
Identity and Self-Representation in Irish Communism

The Connolly Column and the Spanish Civil War

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‘It is perhaps considered easier by some to fight fascism in Spain, than work in the exceptionally difficult conditions in the South of Ireland’.

*Comintern memorandum, 1937*¹

The first thing to say about Irish communist self-representation is that, outside internal party journals and publications on the Spanish Civil War, it hardly exists. This might seem to be a reflection of the weakness of communism in Ireland. Certainly the conventional wisdom is that communists were of no consequence in Irish history. The most acclaimed survey of the political history of twentieth century Ireland, Lee’s *Ireland: 1912–1985*, made just eight passing references to ‘communism’ in 687 pages, and all of them actually dealt with anti-communism.² It is true that the communists were rarely very numerous, suffered chronic problems of organization, and found it difficult to sustain branches outside Dublin and Belfast. The first Communist Party of Ireland (CPI), launched in 1921 by James Connolly’s precocious son, Roddy, probably had about 50 to 100 active members over most of its short history, and was dissolved in 1924 in favour of Jim Larkin’s Irish Worker League. The League began with some 500 supporters, but Larkin used it as little more than a personal soapbox. Following Larkin’s break with the Communist International in 1929, Moscow sponsored the Revolutionary Workers’ Groups, preparatory to the foundation of the second CPI in 1933. Membership of the Groups peaked in 1932 at 340, and then declined in the face of clerical reaction. The CPI was wound up in neutral Éire when Germany invaded Soviet Russia. The Communist Party in Northern Ireland (CPNI) flourished briefly in the period of Britain’s wartime alliance with the Soviet Union, reaching a membership of 1,000 in 1943. By 1949, the roll call was down to 172. Éire communists re-organized in the Irish Workers’ League (later Irish Workers’ Party) in 1948, and survived in near clandestine circumstances during the height of the cold war.

The northern and southern parties united as the third CPI in 1970, with a combined membership of some 600.³

Yet the communists were of remarkable significance in certain phases of radical history. The British intelligence campaign to depict the Irish independence struggle as 'Bolshevist' was not without some basis in fact.⁴ Dáil Éireann sought diplomatic recognition and weapons from Soviet Russia in 1921 and socialist republicanism during the Free State era was driven by the interaction of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Comintern. The Workers' Union of Ireland, the second largest Irish general trade union up to 1990, was founded by the Larkins in 1924 as a communist union, and was the biggest anglophone affiliate of the Profintern up to 1929. The wartime CPNI acquired some lasting positions of influence in Belfast trade unionism and a role in the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in the 1960s. Communists also made a major contribution to historiography through T.A. Jackson and C. Desmond Greaves, the twin pillars of the James Connolly school of history, which in turn hegemonised Irish radical historiography up to the 1970s.⁵ Nonetheless, it is only in relation to the Connolly Column, the name which has become a blanket term for all Irish-born volunteers who served in Spain for the Republic, that communists have received anything approaching due recognition from professional historians or in the public memory.⁶

A shy tradition

A brief review of other communist autobiography will put the Connolly Column material in perspective. Two comrades of the first CPI, Liam O'Flaherty and Jim Phelan, went on to become prolific writers, and among their various autobiographical publications are two volumes which cover the period of their party membership: O'Flaherty's *Shame the Devil* (1934), and *The Name's Phelan* (1948). Both had by then abandoned politics and wrote primarily to earn a crust. Treating their party activities as incidental to jaunty accounts of adventurous lives, neither said much about communism or the CPI per se. Indeed O'Flaherty reveals more about the CPI in one of his best known novels, *The Informer* (1925).

The history of *The Informer* is symptomatic of the way communism has been airbrushed out of the ferment that went into the making of independent Ireland. Set in 1923–4, the plot has Gypo Nolan on the run from 'the Revolutionary Organization' as it hovers on the brink of becoming a power in the land, in a manner approximate to one of Roddy Connolly's pipedreams during the civil war. The organization's commandant, Dan Gallagher, was

invested with many of the failings attributed to Connolly by his disgruntled comrades, notably O'Flaherty himself. The novel has inspired four films. A British production in 1929 by Arthur Robison gave the events a vaguely German location. John Ford's 1935 Academy Award winner shifted the setting to the War of Independence and projected Gypo as a renegade IRA man. The same approach was taken in a 1992 version, while the radical 1968 film *Uptight!* set the story in a black ghetto of urban America. In the 1920s it was possible to believe that O'Flaherty's significance lay in his communism. 'I think if you eliminate Bolshevism and muck-raking from Liam O'Flaherty', wrote Desmond Fitzgerald, the Free State's first Minister for External Affairs, 'you have a very unimportant writer'.⁷ Subsequently, it became impossible to think of Irish communism as anything other than esoteric, even in fiction. Gypo Nolan, one of the great examples of the stock villain of native demonology, passed into Irish idiom as a republican traitor, and the most recent academic study of *The Informer* reckoned that Gallagher was inspired by officers of the Bavarian Frei Korps.⁸

