



IRISH FRIENDS OF THE SPANISH REPUBLIC  
(Women's Aid Committee)

## A MEMORIAL MEETING

for

**JACK NALTY and LIAM MCGREGOR**

Who fell fighting for Liberty and Democracy on  
the Ebro Front on September 23, the eve of the  
Demobilisation of the XVth (International) Bri-  
gade, Spanish Republican Army.

WILL BE HELD ON

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 15, at 8 p.m**  
IN THE

**Banba Hall, Parnell Square**

Collection in aid of those returning from the Irish Unit



# IN SUPPORT OF AN IDEAL

Jack Nalty: From East Wall to the Ebro



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Published by East Wall History Group  
in association with  
Friends of the International Brigades Ireland  
Kindly supported by the Dublin City Council Commemoration  
Fund for Communities

First printing, September 2018

Layout & design: Kevin Squires

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**Rita L’Estrange** – A niece of Denis (Dinny) Coady. A well-known and active member of the East Wall community.

**Thomas O’Brien** - International Brigade volunteer, poet, playwright and publisher. Passed away in 1974.

## Acknowledgements

This project could not have been undertaken without the work of the late Steve Nugent in putting together the story of his uncle Jack Nalty. His research material has been made available, as has a large collection of family documents and photographs. We wish to thank the Nugent family (Dublin and Canada) for their generosity and enthusiasm for this publication and commemoration events.

Thanks to all contributors whose articles have added background and additional material to the story of Jack Nalty and the ‘comradeship of heroes’.

Nalty and Nugent photos and documents courtesy: Nugent family  
Gannon family photos courtesy: Gannon family  
Fiesta photos sourced from: André Marty Archive (AMA) and Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (ALBA)  
Sean Prendergast material: (BMH.WS0755) / (BMH.WSO802)

Thanks to Kevin Squires for design and layout, as well as his patience.



*Let me take the trigger when they come;  
A hundred rounds a minute suits my mood.  
I was in Barcelona when we rushed the machine  
guns with bare hands.  
I saw a man's head severed at the neck with a  
gunburst,  
and rushed through his blood which came like  
water from a hose.  
I laughed at the sight,  
laughed at the roar of their guns  
and charged on, sure of victory, triumphant.  
I was a volunteer at Madrid  
and at Jarama and Calaceite;  
I was amongst the first to cross the Ebro  
and with the last boats re-crossed.  
First and last I was a volunteer,  
and here again I am a volunteer,  
defending the last hill in Catalonia –  
but in no mood for futile dying.*

From 'The Last Hill',  
Thomas O'Brien, 1939



**“IT’S MARVELLOUS WHAT MEN CAN  
ENDURE IN SUPPORT OF AN IDEAL”**

## **THE LIFE OF JACK NALTY (1902 – 1938)**

### **FROM GALWAY TO DUBLIN**

John ‘Jack’ Nalty, one of seven children, was born in Ballygar, Co. Galway in 1902. The son of Stephen and Agnes (*née* O’Connor) who both came from farming families. Stephen was a member of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) serving in the locality. In 1908, the family, including most of the children, moved to Dublin. His eldest sister and brother remained with members of their mother’s family.

The eldest sister Aggie remained in the West of Ireland with the O’Connors and would eventually marry and raise her own children there. Her time there was difficult, and many years later she would write to her sister Peg “I’m sorry I even stayed as it is nothing but work all the time and nothing for it. I’ve got to hate this place.”

The eldest brother, christened Stephen O’Connor Nalty but known as ‘Staffie’ also remained with the O’Connors. He would serve in the British Army during World War I and saw combat at the Battle of the Somme, in which three and a half thousand of his fellow countrymen died. Surviving the conflict, he returned to the West, but having no interest in farming, he eventually set sail for America in 1926. There he worked as a park ranger until the 1960s, returning to Ireland only once, just before his death in the 1960s.

Having moved to the capital, the Nalty family lived very briefly at Millmount Avenue in Drumcondra before settling at No. 11, East Road in the North Docks. Stephen, most likely with a good recommendation as a former RIC Constable, became a watchman at the Anglo Irish Oil Company located near their new home. Jack became a pupil at the Wharf Road Convent School. His brother Mick most likely went to O’Connell’s School on North Richmond Street. His sister

Maisie also enrolled at the Wharf school and afterwards both she and Peg attended the Dominican Convent on Eccles Street. Another daughter, Kathleen, was born in Dublin, and would also be enrolled in the infants school. Kathleen suffered from Downs syndrome and would be cared for by Maisie until her death.



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REGISTER OF *East Wall Central* NATIONAL SCHOOL *Boys*

Date of Birth	Religion	Parents' Name or Full	Date of Birth	Signature	Position or Occupations of Parent or Guardian	State the Name and County of the last State School at which the Pupil attended; and Class to which he was last transferred.	
June 26 1908	135	1 Peter Woods	15.6.03	160.2 Fish Street	Foreman		
" " 136	2 Edward Rice	12.9.07	23. Newcastle St	Labourer			
July 18 1908	137	3 Patrick Byrne	29.7.07	18. Michael's Cott	"		
Aug 31 1908	138	4 John Nalty	20.12.01	11 East Road St. Offical			
" " 139	5 John O'Grady	20.8.04	19. Males & Castle Coppinst				

“STRIKES WERE IN THE AIR AT THE TIME”

The same year the Nalty family arrived, something of huge significance was happening among the workers in the Dockland area. Jim Larkin had founded the Irish Transport & General Workers Union (ITGWU), based on syndicalist principles (‘An injury to one is a concern to all’) and by 1910, more than half the national membership was in the Dublin No. 1 Branch which covered the docks. Between the years 1909 and 1913, national membership rose from 1,200 to 30,000. Jack, aged just nine years old in 1911, would have witnessed this radical trade unionism in action and would have been exposed to open class conflict for the first time.

A national rail strike across the UK quickly spread to the Dublin Dockland rail-yards and ITGWU carters were soon engaged in sympathetic action while also pressing home their own demands. Troops were deployed throughout the area (along the rail lines and on the quay side), scabs were attacked and shots were fired. Some of these incidents occurred quite close to the Nalty residence. Crowe’s Timber Yard, for example, was situated immediately opposite the Nalty home on East Road.

On Saturday, 30th September 1911 Louis Crowe and another man from the Crowe’s Timber Yard had travelled to a blacksmith’s yard on Sheriff Street to get four horses shod. As they returned, they were surrounded by a jeering mob, at

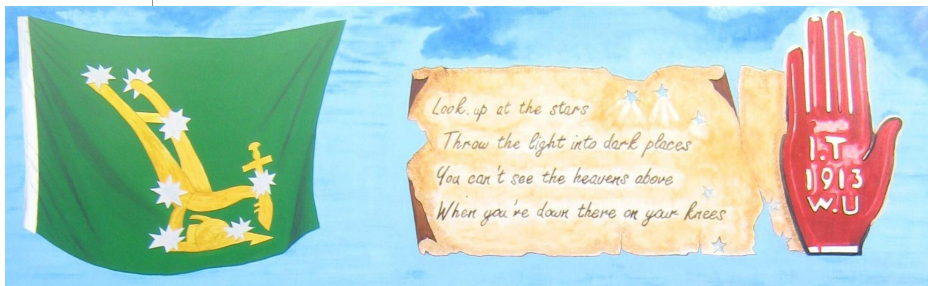
Top: Wharf Road Convent School  
  
Bottom: Nalty’s 1908 school register

whom they fired a number of revolver shots. This resulted in a well-reported court case, in which local men, described as ‘respectfully attired men of the working class’ appeared on charges of assaulting the timber merchant, despite him wielding the revolver. This would have been a major local talking point.

