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# *Dan Breen looks back 50 years from 1967*

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By Jim Maher

I went to see Dan Breen a few times during the sunny August days of 1967 in the St. John of God Nursing Home, Kilcrouney, Co. Wicklow. On these visits he spoke to me about his early life and his War of Independence days. He told me that his militant nationalism came from his mother. (He did not remember his father, because he died when Dan was about four years of age.) She taught him to love his country and to think about Irish freedom. She used to buy many paperback books about Tone, Emmet and the other Irish patriots that sold for a few pennies then.

"We were not too well off in those days", Dan remarked, "and our neighbours were only barely above the poverty line too. We mostly ate potatoes and milk. Sometimes we had salted pork for our dinner, but we hardly ever ate fresh meat. We also ate much cabbage and turnips".

I asked what were the outside political influences that shaped his attitude to life. "In the first place there was the Fenian tradition that survived in South Tipperary. You see, Ballyhurst where they met in '67 was not far from Donohill, and the old people used to talk about it. Secondly, the landlords and the big landowners; the power they had made me wish I was a rebel".

"They had the power of life and death, you know . . . I remember an eviction that took place not far from us. A relation of mine, Michael Dwyer Bán, was put out of his farm and died on the roadside. I never forgot that".

He remarked that he could remember back as far as the year 1900 and that the Irish people were serfs then. Things improved after that, but the ordinary people of Ireland were only getting the crumbs from the British table. "Remember that 'New Tipperary' was only over . . . when I was a young fellow. 'New Tipperary' came about because of all the evictions when they decided not to pay the annual rent . . . But with the coming of the Land Act of 1903 the people were beginning to forget nationalism and Ireland".

I wonder what impact the 1916 Rising had on Dan and his friends in Tipperary. Dan said that they were very shattered over what happened in Tipperary in 1916. When they were young and learning Irish history they looked back to 1798 and wondered why the country did not rise then. "Only Wexford, parts of the north and a small part of the west came out to fight. The other counties just looked on".

"We thought that when it would come to our day we would make sure to be part of it, but we messed it up – wrong orders and not knowing what to do kept us from taking part. We regretted that . . . We made up our minds then that when anything like that would happen again we would be part of it, no matter what".

Were the Irish Volunteers strong in Tipperary town just after 1916? Dan sat back and thought as if he was seeing images of young men from the past. Then he said that fellows like Dinny Lacey were in the Volunteers in Tipperary town. He remembered a non-native of Tipperary, a man named Sean Duffy from Louth, who worked in O'Neill's, 'The Irish House', at the time.

"It was owned by O'Neill – I think he was John O'Neill, a decent old fellow. It was burned down afterwards by the Black and Tans. He spoke to me often in Tipperary advising me about what I should do. 'No, Mr. Breen', he'd say, 'I knew John O'Leary; I knew Kickham; I knew



many of the Fenians. They were all good Fenians in their time and they all died poor men'. O'Neill employed many young Volunteers in his business at the time".

## On Soloheadbeg

I had a difficult question to put to Dan, and I pondered on it for a moment. "Dan", I said, "on 21st January, 1919, you carried out an ambush at Soloheadbeg on a party delivering explosives to Sohohead quarry. There were two armed policemen in the party, members of the R.I.C. from Tipperary town. They were shot dead in Soloheadbeg. It is often asked if they got any chance of firing their loaded carbines before your party opened fire on them at close quarters".

I noticed Dan's jaw tightening. "No, they did not fire anyway", he said; "people have often asked me did they fire. It often comes up. No. They did not get a chance to fire. I see you have a copy of my book *My Fight for Irish Freedom* in front of you there. Well, read out what I wrote about it. Read it out now".

I looked down at the page open in front of me.

"Hands up!" The cry came from our men as with one voice. "Hands up!" But no! They seize their rifles, and with the best military movement bring them to the ready. They were Irishmen too, and would die rather than surrender. Again and again we called upon them to put up their hands. We would have preferred that they should surrender without bloodshed; but they were dogged and stubborn, and now 'twas our lives or theirs. Their fingers were on the triggers. Another appeal on our side would be useless – perhaps too late for ourselves. Quick and sure our volleys rang out. The aim was true. The two policeman were dead.

I put another question to him. "But you did not get any authority from G.H.Q. of the Volunteers or from anywhere else for that action. Am I right?"

