'Farrell on the republican who refused to surrender

CATHAL BRUGHA was centrally involved in all of the major events of Ireland's struggle for independence. Despite this, he remains one of the least understood personalities of the revolution. There is no dedicated English language biography of this complex and important Irish patriot.

Born in Dublin in 1874, Brugha was a gifted sportsman as well as an active member of the Gaelic League, IRB and Irish Volunteers. Though not on the military council of the IRB, he was considered important enough for the leadership to reveal its plans for rebellion to him in the weeks before the Rising.

During Easter week, Brugha was second-in-command of the garrison at the South Dublin Union, led by Éamonn Ceannt.

Those who fought alongside Brugha remarked on his daring bravery, his silent nature, his devout Catholicism and his steely determination. On Thursday, 27 April, Brugha led a charge toward a British position through the warren of rooms around the Union. He sustained up to 25 wounds and, cut off from his unit by the heavy fighting, could be heard shouting, "Come on, you cowards, 'til I get one shot before I die. I am only a wounded man. Éamonn, Éamonn (Ceannt), Come here and sing 'God Save Ireland' before I die."

The rebels mounted a rescue mission and found Brugha propped up against a wall in a pool of his own blood, still clutching his Peter the Painter revolver. Joseph Doolan, who fought with Brugha during the Rising, later recorded that, "It was the greatest, bravest and most inspiring incident of that glorious week. A wounded man, alone practically, holding the forces of England at bay for an hour, taunting them with cowardice and proclaiming to them that he was only a wounded man."

Delirious from blood loss, Brugha was removed from the garrison, under the Red Cross flag, to a hospital in Dublin Castle. He underwent recovery in various hospitals until autumn, by which time the order for his detention had expired. From his hospital bed, he began reorganising what was left of the Irish Volunteers. His wounds never fully healed and he walked with a limp for the rest of his life.

In the midst of the 1918 conscription



Cathal Brugha arrives to Dáil Éireann on his bike in December, 1921.

GETTY

crisis, Brugha led a handpicked team of IRA assassins to London, where he planned to execute the British Cabinet if they introduced conscription in Ireland. The mission was aborted when the threat of conscription passed. He returned to Ireland just in time to be elected to the first Dáil as TD for West Waterford.

Brugha presided over the first meeting of the independent legislature on 21 January 1919, and became Minister for Defence in April. During the War of Independence he strove to assert his

ministerial authority over a decentralised IRA.

He was strongly opposed to any actions which might involve civilian casualties, and clashed with Michael Collins on many issues, including Collins's plan to shoot British intelligence officers, in what later became known as Bloody Sunday. Brugha removed some names from the hit list as he believed that there was not sufficient evidence against them.

Unlike many rebel leaders, he evaded capture throughout the war. He sometimes disguised himself as an Anglican minister, never slept at home, and was always armed. He was always prepared to fight to the death rather than surrender or be captured. He ran his ministry from an office above his candle-making business, Lalor's, on the North Quays.

Brugha opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty, working hard to maintain unity within the IRA in the months before the outbreak of the Civil War in June 1922. Once the war had begun, he joined the anti-treaty forces in the rank of private.

On July 5, surrounded by Free State troops in a burning hotel on present day O'Connell Street, he ordered his men to lay down their weapons and give themselves up. Characteristically, Brugha refused to surrender. There are several accounts of what happened next, but the result was that Brugha was shot and mortally wounded. Before exiting the hotel, he told a female comrade that his death would shock the country into ending the civil war. He died in hospital on July 7.

Brugha has been remembered as an uncompromising republican who favoured war over politics. However, this interpretation is too simplistic, and belies Brugha's inherent belief in politics and his complex attitudes towards violence. As this Decade of Centenaries progresses, perhaps a more rounded portrait will emerge.

Fergus O'Farrell recently completed his MA thesis on Cathal Brugha at the UCD School of History

SNAPSHOT

CATHAL BRUGHA

Born: 18 July 1874, Dublin

Educated: Belvedere College

Affiliation: IRB/Irish Volunteers

Career: Candle salesman, President of the Dáil, Minister for Defence

Died: 7 July 1922

LEARN MORE

READ...

- * *Eamonn Ceannt*, by Mary Gallagher (16 Lives Series, O'Brien Press)
- * *Cathal Brugha — As I Knew Him*, by Sceilg [JJ O'Kelly] (Dublin, 1922)
- * *A Terrible Beauty, Poetry of 1916*, selected by Mairéad Ashe FitzGerald (Dublin 2015)

WATCH...

- * Seán Nunan describes taking

part in the rebellion in the GPO (RTÉ, 1965), <http://bit.ly/1ITexuC>

CHECK OUT...

- * Eamonn Ceannt's last letter in the UCD archives, <http://bit.ly/1TnCbFU>

LISTEN TO...

- * *The Week to Come*. An RTÉ documentary made by Proinsias Mac Aonghusa in 1966 from archive recordings of those who took part in the Rising, <http://tinyurl.com/hj3k5en>
- * *The 1916 Proclamation*. A



History Show special on the Rising's defining document (RTÉ 2014), <http://tinyurl.com/jj2fr9a>

VISIT...

- * Many of the sites of the 1916 garrisons still exist. The South Dublin Union is now St James' Hospital, part of the Jacob's Factory is DIT Aungier Street, part of Boland's Mills is the Nama HQ. The GPO museum closed in March 2015 but a new visitor centre, GPO Witness History, will open in March 2016.