Communist autobiography in the post 1930s is confined to published interviews with Betty Sinclair, Joe Deasy, and Andy Barr, which deal primarily with their involvement in trade unionism and politics rather than internal party affairs; private papers in the Desmond Greaves archive; and Roy Johnston's doorstopper, *Century of Endeavour: A Biographical and Autobiographical View of the Twentieth Century in Ireland* (2003).⁹ Unique in so many respects, *Century of Endeavour* is a biography of Johnston's father, an Ulster liberal and later a member of the Republic's senate, and a memoir of Roy's involvement in communist and republican groups in Dublin from the 1940s, and in the Connolly Association in London. Presented in the manner of a reconstructed diary, and written in a spare and factual style, it includes an extraordinarily detailed record of meetings and discussions.¹⁰

That communists have been shy of autobiography is not surprising. Irish political autobiography withered as a genre with the demise of the Home Rule party in 1918. The party's MPs were infused with the elitist, pretentious atmosphere of Westminster. The demotic political culture of independent Ireland reflected a society which was predominantly rural, conformist, and consensual, and which esteemed the collective above the personal. The few IRA commandants who published memoirs of the War of Independence aimed primarily to give their version of events rather than observations on themselves or the world about them.¹¹ There was too a feeling that the post 1921 period, when the Irish quarrelled more with each other, than with the stranger, and when the arrival at statehood failed to match the high expectations of the journey, was not an appropriate subject of scrutiny. None had

greater cause for embarrassment than the socialists, who witnessed the exhilarating workers' unity of the Larkinite and syndicalist years crumble into extraordinary fractiousness between 1923 and 1959. When William O'Brien, long-time general secretary of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), finally produced a memoir, he refused to go beyond 1923, though he did not retire until 1946.¹² Being mainly working class and imbued with the characteristic secretiveness of their parties, Irish communists felt even less inclined to tell their stories in public. The wonder is not that so few communist autobiographies are available, but that so much has been written in recent years, and written almost entirely in relation to the Spanish Civil War.

'The Spanish trenches are here in Ireland'¹³

Between July 1936 and the summer of 1937 there was no escaping the Spanish question in Ireland.¹⁴ It is possible that *per capita* the Irish accounted for more volunteers in Spain than any other nation. Of course, most fought for General Franco, and many of those on the other side were emigrés. Nonetheless, the level of Irish involvement in the International Brigades was remarkable for a country with a communist party of about 150 members, confined organizationally to Dublin and Belfast. The explanation lies in the way Spain impacted on two forces in Irish society and politics, Catholicism and republicanism. Inflamed by lurid accounts of anti-clerical atrocities, crowds of up to 50,000 thronged the rallies of the Irish Christian Front, formed in August 1936 to support Franco and combat communism. The Irish Catholic hierarchy raised £43,000 in church gate collections for Spanish Catholics, and backed the creation of an 'Irish Brigade' to fight what it represented as a religious crusade. The brigade was commanded by General Eoin O'Duffy, chief of police from 1922 to 1933, then leader of Ireland's 'shirted' movement, the Blueshirts, and for a time the president of the main opposition party, Fine Gael. About 680 strong, with its own pipe band, it attracted widespread curiosity as the only unit of foreign volunteers in Franco's army other than a scattering of individuals and the state-sponsored auxiliaries from Germany, Italy, and Portugal. Such was the intensity of anti-communist feeling that Irish Labour declined to take a stand on the war. After doing its best to avoid the issue, the Labour Party published a remarkably evasive pamphlet, *Cemeteries of Liberty: Communist and Fascist Dictatorships* (1937), written by party leader William Norton and introduced by O'Brien. Skirting both Spanish and Irish politics, Norton treated fascism as Nazism, and equated Nazism with Stalinism. Labour, as Norton would have it, was

anti-fascist and anti-communist equally, but not pro- or anti-Franco. The Irish Trade Union Congress took a similar stance. Even Larkin banned officials of his union from speaking in public on Spain. In some cases, workers in British based unions which funded humanitarian aid to Republican Spain made formal protests or disaffiliated.¹⁵