Cullen’s Transport was based further along East Road and it too experienced strike action. The men at Cullen’s Transport refused to work alongside a man called Keegan, whom they described as a ‘scab’ and management received a phone call from the ITGWU informing them of this. The strike-breaker did not return to work after lunchtime and the matter was resolved in one day!

During this time school boys at the Wharf School styled themselves as the ITSBU (Irish Transport & School Boys’ Union) and engaged in a three-day strike. On 13th September 1911, teachers arriving at the East Wall Wharf National School found this ominous message chalked on the door: “Any boy cot going into school and not following other schoolboys examples will be killed by order Strike Strike Strike”. Pickets were placed in the vicinity of the school and the boys paraded around carrying flags etched with their demands. These included “shorter hours, cheaper books and an end to canings”. The strike continued for three days and pupils attempting to enter the school were branded as ‘scabs’ and pelted with stones and cabbage stalks. Attendance records show that on the days of the strike, just less than half the usual numbers of pupils were present. A number of ‘ring-leaders’ were identified and punished, but other than these boys, the identity of those involved is not recorded. The boys

Mural commemorating the 1913 Lockout



involved were aged between 8 and 13 years old. The inspiration for the strike was not lost on the Parish Priest Father Brady who remarked “Strikes were in the air at the time, and the residential quarters of the general strikers were all around the school”.

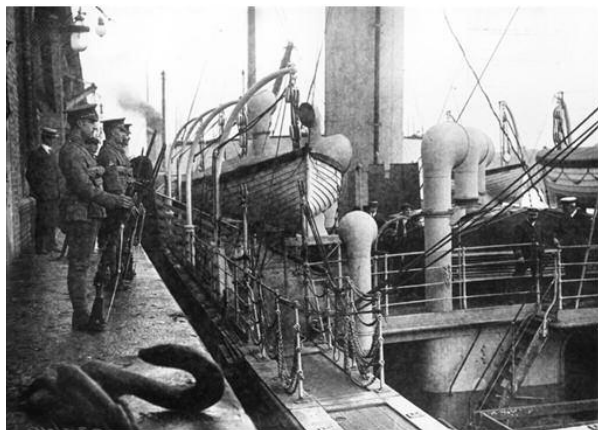
Father Brady and Jack would both have been well aware of local man, Walter Carpenter, a leading trade union figure and secretary of James Connolly’s Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP). Carpenter had been jailed that same year for his opposition to King George’s royal visit to the capital. Walter and his sons, Walter (Wally) and Peter, were later involved in the founding of the Irish Citizen Army (I.C.A.). Wally was O/C of the I.C.A. boy scouts and both brothers served during the Easter Rising of 1916 in the GPO Garrison. Both Walter senior and junior were central to the growth of the Irish communist movement in the 1920s.

Local workers affiliated with the ITGWU had made significant gains in 1911 and those employed at T&C Martins and the Merchants’ Warehousing Company and others received pay increases. Company owners, not just in the Docklands, but across the city, resented the influence and strength of the new trade unionism and in 1913 they set out to get their revenge and destroy the effective workers’ movement. This revenge culminated in the Great Lockout with company owners determined to starve some 20,000 workers and their families into submission.

During this era of open class warfare, the brutality of the employers would not have escaped a young Jack Nalty. While there is no information to suggest the Nalty family were directly caught up in these events, the Docks community was central to this struggle so it is certain that they knew many of those who were affected. This would have included the 62



Residents commemorate centenary of the Lockout evictions on Merchant's Road



British troops at  
North Wall, 1911

workers, and their families, evicted from company owned houses on nearby Merchants Road just before Christmas. This was a vindictive act of revenge, involving as many as 300 people. Included in this number, were some of Jack's schoolboy acquaintances.

'Labour's Bloody

Sunday' occurred on the 31st August when police baton-charged strike supporters on Sackville Street (now O'Connell Street). Among those injured was Patrick Lennon of Irvine Crescent (now incorporated into Church Road), an ITGWU activist and near neighbour of Jack's. Lennon afterwards worked closely with the future playwright Sean O'Casey (from nearby Abercorn Road) when they established the "Women and children's (of Locked out workers) Relief fund". Both men would have been a familiar sight as they travelled the city by horse and cart, collecting donations, some of which were used to develop the famous soup kitchen based at Liberty Hall.

## **"IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN..."**

Between the end of the Lockout (early in 1914) and Easter Week of 1916, organisations such as the Irish Citizen Army, the Irish Volunteers, Cumann na mBan and associated boy scout movements all grew in strength in the locality.

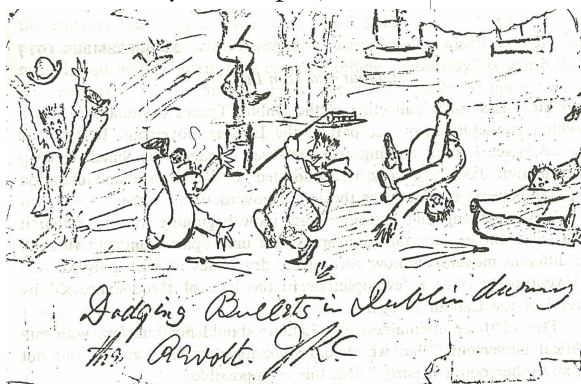
It is not hard to imagine that Jack was inspired by the many locals who participated in the Easter Rising, such as his former school mate Bernard Courtney. The Courtneys had been the first family to move to Merchants Road when it was built in 1908 and were one of the 62 families evicted five years later. Bernard's father Daniel was an ITGWU member and fought with the ICA at the Battle of Annesley Bridge and



at the GPO garrison while 14-year-old Bernard served at Jacobs. Bernard tragically died from TB the following year and his funeral from St. Laurence O'Toole's Church was a major show of strength by the republican, socialist and trade union movements.

Also among those fighting for the newly declared Irish Republic were the brothers and fathers of other class mates, siblings of men such as Michael O'Doherty from Mayor Street, who was hit by 12 machine-gun bullets at the College of Surgeons and survived! While finding inspiration in these heroic deeds, Jack would have been horrified by the local civilian casualties, including some near neighbours shot down by British troops. Throughout Easter Week, the North Docklands area had been cordoned off from the rest of the city, and within this cordon, sniper-fire and machine-gun bursts continued for days.

Many residents were rounded up and imprisoned in St. Barnabas School and in grain sheds belonging to the Merchants Warehouse Company. On Thursday 27th April, British troops swept through the area, shooting dead a number of local women in their homes, who had made the fatal mistake of looking out their window at the activity outside. Also mortally wounded was 12-year-old Walter Scott, whose older brothers Jack had been to school with.



'Dodging bullets during the revolt': A sketch by Séan O'Casey sketch showing civilians caught in crossfire during the 1916 Rising

## “...THEY WERE GAME AND EAGER TO FIGHT”

Jack explains his feelings from this time “I should mention now what sent many lads into the national movement then was the example shown by the men who fought and gave their lives for Irish freedom in the revolt of Easter 1916, in particular James Connolly who was our first working class leader and who was executed although badly wounded.”

