

Crossing Lines¹

Love in the Spanish Civil War

By Mark O'Sullivan

'N Y Nurse Weds Irish Fighter in Spain's War'

'Miss Salaria Kee of Harlem, charming nurse at one of the American hospitals in Spain, was married on 2 October to John Joseph O'Reilly, ambulance driver from Thurles, County Tipperary, Ireland. Her husband was one of the first international volunteers to come to fight on the loyalist side in Spain and was for several months in the trenches. Recently, he was transferred to hospital service.'² Langston Hughes, the black poet and leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance literary scene, travelled to Spain in 1937 and penned a series of reports on the ongoing civil war there. Working for a black newspaper out of Baltimore, his reporting focused particularly on the contribution of Black American volunteers. He emphasised the lack of racial bias among the International Brigades who had come to the Spanish Republic in its hour of crisis. What better way to illustrate this than to highlight a mixed-race marriage among the volunteers.

Spanish Civil War

The civil war in Spain began with a military coup against the democratic Second Republic on 17 July 1936. General Francisco Franco led the uprising and within a week had enlisted the support of Hitler and Mussolini. Britain and France, meanwhile, failed to assist the democratically elected government. Russia, however inadequately in terms of arms and air support, filled the void. There was, of course, a certain inevitability about Russian involvement as the Comintern had been the main organisational force behind the formation of the International Brigades. It is estimated, moreover, that 70-75% of volunteers were members of the Communist Party or its ideological affiliates.



Salaria Kea and John Joseph O'Reilly

Over the two years of the conflict, 35,000 men and a small cadre of women (most of them nurses in the medical services) volunteered for the International Brigades from the Americas, Europe and beyond. Of these, 2,800 came from the United States and though they served in many battalions and military groups they have come to be known collectively as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.³ Among the American Medical Bureau staff who participated was one black nurse, Salaria Kea (sometimes spelled Kee). She arrived in Spain in April 1937 and worked at Villa Paz, an American Base hospital near Saelices, 65 miles south of Madrid. Later, she served close to the Aragon front with the medical support mobile teams.

Approximately 260 volunteers were Irish-born.⁴ Some travelled from Ireland while others were already resident in Britain, many of them economic migrants. Among these latter was John Joseph O'Reilly who until he went to Spain in December 1936 lived the peripatetic life of the disenfranchised and disillusioned in the aftermath of the Depression. Like many others he found in Spain a cause that reflected a certain despair, a sense of justice and a determination to be, as he wrote in a letter to his father in 1938, 'on the right side' in this era of rising Fascism.⁵

John Joseph O'Reilly

John Joseph Reilly (he adopted the prefix 'O' in early adulthood) was born on 29 March 1908 to Francis and Bridget (née Brien) Reilly. He was the third of four sons. In the 1911 Census, the family is recorded as having lived in Friar Street, Thurles.⁶ Francis Reilly was a labourer who would subsequently join the Royal Irish Regiment during World War One. As a consequence, he was given a house in the 'Sailors and Soldiers Buildings' housing scheme financed by the British State (present-day Sarsfield St.). These 27 houses completed in 1926 constituted, ironically, the first social housing project in Thurles after independence was achieved.⁷

The details of John's life before Spain are rather sketchy. They rely almost entirely on his own testimony recorded in hand-written notes taken by researcher Fredericka Martin of an extensive interview with him in June 1977.⁸ He makes no reference to his early childhood in this exchange. However, in a 1975 interview in the *Cleveland Magazine* (his only public utterance), he had spoken of an upbringing marked by poverty. 'John O'Reilly,' the article relates, 'had grown up poor in Ireland. Poverty had been the grinding fact of his existence in a country where jobs were scarce at the best of times.'⁹ By his own account, John left Thurles for the first time at the age of fourteen to live and work on his widowed aunt's farm in Russelstown on the Tipperary/Waterford border. He completed his education in nearby Clonmel though it's unclear at what age. The intention was that he inherit his aunt's farm but he found the remote rural life stultifying. Later, he would tell Fredericka Martin that, 'in the city you had people around you, in the country it was just loneliness'.¹⁰

At the age of twenty, he returned to Thurles and, shortly thereafter, went to England in search of work. Soon, he would join the Irish Guards regiment 'not', as he recalled, 'out of any particular inclination to be a soldier but simply because it was a paying job'. He had signed up for a seven-year period but served only three years before deserting.

