

Prologue

Within seven weeks in July and August 1922, Cathal Brugha was joined in death by Harry Boland, Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins. All were significant figures in the Irish Revolution. Brugha and Boland opposed the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921 and took the republican side in the Irish civil war. Griffith and Collins were the most prominent members of the Irish delegation that negotiated the terms of settlement with Britain and vigorously defended it. Of the four figures, Collins has attracted the most interest from writers, historians, film-makers and commentators of all kinds.¹ Boland and Griffith have also been the subject of several studies.² By some distance, Brugha has been the most neglected of the quartet, a sort of leading personality also-ran, despite being a member of the Gaelic League, Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and Irish Volunteers; a celebrated survivor of the 1916 Rising; a crucial figure in the post-Rising reorganization of the Volunteers and Sinn Féin; speaker at the first sitting of Dáil Éireann and president *pro tempore* until Éamon de Valera's return in April 1919; minister for defence in the underground Dáil government during the War of Independence; passionate and acerbic opponent of the Anglo-Irish treaty; a reluctant participant in the civil war, having tried to prevent it, and that conflict's first high profile fatality. Austin Stack's contention in 1929 that Brugha 'is not sufficiently known to the Irish people' has largely remained intact.³

Three reasons may be advanced for Brugha's relative neglect by historians. The first was that he left little by way of personal or ministerial papers. There are no diaries or runs of correspondence on which prospective biographers could construct a detailed and textured life story. One consequence of this has been a stilted view of Brugha the soldier, remembered for his heroic defiance in 1916 and again in 1922 rather than for his other involvements in the Irish Revolution with one notable exception. Brugha's fractious relationship with Collins between 1920 and 1922 has attracted considerable commentary but largely from the perspective of

¹ The number of biographies of Collins is extensive. For an overview see Anne Dolan & William Murphy, *Michael Collins: the man and the revolution* (Cork, 2018), pp 1–17.

² On Boland, see David Fitzpatrick, *Harry Boland's Irish revolution* (Cork, 2003) and Jim Maher, *Harry Boland: a biography* (revised ed. Cork, 2020 [1998]). On Griffith, see Richard P. Davis, *Arthur Griffith* (Dundalk, 1976), Calton Younger, *Arthur Griffith* (Dublin, 1981), Brian Maye, *Arthur Griffith* (Dublin, 1997), Owen McGee, *Arthur Griffith* (Sallins, 2015), Colum Kenny, *The enigma of Arthur Griffith: 'father of us all'* (Newbridge, 2020).

³ *Wolfe Tone Weekly*, 2 July 1938.

Collins rather than of both men.⁴ In this regard, Brugha's furious contribution to cabinet meetings in December 1921 and the subsequent treaty debates damaged his reputation at the time and shaped subsequent perceptions of him. A second reason lies in Brugha's personality. A reticent and reserved man, he was not a flamboyant or charismatic figure like Boland or Collins. J.J. O'Kelly recalled how Brugha 'loathed limelight' and 'was so retiring except when there was fighting'.⁵ As a worker in Brugha's firm reflected, 'very few people really knew Cathal'.⁶ Likewise, Robert Barton, later wondered if, apart from de Valera, any of Brugha's political colleagues had close relations with him.⁷ Among his contemporaries, Brugha was a figure more respected than loved. Third and relatedly, that sense of regard was due to Brugha's extraordinary physical courage and his resolute and lifelong pursuit of an Irish republic. James Quinn commented in his *Dictionary of Irish biography* entry on Brugha that 'even in a movement of zealous men and women, Brugha's zeal was exceptional'.⁸ In 1919, for instance, Brugha remarked, prophetically, that 'the death he would like to die would be fighting for the Republic'.⁹ When that wish transpired on 7 July 1922, the *Irish Times* produced a biting obituary comment of 'Ireland's stormy petrel':

Of all Ireland's many extremists he was the most extreme. The manner of his death was typical of his life. Cathal Brugha died, as he lived, in the last ditch ... All his life he hated England with an intensity of feeling which is rarely found even in this country of painful memories. Whenever there was talk of a rebellion he was at the head of the insurgent movement. Whenever there was talk of a surrender he was found fighting to the last.¹⁰

While this captured Brugha's noted tenacity, it ascribed to him a simplistic extremism. Ever since, this view has dominated how he has been portrayed and remembered.

Brugha did, however, have his ardent defenders, none more so than the Valentia Island-born J.J. O'Kelly, also known by his *nom de plume* Sceilg. He was a journalist, an Irish language activist, a founder of the Keating branch of the Gaelic League, a member of the first and second Dáil, and a prolific writer.¹¹ O'Kelly had closely identified with Brugha since their

⁴ An exception is Brian P. Murphy, *Patrick Pearse and the lost republican ideal* (Dublin, 1991).

⁵ J.J. O'Kelly (BMH WS 384, p. 20).

⁶ Liam Kavanagh to Ruairí Brugha, 21 May 1965 (in possession of Cathal MacSwiney Brugha).

⁷ Robert Barton to Ruairí Brugha, 6 May 1965, *ibid.*

⁸ James Quinn, 'Brugha, Cathal', *Dictionary of Irish biography* (hereafter *DIB*).