"Look", answered Dan, "if we waited for orders from Dublin or from G.H.Q. to do an ambush, there would never be a fight. If you wanted to organise an ambush when you were fighting a guerrilla war like we were, you just couldn't be waiting for orders to come from as far away as a hundred miles to get permission to do it".

Now, on one of his favourite topics, Dan continued.

"Most of the fighting in guerrilla warfare is accidental – surprise. You might surprise them here and there . . . but you can't say beforehand will you meet them for certain, because most times when you go out to meet them, they're not there. They're using their heads as well as you are.

"Then they could come in such great strength that you could not attack them. Every little town and village was garrisoned by both police and soldiers. The most you could fight for was half-an-hour or three-quarters of an hour at the longest. You had to be swift. You could not attack at long range – you had to attack at very close range because you had to get away.

"We could not afford heavy casualties. We were limited in ammunition, because we had to get our ammunition from the other side by taking their ammunition when they were dead. Hit hard; run and pick up all you could, but avoid casualties to your own side. We could not afford to lose too many people. The population of Ireland was too small for that. If we lost one hundred men in a battle our people would break; their spirit would break. The Irish people built up a great spirit in 1920 and 1921.

"In my young days before the First World War the British Army paraded the roads with bands and banners flying, and bayonets fixed and flashing, to show their strength. If you mentioned to anyone that you were going to fight this army of 50,000 men, well-armed, well trained, he would say that you were mad and should be locked up.



“It was only by guerrilla tactics that we could break them down. But we could never fight a pitched battle with the British forces. All we could do was to make government impossible for them and drive them in from outposts into the towns. Then they would have to come out to us in the country and we could ambush them”.

## On Physical Force

It has often been a contentious issue whether physical force methods as opposed to constitutional methods were necessary in the 1918-1921 period to get what freedom we have in this part of Ireland today. I asked Dan whether he thought constitutional methods might have achieved as much as the policy of physical force that he adopted. He rubbed his chin with his hand for a second or two and then began to answer in a slow and deliberate low tone, as if he were weighing up his words as he went along.

“All the tradition that I knew came from Tone, Jemmy Hope and the Russells – from the North, you could say. The only tradition of nationalism that came to me came from them and from their independence. It also came from Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Robert Emmet and John Mitchel. Daniel O’Connell and his type never looked for anything only concessions. The Irish Party followed on, and all they wanted to get were concessions also.

“But Sean MacDiarmada used to say: ‘Damn your concessions, England, we want our country’. I was a great admirer of MacDiarmada. My belief has been – a man comes in and occupies part of my house or takes over my country. I am entitled to use any and every means to get him out, whether I hit him in the back or on the head or fight him openly.

“As long as I get him out that is what matters. The only thing that matters is to win. You only commit treason when you lose, and we were determined not to commit treason. Griffith was never a physical force man. A lot of people who were in Ireland, who were great Irishmen like Griffith, did not believe in physical force; they were peaceful by nature. You wouldn’t ask them to fight.

“You also had great men like poets and scholars – like Yeats and many more. You would not risk them even if they were willing to go out; you could not afford to lose them because they were too important. If Pearse, Seán MacDiarmada and James Connolly had been able to come back again, do you think you would allow them out to get killed?



*Dan Breen's grave (and his widow's) in Donohill cemetery near Tipperary. (Photo: copyright Frank Burgess).*

“There was another man, Michael Collins, you would not like to risk, although he did take risks. The loss of Collins, with his ability in charge of intelligence, was far too great to risk by letting him out into an ambush. You could not replace him, because all his contacts would be lost. And you could not let Eamon de Valera take chances of being killed either; he was far too important in the political sense.

“Fighting was another job altogether. Treacy and myself were pacifists in our young days, but we later trained ourselves to be soldiers. If the country was full of pacifists we would never have got anywhere. The country was lucky to have men like Michael Collins, Tom Barry, Liam Lynch, Sean Moylan, Sean McKeown, Sean O’Hegarty, Terence McSwiney, Sean Treacy and many others. But it was a combination of the lot – the soldiers and the pacifists – that made government in Ireland by the British impossible”.

Next I asked Dan about the quality of life he experienced while ‘on the run’. I got a quick reply.

“I disagree with you there. I was never on the run. I never went too far out of my way to avoid anyone, and I am here today because I always got the best of the fight. But you ask about getting shelter in the houses of the people. Well, I’ll tell you, the women of Ireland never let us down. Their loyalty should never be forgotten. I would give great credit to the women of Ireland for what we have today.

