

Legendary figure from Tipperary

His advice to youth

THE death of Dan Breen brings to an end an epoch in the history of the Irish fight for freedom. He will probably be remembered more than many, because he was one of the men whose blow against the British was simultaneous with the meeting of the first Dail to which the Irish Republican Army owed allegiance.

Dan Breen was born near Soloheadbeg in Tipperary in 1894. He went to the nearby National School of Donohill and left it, as he has recorded himself when he was 14.

Organiser

Even before 1919 he had been active in organising the volunteers of South Tipperary and the decisive step in 1919 was the result of long and deliberate thought.

On January 21, 1919, the day the Dail met in the Mansion House, Dublin to formally and democratically sanction and establish the Irish Republic, he, with Seamus Robinson, Sean Hogan, Paddy McCormack, Sean Treacy, Paddy Dwyer and Tim Crowe attacked and killed two R.I.C. men escorting a load of gelignite at Soloheadbeg.

There are three survivors of this ambush that opened the War of Independence — Mr. Crowe, Mr. McCormack and Mr. Dwyer.

A couple of the police were killed on that occasion and Breen and his comrades in arms were described on posters and in the hue and cry that followed as murderers.

The British propagandist machine worked wonders in pictures and the photographs published of Breen after Soloheadbeg made him look like the prince of murderers.

Hunted men

Dan Breen was, in fact, an ordinary boy from Tipperary who grew up on the legends of Irish freedom and was determined to fight for it. He was coming to manhood at the period when the generous youth of Ireland had seen through the sham of the Redmondite agitation.

After January 1919, Breen and his comrades were hunted men on the hills of Ireland and despite every form of British and unfortunately some Irish vilification, there were kindly folk to give them shelter at a time when it was not fashionable to give shelter to wanted men.

Then one of the four—Sean Hogan—was captured and the rest decided on rescue. It was difficult and the name of Knocklong went into Irish history on May 13, 1919, when Hogan was taken from his captors at pistol point in an epic fight in which there were mortal casualties among the R.I.C. again.

Surprised

Dan Breen himself took the foremost part in the fight and received bullet wounds which he carried with him to the day he died.

Later he came to Dublin to assist in Michael Collins' abortive attempt to assassinate Lord

French, who was chief British Governor in Ireland. He saw Martin Savage die at Ashtown that day. Afterwards he returned to Tipperary to fight at home. Many an R.I.C. barracks fell to the determined assaults of Breen and his comrades in Tipperary.

One of his last fights with the British in Dublin took place in October 1920 at Fernside, Drumcondra, the home of Professor Carolan. That night Treacy and Breen were sheltering there, but were surprised in the early hours by Black and Tans and military who were guided to the house by spies.

Breen fought his way out, badly wounded, and managed through the aid of friends in Dublin to get to the Mater Hospital. Treacy was killed a few days later in Talbot Street.

When the Civil War was looming, Dan Breen made many efforts to come to terms with his old comrades who had taken the Free State side. He intervened successfully to prevent hostilities between the opposite groups in Limerick in July 1922.

Elected

Later he was arrested and interned. In 1923 he was elected a Republican deputy in Tipperary. He was the first anti-Treaty deputy to take his seat in the Dail in 1927. He had gone in to test the Free State contention about the oath of allegiance.

In 1927 he went to America and returned only in 1932 to head the poll for Mr. de Valera's Fianna Fail party in his native Tipperary.

Dan Breen's was the heroic and indomitable spirit that took no heed of odds or risks. He said: "We showed the British that there were men—and they did not know how many—who were willing to fight to the last gasp before they would surrender to the tyranny of being brought to Dublin Castle and tortured and murdered.

"I say to the youth of today—be patient and study Davis—'It is not the sword and 'tis not the steel alone can make the tyrant yield, but wisdom working day by day alone can make the tyrant sway.'

Special place

"I don't believe we can recover our Six Counties by force of arms. I say—concentrate on what you have down here in the Twenty-Six Counties and make it an example to Europe and the world."

Even in 1955 when the Coalition Government was in power and Dan Breen complained about discourtesy at Dublin Airport, the then responsible Minister in the Dail, Mr. Norton, said: "Every party in the Dail would agree that Deputy Breen occupied a special place in the affection and esteem of everyone. In his own sufferings he has epitomised the struggle of a Nation for its freedom."

In 1959, he was presented with his portrait by his old I.R.A. Comrades, to mark the 40th anniversary of the events of January 21, 1919, when he, Sean Treacy and their comrades, fired the first shots of the Anglo-Irish War at Soloheadbeg.

In 1924, Mr. Breen's book, "My fight for Irish Freedom" was published. It was re-issued in paperback editions in later years.

In an interview recently, Mr. Breen gave his views on contemporaries and on present-day happenings.

The events in the Six Counties since 1968 shocked him and the man whom the British once described as of "sulky bulldog appearance" and put a £10,000 price on his head said: "It is horrible to have religious bigotry. I was in the North in 1921 or 1922 and saw pogroms. I saw houses burned and people stoned to death. Both sides lose their heads. There is no use in saying the Protestants are bad. The Catholics are just as bad and it is all done in the name of Christianity. If Christ came back He would wonder what they are at".

The language

He deplored certain features of life today in Ireland. "Materialism has grasped the heart of the people. They seem to want to do the least work for the most money. It is no longer an economic necessity to emigrate, yet they do. What they do not realise is that they will have to work much harder abroad. An hour's work in Canada is worth nine hours work here. They could be happy here and if they worked they could earn as much money."

Dan Breen, the man who said he lived all his life a Fenian, and would die a Fenian, was also a firm believer of the necessity to restore the Irish language—"I think we are lost as a nation if we lose the Irish language."

He was part of Irish history, and as such he will live forever as a great soldier, a great man and a great representative of our people.

Mr. Breen's son is a doctor in Birmingham and his daughter lives in Sydney, Australia.

The President, Mr. de Valera, visited the late Mr. Breen several times in the Bray convalescent home—the last occasion being on November 13. ©Irish Newspaper Archives

BREEN — Dec. 27, 1969, at St. Joseph's Home, Kilcroe, Bray, Co. Wicklow, after a long illness, Daniel, husband of Brigid; deeply regretted by his wife, son, daughter, relatives and friends. R.I.P. Remains will leave St. Mary's Church, Enniskerry, this (Monday) morning after 10 o'clock. Requiem Mass for Donohill Church, Co. Tipperary, arriving 4.15 o'clock approx. Requiem Mass to-morrow (Tuesday) in Donohill Church at 11 o'clock. Funeral immediately afterwards