The year following the Rising would see many locals en-



The Nalty brothers  
(L-R) Staffie, Jack  
and Mick

gaged with the national movement for the first time. For example, Johnny Hunter from Irvine Terrace (who had been caught up in the Docklands round-up by British troops) joined the I.R.A. while his sister Dina would join the I.C.A. Still a youngster, Jack joined Na Fianna Éireann:

“In 1917 at the age of fifteen I joined the boy scout movement known as the Fianna. This was a national revolutionary movement for Irish boys and was closely connected to the Irish Republican Army. In this organisation we boys were trained in all branches of military activity to enable us to take our places in the I.R.A. when we reached the necessary age which was at that time eighteen years.”

In 1919 there were three significant milestones in Jack’s life: he left school, he entered full time employment and he joined the I.R.A.

“Early in 1919 I decided that I had enough of school, because like many of my comrades in the Fianna, I had difficulty in attending to my school tasks as well as my activities in the national movement, so I finished with school and went to work in the Anglo-American Oil [Company]. I worked there till about November of 1919 and then went to work in a ship yard in Dublin, and about the same time I was with the help of friends transferred to the ranks of the I.R.A. although not yet the necessary age. The unit I was attached to was C. Coy No 1 Batt. Dublin Brigade.”

The shipyard referred to was the Dublin Dockyard Company. His brother Mick served a five-year apprenticeship here and continued a career as a ship’s carpenter and shipyard worker until his retirement. An Easter Rising veteran, I.C.A. man Willie Halpin was foreman there and the company’s em-



ployment records read like a *Who's Who* of local republican and socialist activists. This included Frank Robbins, Thomas Leahy, the Carpenter brothers and many more. Ironically, while this was a 'loyal' company with major British Navy contracts and had operated a war-time munitions factory, men who were blacklisted and considered 'undesirable' could still find a job there.

Having transferred from Na Fianna to the Dublin Brigade of the I.R.A., Jack was attached to C Company, 1st Battalion. Regarding his service during the War of Independence (the 'Tan War') he simply described his activities as "I took part in several engagements against the British troops in Dublin."

With no further details provided by Jack, the account written by his commanding officer, Sean Prendergast fills out the particulars of those years. Prendergast outlined just what these 'engagements' entailed and the character of the young men like Jack who were involved:

"The streets of Dublin became a veritable battle centre, where many bloody encounters were fought, spasmodically at first, but later in growing fury and momentum. As time progressed and as experience was gained innumerable operational exploits became acceptable features of I.R.A. activity. Of the men, especially the men of our Company, who participated in ambushing a few, general reference must be made. Here were youths and young men ranging from 18 to 30 years. These only possessed a limited and in many instances little knowledgeable military training, certainly not anything like the training of those arrayed against them. One of their big advantages in their favour was that they were disciplined and orderly to an uncommon degree. Other than that they were game and eager to fight. No need to apply force to make them do so; no endeavour, no sacrifice was too great for them; they would go to any length to prove their loyalty to and their faith in our cause. Any enterprise that called for dash, initiative and daring commanded their support."

"That work was generally more for the fleet of foot, the young and the active, a fact begot by experience as many had learned. 'To hit and run' quickly was ever the safest course to pursue on such occasions. Speed in bringing off an ambush

and getting away were vitally essential conditions and considerations in that type of warfare then becoming fast and furious. If there was any choice it was and had to be in favour of the young fast-moving and least cumbersome among our men.”

Jack certainly met those criteria, as within a few years he became a champion athlete.

One of the most spectacular I.R.A. operations during this period was the burning of the Custom House on 25th May, 1921. A number of men from C Company were involved in providing cover for those inside the building. While Jack was not present, the result of the operation had a major impact both militarily and politically for the I.R.A. and the broader movement. Edward Dorins who lived at 145 Church Road, was a contemporary from the Wharf Road School and employed as a plumber in the Dublin Dockyards Company. A member of the 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade, he was shot and killed during the raid. His funeral in St Laurence O’Toole’s Church attracted a huge crowd of mourners including fellow republicans and many employees of the Dublin Dockyard Company.

Among the members of C Company was James Kinsella from Spencer Street, North Strand who worked at nearby Smith & Pearsons. Close friends who had been in Na Fianna

together, Jack would be best man at his wedding to Lil Healy, whose 14-year-old brother Sean Healy was one of the youngest casualties of Easter Week.

Jack and the other activists of C Company continued their military operations until the truce of July 1921. During the subsequent period, the men continued to drill and train, developing their fighting capabilities in anticipation of a resumption of hostilities. When

Jack (second from right, top row) as best man at the wedding of James Kinsella from Spencer Street, North Strand



the Treaty was signed the following year the I.R.A. was split in their response. The majority of members from C Company took the anti-treaty stance. In the words of Sean Prendergast:

“Was it any wonder that men who still adhered to the I.R.A., officers and men demanded ‘Scrap the Treaty and maintain the republic... We do

not want any compromise that falls short of our demands to complete and absolute Irish independence’.”

They were prepared to “Get back to where we were, even if it means toiling in blood and sweat, or immediate and terrible war with the English. Better those things than that we should accept and maintain a false peace or a false freedom.”

### **“WHAT WAS TO BE DONE UNDER SUCH ADVERSE CONDITIONS?”**

In April 1922 members of the anti-treaty I.R.A. occupied the Four Courts in Dublin, and tensions between the Republicans and the new Government forces intensified. The London authorities applied pressure to force a military confrontation with the Four Courts garrison and eventually, using artillery borrowed from the British, an attack was launched. This action, and the subsequent Battle of Dublin, developed into the year long civil war. In the days leading up to the bombardment, it became obvious that the new National Army was preparing to move against the Four Courts occupation and Troop movements intensified within the city centre.

Christy Crothers, the intelligence officer for the I.C.A. claimed “I got information the evening previous that the Four Courts was to be attacked. I took it up to the four courts.” On the evening of 27th June, as word spread that “the Staters are going to attack the Four Courts” the anti-treaty members



British Auxillaries  
after an attack in  
North Wall



O'Connell Street  
after the Battle of  
Dublin, 1922

of the 1st Battalion were mobilised at various North Inner City locations, including 44 Parnell Square, to await further orders. The intention was to deploy men in the vicinity of the Four Courts to provide protection to the garrison there. The men were receiving instructions “not to attack or commit any offensive act unless first attacked.”

Jack and the other men of C Company gathered at Tara Hall in Gloucester Street. They were initially ordered to take over a building at the junction of Strand Street and Capel Street. However, once the shelling of the Four Courts began and National Army troops filled the streets this manoeuvre became impossible.

“We are ready to move. Scouts still reporting increasing Staters activity in O'Connell St. Would it not be suicide to try and run the gauntlet in the face of our sheer weakness and their vast strength, to match our poorly armed men against better equipped forces? We would surely be slaughtered if we made the attempt to get through to the goal more than a half mile away.”

Instead Prendergast, Nalty and approximately 40 members of C Company were sent to Lower Gardiner Street with instructions to take over the Hughes Hotel (opposite Moran's Hotel which was already occupied).

“We put them in a state of defence, then extended our operations by tunnelling through the adjoining houses until we had taken possession of the line of buildings stretching from the corner of Deverelle Street to the corner of Talbot Street. During the progress of that work we had been reinforced by officers and men from other units ... in all the garrison numbered about seventy.”

Annie Norgrove was one of four women posted here. The Norgrove family were from Strandville Avenue off the North Strand. Five members of the family (both parents, one son

and two daughters) had served during the Easter Rising. Annie and her sister Emily were members of the Irish Citizen Army and the Irish Women's Workers Union.