There followed five years of travelling back and forth between England and Ireland during which time he worked as a building labourer (including a stint on the construction of the sugar beet factory in Thurles) and, latterly, as a tannery worker – an occupation to which he would return after Spain. His political allegiances appeared to be of a Republican Socialist nature. He became a member of the ITGWU in 1935 and had previously been a member of the ‘Republican’ Party (though of which iteration of republicanism is unclear).¹¹

Towards the end of 1935, he re-enlisted in the British Army (one assumes under a different or, at least, altered name) but deserted again in March 1936 and returned to Ireland.¹² He worked briefly as a boilerman in a local hospital before leaving Ireland for the last time in mid-1936 never to return.

Spain

Recruitment for the International Brigades in Spain began in September 1936. The call for volunteers went out in radical newspapers such as the *Daily Worker*, at political meetings and at rallies in support of the Spanish Republic. At this time, O’Reilly was working in a brickyard in Oxford and regularly went to public meetings in the university common, many of which focused on the situation in Spain. Soon, he came upon a small newspaper advertisement seeking volunteers to fight the Fascist rebels.¹³

While there is no precise record on when O’Reilly went to Spain, there is some convincing evidence that he travelled in December 1936. In a subsequent newspaper interview (Dec. 1937) with Salaria Kea conducted by writer and political activist, Nancy Cunard, mention is made of O’Reilly and confirms this approximate time of arrival. In addition, a letter from another volunteer, ambulance driver John Jolly to his (Jolly’s) wife, makes reference to O’Reilly having travelled to Spain with him in December 1936.¹⁴ This does, however, raise the possibility that O’Reilly may have volunteered initially for the medical services. It was, on the other hand, quite common for medical volunteers like Jolly to travel with other volunteers rather than with distinct medical units.¹⁵ Either way O’Reilly’s recollections contain a depth of knowledge of events in the following months that suggests he was soon to be, however briefly, a frontline fighter.

The British volunteers with whom O’Reilly travelled, met up at Victoria Station in London and bought weekend tickets to France in order to avoid the necessity of passport checks. They made the Dover-Calais crossing and went on by rail to Paris and south to Perpignan. From there, they crossed into Spain by rail or by bus and proceeded to the International Brigade in Albacete, the provincial capital of La Mancha. Their ultimate destination was a training base in the nearby village of Madrigueras. Their period of preparation there would be brief and wholly inadequate.

O’Reilly described himself as being ‘appalled at the inefficiency and unmilitary behaviour’ and of ‘officers often selected not for experience or leadership qualities but because they happened to be members of some political organisation’¹⁶ – a clear reference to the Communist Party of which he never became a member.¹⁷ Lack of military experience, poor organisation and defective armaments amounted to a recipe for disaster. Only their

enthusiasm and commitment to the cause offered any hope of success. In their first engagements, these would prove insufficient.

With this influx of British and Irish volunteers, an English-speaking battalion (the Marseillaise) was formed and attached to the 14th (Franco-Belge) Brigade. Among its No. 1 Company comprising 145 volunteers were 43 Irishmen of whom O'Reilly was one. On Christmas Eve 1936 this battalion set out for the Cordoba front. The No. 1 Company was led by a controversial though effective officer, George Nathan, who had served with the Auxiliaries in Ireland during the War of Independence.¹⁸ Remarkably, he was assisted by IRA veteran, Kit Conway from the Glen of Aherlow in Tipperary.¹⁹ The Company's task was to capture the strategic town of Lopera. For almost a week, the battle continued but ended in failure. Seven Irish volunteers died and many of the others were wounded. In all, 300 members of the battalion died and 600 were wounded.

