

A Forgotten Patriot...

Seamus Burke TD

By George Cunningham

One of the most colourful and talented figures of the War of the Independence and the emerging Irish Free State, once called the 'most hunted man in Ireland' by the *Irish Independent* is today virtually unknown, even in his native county of Tipperary.¹ Both locally and nationally Burke was a leading figure in the political and cultural life of Ireland from 1918, through the 20s into the 1930s. His popularity at local level may be assessed by his first preference vote in the first Dáil elections: he headed the poll on four occasions and polled consistently well until the mid 1930s when his vote started to spiral downwards.

This complex and revolutionary figure was born at Rathnaveoge, Roscrea on 14 June 1893. His parents emigrated to America, prospered there, returned to Ireland in 1908 and bought Rockforest House, Knock, Roscrea, Co Tipperary.² So Seamus had an American and Irish education in both countries from the Jesuits. He became involved with the original Irish Volunteers in 1913 and in 1915 qualified as a barrister in TCD but never practiced.

Burke's Sinn Féin nomination for a mid-Tipperary seat in the 1918 General Election was fortuitously obtained over a favoured republican candidate, Seán Ó Neill.³ He was



Rockforest House was burned by anti-treaty forces in March 1923.

returned unopposed, his cause probably highlighted and helped by constant shadowing and attention from the RIC. He was re-elected at all subsequent elections – topping the poll on many occasions – first for Cumann na nGaedhal (in which he was a founder member) and then for Fine Gael until he lost his seat in 1938, after which he stood unsuccessfully as an Independent in the 1943 elections where his first preference votes dropped to 3,300.⁴

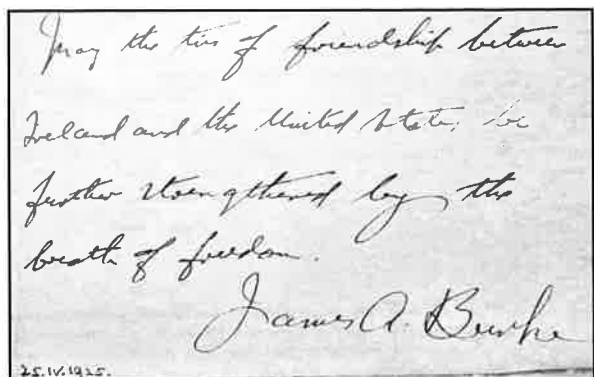
His American connections made him a key figure in fundraising in the USA, at first for Sinn Féin and then for the fledgling Free State throughout the 1920s. Burke's sister Leonora who owned property in New York and made frequent visits there also assisted the republican cause. In one noteworthy venture she carried across the Atlantic a manuscript about Chief Secretary Arthur Balfour devious behavior for publication by Cumann na nGaedhal in the USA.⁵

Burke's first book, *The Foundations of Peace* (D. 1920) reveals an idealist, much of the content researched in the Dublin public libraries where he 'hid' in open view while on the run. Much of it was written in the home of James Dooley, Neilstown, Roscrea, a safe IRA house.⁶ His pro-Treaty stance (the only Tipperary TD to vote for the Treaty) led to the burning of his estate house at Rockforest in March 1923 (the burning could also have been as a reprisal for the execution of four anti-Treatyites in Roscrea earlier in January). During the Treaty debate he argued, somewhat Jesuistically as has been pointed out, about his intention to vote yes, 'The Treaty is not sufficiently bad to prevent me voting for it and it is not sufficiently good to prevent me voting against it if I saw any rational alternative.'⁷

In the 3rd Dáil, (1922-1923) 'The Pact Election', the first under the PR system, his pro-Treaty stance saw him top the poll with 9,309 first preferences. This was an election he described as 'dominated by trench coats, leggings and revolvers' (he was also to say the same about the 1933 election).⁸

He headed the poll again for the 4th Dáil, 1923-1927, Elected on the first count with 12,257 votes, some 3,200 ahead of his nearest rival, Dan Breen. He became the first Minister for Local Government with added responsibility for public health from 1923 until he had to vacate the Cabinet to make way for Kevin O'Higgins in 1927. During that time he abolished the workhouse system and made radical changes to local government structures.