The twin pillars of opposition to Franco in the Free State were the CPI and the Republican Congress. Alliance with republicans had been a strategic aim of Comintern policy in Ireland since 1920, and republicans had been providing the cadres for communist fronts in Ireland since 1925. The Republican Congress was formed in April 1934, when leftists abandoned the IRA to launch a 'congress of progressives'. The CPI affiliated to the Congress in September. Within weeks the Congress split over whether to continue as a 'united front' or become a political party. What remained of it was so close to the CPI, and *vice versa*, that both organisations could be said to have shared a mutual 'communist republicanism', which might be encapsulated as a belief in the politics of anti-imperialism at home, and the popular front internationally. Little more than their conviction in the party and the Comintern separated the communists from the Congress. Something of a popular front atmosphere emerged as a few writers, intellectuals, and liberals helped to create groups like Irish Friends of the Spanish Republic, branches of the Left Book Club, socialist theatre guilds, and radical debating societies. A fine example of the spirit is Leslie Daiken's *Good-Bye, Twilight: Songs of Struggle in Ireland*, a collection of seventy five poems and ballads by forty Irish writers and workers, all 'showing unmistakably out of the experience of the proletariat, that revolutionary poets, playwrights, and novelists are developing an art which reveals more forces in the world than the love of the lecher and the pride of the Narcissist'.¹⁶ If minor by international standards, this level of bourgeois and intellectual engagement with socialism was novel in Ireland. And it reflected a 'communist republican' politics. It was symptomatic of the centrality of republicanism—and emigration—for Irish socialists, that Daiken, a Dublin Jew, was editor of *Irish Front*, the monthly paper of the London branch of the Republican Congress. Only in Northern Ireland, where the climate was more tolerant in relation to Spain, was it possible to find anti-Franco activism outside the 'communist-republican' rubric, in the form of the Socialist Party, Northern Ireland (SPNI), previously the Belfast branch of the (British) Independent Labour Party, and sections of the Northern Ireland Labour Party.

Republicanism is particularly marked in the composition of the 'Connolly Column'. The CPI decided to contribute to the International Brigades in September 1936, and leaders of the Republican Congress, notably Peadar

O'Donnell and Frank Ryan, were instrumental in the recruitment of what was intended to be a distinct Irish unit. O'Duffy's 'Brigade', raised with the encouragement of all that republicans regarded with hostility—Fine Gael, the Blueshirts, the Catholic hierarchy, and the *Irish Independent* newspaper—acted as a stimulus. O'Duffy himself was something of a hate-figure for republicans, blamed for the massacre of IRA prisoners at Ballyseedy in 1923 and Garda harassment in his days as chief of police.¹⁷ And having been excommunicated in 1922 and 1931, the IRA was cynical about the theological integrity of clerical politics. In respect of those who left from Ireland, the table below almost certainly understates the proportion of volunteers with an IRA background, who are likely to account for the bulk of unknown affiliations.¹⁸ By contrast, it is possible to be reasonably accurate on the CPI members, and say that the communist percentage was low in comparison with other countries.¹⁹ Most republicans were in a batch of about eighty who went to Spain with Ryan in December 1936. Communists dominated the subsequent trickle of recruits.

The politics of the Connolly Column

Residence before Spain	Total	Known affiliation	Communist (with a previous republican affiliation)	Other republicans	Labour/socialist (with a previous republican affiliation)	Non-party
Ireland	134	62	29 (13)	22	7(1)	4
London	32	23	14 (7)	6	1	2
Elsewhere	77	39	33 (4)	3	3 (1)	-
Total	243	124	76 (24)	31	11 (2)	6

Note to table: Various lists of the Connolly Column have been compiled on the basis of snippets gleaned from a range of sources, and it is impossible to be exact on figures. All lists include all those born in Ireland as, while many of the expatriates were politicized abroad, others were the product of Irish politics, and some, notably those in the London Republican Congress, were still engaged with Ireland. This table does not include second generation exiles or the 'honorary Irish', foreigners who associated with the Irish in Spain. The total of 243 includes 5 who served with the POUM, the CNT, or the Madrid militia, five who served in medical units, and one driver on a supply convoy. The others were International Brigaders. 'Communist' refers to membership of any communist party before Spain. 'Previous republican affiliation' means former membership of the Citizen Army, IRA, or Republican Congress. 'Labour/socialist' includes an anarchist and members of the Irish and Northern Ireland Labour Parties, the SPNI, the (British) Independent Labour Party, and the Industrial Workers of the World. 'Non-party' includes a Quaker and volunteers designated as such or known to be of no political affiliation.

(Sources: RGASPI, Moscow, International Brigades in the Spanish Republican Army, 545/6/-; Marx Memorial Library, London, International Brigades Memorial Archive; newspapers, especially the *Irish Democrat*; O’Riordan, *Connolly Column*; and the most authoritative and comprehensive webiste on the topic, www.geocities.com/IrelandSCW/ maintained by Ciarán Crossey, Belfast International Brigades Commemorative Committee (IBCC).