Soon, in true Stalinist denialism mode, a scapegoat was found by the leadership. The French battalion commander, De la Salle, was executed for supposedly taking bribes from the Italians for information regarding the attack. 'Because we had lost, the charge was made that he led us into a trap,' O'Reilly later lamented. 'Any time anything went wrong, somebody would charge it was sabotage. This kind of suspicion was a problem throughout the war.'²⁰

On 11 January 1937, the much-reduced No.1 Company moved from the centre of Madrid to the outlying village of Las Rozas (now a suburb of the city). The village had been taken by Fascist forces as part of an attempt to encircle the city from the north-west. The efforts of the Internationals were stymied by the superior armaments of the rebels and they were forced to retreat, sustaining many more casualties.

Of the Company's original 145 volunteers only 67 returned to the International Brigade HQ at Albacete.²¹ In their absence, a British Battalion had been formed at the training base in Madrigueras from which a group of around 20 Irish volunteers had split and joined the American brigade. O'Reilly decided to stay with the British at Madrigueras. Most of the survivors of those early engagements were then kept in reserve and became section leaders, company commanders or were given other areas of responsibility.²² O'Reilly was appointed to the rather less glamorous role of Quartermaster at the British Battalion's cookhouse with which he soon became disillusioned.²³ As the iconic Battle of Jarama proceeded, he volunteered for service as an ambulance guard at Morata close to the battlefield. For almost three months he remained in this role, helping to ferry the wounded from the frontline to the reception area in Morata and on to the various hospitals in the area. During one such rescue operation, he was forced to arrest the ambulance driver who panicked en route and refused to continue to the front.²⁴ Among the hospitals which received the wounded was the American No.1 Base Hospital at Villa Paz. It was here that John and Salaria met for the first time.

Villa Paz

Villa Paz was a sprawling country residence near the village of Saelices which had been confiscated from the Infanta Paz, the elderly aunt of the Spanish King who had abdicated

in 1931. It had been vacated in the immediate aftermath of the rebel rising in 1936. Dr. Barsky, the head of the American Medical Bureau (AMB) described it as containing 'most romantic gardens with rare trees and sweet flowers and there were nightingales in the trees.'²⁵ More importantly, however, its vast stables and grain lofts proved ideal to accommodate a hospital of significant size. An AMB team arrived there on 14 April 1937 and set to work. Soon, American Hospital No.1 as it was designated had 250 beds, several operating rooms, an x-ray machine and a long dining room with kitchen attached. Strikingly, the head ward nurse was Salaria Kea, a black nurse supervising the work of five white nurses – a situation that would never have prevailed back in 1930s America.

Salaria Kea

Sarah Lillie Kea was born on 13 July 1911 in Milledgeville, Georgia. She later changed her name to Salaria because she believed her mother had named her for a white woman for whom she'd worked. The youngest of four children, she was the only girl. Her parents worked at the city's mental institution (one of the largest in the U.S at that time). In 1912, her father was murdered there by his cousin, a fellow worker. Her mother soon remarried and over time mother and daughter grew estranged. In 1925, Salaria left for Akron, Ohio where her older brothers had gone to find work and a modicum of freedom. They supported her through her high school years and in her ambition to become a nurse. The racial barrier in Akron forced her, with the help of a local black doctor and his activist wife, to pursue her career at Harlem Hospital in New York.²⁶

As a trainee nurse, Salaria participated in a successful campaign to desegregate the staff dining facilities in the hospital. The spectacle of lacerating deprivation among the patients she encountered in Harlem heightened her political awareness. Neither Democrats nor Republicans seeming to offer any way forward for her people, she joined the Communist Party in 1935.²⁷

In 1936, what became known as the Great St. Patrick's Day Flood struck the city of Pittsburgh. Such was the scale of the disaster that the Red Cross was called on for assistance. Salaria volunteered her services but was told that the presence of a black nurse there would be 'more trouble than it was worth'.²⁸ As the Spanish Civil War unfolded she heard, at political meetings and in her workplace, the testimony of German (mainly Jewish) and Spanish doctors on the calamitous effects of the rise of fascism in Europe. It seemed to her that fascism and racism arose from the same perverted impulse to subjugate the poor and to suppress every liberal instinct. When, eventually, she was asked to volunteer for the AMB in Spain, she did so without hesitation.