The short 5th Dáil (June-August, 1927) saw the rise of Dan Morrissey



This signed card survives from one of Burke's visits to the USA; it appeared in an USA manuscript catalogue in 2018 for \$350. It reads: 'May the ties of friendship between Ireland and the United States be further strengthened by the breadth of freedom.' (April 1925).

with Burke's vote dropping to 8,043 votes, a decline attributed to the rise of Fianna Fáil and the subsequent decline of Cumann na nGaedhal. However, a huge sympathy vote following the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins saw him top the poll for the 6th Dáil. From 1927 until 1932, as parliamentary secretary to the Minister for Finance with special responsibility for the Office of Public Works, he steered the original National Monuments bill through the Oireachtas.

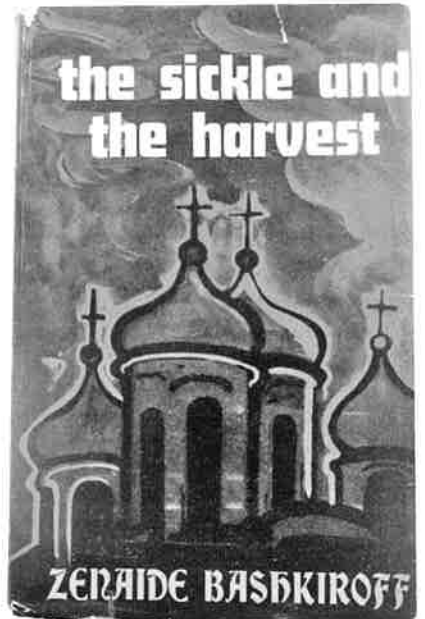
The return of Dan Breen to Fianna Fáil for the 7th Dáil saw Burke trailing him with 8,056 votes. This reduction in Burke's vote continued drastically into the election for the 8th Dáil (1933-1937) where he scraped home with just 4,940 votes. In January 1933, Fine Gael emerged from a coalition of Cumann na nGaedhal, the Centre Party and the Blueshirts of the National Guard. This gave Burke a much needed boost, albeit temporarily, and he was elected to the 9th Dáil (1937-38) on the 8th count with 6,713 first preferences. His fading popularity came to a head in the election for the 10th Dáil (1938-1943) and he was eliminated on the 5th count with 5,657 first preferences, losing out to the other three Fine Gael candidates. He stood as an independent for the 11th Dáil (1943-1944) but failed to make any impression, polling only 3,300 first preferences and was eliminated on the 21st count.⁹

In 1929, Burke married a young Russian aristocrat, Zenaide Bashkiroff, whose mother's first cousin, Prince Youssoupoff had triggered off the Russian Revolution by killing Rasputin. She later wrote an acclaimed volume, *The Sickle and the Harvest*, (L.1966) on the Revolution as seen through the eyes of a child¹⁰ and became a noted ceramic artist when they went to live in England after Burke lost his Dáil seat. He died there in 1967 and is buried in historic Glankeen, Borrisoleigh, Co Tipperary.

Throughout the 1930s Burke was very much a high-profile politician and literary figure, writing pamphlets on the ills of the time as he saw them and small but important publications on Irish



Zenaide as painted by the celebrated artist, Gaetano de Gennaro.



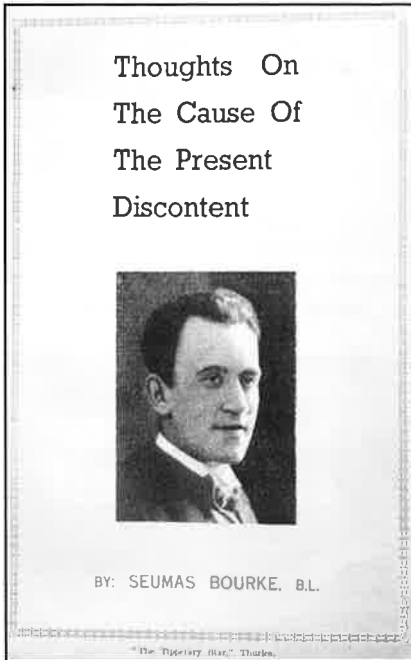
The Sickle and the Harvest

*Zenaide wrote this extraordinary book on growing up in Russia before and during the Revolution as seen through the eyes of a child (1960). It was also published in the USA under the title **Nights are Longest There.***