“We made the strike and then moved away; but they had to stand their ground afterwards and put up with any reprisals that the military made them suffer. I often worried over them when we had to get out quickly”.

Next I asked what support was there in Dublin for guerrilla fighters like himself, and did he feel less safe there than at home in Tipperary.

“The Dublin working-class people were very nationalistic and the Dublin tradesmen were the same. The death of James Connolly in 1916 made the working-class people and the tradesmen of Dublin supporters of the Republican cause. They you had great men like Bill O’Brien and Thomas Foran; while they did not show that they were active on the nationalist side, they were big trade unionists and they controlled the I.T.G.W.U. They were on the republican side without showing it.

“They could do things that we couldn’t do because they were trade unionists and they could travel, unlike us, under the guise of trade unionists. They were always willing to risk everything for us. All we had to do was ask them and nothing was any bother to them.

“Croke Park was a great place to stay. It was in Croke Park that all the I.R.B. men met. Most of the heads of the G.A.A. were I.R.B. men. It was generally recognised that Croke Park was a safe meeting-place. Ald. James Nowlan of Kilkenny was president of the G.A.A. around this time and another great friend of ours was Dan Fraher from Dungarvan.

“We walked the streets of Dublin as free as anybody. You see, we had burned our boats long before that. In Dublin we always went fully armed and determined to fight. But we avoided acting foolishly . . . . We never accepted that we were fugitives in Dublin. We didn’t refuse to fight the enemy if we met him. Instead of the enemy looking for us, we were looking for him. But then Sean Treacy was killed in Talbot Street in Dublin while he was mobilising men to rescue me from the Mater Hospital”.

## On Sean Treacy

When Dan mentioned Treacy’s name there was an emotional catch in his voice . . . He stopped talking for a minute or two to gather himself together and then went on to speak about his greatest friend in those days.



“Sean Treacy tried to form himself on the image of Michael O’Dwyer of Wicklow, the rebel who held out in the Wicklow hills after 1798. Treacy loved everything that was Gaelic. He spent much time studying the Irish language when he was young. And he fancied himself as a singer, although he had a voice like a crow. Often he nearly drove me insane listening to him trying to sing *Oro! Sé do Bheatha Abhaile*, but it sounded to me like *A Nation Once Again!*”.

Here Dan gave a hearty laugh.

“People were always telling Sean as he left their houses: ‘be careful this time, Seán’. His reply always was: ‘The other fellows better be more careful’. That meant that he would fight to the end – no matter what the odds. And he did that in Talbot Street the day he was killed. It was Treacy who first advocated setting up flying columns in Co. Tipperary. Shortly before his death he told me that he was thinking of returning to Tipperary to form the first Flying Column in the county. But he never got back to do it”.

When Sean Treacy was killed in Talbot Street on 14 October, 1920, Dan Breen was receiving treatment for his wounds in the Mater Hospital, Dublin.<sup>2</sup> It took many weeks before he was strong enough again to return to Co. Tipperary. He explained:

“In December 1920 Sean Hyde of Cork travelled with me to Munster. Michael Collins sent Eamon Fleming of The Swan, Co. Laois, with us to guide us down. We went through Wicklow and then down to Cork. When the No. 2 Flying Column was being formed, I helped with their initial training. We trained over near Crotty’s Rock in Co. Waterford; there was an old disused house there. We thought that we could feed ourselves on the mountain sheep, but after killing a few of them we found you couldn’t eat them because they were too stringy.

“Sean Hogan was put in charge of the column, but I did much of the training. I remember that the weather was cold at the time. I don’t know how long I stayed with them, but I did not go into any ambushes with them. Co. Tipperary was not the ideal place for a flying column. It is too level. Kerry would suit a column better. If you have a lot of roads in level country it is dangerous for a column.

“South Tipperary is honeycombed with byroads, and the enemy had the cars and the armoured cars and could surround a column in the fields. The British forces cried out because we shot from behind fences and ditches. They fired from behind armour. I would change position with them any day. They had machine-guns and we had only rifles, and second-class rifles at that”.

Dan then praised the national leaders during the War of Independence, particularly Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera.

“I loved Collins. I would have died for Collins, because he was the first of the big men in Dublin to give us support. Collins would stand by you until the last. G.H.Q. in Dublin often did not back us up, but Collins always approved of our actions. But my opinion of Eamon de Valera was equally as high. He raised the Irish question out of the level of national politics and made it an international issue all over the world. He put the question of Irish freedom on a footing that it was never on before, particularly in America. I felt that de Valera gave the whole national movement a great uplift”.

