

Speech at Frank Ryan's birthplace, 22.07.2017

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, a chairdre

I felt very honoured when asked by Deirdre Byrne and her committee in Knockainey to speak a few words outside Frank Ryan's birthplace. My interest in him goes back about 45 years, to student days at Frank's old Alma Mater UCD. Since then we have learned far more about this extraordinary personality from south-east Limerick, through newspapers, essays, books and film. There are few figures in recent Irish history about whom four well-researched biographies have been written. And there are no signs that this interest in Frank Ryan is waning, the number of recently erected memorials to Irishmen in the International Brigades are witness to the fascination the Spanish war still has for Irish audiences.

Although Frank Ryan died at 41 years of age, he packed many lives into one. Born in this house on 11 September 1902, Frank was the seventh of nine children and the youngest of the five boys. Their parents were Irish-speakers and national school teachers in the school up the road. The father, Vere Ryan, born in 1863, was a teetotaler and non-smoker, a strict disciplinarian and a lover of learning. His wife Annie Slattery hailed from farming stock in Kilfenora Co. Clare, while Vere himself, the son of national school teachers, grew up in Sallybank near Croom. Vere was an Irish speaker and he instilled a love for the language in all his children. The house was full of books and Mrs Ryan taught her children to play the piano. When it was Frank's turn she noticed his hearing impediment, which grew worse during his internment in 1922-23. But he learned to live with it.

Three of the Ryan daughters became nuns: Mary and Ann served in Cobh, while Catherine, Frank's favourite, was in a convent in Tralee. She died of TB in 1937. That was also the fate of the second eldest child, John, who died in New York in 1932. The eldest son, Jeremiah, called after his Croom grandfather, became a national school teacher and resided in Lower Mallow St. in Limerick in the 1930s. Of the three remaining brothers, Maurice studied medicine and died in Liverpool in 1945. Vincent was also a doctor, he specialized in the treatment of tuberculosis in Yorkshire. And Frank, the youngest boy, studied Celtic languages at UCD to MA level. All the graduates in the family had won scholarships. Eilis (Lizzie) was the youngest child. She studied Arts in UCD, did some teaching and was working as a librarian when Frank was in Spain. Like many in the family, Frank included, Eilis suffered from a heart ailment.

Frank Ryan was the only one in the family to become a physical force Republican. The parents were Parnellites and none of his brothers were very political. But like Eilis, and their father, they supported Frank in his politics although they did not share his very decided views. The origin of Frank's radical separatism was, on the one hand, the influence of a priest in St. Colman's, Fermoy, where he was a boarder during the War of Independence. On the other, his mother's family in Clare were said to be strongly Republican. Frank's many visits to

the Kerry Gaeltacht, starting when he was still at primary school, were also an influence. And as he was a popular boy locally when home from boarding school, cycling around with his friends, he heard many accounts of the successes and disasters of the local IRA (Knocklong, Lackelly) in the Black and Tan War. It seems he joined the local IRA during the Truce after he had completed his secondary school education. After his first year at UCD on a scholarship from Limerick Co. Council, Frank Ryan would have followed events closely in Dublin, the slow drift to Civil War. From his home he joined an IRA column in August 1922 when the civil war broke out. Wounded and captured by Free State Army soldiers in Tipperary a month later, Frank was interned in the Curragh until November 1923.

As Frank's later career is the theme of our conference later, I think it best to emphasize why and how Frank changed his politics over time. Being an Irish language enthusiast (and a leading member of Conradh na Gaeilge) was unusual in top IRA circles. But what set Frank apart from the average IRA volunteer, I think, was his internationalism. He was present at international anti-imperialist conferences abroad in the 1920s and gained a deeper understanding of British Imperialism, hosting, with others, Indian politicians when they came to Dublin after 1932. Over time Frank Ryan, an extremely courageous individual, changed his street fighting image, stating that violence against the provocative Poppy Day meetings on 11 November was counter-productive. This was partly due to his realization that most Irishmen who joined the British army in 1914-1918 had done so for economic reasons and according to him, if they did want to wear a poppy it was as a gesture to their dead pals. In like manner, Ryan was against street brawling with the Blueshirts.

He had come to realize that the most pressing challenge to Irish republicanism was not to wage another war to win the 32-County Republic but to confront the appalling social conditions North and South. He hoped to unite the rural and urban poor, the small farmers and workers in a broadly-based movement which would put pressure on the new de Valera administration. In a word, he was in the words of Sean Cronin, his first biographer, "searching for the Republic", for a just society with freedom from want and equal opportunity for all. We may ask ourselves today if this search is over. I don't think it is. Not by a long shot.