The following day, the men received orders to move to a position on Upper O'Connell Street, placing them closer to the republican headquarters in the Gresham and Hamann Hotels. However, realising that this would leave those in Moran's vulnerable they questioned this order and as a result were told to remain where they were. A mine had been placed on the road outside Moran's earlier in the week and the men had watched eagerly for an opportunity to detonate it. However, while a Free State armoured car had passed close by on a number of occasions it never came close enough for an effective attack. On Saturday, the moment finally came, with unforeseen consequences:

"Suddenly one loud explosion is heard as the mine explodes, tumbling down a lot of our barricades at doors and windows and causing the buildings to quiver and shake. So violent was its impact that several of us were knocked to the ground. That was my fate. Confound the mine anyway! What a mess it left our position in. With our defences broken down and strewn about the rooms and in the hallways, our positions presented anything but a fortress then."

The situation was to deteriorate further:

"The Treaty forces had brought up an armoured railway engine on which they had erected a trench mortar to pound at our positions. That engine and the railway itself afforded them very good cover, as well as the fact that they held undisputed use of the railway system. In addition, they had the protection of the gable ends of houses which met the bridge at that point. Our men were not so well fitted to counter that move - the only effective fire they could deliver was through a few loopholes made in the walls of the corner house where only a few men could operate at a given time. These men had narrow escapes when

Irish Free State troops in action







Anti-Treaty I.R.A.  
on Grafton Street,  
1922

the missiles exploded about them, tearing holes in the wall. They could not be expected to perform wonders in the face of the form and the severity of the attack launched against their position. In great extremity they were forced to abandon their positions and to fall back to other positions, having to vacate what, up to then, had been our main offensive and defensive flank position.”

“During all that time our men behaved wonderfully cool, collected and determined, showing neither sign of hysteria or fuss, all under perfect control. The human factor, it could be seen, stood up to the strain imposed by the ordeal. Yet alas, it was only of secondary importance to that of armaments in deciding the issue of the fight. We had no means of checking the pace which the Treaty forces imposed, for already most of our men had nothing better than small arms to fight with. What was to be done under such adverse conditions?”

A decision was taken that twelve men (including O/C Prendergast) would remain to cover the withdrawal of the main body of men towards the O’Connell Street garrisons. Shortly afterwards, having fulfilled this duty, the men left behind had no option but to surrender to the numerically superior and better equipped pro-treaty forces. The Garrison at Moran’s had also been subject to an intense attack and had also withdrawn.

The main body of Republicans (under the leadership of Oscar Traynor and Cathal Brugha) were eventually contained at the Northern end of O’Connell Street within ‘the block’. This was a number of adjacent buildings which had been oc-

cupied, their walls knocked through to connect them, and a stronghold created. Now subjected to increasingly intense bombardment from the National Army, including incendiary rounds, the buildings were soon engulfed in flames. The men and women within were left with no option but to withdraw or surrender. Cathal Brugha, having ordered the last of those remaining to surrender, then emerged with a revolver and was shot down. The man who had survived an incredible 25 wounds during the Easter Rising would die from blood loss after a bullet severed an artery in his leg.

(Many years later in Spain, Jack was introduced, by 'Kit' Conway, to a Polish International Brigade commander as a man who had fought "by the side of Cathal Brugha in the Hamann Hotel").

After the events of the Battle of Dublin, Jack continued military action and was promoted to Captain before his arrest the following year, on the 26th March 1923. After being briefly placed in Mountjoy Prison he was transferred to the 'Glasshouse' at the Curragh where he would remain until later that year. His friend James Kinsella was also by his side at the Hughes Hotel and following his subsequent arrest on West Road was also interned and went on hunger strike for a period.

Jack summarised his Civil War experiences:

"... in July 1921 came the truce between the I.R.A. and the British Govt. Next a treaty was signed and accepted by some of our leaders and rejected by others. This resulted in the Civil war which broke out in June 1922 and ended with the defeat of the Republican forces in April 1923. As a member of the Republican forces I fought in the Dublin area till I was arrested in March 1923 and then was interned on the Curragh till the end of November of same year. On being released I reported back to my Coy, now very much depleted in numbers through various reasons."

Jacks sister Aggie shared reminiscences of this period with her daughter Peg:

"He was of course in the I.R.A. in those 'troubles'. She had some stories of soldiers looking for him, and searching for guns. Once there was a gun in some kind of seat in the

kitchen, but they didn't find it. Afterwards Mick took it to the shipyard with him and threw it in the sea. Don't know whether Jack was thankful for that or not." Another family member also recounted how Jack's mother would hide his guns on the outside windowsill during the raids.

## **"NALTY RAN WITH GREAT DETERMINATION"**



Nalty (front row, third from left) with the Dublin Harriers

During the period of the Civil War, many within the Republican movement had begun to look more closely at their own political beliefs and the movement's tactics. Sean McLoughlin, a member of the Communist Party and commander of an I.R.A. flying column wrote that "Victory lies

with the side that can attract to itself the masses, the workers of the towns and cities and the landless peasants. Republicans here is your chance. With the workers behind you, the Free State lapses into the black hell from whence it came." Within Mountjoy Jail, many Republicans had discussed broadening their political base and it is clear that leaders such as Liam Mellows were moving in a more left wing/socialist direction. Within the internment camps, similar discussions and change of focus was also evident. Jack was part of this trend:

"Through discussions in the internment camp I had begun to take an interest in working class politics and shortly after my release joined the Revolutionary Workers Group."

Another reminiscence shared by Aggie with her daughter concerns Jack's activity at this time:

"It seems in the twenties and thirties there were plenty of evictions, despite the fact that the 'terrible Brits' had gone. Jack used to help such people as he could."

He would also throw himself into trade union organisation, becoming a member of the ITGWU:

"I was also lucky in procuring work in another oil firm,



and as a result joined the Irish Transport & General Workers Union. After some two years I became a Union shop steward on the job, and oil delegate to the branch committee of the union”.

In 1934, he “was elected Chairman of the Oil section in my union. This Oil Section comprised the men in eight oil firms or a total of 600 men.”

During the years 1925 to 1933, he also pursued another interest, a long distance runner with the Dublin City Harriers, winning championships on numerous occasions and even representing Ireland in 1931. The records of the club reflect his achievements:

In the seasons 1925-26 and 1926-27, he won the Seven Miles Cross-country Club Championships.

In 1927-28 he dead heated for the title and won it again in 1932-33.

He is listed in individual performances in Cross-country Championships:

In 1927-28 – Second in the County Dublin Senior.

In 1928-29 –Third in the County Dublin Senior (“Nalty ran with great determination and finished a good third”).

In 1930-31 – Third in both the National Senior and the Connacht Province Senior.

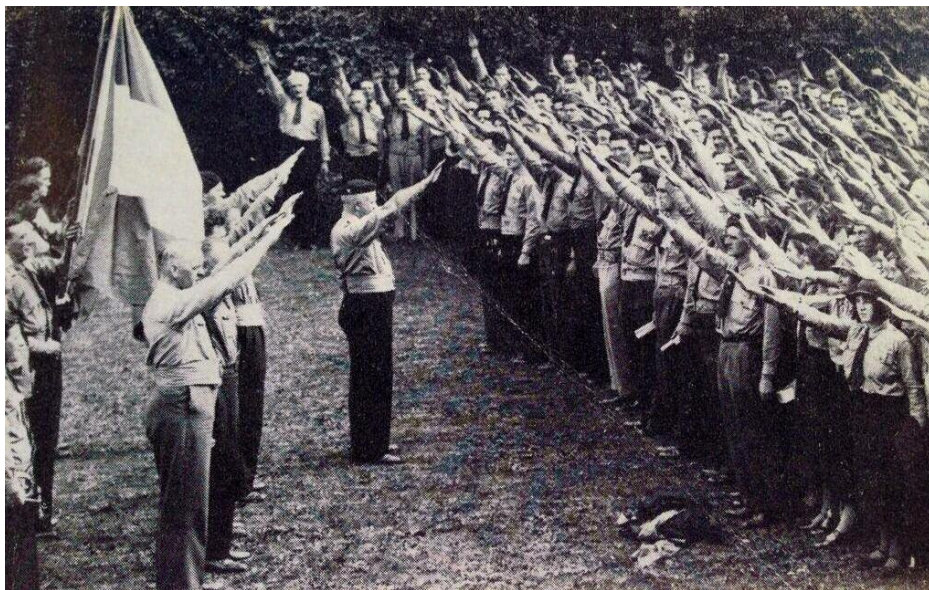
In 1931 he received International honours when he represented Ireland in the cross country team at Baldoye, County Dublin.