Between 1919 and 1921 some members of the Irish Republican Army were gloomy at the way things were going.

“At times in 1919 Treacy, Robinson, Hogan and I had a tough job forcing the fight. We were near giving up sometimes, but we kept on as a duty to our country. But as 1920 and 1921 progressed activities became more widespread. As the rural garrisons were being driven in [to the towns], the British were only able to hold the towns with strong military forces, and the people were very hostile to them. Even their own friends began to desert them. These people



had sided with the British up to that, but now they were getting nervous because we were beginning to come out on top. The country had risen also. This was unlike 1798, 1848, 1867 or 1916.

“Kilkenny, Waterford and other counties that had not been so active became more active in 1921. The I.R.A. was trying to take the pressure off the counties that were getting it tough. There had been many burnings and reprisals in counties Tipperary, Limerick and Cork, and it was time to lift some of the burden off them. Things were different also in 1921 because we now had the support of G.H.Q. and Dail Eireann because of the de Valera declaration in March 1921 that the I.R.A. was a state force under Dail control”.

A Truce between the British Army and the Irish Republican Army was agreed for 11 July 1921, with the promise of a conference between the British Government and the representatives of Southern and Northern Ireland. Dan Breen was not surprised at this outcome.

“The Truce was caused by world opinion. Opinion in America was swaying from the British, and General Smuts in South Africa was putting pressure on the British Government to make some settlement in Ireland to end hostilities. As well as that, when the King’s Writ does not run in a subject country, then it is time for the conquering country to start thinking because the government is failing to function.

“The military forces, including the Auxiliaries, and the Tans had got out of hand and there was no one in proper control. These forces were doing shocking things to the people, and their acts were giving the British government bad publicity abroad. The British realised by then that there were men and women – and they were not sure how many – who were willing to fight to the death before they would surrender to tyranny”.

A revolution had taken place in Ireland, carried out by men with different visions and coming from varied backgrounds. Dan Breen described to me what type of revolutionary he was:

“I was a Socialist in outlook. I was never a Communist; I never believed in Communism but I was a strong Socialist. I did not see any possibility of a Socialist state, because I knew that the Establishment would step in and crush it. I never understood why any man with a family, denied work, should let himself and his family go hungry. I always felt that it was the duty of a man to provide for his family, and if he couldn’t get enough food by honest means, he should take it.

“I never understood either why a million people were allowed to starve to death in Ireland in the Great Famine in an agricultural country, when Irish wheat and other foodstuffs were allowed out of the country. I wanted to take the people of Ireland out of serfdom. I did not want to enrich them, but I wanted them to have a better way of life. I wanted to take the people out of the slums and bad living conditions and give them decent lives – lives as good as they would get anywhere else in the world”.

I noticed that Dan was tiring. He got a bout of coughing, and we waited to let it abate. But the breathlessness brought on by the coughing remained, and Dan shifted from his armchair to lie on his bed for a rest. When he was comfortable on his bed, I asked if his old wounds still caused him trouble. He pointed to his hand, covered by a brown mitten even on that warm day at the end of August.

“From the first time I was wounded in Knocklong to this day, I have never been free from pain; it is only what degree of pain there is. I went out in fights and I only had one hand and one leg – this hand that I have the mitten on was out of action and this leg – the left leg and the left hand. I went out to Ashtown to ambush Lord French and I had only one hand and one leg and I got hit in the bad leg again. I got away on a bicycle. I have pain as I am talking to you now”.

I got ready to go. Dan was speaking again.

"I feel autumn coming on more every day. My blood circulation has never been good because of the wounds, and I feel the cold more than others. At this time of year I always miss my great comrades that I lost in battle; yet they died bravely. Sometimes now I wish that I had ended just like them. I don't like winter, but I look forward to spring after that, when the buds and the flowers come out. I love listening to the thrushes making a great chorus in spring".

As I stood to go, I told Dan I would be back to see him again in the spring.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The material used in this article came from a series of three interviews conducted with Dan Breen in St. John of God Nursing Home, Kilcrouney, Co. Wicklow during August 1967. The last interview took place on 29 August, 1967.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Dan Breen: *My Fight for Irish Freedom* (Dublin, 1924), pp. 39-40.
2. Desmond Ryan: *Sean Treacy and the Third Tipperary Brigade* (Tralee, 1945), p. 173.