The Irish were unusual too in their policy on recruitment. O’Donnell said he wanted just enough men to make a credible counterpoint to O’Duffy. His claim that hundreds had offered to fight but ‘he selected only 145’ was echoed by Ryan, and divers sources attest that O’Donnell, Ryan, and the CPI dissuaded them from going to Spain, arguing that they were needed at home. Tacitly accepting special treatment for the Irish, the XV International Brigade allowed Ryan to repatriate those he deemed to have done a reasonable tour of duty.²⁰

Wherever the Irish in Spain formed a critical mass, they did what they could to assert their distinctive politics. The most controversial instance occurred in January 1937 when the Irish were denied battalion status for lack of numbers. In one of only two such ‘mutinies’ in the International Brigades, the majority left the British battalion and formed the ‘James Connolly centuria’ of the Abraham Lincoln battalion. The centuria commemorated Easter Week, 1916 on the Jarama front in March 1937, and organized a more official commemoration, with formal XV Brigade participation, on 12 May, the twenty-first anniversary of Connolly’s execution. The gathering pledged to fight fascism internationally, and ‘imperialism, native and British’ at home. Just over a year later the Irish on the Ebro front marked the high point in the republican calendar with a ceremony for Wolfe Tone, founder of the United Irishmen.²¹ Drawing comparisons between Spain and Ireland became a theme of ‘communist republicanism’. With their strong sense of history, republicans found all sorts of connections: O’Duffy and Franco; the misuse of religion by the bishops; the nationalism of the Irish, the Basques, and the Catalans; the struggle of the landless against landlords; stories of Republican atrocities and loyalist propaganda against the insurgents in 1798; and the hysteria for ‘Catholic Spain’ in 1936 and ‘Catholic Belgium’ in 1914.²² A similar sensibility is a feature of the satirical ballads on O’Duffy and the Christian Front by ‘Somhairle MacAlastair’, pseudonym of ex-IRA man Diarmuid MacGoille Phádraig.²³ Most are hilarious. ‘Ballyseedy befriends Badajoz’, the title linking sites of massacres of Irish and Spanish republicans, is bitter:

O’Duffy calls his ‘godly band’ and leads them to the fray,

(They murdered Liam Mellows upon Our Lady's Day),
 God help you, Spanish Connollys, if Lombard Murphy's crew
 Should blood their drunken hellhounds and send them after you...²⁴

O'Donnell's *Salud!*, an account of his time in Spain at the start of the war, is almost obsessive in finding parallels. He opened the book with flashbacks to an episode in which he was caught up in a dispute over a sub-post office on Achill Island.

I can imagine few things more exciting than to watch the days unfold against home conditions under a foreign sky; your own village is most exciting when you meet it between strange mountains...I walked into a Civil War in Achill just as I walked into one in Spain, and it was the same Civil War...A picture of Achill is a map of Spain.²⁵

As the war progressed, the CPI took an increasingly republican line, even to the point of jeopardizing the effort for Spain. The CPI's relations with the IRA improved when Tom Barry became chief of staff in June 1936. Though Barry banned IRA volunteers from going to Spain, the ban applied to both sides and the motivation was to keep the army focused on what he regarded as its primary purpose rather than fear of the crozier. Barry ended the IRA's proscription on CPI membership—introduced in 1933—and the party found him 'very sympathetic and helpful'.²⁶ Ryan resumed collaboration with the IRA, for the first time since the split in 1934. In March 1937 the CPI retired its organ, the *Worker*, in favour of the *Irish Democrat*, which was published jointly with the Republican Congress and the SPNI. The *Democrat* survived tensions over Spain: its denunciation of the POUM as 'fascists in the rear' provoked objections from the SPNI. It did not survive tensions over Ireland. The CPI complained of having to exclude IRA targeted material to accommodate the SPNI, whose membership was at once largely Protestant, anti-partition, and anti-IRA.²⁷ The *Irish Democrat* collapsed in December when the cash-rich SPNI withdrew its support over the paper's republican slant. Ironically, the SPNI's sizable war chest was the balance of compensation for the burning of its hall by loyalists in 1921.

The Comintern's policy was also shaped by perceived parallels between Ireland and Spain, and sought to apply to the CPI its prescriptions for the Spanish party. Augmented by the return of O'Duffy's 'fascist bravos', Comintern experts believed that the Christian Front would mount a serious challenge to Fianna Fáil in the 1937 general election, and strengthen 'developments towards fascism in Ireland...unless resolute counter-measures are

taken'. To bolster ...amon de Valera's refusal to recognise the Franco regime in the face of Catholic pressure, the CPI was directed to broaden its membership, and build a new popular front that would include the rank and file of Fianna Fáil. The Comintern further considered inviting 'a small group of influential Fianna Fáil people' to Moscow, and promoting cultural and trade relations between Russia and Ireland. The CPI's election manifesto duly called, not for the replacement of Fianna Fáil, but for 'a vigorous working class and republican opposition' to make Fianna Fáil 'fight'.²⁸

The general election in July 1937 was indeed a watershed for partisans of the Spanish conflict. The Fianna Fáil government survived with a reduced majority. But Fine Gael too lost ground and the Christian Front threat failed to materialize. O'Duffy's men had limped home in June, to be received with embarrassment on account of their poor military performance, and internal disputes which suggested some disillusionment with Franco and his war. On all sides, interest in Spain began to abate.