Love and War

Now that the Battle of Jarama had settled into a stand-off that was to last for the rest of the war, the focus of ambulance crews at Morata shifted to transferring recovering patients between hospitals. Wounded men generally preferred to be cared for at hospitals staffed by their compatriots. It was in this context that O'Reilly first arrived at Villa Paz at the end of April 1937 and met Salaria.

Their states of mind could hardly have been more different at this time. Salaria, in Spain little more than three weeks, was in the first flush of enthusiasm at this liberating if hazardous experience. Disillusionment on the other hand darkened O'Reilly's perspective. It was, no doubt, their meeting that emboldened him to stay in Spain and indeed to remain there until October 1938 when the International Brigades finally left the country. O'Reilly describes how he 'wasn't able to take his eyes off her' at that first meeting.²⁹ Salaria professed to have had no idea of his infatuation with her at this point. In any case, the American hospital being presumably not yet fully staffed, O'Reilly had within two weeks prevailed upon his superiors at the 15th Brigade headquarters to transfer him to Villa Paz.³⁰ There, he worked as an attendant in the general wards. In an unpublished memoir, Salaria speaks of his quiet, efficient and detached presence. Soon, however, she discovered he was writing poems about her.³¹ While none of these poems have survived, we do have one poem of his from February 1937 a few months before they met. A valedictory poem, it was written during the Battle of Jarama when O'Reilly worked to ferry the wounded from the front. The persona he adopts here – a dying soldier – was certainly one he must have encountered many times in those grim days.

A Dying Comrade's Farewell to His Sweetheart

You can tell my little sweetheart that I send her all my love.
 You can tell her that I loved her and in death I love her still.
 You can tell her that my body lies where the Jarama river flows,
 Where Spanish guns still flash and the Workers' Army goes.

Oh, well do I remember her farewell kiss to me.
 She told me not to falter when the fascist guns did roar
 But to show the Spanish workers that we're with them to the last
 And to defend their country from Moorish savage hands.

When Franco threw his terror amongst the working class
 Our comrades were determined that they'd fight him to the last
 For we'd sooner die than see fascism rule their land.
 Loud on high we raise the cry, fascism shall not pass.³²

It's not an especially complex or accomplished poem but neither is it rhyming doggerel and its sentiment is certainly heartfelt.

Salaria was, at first, reluctant to consider O'Reilly's advances given the potential long-term difficulties of a mixed-race marriage back in her native country. She was in the end, however, won over by the sincerity of his pleading. 'Would you let the reactionaries take away the only thing a poor man deserved and that thing is his right to marry the one he loved and believed loved him?'³³ They were eventually married on October 2nd in the nearby village of Saelices.

'Instead of the usual wedding march,' Langston Hughes relates, 'A chorus of young girls sang *Joven Guardia* and other songs. The old judge from Saelices who sports a

large handlebar moustache performed the ceremony.' In an interesting aside, he adds, 'Hemingway and Martha Gellhorn were here on 2 October but could not stay for the wedding.'³⁴ Hemingway would go on to write 'For Whom the Bell Tolls', perhaps the definitive novel of the war (at least from a non-Spanish perspective). Gellhorn would become one of the finest war correspondents of the twentieth century in a career spanning sixty years.

Throughout that summer of courtship, the couple were more concerned with duty than with romance. The American Hospital received wounded and convalescent volunteers from battles at Brunete, Belchite and beyond as well as providing much-needed medical services for the local population. In addition, Salaria worked with AMB mobile units closer to the front. After the wedding, she served at the Teruel offensive and the counter-thrust by the fascists. She became detached from her unit in the chaos of retreat and was briefly jailed by Republican political police grown paranoid with fears of desertions and fifth-columnists. In March 1938, the hospital at Villa Paz was evacuated and staff transferred to Vic, a large convalescent hospital 45 miles north of Barcelona.