⁹ *Waterford News*, 14 July 1919.

¹⁰ *Irish Times* (hereafter *IT*), 8 July 1922.

¹¹ Brian P. Murphy, 'O'Kelly, John Joseph ('Sceilg'; Ua Ceallaigh, Seán)', *DIB*.

days in the Keating branch. As editor of the *Catholic Bulletin*, a monthly magazine, he played a pivotal role in proclaiming the reputations of those who took part in the 1916 Rising. O’Kelly shared Brugha’s opposition to the treaty but did not take up arms. He wrote a great deal about Brugha; the first piece appeared in the *Catholic Bulletin* in August 1922. Twenty years later, this was developed into a 348-page biography called *Cathal Brugha*.¹² Its immediate impact was limited because it was published during the restrictions and tightly regulated censorship of the Second World War and because it was written in Irish in Gaelic script (cló Gaelach). Overdrawn in style, it offers several defences of Brugha which, beneath thickets of hyperbole, provide valuable life details as well as useful insights on his character and concerns. In 1948 O’Kelly produced a précis of his biography in an anniversary lecture on Brugha, Austin Stack and Terence MacSwiney delivered at Sinn Féin headquarters. This was subsequently published as a pamphlet.¹³ O’Kelly’s work was infused with his own particular political stance. He had been engaged in a contest for ‘republican primacy and purity’ fought between Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁴ In 1969 Tomás Ó Dochartaigh, general manager of Comhar Linn and the son of Brugha’s sister Eveleen, published a complimentary portrayal under the title *Cathal Brugha: a shaol is a thréithe* that drew substantially on O’Kelly’s 1942 work.¹⁵ Partly because the biographies by O’Kelly and Ó Dochartaigh were written in Irish and partly because of their hagiographical style, they did little to shake the enduring popular image of Brugha the militant extolled by republican propagandists during and after the Irish civil war. Brugha’s only son Ruairí claimed never to have been ‘satisfied with the Sceilg book from an objective point of view’.¹⁶

Predictably, the story of Brugha’s courage, defiance and sacrifice in 1916 and 1922 was frequently rehearsed in republican periodicals such as the *Wolfe Tone Annual* published between 1932 and 1962 by Brian O’Higgins, a veteran of the 1916 Rising, anti-treatyite and republican campaigner.¹⁷ Each issue proclaimed a hero or epic episode of Irish history in narrative articles and also occasionally in ballad or verse. Between September 1937 and September 1939, O’Higgins also produced the short-lived *Wolfe Tone Weekly* with the assistance of fellow republican and 1916 veteran, Joseph Clarke. It was suppressed by the Irish

¹² Seán Ua Ceallaigh [J.J. O’Kelly], *Cathal Brugha* (Dublin, 1942).

¹³ J.J. O’Kelly, *A trinity of martyrs. Terence MacSwiney, Cathal Brugha, Austin Stack. Anniversary lectures delivered by Sceilg at Sinn Féin headquarters* (Dublin, n.d. [1947]).

¹⁴ Murphy, ‘O’Kelly, John Joseph (‘Sceilg’; Ua Ceallaigh, Seán)’, *DIB*.

¹⁵ Tomás Ó Dochartaigh, *Cathal Brugha: a shaol is a thréithe* (Dublin, 1969).

¹⁶ Ruairí Brugha to Florence O’Donoghue, 21 May 1966 (National Library of Ireland (hereafter NLI), Florence O’Donoghue papers, MS 31,319/2/14).

¹⁷ ‘The story of Cathal Brugha’ featured in the *Wolfe Tone Annual 1962*.

government on the outbreak of the Second World War but not before aspects of Brugha's career were aired in several issues.¹⁸ Brugha's valour was also instanced in *Guerrilla days in Ireland*, Tom Barry's bestselling memoir of his role as commandant of the West Cork Brigade IRA, first published in 1949: 'Brugha's place in Irish history, high amongst our great patriots, will of a certainty be determined, not by those virtues [of integrity and unselfishness], but because of his incredible courage'.¹⁹

The approach of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising prompted Ruairí Brugha to gather information from his father's contemporaries. These included Richard Mulcahy, who was IRA chief of staff and succeeded Brugha as minister for defence after the treaty split, and Robert Barton, minister for economic affairs in the second Dáil and treaty signatory. Mulcahy compiled valuable 'notes' on Brugha that are among his papers in the University College Dublin Archives. In early 1966 Ruairí corresponded with Florence O'Donoghue, who was Cork No. 1 Brigade intelligence officer during the War of Independence but remained neutral during the civil war and later resurrected his military career in the 1940s, rising to the rank of major. Having served on the advisory committee of the Bureau of Military History (BMH) which collected over 1,700 witness statements from participants in the Irish Revolution in the 1940s and 1950s, O'Donoghue turned his attention to writing about the Irish Revolution in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁰ On 25 April 1966 he delivered a lecture on Brugha before a meeting of the Fianna Fáil Cumann Tír Chonaill in the Royal Hibernian Hotel in Dublin. Attended by President Éamon de Valera, members of the Fianna Fáil front bench and the Brugha family, it received extensive coverage in the press.²¹ The hope expressed by Ruairí Brugha that O'Donoghue's paper would be published was not realized as O'Donoghue died in 1967.²² Members of Cumann na mBan, who served with Brugha before his death, criticized O'Donoghue for not eliciting their recollections during his research.²³