'Viva la Quince Brigada'²⁹

Today, there is nothing to commemorate O'Duffy's bandera. By contrast, there are fourteen memorials to men of the Connolly Column. More are in the pipeline. Identification with the International Brigades goes well beyond the far left. The monument in Waterford was erected on behalf of the city, and others have had the blessing of local authorities. Tributes have been paid to the Connolly Column by Presidents of Ireland and Lords Mayor of Dublin and Belfast. In 2001, Michael O'Riordan, a veteran of the British battalion in Spain and longtime general secretary of the CPI, was invited to address the Labour Party's annual conference and hailed by the party leader as a champion of democracy in the 1930s. When Peter O'Connor, a sergeant in the Lincoln battalion, died in 1999, his death was the lead item on the flagship news bulletin of the state television channel, RTÉ 1. The same RTÉ commissioned a seven hour television history of the state, *Seven Ages*, broadcast in 2000, which never once mentioned labour. So what is the celebration of the Connolly Column about?

The key to this question lies in the power of the Catholic church in Ireland from the 1930s to the 1960s, and the way in which the church made anti-communism an expression of that power. The church said little on communism in the 1920s, communist public meetings attracted no hostility, and there were occasions when Fianna Fáil politicians stood on communist platforms. The coincidence of three developments in 1929–30 would change that profoundly. First, in December 1929 Josef Stalin launched a new

campaign against religion in Russia. Pope Pius XI responded in 1930 by virtually excommunicating communists. Secondly, the Papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) encouraged a specifically Catholic engagement in society and politics. Thirdly, the centenary celebrations of Catholic emancipation in 1929—followed by the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin in 1932—palpably demonstrated to a pleasantly surprised clergy that they were no longer of a minority church in a Protestant state, but enjoyed a virtually unchallenged status in independent Ireland. Catholic reaction emerged in early 1930, and fought a small, but growing, communist movement by creating a near totalitarian intolerance of any expression of socialism. It was clear by 1933 that the church had triumphed. While the CPI was legal, Comintern agents in Dublin complained of a ‘spirit of illegality’ in the party. Pat Devine reported ‘serious capitulatory tendencies shown by our members in the face of [Lenten religious sermons]. On more than one occasion I had to practically force our comrades to hold [street] meetings’.³⁰ The climate extended to labour too—the Labour Party submitted its constitution to vetting by the hierarchy in 1938, and duly removed references found contrary to Catholic teaching—and would intensify during the height of the cold war, when any expression of socialism or leftwing internationalism was taboo.³¹ Given the weakness of the left, it beggars belief that the rationale was political. Arguably, it was not theological. Plausibly, it was a means of establishing loyalty to clerical authority.

Attitudes relaxed in the 1960s. And whereas the liberalism of that decade was often justified with references to the reforming pontificate of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, the 1970s saw the growth of secularism, and the emergence of demands for reform of legislation on sexuality, public morality, and control of education: a socio-political force which the media labelled ‘the liberal agenda’. The Catholic hierarchy won some tactical battles against ‘the liberal agenda’ in the 1970s, but by the mid 1980s it was patently losing the war. By the 1990s, secular liberalism was the new hegemony. The Spanish Civil War served as a reminder of how things were, and how much had changed. The Connolly Column became re-imagined as a prophetic forerunner of modern, pluralist Ireland. Just as the clergy had exploited fear of communism to demonstrate its imperium, so the left now used anti-communism to flaunt its new-found freedom, and exorcise the ghosts of its submission to clericalism. As O’Riordan observed on his invitation to address the Labour Party in 2001, it ‘revers[ed] the role of that Party during the War itself’.³²

The first Irish memorial of the Spanish Civil War was erected in 1984. Others were unveiled in 1989, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1997 and each year from

2003. The first two were in a well-worn tradition of republican remembrance, and dedicated to two republicans. Subsequent projects were led mainly by radicals of various persuasions and trade unionists, who had the advantage of access to organization and finance. The commemorations reflected the generational gap between the 'authenticist' mentality of the Irish left in 1936 and the 'modernist' mentality of its successors. With a rooted mindset acquired from republicanism, the 'authenticists' understood Spain through the prism of Irish history. Spain was an extension of Ireland, a second front. For the 'modernists', on the other hand, Spain was (and is) an escape from the shackles of Irish history, and internationalism is a huge part of the attraction of the Connolly Column. Typically, the speeches at commemorations have focused on Catholic reaction at home, anti-fascism, and international solidarity, and represented the war as a conflict of good and evil, which drew, almost magnetically, the best men to fight the good fight. Republicanism is treated as coincidental to the background of volunteers, rather than the fundament of their politics; Spain is the focus. Belfast offers its own peculiar example of selective, 'present centred' commemoration. No less than four memorials appeared in the city in 2006 and 2007, commissioned by the Workers' Party, Sinn Féin, the Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre, and the IBCC. That Belfast volunteers were Catholic and Protestant makes them rather precious in a divided city, and as cross-community projects, the trades council sponsored Unemployed Resource Centre and the IBCC emphasise the diversity of their backgrounds more than anything else. The inscription on the splendid IBCC memorial in the centre of Belfast's arts quarter uses the mincing language of Northern Ireland's peace and reconciliation industry: 'Dedicated to the people of Belfast, the island of Ireland and beyond who joined the XV International Brigade to fight Fascism in the Spanish Civil War 1936–39, and to those men and women from all traditions who supported the Spanish working people and their Republic'.³³