Nalty (front row, far right) with the Irish cross country team, 1931

## RED FLAGS AND BLUESHIRTS

The years from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s saw the I.R.A. (and the broader Republican movement) struggle with its own identity and tactical and ideological disagreements brewed within the movement. Discussions on military action versus social agitation divided activists with those looking to-



The fascist salute at a Blueshirt rally

wards socialist and communist politics becoming increasingly alienated from the traditionalists. In 1926, Éamonn de Valera had founded Fianna Fáil, which attracted widespread support from within the anti-treaty republican forces. The following year's election saw this new party win a substantial number of seats and abandon the abstensionist principle and enter Dáil Éireann. In 1932, the party came to power in the 26 county Free State. It suspended existing emergency powers, lifted the ban on organisations including the I.R.A. and released a number of prisoners. A surprise election was called in 1933 and Fianna Fáil was again returned comfortably.

These victories for Fianna Fáil, of course, meant defeat for Cumann naGaedheal. Pro-Treatyite forces formed the Army Comrades Association (more commonly known as the Blueshirts) with Eoin O'Duffy at its head. O'Duffy (former Garda Commissioner under the Cumann naGaedheal government) and other key figures were strongly influenced by the European fascism that was emerging at this time. They particularly admired the policies of Mussolini in Italy and adopted a Blueshirt uniform, the use of a straight arm salute and staging of showcase rallies, all characteristics of other such movements. The Blueshirts opposed the social policies of Fianna Fáil and broke up and opposed meetings of politi-

cal organisations they deemed communist.

Deeply conservative, in addition to groups that were avowedly socialist, they also denounced the broader republican movement, the I.R.A. and Fianna Fáil as ‘Reds’. The Blueshirts claimed a membership of 30,000 across the country and soon fistfights and escalating violence became commonplace as the opposing ideologies of left and right engaged in deeds not words. The Blueshirts movement was short lived. They announced a major parade to be held in Dublin in August 1933, a commemoration for Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins and Kevin O’Higgins. There had been rumours of a planned coup and establishment of a military dictatorship in Ireland and it was feared that the August rally was an attempt to imitate Mussolini’s ‘March on Rome’ that brought him to power. The march was banned by the Government, and shortly afterwards, the Blueshirts were designated an illegal organisation. A short time later, O’Duffy became leader of Fine Gael, a new party which included many former Blueshirts. After a disastrous showing at local elections the following year, O’Duffy left the new party, while continuing to nurture his European Fascist links.

Ironically, O’Duffy and Jack had known each other through sporting connections and it was said that O’Duffy admired him as an athlete and for a time was friendly towards him. Latterly Jack however, was among those that clearly identified with the movements and policies that O’Duffy and the Blueshirts detested.

“...to 1934 I was still a member of the I.R.A. and then because of my working class activities I became a member of the Irish C.P. (communist party) on its formation in 1933, within the I.R.A. I was dismissed from its ranks in

Cumann na  
nGaedheal election  
poster, 1932





Frank Ryan  
unveiling an Easter  
Rising memorial at  
Glasnevin in 1929

May 1934. For about three years before my dismissal I held the rank of Company Commander, and because of this many of my Company resigned. After this I gave my time solely to working class activities.”

Many years later Paddy Feehan told Steve Nugent (Jack’s nephew) of the circumstances of their dismissal which took place at a meeting in Hardwicke Hall:

“To their surprise, the Commanding Officer asked those of the battalion who were members of the Communist Party, or any other Socialist Party, to fall out. About 10, including Paddy and Jack, did so and were immediately expelled from the I.R.A. The C.O. saluted them as they left and said that it was a sad day to see them going.”

Paddy Feehan also recalled the last time he saw Jack which was in 1935 at the unveiling of the memorial to Liam Lynch in Goatenbridge, County Tipperary. Lynch had been Chief of Staff of the I.R.A. during the Civil War and had been shot dead by National Army troops in 1923. Despite torrential rain, the unveiling ceremony attracted up to 15,000 people, but as Paddy and Jack were no longer I.R.A. members at this time, they had to observe the proceedings from a separate field.

## THE WORKERS’ REPUBLIC

Jack had been a member of the short-lived Saor Éire in 1931. This had been a radical departure within the IRA, the establishment of a political organisation dedicated to the ‘workers republic’. An Phoblacht, the republican newspaper edited by I.R.A. leader Frank Ryan, enthusiastically reported on the activities and political programme of the new organisation. However, the Cumann NaGaedhal government was alarmed by this radical departure and the Catholic Church



condemned what they described as an effort to “mobilise the workers and working farmers of Ireland behind a revolutionary movement to set up a Communist state. That is to impose upon the Catholic soil of Ireland the same materialistic regime, with its fanatical hatred of God, as now dominates Russia and threatens to dominate Spain.”



Republican  
Congress march at  
Bodenstown, 1934

Having been identified by the bishops as ‘sinful and irrereligious’ both the I.R.A. and Saor Éire were proscribed and An Phoblacht was suppressed. In an era where Red scare propaganda was used as a tool by both the Church and conservative political opponents, the I.R.A. became increasingly concerned about being identified with radical social policies.

Jack continued with his membership of the Communist Party and became Chairman of the Dublin Group. He and Paddy Feehan would remain active together within the Republican Congress, in a time when their political and trade union activity would intensify. Jack described this period:

“In 1934 was formed the United Front movement against Fascism, called the Republican Congress, and I became a member on its formation. In 1935 in Feb I took part in a mass picket and was sentenced with twenty other comrades to six weeks in prison. On my release I continued my activities but after about one month of freedom I was again arrested with about 40 more men and sent to the Military Detention Barracks on the Curragh. This time the crime was for being a Republican and after being five weeks in prison I was brought before a military court comprised of three high military officers, one colonel and two majors and sentenced to one months imprisonment from date of arrest, which meant I was there and then released.”

As outlined above, in 1935 imprisonment became an occupational hazard for Jack and his companions. A bitter strike for Trade Union recognition at Bacon Shops Ltd

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L. No. 8.

SATURDAY, JUNE 23, 1934

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## DISGRACEFUL SCENE AT TONE PILGRIMAGE

### ATTACK ON BELFAST REPUBLICANS

**by Order of I.R.A. Leaders**

Republican Congress forces had to fight for their banners at the Wolfe Tone Commemoration on Sunday last. The most astounding and shameful feature of the scene was that Protestant workers from Shankill Road and Ballymurn had led off their banners too—in this, their first appearance at the scene.

Some Independent and Unionist demonstrators also appeared at the scene. But it was the Republican Congress forces who were the main attraction. They were led by the late Willie Burke, who was killed in the 1916 Rising. The march was a very successful one, and the Congress forces were well represented.