Within weeks, a group of AMB volunteers suffering from what would now be termed post-traumatic stress disorder, were sent back to the U.S. Salaria, herself in a poor physical and mental state, was prevailed upon to join them. O'Reilly, because he was not a U. S citizen, could not go. It must have been a difficult parting filled with sadness and uncertainty. Six months were to pass before they were able to make contact again and, even then, only by correspondence. In the months that followed her return to the U. S, Salaria toured the country raising awareness of the conflict in Spain and fundraising for the American Medical Bureau. All the while, she tried without success to find employment. The anti-communist crusade of the House Un-American Committee had begun in earnest and she was, for the present at least, 'persona non grata'.

During this time, O'Reilly continued to work at the Vic hospital. Conditions there deteriorated due to overcrowding, lack of medical supplies and equipment, and an unsafe water supply. In mid-September an outbreak of typhoid devastated the hospital population. O'Reilly's friend and former work colleague at Villa Paz, Tommy Kerr from Belfast, was among the dead. O'Reilly himself contracted typhoid in September and was gravely ill for some weeks.³⁵

As O'Reilly lay recuperating, Juan Negrín, Prime Minister of the Spanish Republic announced that all International volunteers would be withdrawn from the conflict. He did so hoping against hope for a similar removal of Franco's foreign allies, Germany and Italy. No such quid pro quo occurred.

At the end of October 1938, O'Reilly was repatriated to England. Such was his emaciated state on arrival at Victoria Station in London, he was hospitalised by the health authorities for three weeks. He spent some time living in a small refugee camp in Surrey which was mainly occupied by Czechoslovakian Social Democrats fleeing the Nazi threat to their country's integrity.³⁶

Subsequently, he took a job in a tannery in Chilworth (on the outskirts of London) and began the long process of seeking a visa to the U. S. He was initially given little hope of success by the American Embassy in London. However, Salaria had somehow been reinstated at Harlem Hospital which strengthened his case significantly. His visa was granted and he arrived in New York on board the SS Samaria on 22 August 1940.³⁷ He found work with the IRT (Interborough Rapid Transit Co.) which hired so many Irish workers, it was commonly referred to as the Irish Republican Transit.

The couple lived from 1940 to 1943 in a mainly Jewish area. A large proportion of their colleagues in the AMB had been Jewish progressives and the couple would have found a more tolerant attitude among such people. During this period, O'Reilly applied unsuccessfully for naturalisation. He would ultimately receive his Certificate of Naturalisation in quite unforeseen circumstances.

World War Two

The U. S entered the war in early December 1941 following the Pearl Harbour attack. The Army and Navy's demand for personnel soon increased exponentially and the range of draft selection widened. In early 1943, at the age of 35, John O'Reilly was called up and assigned to the 82nd Engineer Combat Regiment. Training took place at Camp Swift, Texas. The regiment sailed for North Africa in November 1943 and on to Liverpool in January 1944. Soon, they reached Frome in Somerset where they were billeted until the D-Day invasion.

On 16 June (ten days after D-Day), the 82nd landed at Omaha Beach. The bodies of dead GIs still lay on the sands awaiting removal. Over a period of 11 months, the regiment supported the Allied advance southwards to within 12 miles of Paris and then eastwards across northern France, Belgium, Holland and into Germany. Its main task was to keep supply lines to the rear open. They removed roadblocks, repaired roads, constructed bridges and removed mines along the way. At the Battle of the Bulge in mid-December 1944 they operated for a time as frontline infantry. They might eventually have entered Berlin had it not been for the Allied Forces decision to allow the Soviet Union to take the city. Instead, their ultimate destination in mid-April 1945 was to be the city of Magdeburg, 95 miles from the German capital. C Company, in which O'Reilly served, ended their operational involvement with a bridge security assignment on the Salle river. On May 6th 1945, operations ceased and they made the long journey back to Normandy and onwards to the U.S.³⁸