What would the Connolly Column make of it all? Daiken's introduction to *Good-Bye Twilight* actually addressed the dichotomy of 'modernists' and 'authenticists'. Attributing 'almost every anomaly in recent Irish social events...to the betrayal of the national aspirations by the Treaty of 1921 [his emphasis]', he delineated two main tendencies in Irish poetry: 'modernist' and 'traditionalist'. 'Modernism' was flight: 'traditionalism' was fight. 'Modernists' had tried to escape from Irish reality; their bourgeois aesthetic, cosmopolitanism, and 'fashionable anti-clericalism' amounted to a self-indulgent excuse for politics. However, according to Daiken, the sharpening economic crises were pushing the middle-classes to the left and bringing the

‘modernists’ into the organic struggle never abandoned by the mainly republican ‘traditionalists’.³⁴ Unfortunately, public opinion on the Spanish Civil War turned turtle too late for veterans to speak as they would have spoken in the 1930s. O’Donnell’s edited memoir in 1974 featured a chapter on Spain without generating much interest in the subject.³⁵ When O’Riordan’s *Connolly Column* appeared in 1979, it was printed in the German Democratic Republic for want of an amenable printer in Ireland. The fiftieth anniversary of Franco’s revolt marked a turning point. Harry Owens, of the Post Office Workers’ Union, was overwhelmed by the response to an evening of history, politics, and music which he organized in Dublin.³⁶ A stream of publications began to flow, including biographies, souvenirs, local and general histories, poems, plays, and songs—Christy Moore’s ‘Viva la Quince Brigada’ is near universally known. However, there were only five autobiographical memoirs, those by: Joe Monks (1985), Eoghan Ó Duinnín (1986), Peter O’Connor (1996), and Bob Doyle (2002 and 2006).³⁷ To the five recollections can be added oral history interviews with Frank Edwards (1980) and O’Riordan (1990), and O’Riordan’s *Connolly Column* itself, which, if informative and factual, is a eulogistic CPI version of events.³⁸

These six veterans and their memoirs have a number of characteristics in common. All went into print as a contribution to radicalism, most at the prompting of younger admirers with a romantic view of Spain, which explains why the authors, apart from Ó Duinnín, were communist stalwarts to the last. Possibly because he left the party for activism ‘in an individual kind of way’, or possibly because he wrote in Irish, his second language, which provided a sense of distance from the text and concealment from all but the few who read it fluently, Ó Duinnín offered the most candid account, peppered with amusing anecdotes showing comrades to be more human than the stainless heroes of legend.³⁹ Monks excelled in describing front line service, with a taut, gripping narrative. All the autobiographers leave the reader wishing they had written more, or have been challenged by what we know of the CPI since the opening of the Moscow archives. The memoirs said little on life within the party, on their authors’ understanding of communism, or on the Comintern and communist politics internationally. Glossing over the fractiousness of the Irish left in the 1930s, and the sharp shifts in Comintern policy, they represented the authors in relatively bland terms as idealistic radicals, and victims of Catholic intolerance. On Spain, they dealt with military life more than politics and depicted the war as simply a struggle of democracy against fascism. All were republicans, and their ‘authenticism’ is evident to the trained eye, but it is also overlain with the ‘modernism’ of the post 1970s. Veterans who spoke at public meetings on

the International Brigades from the 1980s said little on republicanism, and presented themselves as anti-fascists more than communists, ever ready to support contemporary causes, but vindicated by the restoration of liberal democracy in Spain.

Conclusion

On the eve of Ireland's accession to the European Union (EU), Lyons wrote of ex-Blueshirts and ex-IRA men reprising the Irish Civil War in 'the will-o'-the-wisp of the Spanish Civil War...that had nothing to do with any of them'.⁴⁰ Recent researchers have been more impressed with how European Irish mentalities were in 1936, and how tens of thousands identified with the Catholic church, or with anti-fascism, in Spain.⁴¹ At the same time, the Connolly Column didn't spring out of nothing. It was the product of the CPI and the Republican Congress, and the last hurrah of a socialist republicanism that can be traced to the foundation of the ITGWU by Larkin in 1909. When Labour abandoned republicanism in 1922, the communists stepped in, and the Comintern was remarkably successful in persuading a section of the IRA to adopt its *Weltanschauung*; but from the separatist tradition the 'communist republicans' acquired a rooted approach to the world. They saw the war in Spain not simply as a clash of global ideologies, but as a struggle of people like themselves—small holders, farm labourers, and workers—against very familiar enemies: bishops, the army, and big landowners. Spain was the swansong of a politics throttled by clerical intolerance at home, and equally, an effort to sustain that politics in Ireland.