art and culture. One such small but significant book, printed at the Sign of the Three Candles in Dublin, was a study of *Patrick O'Connor, Painter of Portraits*. He was very much opposed to De Valera's constitution and became engrossed with fascism and a trenchant opponent of communism. He penned an extraordinary pamphlet in 1937, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontent*, printed by the *Tipperary Star*, in which he expressed open admiration for Hitler.

Why then did such a multi-talented and significant patriotic figure who had played a seminal role in gaining independence for Ireland fade from the scene? Why was his role

in the struggle of those early years never referred to in any of the memoirs, historical works or essays on the period. His contemporaries are silent about him. It is as if he never existed.



The answer seems to be multi-faceted. A drink problem after he lost his seat did not help.¹¹ Nor did the pamphlet extolling Hitler. His very name Seamus Burke posed problems as to his own identity. He called himself variously Seamus (Seumas) Burke or James Aloysius Burke, sometimes Seamus de Burca. To complicate matters there were three Seamus Burkes living roughly at the same time. One, a playwright and costumier, changed his name to Seamus de Burca to avoid the confusion. But the other Seamus Burke (b1888) confused even the National Library of Ireland where the works of the two SB's are all assigned to Seamus the TD, born 1893. The autobiography, *From the Earth to a Star – my Incredible Life* (Greystones 1959) is by the Kilkenny-born Seamus (b1888), a playwright and 'enterologist', as are all the one-

act comic plays and farces of the 1950s.¹² Even today Burke's Christian names confuse his identity. In 2019, a present day Tipperary TD, Michael Lowry, commemorated Burke's election to the first Dáil by inviting his nephew Patrick Treacy Snr, Nenagh to a private function in Leinster House. Reporting on the event the *Tipperary Star* named him as James and not as Seamus as he was more famously and historically known.

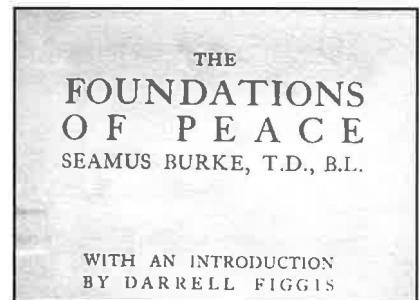
As the main aim of this short paper is to draw modern attention to Burke and his forgotten place in Tipperary and Irish history a detailed analysis of his political burn out is outside its remit and beyond its scope. Pointers for an extended study of Burke's political demise may be gleaned from recent comments:

His political demise may very well be agrarian related as much as political, so the context of what is going on in Tipperary in 1930s is crucial. His first preference vote was depleted, halved, between 1937 and 1943 elections, so he lost a lot of ground. However, in '43 he still polled comparatively well in the first count but lost out on transfers to Labour and perhaps as significantly to a Clann na Talmhan

candidate which means land issues and issues relating to agricultural labourers and the landless were very much to the fore at a time when he was running as an Independent who would not be pressing for the acquisition and redistribution of estates, or at least who would not be deemed to have much parliamentary clout. Shouting for the Blueshirts would not have made him popular with certain farming communities. Moreover, land issues garnered more votes locally than would have been lost because of his public support for Hitler. Kavanagh puts this wonderfully in 'Epic' where he tells us the 'Munich bother' was much less important to the Duffys and McCabes fighting over a half rood of rock.¹³

I believe that the former Minister and TD became very much disillusioned after his failure to regain his Dáil seat as an independent in 1943 and, of course the drink problem exacerbated the situation. His move to England was radical for someone who had given so much to the new Ireland. He seems to have lost all his friends, so much so that he was written out of their lives and printed works.