## ALLEGED ASSAULT IN BRAY

### Woman Knocked Unconscious

That the wife of an unemployed man was refused her supply of free milk, smashed and knocked unconscious. These allegations are made by a **Big** correspondent in a report which we give hereafter.

**(From a Big Correspondent.)**

I was able to make it myself to the scene of the alleged assault. I was told that the woman was knocked unconscious by a man who was with her. The woman was taken to hospital, and the man was arrested. The woman's husband is unemployed, and the woman is the wife of a man who is unemployed.

## ARMED RAID ON SCABS

### AT DE SELBY QUARRIES

The special authority shows the part of the strike. The strike was a very successful one, and the Congress forces were well represented.



Shankill Road Contingent at Connolly's Grave.

## FROM SHANKILL ROAD TO CONNOLLY'S GRAVE

### Northmen at Arbour Hill

Republican Congress,  
23rd June 1934

throughout Dublin was supported by Republican, left wing and Union activists. Jack was amongst twenty men committed to Mountjoy Jail for their support activities. This imprisoned group also included Charlie Donnelly and Denis 'Dinny' Coady, fellow Republican Congress members who would

both die two years later in the early days of the Spanish conflict. Jack had just served his sentence when he was again arrested and imprisoned, this time during the even more bitter Tram and Bus strike. The Free State Army had been used as strike breakers and the I.R.A. and socialist groups had called for action in support of the workers. A 'round up the usual suspects' response had led to his imprisonment at the Curragh. Others jailed at this time included Bill Scott and Charlie Clarke, who would also serve in the Spanish conflict in the following years.

The bitter transport strike had begun in Dublin on March 3rd and lasted for 76 days. The government called on the Free State Army to supply trucks and drivers for transport. There was sniping at lorry tyres and two Gardaí were shot. The I.R.A., the Republican Congress and the Communist Party condemned the Government's use of the Army for strike breaking purposes in a labour situation involving a private monopoly of Dublin Transportation. They called for the organised support of all those who stood for decent working and social conditions. The call for support, particularly that issued by the Council of the I.R.A., alarmed the Government. They responded with house raids and arrests, with 44 men taken into custody. Many of these were soon released after interrogation but others received sentences ranging from 6 to 18 months. Jack's charges were listed as "being a mem-

ber of an unlawful association” and “failing and refusing to give an account of his movements when demanded by a member of the Garda Siochana.”

His file from this period of arrest and internment gives his occupation as ‘storeman’ and his physical description as 5' 10", 161 lbs., dark brown hair, brown eyes and with a “fresh” complexion. His visitors at this time included his mother and his cousin Sean O’Beirne along with political associates Frank Ryan and Roddy Connolly. Upon his release, the sum of ten shillings and four pence were returned to him.

Jack also had some more personal matters to address during this time as his employer did not look favourably on his activities and particularly, his long absences due to incarceration:

“On my release I applied for my job but only succeeded in getting it after the men on the job threatened strike action. From this on to the time I came to Spain I was engaged in getting better conditions and pay for the workers engaged in the oil firms, with much success.”

As member of both the Communist Party and the Republican Congress, Jack became part of a close knit group of leading activists which also included Bill Gannon (from Jane Place, North Wall), Sean Murray (from Belfast but living in Dublin), Denis Coady and Kit Conway. These men, along with founding member and leading strategist of the Republi-



Above: Nalty's parents in the back garden of No. 11, East Wall Road (now renumbered as 22)

Below: Seaview House as it looks today



Nalty's sister Maisie  
on O'Connell  
Bridge, late 1930s

can Congress Peader O'Donnell, and I.R.A. leader Frank Ryan, would become instrumental in mobilising Irish support for the Spanish Republic in 1936. Leading by example, they were early volunteers in the International Brigades formed in response to the European Fascist offensive.

A Detective Special Branch report compiled in the early 1940's recorded that Jack's sister Maisie Nalty had acted as a courier for

the I.R.A. when her brother was a member. In its assessment of Jack it stated that he "went over to the congress party", was "definitely communistic", and had fought on the side of the "Reds" in Spain. They believed Maisie shared these views, but despite fresh surveillance and inquiries they concluded that "so far nothing has transpired that would connect her in any way with the I.R.A. or any other illegal organisation". Her employment at May Roberts Pharmaceutical was not adversely affected.

Jacks sister Margaret, known as Peg got married in 1928 to Barney Nugent. He was part of the famous local family of horse breeders, based at Seaview House, Church Road. They moved to The Ward, County Dublin. They had two children (Jim and Steve), but sadly in August of 1934 Peg died of TB at the age of 33. In 1936, the Nalty family (both parents along with Mick, Maisie, Kathleen and Jack) moved from East Wall to 1 Merville Terrace, Convent Avenue, in Fairview. Shortly after the move, Jacks sister Aggie and her daughter Peg came from Carrowkeel to spend Christmas with the family. When they arrived they were disappointed to find that Jack had left for Spain to join the International Brigades and Mick had been asked at the last minute to go to sea. After the holiday season, on the day that Aggie and Peg were leaving to return home, word reached the family that Jack had been wounded.



## BACKGROUND TO THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

Spain in the early 20th Century was politically, economically and socially still rooted in the past. An ultra-conservative monarchy, the country still retained an almost feudal system with an aristocratic, land-owning class, a powerful army strictly controlled by aristocratic officers and a dominant Catholic Church that aligned itself with the ruling class and maintained this status quo. Poverty, along with primitive and miserable living conditions was the reality for the peasant workers and the working class in the slowly developing industrial sectors. There was a growing desire for change in the country, not just from the workers and peasants, but also by many in the professional classes. This had been strongly resisted by the aristocracy, the military and the church.

In the years following World War I Spain suffered a major economic slump. The working class responded through the increasingly militant stance of the Trade Union movement and the impoverished rural poor began to seize land for their own use. In 1923, influenced by Italian Fascist leader Benito Mussolini, there was a coup leading to the imposition of a military dictatorship. Miguel Primo de Rivera became leader with the blessing of King Alfonso XIII. The dictatorship was poorly led and saw three changes of leadership in a short period of time. In the following years, popular opposition intensified and by 1931, the King had no choice but to abdicate. The Spanish Republic was proclaimed in April of 1931, and



Republican  
propaganda poster  
from the Spanish  
Civil War

a new progressive constitution was soon introduced. Its wide reaching measures saw the aristocracy stripped of any legal status, a separation of the powers of church and state and the extension of voting rights to women. It established legal procedures for the nationalisation of public services, land, banks, and railways and all of the country's regions (such as Catalonia and the Basque Country) had a right to exercise their autonomy. Provision for a wide range of social reforms and the protection of civil liberties was included also.

An election in 1933 saw a coalition of right wing and conservative parties take power and suspend many of the reforms the constitution was implementing. In some areas, workers responded with strike action and the autonomous Government of Catalonia resisted, leading to their suppression by the Army. In a foreshadowing of events to come, General Francisco Franco earned the name the "Butcher of Asturias" for his brutality in crushing a miners revolt in the region, including the deliberate destruction of much of the city of Oviedo.

Early in 1936, another election was called. The various republican and working class organisations established the Popular Front to contest the election. Despite many political differences, communist, socialist, republican and other groups came together (supported by Trade Unions and regional separatist movements) and realised that unity was essential to implement and defend the reforms of the Republican Constitution. The Popular Front won the election and once again pushed forward with change. Spanish Fascists now plotted to bring

Republican  
propaganda poster  
from the Spanish  
Civil War



about another military coup. The Falange Party, led by son of dictator Primo de Rivera, and Spanish Monarchists orchestrated opposition to the Popular Front Government and street violence and murder became commonplace. Despite the deliberately moderate tone of the new Government, there

had been calls for the army to intervene and a declaration that soldiers should save Spain from Communism if “there are no politicians capable of doing so.”