This 'authenticist' mentality has been lost sight of in the commemoration of the Connolly Column. The image of pre EU Ireland—a station on the highway between Europe and America, speaking the most global of languages, practicing the most catholic of religions, with a large and far flung diaspora touching almost each of its families—as introspective and isolated endures in public perceptions. And the Connolly Column, one of the great examples of Irish extroversion, has become subsumed into the myth. Not even the rehabilitation of Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (VALB) in the United States compares with the re-discovery and lionization of the Connolly Column. Like VALB, which has been invoked by those such as President Ronald Reagan, the Column's history has been appropriated by some implausible friends.⁴² In the process, its 'communist republicanism' has been sloughed off. Its published veterans did not deny their political pedigree, but their memorialists have other values and other agendas.

Notes

1. Russian State Archive for Social and Political History (Rossiiskii Gosudartsvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istории, RGASPI), Moscow, Memorandum on Ireland, 22 May 1937, 495/89/102–5/9.
2. J.J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989).
3. There are two general histories of Irish communism, Mike Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland: The Pursuit of the Workers' Republic since 1916* (Dublin, 1984); and Emmet O'Connor, *Reds and the Green: Ireland, Russia, and the Communist Internationals, 1919–43* (Dublin, 2004). Except where stated, references to Irish communism are based on Reds and the Green.
4. See the British Parliamentary Paper, *Intercourse Between Bolshevism and Sinn Féin*, Cmd.1326 (1921). Another example of British propaganda is Richard Dawson, *Red Terror and Green* (London, 1920).
5. See especially T.A. Jackson, *Ireland Her Own* (London, 1947), the first Marxist general history of Ireland, and C. Desmond Greaves, *The Life and Times of James Connolly* (London, 1961), and *Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution* (London, 1971).
6. The term was not coined until the 1970s, when it was suggested to Michael O'Riordan as a title for his eponymous history, but it has a true pedigree. The first Irish volunteers, serving in the 16th battalion, XV International Brigade, called themselves the 'Irish column', and later the 'Connolly unit'. In January 1937 a James Connolly centuria was formed in the Abraham Lincoln battalion and survived until smashed in the battle of Brunete. Michael O'Riordan, *Connolly Column: The Story of the Irishmen Who Fought in the Ranks of the International Brigades in the National-Revolutionary War of the Spanish People, 1936–1939* (Pontypool, 2005), pp.2–3 (first edn, Dublin, 1979).
7. John M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution, 1921–1936: Treaty Politics and Settlement* (Dublin, 2001), p.283.
8. Patrick F. Sheeran, *The Informer* (Cork, 2002), pp.1–12. O'Flaherty did say that the book was based on events in 'some town in Saxony', but he also claimed to be living in fear of his life in consequence of the novel. It would be quite out of keeping with his other work if O'Flaherty had not set *The Informer* in Ireland and based it on personal experience.
9. Betty Sinclair, 'A woman's fight for socialism, 1910–80', *Saothar*, 9 (1983), pp.121–32; Joe Deasy, 'The evolution of an Irish Marxist, 1941–50', *Saothar*, 13 (1988), pp.112–19; Andy Barr, 'An undiminished dream: Andy Barr, communist trade unionist', *Saothar*, 16 (1991), pp.95–111. The oral history of Sinclair is based on two lengthy taped interviews, one of which is with the CPI and the other is in the archive of the Irish Labour History Society, Dublin.
10. *Century of Endeavour* is also available in hypertext, with footnotes hotlinked to primary material, making it interactive for those wishing to engage with the author.
11. The appeal of Ernie O'Malley's memoirs, *On Another Man's Wound* (Dublin, 1936), and *The Singing Flame* (Dublin, 1978), lies partly in their exceptionality in