To me the silence that is most telling comes in the autobiography of Micheál Breathnach, *Cuimhne an tSeanphaiste* (BÁC, 1966). This native Irish speaker and educator came to teach at Cistercian College Roscrea in 1915 and lived in Roscrea town until his departure as a schools' inspector in 1923. In his autobiography he has two extensive chapters on the Roscrea area: one on the College and another on Cogadh na Saoirse as he lived through it and of his involvement both locally and regionally.¹⁴ He knew Seamus Burke, must have known him quite well. I have a signed presentation copy of Burke's *The Foundations of Peace* to Mr and Mrs Walsh at Beechwalk, Roscrea where they lived. But in this extended chapter on those pivotal years in Roscrea there is no mention of Burke. Surely a national figure like Burke deserved a mention as he gained national, even international prominence, becoming a Cabinet Minister in 1923? Burke's success in the 1918 election was celebrated locally with bonfires on the streets of the town, not least up Limerick Street, a stone's throw from where Breathnach lived. There must have been much collusion between them in the years leading up to the Civil War. Did Burke antagonise Breathnach when he became Secretary at the Department of Education¹⁵ or did Burke's views or conduct become anathema to him?



The Foundations of Peace shows an altruistic view of the world. (this was the book presented to Micheál Breathnach)

There is or was nothing written locally about Burke down the years. One reason, of course, is that the local historians, this writer included, were more concerned with earlier periods and with monuments than with the struggle for independence. And for the latter part of the twentieth century the troubles in the North diminished research into the period. Recent works have begun to redress the situation. A biography of Seamus Burke, hopefully, will come to fruition in the not-too-distant future, allowing us to learn more about a pivotal but forgotten Irish patriot.¹⁶

References

- 1 *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Vol 2, pp 34-35. As far as this writer can ascertain this is the only comprehensive article on Burke.
- 2 The estate of the Gibson family, one of whom was Lord Ashbourne of Land Acts fame. The estate was later acquired by the Land Commission; fragments of Knockballymeagher towerhouse had been incorporated into Rockforest House which was never restored following the burning.
- 3 Bureau of Military History WS 1474, Eamon O'Dwyer P46, quoted in *Ned Quinlan* as detailed below.
- 4 The statistics concerning the elections to Dáil Éireann, 1918-1943 have all been extracted from William Corbett, *A Political Directory of County Tipperary, 1918-2010*. Edited by Denis G. Marnane and Mary Guinan Darmody (County Tipperary Joint Libraries Committee, 2010).
- 5 Gerard Dooley, *Ned Quinlan and the War of Independence in Roscrea* (Roscrea People 2014). P9.
- 6 *Ned Quinlan*, *op cit.* P8.
- 7 Corbett, *op cit.*, P7
- 8 Corbett, *op cit.*, P9 quoting the *Tipperary Star*, 11 February 1933.
- 9 As stated the statistics for the early Dáil elections have been extracted from Corbett, *op cit.* PP3-29. This primary source book concerning parliamentary election results, deputies and senators is of immense benefit to all researchers of Tipperary's political history.
- 10 Also published in the USA under the title *Nights are Longest There*.
- 11 DIB, *op cit.*
- 12 While researching over a long period some aspects of Burke's life I originally thought him to be the author of the comedy sketches and plays of the 1950s, being led astray by the NLI date of birth. I illustrated these in a brief sketch of Burke in *Roscrea People*, December 2019, pps 162-163. It was only after I acquired from NLI a copy of the autobiography *From the Earth to a Star* that I realised the error brought about by the name and date of birth confusion.
- 13 Pers Comm October 2019, via Dr Marian Lyons NUIM, from an anonymous reader commenting on an earlier draft of this paper. I am grateful for these comments and hope that some young scholar will research fully these and other points in relation to Burke's political demise.
- 14 Múinteoireacht sa Tuath, pp182 -194; Cogadh na Saoirse, pp 195- 216. This latter chapter has been translated into English by Frances Maxwell and an abridged version is published in *Roscrea People*, Vol 33, 2018, pp 158-162.
- 15 Appointed February 1944.
- 16 Sean Hogan, author of *The Black and Tans in North Tipperary* (2013), is researching Burke's life.