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Review of *Cathal Brugha* by Fergus O'Farrell

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However, *Walking Waterloo* is far more than a guide to a well-known battlefield. Esdaile has brought a fresh perspective to the field, carefully examining the terrain and considering whether the oft-repeated stories about the battle are realistic when one stands on the landscape itself. The book therefore offers a highly persuasive re-evaluation of commonly held beliefs about the battle, including questioning how it is possible for the collapse of the imperial guard to have shattered the morale of the entire French army, when a ridge of high ground makes it impossible to see from one half of the field to the other. The advantage of presenting this information in a battlefield guide is that the visitor only needs to look up from the book to see the evidence for themselves.

The only notable omission is the absence of tours for Quatre Bras, and Ligny, which were important battles of the Waterloo campaign. Whilst this was necessitated by a lack of space, it is disappointing that they were not integrated into the book, perhaps as a unique download.

Overall, In *Walking Waterloo* Charles Esdaile has achieved the historian's 'Holy Grail'. This is a significant book for historians, which will also inspire the public to know more about this crucial battle. The reader is not only informed about discussions at the cutting edge of historical debate, but is physically involved in that process, being invited to investigate Esdaile's conclusions for themselves. This is quite simply one of the most important books on Waterloo to have been written in 200 years.

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**Fergus O'Farrell, *Cathal Brugha*. Dublin: UCD Press, 2018. xv + 111 pp. ISBN 978-1910820278 (paperback). Price £15.50**

This short book is the first English-language biography of Cathal Brugha (born Charles William St John Burgess in Dublin in 1874). Portraits in Irish by Sceilg (J.J. O'Kelly) and Tomás Ó Dochartaigh were published in the 1940s and 1960s respectively and are dismissed by the author as hagiography. This neglect may seem unusual, not least given the explosion of biographical and prosopographical work on Irish revolutionaries in recent decades. Nor was Brugha a bit-part player: severely wounded in the 1916 Easter Rising; elected MP for Waterford in 1918 and subsequently a Teachta Dála and minister for defence in the underground Dáil Éireann government during the Irish War of Independence; one of the key opponents of the Anglo-Irish Treaty; and an early but

## BOOK REVIEWS

prominent casualty of the Irish Civil War. The absence of a serious study of Brugha is even more glaring when compared to the enduring fascination with figures like Michael Collins and Éamon de Valera, but becomes somewhat more understandable when reading O'Farrell's book.

If the outline and trajectory of Brugha's life is easily told, O'Farrell has had to work hard to account for his subject's beliefs and motivations. Brugha was 'was no political theorist. We do not know what books he read and he left no record of his thoughts on political systems' (p. 10). He also preferred to work 'in the shadows' (p. 56) and was particularly reticent about committing anything to paper. This might be expected of a minister in an underground, illegal government in the midst of a guerrilla war but was actually unusual by the standard of some contemporaries who – perhaps unwisely but to the immense benefit of historians – hoarded abundant paperwork. Much of what we know about Cathal Brugha, therefore, comes through the mediated voices of others.

Nevertheless, O'Farrell has constructed a thesis that is clearly articulated at the outset and argued throughout the book: Brugha has been incorrectly typecast as a republican extremist and 'arch-militarist' (p. 3) and instead operated in something of a middle ground where politics and violence worked hand in hand; even after the republican split in 1922 Brugha was 'too purist for the pragmatists, too pragmatic for the purists' (p. 5). Brugha, for instance, pushed the oath of allegiance that brought the republican army under the control of the Dáil, and was much more concerned about civilian casualties than some of his colleagues (though, as a married man and father, reckless with his own safety). Even Brugha's ambitious but abortive plans to assassinate the British Cabinet – returned to seriously twice more after the initial plan was cancelled in 1918 – is explained by the author with reference to a belief that it was the politicians who were ultimately responsible for British policy in Ireland and therefore legitimate targets for political assassination.

Brugha's interaction with other leading revolutionaries, particularly Collins, de Valera, and Richard Mulcahy (chief of staff of the IRA and, like Collins, technically Brugha's inferior), gets significant attention. Relations with Collins were famously sour and culminated in Brugha's bitter and much criticized attack on Collins during debates on the Anglo-Irish Treaty. It was only after 1920 that Brugha's relationship with Mulcahy began to break down, but this was all part of a process whereby more effective and energetic comrades effectively usurped control of the army. At the same time, much of the conflict took place beyond the direct influence of headquarters anyway – especially in Munster.

Brugha makes for an intriguing guerrilla minister for defence. He refused to take a Dáil salary and remained in his day job running a candle-makers. Undoubtedly brave and

committed, he could also be intransigent, aloof, and cantankerous. It is therefore very easy to see Brugha as a 'die-hard' among the opponent of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Instead, the author argues, he was among the 'moderates' in that cohort. Even still, Brugha was never afraid to die for Ireland and the book ends with his death on 7 July 1922 after a shootout with pro-Treaty National Army forces – heroic or foolish (or both) depending on your view. A useful follow-up project would explore the impact of Brugha's death on Anti-Treatyites and the Civil War, his place in Irish republican iconography, and the lives and careers of his wife, children, and descendants – all beyond the scope of this short, clearly defined study.

The author has generally made good use of the limited source material available. Recollections in interviews given to Ernie O'Malley, not cited here, may have added some additional touches but would correspond largely with what is presented in the book. O'Farrell is wisely skeptical of such retrospective testimony anyway, though perhaps unhelpfully speculates that Éamonn Ceannt's call to never again surrender to the enemy, composed before his execution in 1916, 'echoed in Brugha's ears for the rest of his revolutionary career' (p. 25). Similar rhetorical flourishes can jar a little, and there is also some carelessness with the spelling of names, particularly Irish names.

But on the whole, while seeking to challenge what he sees as poorly formed, and even unfair, treatments of Brugha by most historians, O'Farrell is thoughtful and judicious. His argument is clearly articulated and deserves considered attention from scholars of the military history of the period. This is also an attractive and accessible volume that will appeal to the very large group of general readers interested in the key personalities of the Irish Revolution. Scholars interested in the interaction between politics and militarism in irregular wars might also consider looking to Brugha as a useful case study. Cathal Brugha remains a very tricky subject for biography, but this book should – as the author intends – prompt a more sustained reevaluation of a republican icon.

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