- this regard.
12. William O'Brien, *Forth the Banners Go: Reminiscences of William O'Brien as Told to Edward MacLysaght, D.Litt* (Dublin, 1969).
 13. Frank Ryan, quoted in Steve Nugent, *No Coward Soul: Jack Nalty (1902–1938)* (Toronto, 2003), pp.40–1.
 14. Two academic studies exist: Robert A. Stradling, *The Irish in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939: Crusades in Conflict* (Manchester, 1999); and Fearghal McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cork, 1999).
 15. McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, pp.182–90.
 16. Leslie H. Daiken (ed.), *Good-Bye, Twilight: Songs of Struggle in Ireland* (London, 1936), xviii.
 17. Stradling, *The Irish and the Spanish Civil War*, p.132.
 18. McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, p.58 estimates that half of recruits to the Connolly Column in Ireland had been in the post Civil War IRA.
 19. Communists accounted for approximately 60 per cent of French, 62 per cent of British, and 70 per cent of United States volunteers. Richard Baxell, *British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War: The British Battalion in the International Brigades, 1936–1939* (London, 2004), pp.15, 23; Andy Durgan, 'Freedom Fighters or Comintern army? The International Brigades in Spain', *International Socialism*, 84 (autumn, 1999).
 20. Michael McInerney, *Peadar O'Donnell, Irish Social Rebel* (Dublin, 1974), p.179; McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, p.58; O'Connor, *Reds and the Green*, p.281; Uinseann McEoin, *The IRA in the Twilight Years, 1923–1948* (Dublin, 1997), p.769.
 21. Frank Ryan (ed.), *The Book of the XV Brigade: Records of British, American, Canadian, and Irish Volunteers in the XV International Brigade in Spain, 1936–1938* (Pontypool, 2003), p.91 (first edn, Madrid, 1938); O'Riordan, Connolly Column, pp.2–3, 77–8, 124.
 22. Comparison between Ireland and Spain was particularly marked in the *Irish Democrat*. See also the 'manifesto' of 13 International Brigaders then resident in Ireland in the *Irish Democrat*, 23 October 1937.
 23. Bob Doyle, *Brigadista: An Irishman's Fight Against Fascism* (Dublin, 2006), p.143.
 24. Daiken, *Good-Bye Twilight*, pp.78–9. Mellows, a prominent republican, was executed by the Free State on 8 December 1922; Lombard Murphy was the owner of the *Irish Independent*. For another example, see the poem by Mick McGinley, *Irish Democrat*, 10 April 1937.
 25. Peadar O'Donnell, *Salud!: An Irishman in Spain* (London, 1937), pp.8–9.
 26. O'Connor, *Reds and the Green*, pp.222–3.
 27. See, for example, the attack on the IRA by Victor Halley, SPNI, *Irish Democrat*, 12 June 1937.
 28. RGASPI, Proposals in connection with the CPI, 8 May 1937, 495/89/102–1/4.
 29. From Christy Moore's ballad of that name.
 30. RGASPI, Pat Devine to Dick [?], 10 May 1935, 495/1434–7/11.
 31. Niamh Puirseil, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922–73* (Dublin, 2007), p.71.

32. O’Riordan, *Connolly Column* (2005 edn), p.4.
33. The memorials (with date of erection and dedication) are located in Achill Island (1984 to Tommy Patten); Kilgarvan, County Kerry (1989 to Michael Lehané); Liberty Hall, Dublin (1991 to the Connolly Column); Unite (formerly the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers’ Union) hall, Waterford (1994 to the 11 local International Brigaders); Unite hall Dublin (1996 to the International Brigades); Unite hall Clonmel (1997, to Amalgamated Transport and General Workers’ Union solidarity with Spain, 1936–9); Coalisland, County Tyrone (2003 to Charlie Donnelly); The Mall, Waterford (2004 to the 11 local International Brigaders); Burncourt, County Tipperary (2005 to Kit Conway); the John Hewitt bar (administered by the Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre), Belfast (2006 to the International Brigades); Milltown cemetery, Belfast (2006 to ‘Irish republicans who fought against fascism’ in Spain); Leeson Street, Belfast (2006 to Paddy McAllister); Writers’ Square, Belfast (2007, as above); Inistiogue, County Kilkenny (2007 to the four Kilkenny International Brigaders). See Colin Williams, Bill Alexander, and John Gorman, *Memorials of the Spanish Civil War* (Stroud, 1996), pp.52–7; www.geocities.com/IrelandSCW/.
34. Daiken, *Good-Bye Twilight*, xi–xviii.
35. McInerney, *Peadar O’Donnell*, is based ‘almost entirely’ on interviews with O’Donnell. The chapter on Spain is fairly outline, dealing with the politics of the period.
36. Bob Doyle, *Brigadista*, pp.140–7.
37. For the extensive range of publications, varying from detailed scholarly studies to short appreciations, see www.geocities.com/IrelandSCW/. The plays include Jim Nolan, ‘The Guernica Hotel’ (1994), and Martin Lynch, ‘Pictures of Tomorrow’ (1994). Joe Monks, *With the Reds in Andalusia* (London, 1985); Eoghan Ó Duínín, *La Nina Bonita agus an Róisín Dubh: Cuimhní Cinn ar Chogadh Cathartha na Spáinne* [Nina Bonita and Róisín Dubh: Recollections of the Spanish Civil War] (Dublin, 1986); Peter O’Connor, *A Soldier of Liberty: Recollections of a Socialist and Anti-Fascist Fighter* (Dublin, 1996); and Bob Doyle, *Memorias de un Rebelde sin Pausa* (Madrid, 2002), and *Brigadista*.
38. ‘Frank Edwards’ in Uinseann MacEoin, *Survivors* (Dublin, 1987, first edn 1980), pp.1–20; and ‘Michael O’Riordan of Cork City and the International Brigade’, MacEoin, *The IRA in the Twilight Years, 1923–1948*, pp.751–66. O’Riordan has also been interviewed in newspapers and written for CPI journals on Spain.
39. The quote is from McInerney, *Peadar O’Donnell*, p.181.
40. F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine* (London, 1971), p.533.
41. McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, p.234.
42. Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford, 1994), pp.359–80.

