

From Burncourt to Jarama

Brendan Ó Cathaoir

A plaque was unveiled to Kit Conway in Burncourt, south-west Tipperary, on 11 June 2005. Dedicated to the memory of all from Burncourt who fought in the War of Independence, it records Conway's death at the battle of Jarama in 1937. At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the vast majority of Irish people supported General Franco rather than Spain's democratic government.¹ Some 850 men joined Eoin O'Duffy's Irish Brigade. They were predominantly young men from a farming and Fine Gael background, motivated by the notion that the Spanish conflict was a crusade against communism.

In December 1936, about 100 men were given the fascist salute by sympathisers as they left the North Wall for Liverpool en route to Spain;² 753 volunteers from all parts of Ireland boarded a vessel off the north Clare coast which carried them to the Spanish front, where their adventure ended in O'Duffy's inglorious campaign.



Kit Conway

The Irish Brigade was blighted by infighting between O'Duffy and his officers.

Led by Frank Ryan, 240 Irish volunteers went to defend the Spanish Republic. They tended to be urban, working class and left-wing republicans. The Connolly Column fought bravely in the 15th International Brigade and sixty of its members were killed in action.

Conway was born in the Burncourt area in 1897. An orphan, he was reared in Clogheen Poorhouse and at the age of fourteen went to work for a farmer for two shillings a week.³ Seán Ua Cearnaigh recalled that Conway was a remarkable figure, even in his early years. 'Highly intelligent and articulate, largely self-taught, light-hearted and humorous, he had an enormous capacity for friendship'. Conway joined the British army in 1915. He regretted his decision almost immediately, feigned insanity and was discharged from the army's training camp in Kilworth, north Cork.

Thomas Ryan, commander of the 6th Battalion, 3rd Tipperary Brigade, first heard of Conway as a suspected spy. Ryan interviewed him and learned he had been driven, like many other young Irishmen, by economic pressure to enlist in the British army. Colonel Ryan wrote in the *Tipperary Historical Journal*:⁴

Some time after that I invited Conway to take part in an attack on the RIC barracks at Ballyporeen. He was posted in the most dangerous position during the attack, where we kept him under observation with a view to shooting him at once if he showed any signs of treachery. Instead, to our surprise, he showed himself fearless and determined in the course of the attack, and demonstrated to those of us who watched him how a man should behave under fire . . . Conway was fearless and a natural born fighter.

During the remainder of the Tan war he served in Seán Hogan's Flying Column. Following the Truce, he reverted briefly to his former occupation of farm labourer. After the Treaty he joined the Free State Army. This was another decision he regretted; with the outbreak of the Civil War, he deserted and joined his anti-Treaty comrades. After hostilities ended he became an active member of the Building Workers' Section of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in Dublin. In 1928 he emigrated to New York, but returned four years later with the defeat of the Cumann na nGaedheal government. When the IRA split (again) in 1934, 'Kit, remembering the plight of the Tipperary farm workers and observing the privations of Dublin's poor', joined the Republican Congress led by Peadar O'Donnell and Frank Ryan.⁵ Although a socialist, Conway was essentially a man of action in a militaristic age. Three years later he died fighting among olive groves of Jarama, far from where Burncourt nestles in the green plain between the Galtees and the Knockmealdowns.

Last year's ceremony in Burncourt was attended by the two surviving Irish brigadistas: Michael O'Riordan and Dubliner Bob Doyle, who travelled from London.⁶ Doyle, who had followed Conway into the republican movement and later to Spain, recalled Kit Conway:



Conway Memorial. Photograph by Séamus Murphy

I found lodgings...and learned that Kit was a well known IRA activist who was regarded as a legend in his native Tipperary, he had fought against the Black and Tans and later against the Treaty. In one action, a bullet went through his mouth and left him with a slight lisp. Kit Conway was a model instructor and a strict upholder of military discipline. He recruited me to the 1st Dublin Battalion of the IRA. We used to train in the fields of the Dublin suburb of Cabra West...an expert in handling a machine gun, he was able to disassemble any one of them with his eyes closed.

He added that the training he had received from Conway 'afterwards proved very useful in Spain'.

Michael O'Riordan said:

At Jarama, the greatest loss of all was sustained in the death of Captain Kit Conway. More than sixteen years before, he had earned a reputation as a tough guerrilla commander both against the British and the pro-Treaty forces. He went on to become an active member of the Building Workers' section of the ITGWU, as well as an indomitable opponent of fascism. On the day of his departure for Spain, he mounted an oil barrel on the building site where he was employed and addressing his fellow workers, he explained what was happening in Spain, telling them, 'sooner than Franco should win there, I would leave my body in Spain to manure the fields'.

Michael O'Riordan died on 18 May, 2006. He thought the rank-and-file Blueshirts who fought for Franco were simply misled: 'I never regarded them as fascists.'

References

¹Fearghal McGarry, 'Ireland and the Spanish Civil War' in *History Ireland* (Autumn 2001), pp. 35-40.

²*Clare Champion*, December 1936.

³Seán Ua Cearnaigh, *Irish Democrat*, February 1987.

⁴Thomas Ryan, *Tipperary Historical Journal* (1991), p. 26.

⁵Ua Cearnaigh, *Irish Democrat*.

⁶*Irish Times*, 13 June 2005; O'Riordan, *Connolly Column – The Story of the Irishmen who fought for the Spanish Republic*; Doyle, *Memoirs of a Rebel without a Pause*.