After the U. S entered World War Two, the Second War Powers Act of 1942 was passed. This provided for the expedited naturalisation of non-citizens serving honourably in the Armed Forces. Applicants were exempted from many of the routine requirements. In all, 13,587 such overseas naturalisations took place among which was that of John O'Reilly.³⁹ He received his Certificate of Naturalisation in Paris on 28 May 1945 almost five years after his original application.

Salaria too played her part in the war. Her initial attempt to enlist as a volunteer nurse was rejected on the basis that 'there are no provisions in the Army regulations for the

appointment of coloured nurses in the Corps'.⁴⁰ The racial ban was eventually lifted by President Roosevelt and Salaria was drafted in early 1944. She nursed wounded and convalescing soldiers in various locations in France, England and in the American base in Derry.

Post-war Life

For Salaria and John, the post-war years began with tragedy. Their only child born in October 1946, died after three days. They also experienced, as many International Brigade veterans did in the McCarthy witch-hunt era, some harassment from the FBI. For them, overt political activism was no longer an option. In any case, Salaria had long since distanced herself from the Communist Party and, over time, became deeply invested in her religious faith. She remained committed to the ideal of racial equality. Having studied for a B.A and M.A in nursing, she worked as a nursing tutor and played an important role in the desegregation of the nursing profession at several New York hospitals. Meanwhile, O'Reilly moved on from his manual work at the IRT to become a Transport Police officer.⁴¹ Their greatest struggle, however, lay in the stark realities of life as a mixed-race couple. In 1945, attitudes were such that a Columbia University Professor of Psychiatry, Nathan Ackerman, could write that marrying inter-racially 'is very often evidence of a sick revolt against society'. A 1958 survey of mixed race marriages in 'liberal' New York painted a rather grim picture. Couples were confronted on the street by people of both races to such an extent that many carried their marriage licences wherever they went.⁴² Until the mid-1950s the couple remained in a 'neutral', mainly Jewish area. Later they moved to a house in a more mixed area on Grace Avenue, the Bronx, where in time they would be pressured to leave the neighbourhood after their home and car were vandalised.⁴³

In 1973, the couple moved to Akron, Ohio, where Salaria had grown up and where her married brothers and their families lived. Here, they experienced the positive impact of a close and caring family network but also a number of unseemly discriminatory incidents including receipt of an anonymous threat purportedly from the KKK after having attended Sunday Mass together.⁴⁴

During these years, Salaria suffered increasing mental health issues and was eventually diagnosed with Alzheimer's. O'Reilly took care of her for as long as he was able to. When he died on 31 December 1986, Salaria had already forgotten who he was. She died on 18 May 1990. They had met at Villa Paz – the House of Peace – and now they lay in peace side by side in Glendale Cemetery, Akron.

The course of Salaria and John's lives changed utterly when they had determined, in the face of the Fascist threat, 'to do right'⁴⁵. Sadly, as the French philosopher and writer, Albert Camus later wrote that, '... one can be right and yet vanquished, that force can subdue the spirit, that there are times when courage does not have its reward.'⁴⁶

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- 8 Fredericka Martin was the Administrator of the American Base Hospital in Villa Paz during the Spanish Civil War. Her research notes of interviews and correspondence from decades later with former volunteers are held at the Abraham Lincoln Brigades Archives (ALBA), Tamiment Library, New York University.
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- 18 Barry McLoughlin, '*Fighting for Republican Spain*', 2014 – Nathan was almost certainly involved in the British 'murder gang' which was responsible for the assassination of the Lord Mayor of Limerick and his predecessor in March 1921. The exposure of his role in Ireland contributed to the rift between Irish and British volunteers and, indeed, among the Irish volunteers themselves, many of whom accepted his confession and declaration that he was merely carrying out orders.
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