On the 17th July 1936, the Military Coup began. Instigated by the Generals and led by Franco, their forces gathered in Morocco (a Spanish colony). With the use of transport planes provided by Nazi Germany, these insurgent forces soon launched an assault on Spanish soil as military units across the country also took up arms against the Government. However, the swift victory expected by Franco was foiled when his Nationalist Army met fierce resistance. The workers in many parts of the country, including those in the major cities, were loyal to the Republic. In many areas the Government issued weapons to hastily formed militias while in some places, workers armed themselves and faced down the rebel troops. With his rapid advance slowed down, Franco built up his forces, consolidated the support from Germany and Italy and for the next three years slowly wore down the Republican forces, devastating the country and at the cost of half a million lives. While the conflict is most commonly referred to as ‘The Spanish Civil War’ many would argue that it is best described as the ‘anti-fascist war’.

Britain and France instigated a ‘Non-intervention Pact’ which was signed up to by 27 countries. At this stage, both countries were engaged in a policy of appeasement with Nazi Germany. The Free State Government would introduce its



Republican propaganda poster from the Spanish Civil War

own legislation the following year, known as the “Spanish Civil War (Non-Intervention) Act, 1937”.

Germany and Italy supported Franco even in the planning stages of the coup and continued to do so. The Nazi contribution of men and material (including bombers and fighter planes) was ultimately crucial to the insurgent victory. Mexico and the Soviet Union declared their support for the Republican side, and the Soviets delivered military expertise and equipment. However, taking into account geographical and political concerns, the policy of Non Intervention and subsequent embargo would restrict the capability of Republican supporters to act, while Fascist supporters could operate freely.

Author, and participant in the conflict, George Orwell later argued: “The outcome of the Spanish war was settled in London, Paris, Rome, Berlin — at any rate not in Spain.”

### **“THE SPANISH TRENCHES ARE HERE IN IRELAND”**

The Fascist aggression against the democratic government of Spain resonated around the world and led to an unprecedented response of support. Very quickly, an International Brigade was established and attracted volunteers from all over the world offering their lives in the military resistance to Franco’s fascist forces. In Ireland, many eyes were turned towards the Spanish conflict and while the left wing, socialist and Republican movements debated (and argued) on how they should best respond, Ireland’s conservative forces and domestic fascists were clearer on their intentions.

The Republican Congress and the Communist Party of Ireland immediately began to organise not only propaganda and financial support for Republican Spain, but also to plan for joining the Brigades. Ironically, Frank Ryan (whose courageous and talented leadership has made his name synonymous with the International Brigades), was at first reluctant to commit to the formation of an Irish military contingent, arguing that “the Spanish trenches are here in Ireland.” Among those most vocal in their support was Peadar O’Donnell, he had actually been in Barcelona when the Fascist coup began.



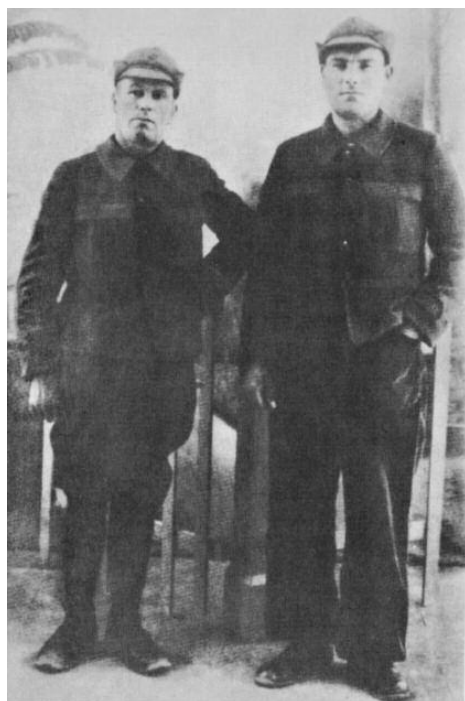
1936 was the year of the Berlin Olympics and many correctly anticipated that this would be a showcase for Nazi Germany. In response, the Spanish government announced that they would not only boycott the event but would host a People's Olympiad in Barcelona. A total of 6,000 athletes from 22 nations registered with support coming from trade unions, workers associations, socialist and communist parties, other left wing groups and political exiles from the Nazis. This event was scheduled to begin when the attempted coup was launched. Many of those who were there to participate became involved with the workers' militias that were quickly formed, and so became the first international volunteers. Peadar O'Donnell had been there to attend the Olympiad and having witnessed the organic birth of the International Brigades, was committed to this approach.

The deliberations by anti-fascist elements in Ireland took place against a skilfully waged propaganda war, a re-invigorated Red-scare and deliberate distortions of fact. The Catholic Church was instrumental in this and soon collections were taking place outside Mass in support of "Catholic Spain" and the Fascist rebels. Stories of nuns being raped and priests being massacred by the Government/Republican forces soon became commonplace. The truth however, was more complex.

A public meeting at the Gaiety Theatre heard from Basque priest, Ramon Laborda, who argued strongly that the Spanish conflict was not a religious war but a political one. Describing Franco as "a blood thirsty militarist who had dragged thousands of innocent and defenceless citizens from their homes, beat them and then shot them" he also clarified that the Spanish Republican Government was not communist but was, in fact, a coalition of many parties. The Spanish Republican Government had implemented reforms which included the



Poster for the 1936 People's Olympiad in Barcelona



Nalty (right) with  
friend Paddy Duff

separation of the power of church and state but as Nationalist forces seized areas, they promoted Church dominance again. Father Laborda also indicated that much of the animosity towards the churches was often as a result of those churches facilitating Fascist meetings. Despite his first-hand experience of events, his factual account was dismissed. He was described as “blindly biased” and a planned meeting at Queens University, Belfast, was cancelled. At the Ulster Hall, he was shouted down by shouts of “Up Franco!” and “What about the murder of nuns?”

The *Irish Independent* newspaper was, of course, at the forefront of this sensationalism and just weeks

into the attempted coup was referring to an “Anti-Red Crusade for Spain” and explicitly endorsed Eoin O’Duffy as being “sincere in his motives to lead a band of missionaries to a country where the forces of evil were striking a deadly blow at the Catholic Church.” O’Duffy had seen his once-powerful Blueshirt movement become almost irrelevant and saw this as an opportunity to re-invigorate Irish Fascism. Standing at the site of the assassination of Michael Collins, he proclaimed that if Collins were alive, he would have been leading the Crusade to Spain. His bluster did not go unnoticed – a Spanish aristocrat in London used Cardinal MacRory as an intermediary to contact O’Duffy and suggested he raise “a volunteer army” to support the Spanish Nationalist/Fascists. O’Duffy dutifully obliged (possibly with financial support promised from the *Irish Independent*).