The fiftieth anniversary of Brugha's death was marked on 9 July 1972 by a commemorative pageant in Dublin's Olympia Theatre. Produced and scripted by Noel Mannix, the lead role was played by Brugha's grandson and namesake in a performance that ran to over two hours. One theatre critic described it as a folk hero story and 'just as expected in its fervid

¹⁸ *Wolfe Tone Weekly*, 13 Mar., 16 Apr., 2 July 1938.

¹⁹ Tom Barry, *Guerrilla days in Ireland* (Dublin, 1962 [1949]), p. 188.

²⁰ Marie Coleman, 'O'Donoghue, Florence ('Florrie')', *DIB*. On the Bureau of Military History, see Diarmaid Ferriter, *A nation and not a rabble: the Irish revolution, 1913–23* (London, 2015), pp 17–23.

²¹ *Irish Times* (hereafter *IT*) and *Irish Press* (hereafter *IP*), 26 Apr. 1966.

²² Brugha to O'Donoghue, 21 May 1966 (NLI, O'Donoghue papers, MS 31,319/2/140).

²³ On this see Eve Morrison, 'Tea, sandbags, and Cathal Brugha: Kathy Barry's Civil War' in Oona Frawley (ed.), *Women and the decade of commemoration* (Indiana, 2021), p. 197.

patriotic aura and in its utter devotion to its subject'.²⁴ The most arresting performance came from the audience when 91-year-old Joseph Clarke interrupted the show to draw the attention of Taoiseach Jack Lynch and President de Valera to republican prisoners on hunger strike in the Curragh.²⁵

Writings about Brugha remained remarkably few in the decades that followed. In 1985 Micheál Ó Cillín contributed a useful article, particularly on Brugha's early life, to the *Dublin Historical Record* and there was a piece about Brugha in his daughter-in-law's memoir published in 2006.²⁶ More recently in 2015, Fergus O'Farrell completed a MA thesis in UCD under the title 'Cathal Brugha: Peter the Painter, Candlestick Maker, 1916–1921'. This was subsequently published in the new Life & Times series of short biographies by UCD press.²⁷ Drawing on the BMH, O'Farrell's brief but highly informative account sheds new light on aspects of Brugha's revolutionary career, particularly his involvement in a plot to assassinate the British cabinet during the conscription crisis in 1918.

Cathal Brugha: 'an indomitable spirit' is not a biography in the conventional sense of that term. The frustrating paucity of personal papers left by Brugha ensures that he remains an elusive figure; a minute account of his life, thoughts, impulses, concerns, what he read and who he met cannot be constructed. That, however, is not to suggest that a detailed reassessment of his various involvements in the Irish Revolution cannot or should not be attempted. Far from it. The abundance of source material on the Irish Revolution – the 'best documented revolution in modern history', according to one prominent historian – reveals an array of perspectives on Brugha as others (friends, political allies and opponents) saw him during the complexities and strains of an extraordinary period.²⁸ This wealth of surviving evidence allows the simplistic and reductionist depiction of Brugha to be replaced by a nuanced and multilayered reappraisal of him. That in essence is the goal of this study. What follows is not a defence or rehabilitation of Brugha but rather an attempt to chronicle his public and private life and the influences that shaped him, to examine his uncompromising commitment to an Irish republic that dominated his life, to appraise his complex involvement in the Irish Revolution, to contextualize his relationships with contemporaries such as Collins, de Valera and Mulcahy, to explore how his premature death at the age of forty-seven affected his young family and how his wife, Caitlín,

²⁴ Desmond Rushe review in *Irish Independent* (hereafter *II*), 10 July 1972.

²⁵ *Evening Herald*, 10 July 1972; Anne Dolan, 'Clarke, Joseph Christopher', *DIB*.

²⁶ Micheál Ó Cillín, 'Cathal Brugha 1874–1922', *Dublin Historical Record*, 38 (1984–85), 141–9; Máire MacSwiney Brugha, *History's daughter: a memoir from the only child of Terence MacSwiney* (Dublin, 2006), pp 262–73.

²⁷ Fergus O'Farrell, *Cathal Brugha* (Dublin, 2018).

²⁸ Peter Hart, 'The social structure of the IRA, 1916–23', *Historical Journal*, 42:1 (1999), 208.

upheld his political principles by standing as a Sinn Féin TD, and to comment on how Brugha's indomitable patriotism was propagandized after his death. Based on exhaustive research of the personal papers of Brugha's numerous contemporaries in the National Library of Ireland and UCD Archives, state papers in Britain and Ireland, press and parliamentary material, the records of the BMH and Military Service Pensions Collection (MSPC), among other sources, we present a broad and multifaceted portrait of a complex, tenacious, and often maligned figure.