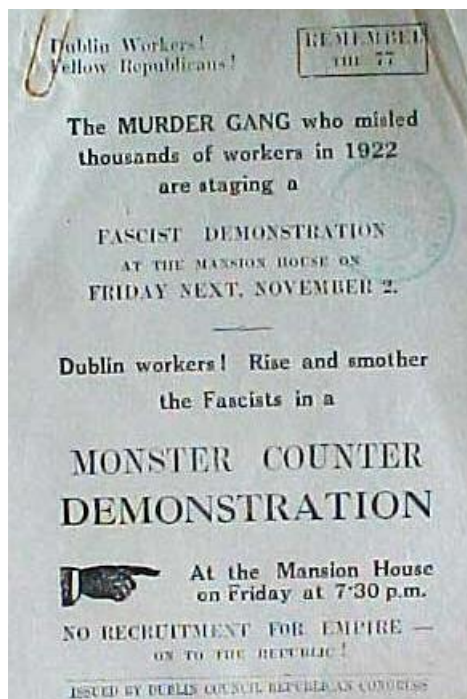
Following his return from a visit to Spain, 6,000 men across Ireland answered his call. Naturally, some committed Blueshirt fascists responded but so too did many who believed the propaganda and saw this as defending their

Catholic faith. Eventually, an approximate 600 travelled to Spain where their contribution was less than inspiring. They suffered a small number of casualties (inflicted by fellow fascists), were poorly disciplined (at one stage hesitating to obey orders to go into combat) and had been seen as an embarrassment by Franco and were dismissed from service in June of 1937. Brendan Behan (who had tried to join the International Brigades but was not accepted by Frank Ryan due to his age) sagely remarked that they had achieved “the remarkable military feat of returning home with more men than they went out with.”

### **“ALL PEOPLES WHO ARE THE VICTIMS OF TYRANNY”**

It was in this poisonous atmosphere of propaganda and during the Blueshirt mobilisation in support of European Fascism, that a decision to organise Irish volunteers to defend the Spanish Republic and fight Fascism was taken. Those who made this commitment clearly understood the political import of what they were doing. The Dublin Brigadier Bob Doyle later explained his motivation: “I thought there was a danger that Ireland would go fascist and that was one of the motivating factors in making up my mind to go to Spain. I didn't know much about Spain, but I knew my thoughts were that every bullet I fired would be against the Dublin landlords and capitalists.”

There is no doubt that Eoin O'Duffy's personal involvement was a special challenge that provoked the left. While many believed that they had smashed O'Duffy's bid to set up a fascist dictatorship in Ireland and that his presence in Spain was irrelevant, others who joined were said to be looking for a chance to re-fight both the Blueshirts and the Irish Civil War on Spanish soil. Of the more than 300 Irishmen who fought for the Spanish Republic, the majority were working class, coming from Belfast, Dublin, Cork, Waterford and similar regions. Most of them had been through years of economic depression and were considered to belong to communities which were among the poorest in Europe. They had fought strikes



Poster for an anti-fascist demonstration at the Mansion House, called by the Dublin Council of the Republican Congress

and on the streets. Some believed the war in Spain was identical to the struggle against economic exploitation at home and were spurred on by political idealism. A desire for adventure, discontent at home, poverty, and an inability to settle down may have been a factor for others but the main motive was the need to respond to the fascist challenge. “*Antifascita*” had a very real meaning for Ireland, as the Blueshirt movement had clearly aligned itself with movements in Italy, Germany and Spain. Once claiming 30,000 members, they had the potential to become a powerful fascist body in Europe.

On Sunday 13th December 1936, five hundred men of O’Duffy’s Christian Brigade set sail from Galway Bay aboard the *SS Urundi*, flying under the Nazi swastika flag. A few days earlier, the first men destined for the International Brigades had left Dublin on the Liverpool ferryboat. Jack Nalty was among them.

At the Quayside Frank Ryan spoke to newspaper reporters and outlined the motivations of his group as:

“a demonstration of the sympathy of revolutionary Ireland against international fascism. It is also a reply to the intervention of Irish fascism in the war against the Spanish Republic which, if unchallenged would remain a disgrace on our people. We want to show that there is a close bond between the democracies of Ireland and Spain. Our fight is the fight of the Spanish people, as it is of all peoples who are the victims of tyranny.”

According to Ryan, the volunteers included “members of the Republican Congress, the Labour and Communist parties, the I.R.A. and trade unions.”



## “IN LEST THAN AN HOUR WE GOT OUT ON PARADE”

The group travelled via London, through Paris, arriving at Perpignan on December 14th. They travelled quite openly, crossing the Spanish frontier by railway through the tunnel under the Pyrenees to the collecting point at the old fortress-like barracks overlooking Figueras. In addition to Ryan and Nalty, this group included Jack's close friends Paddy Duff and Donal O'Reilly along with Joe Monks, Kit Conway, Jim Prendergast and Frank Edwards. All were experienced and committed activists.

They reached Albacete, the headquarters of the International Brigades on December 16th having journeyed in a packed and slow moving train through Barcelona, often to cheering crowds, welcoming them at stations en route. Albacete had been strategically chosen because it was on main railway lines and also had good road connectivity to most of the front-line zones to the north, west and south. The headquarters was in a large villa built around a courtyard and operated as the Brigades H.Q. until the conflict ended. Jack was among the group of new recruits who were shaped into a military unit at Madrigueras, a nearby village, situated on a plain of vine and wheat fields. It was recalled that on the first day of manoeuvres a Dubliners voice sang out:

*In lest than an hour we got out on parade,  
The Red Volunteers from the Dublin Brigade.*

After barely a week of training, the men were moved into frontline positions. There were some that believed that a longer training period was necessary but as many of the Irish had military backgrounds, they found themselves quickly drafted into ad hoc units. While some tensions between the Irish and

The flag of the  
Connolly Column



British volunteers emerged and flared up at times, for most of the campaign they were united by their common cause. Naturally enough, language differences would create some problems and it was important to ensure volunteers and their leaders could communicate efficiently. While the Irish maintained a distinct identity, they served for a short time within an English-speaking United States group but for most of the duration within the British Battalion. The fact that their first Captain, George Nathan, was a former member of the Royal Irish Constabulary and British Army created some difficulties but he proved himself under fire and was later described as “resourceful, brave and respected by all”.

It was in these early stages that the Connolly Column was instigated. International Brigade Battalions often adopted a name closely associated with their own national heroes – the American Abraham Lincoln Battalion, the Canadian Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, German Thaelmann Battalion etc. so it is no surprise that the Irish looked to James Connolly as their inspiration. Joe Monks recalls:

“Back in the billet the Irish held a unique political meeting which Nathan attended. An Irish Unit, a section of 43 men, had been formed by Captain Nathan at the behest of Frank Ryan. This was done purposefully for the home front so that the Irish Race could read and hear of the Irish anti-Fascist fighters... Nathan referred to the fact that he had served in Ireland with the Crown forces. He specified that he had been with military intelligence in County Limerick. His exact words were: ‘We have all grown up politically. We are Socialists together now.’ The meeting responded to the spirit of his speech and clapped him.”

To the amazement of the men, it was ‘Kit’ Conway, and not Frank Ryan, who was appointed Section Commander. Ryan explained that he had organisational matters to address at headquarters. He bade farewell to the men:

“Sorry boys that I am not going with you. You will obey orders and uphold the honour of Ireland. But do not be needlessly careless with your lives because Spain needs you, and above all Ireland needs you.”

There would be one final, short calm before the storm.

Some of the men had a quiet Christmas Day and “by front line standards, our Christmas meal of tinned meat, bread and sour white wine had been good.” Stephen’s Day saw the men in reserve positions and “there was a pleasant feeling of relaxation... Most of the laughter came from a group of youths that included Charlie Hutchinson, a London Eastender, Jock Maguire and Dubliner Tommy Woods who were listening to John Cornford, Jock Cunningham, Joe Hicks and Sam Russell, the men from Madrid.”

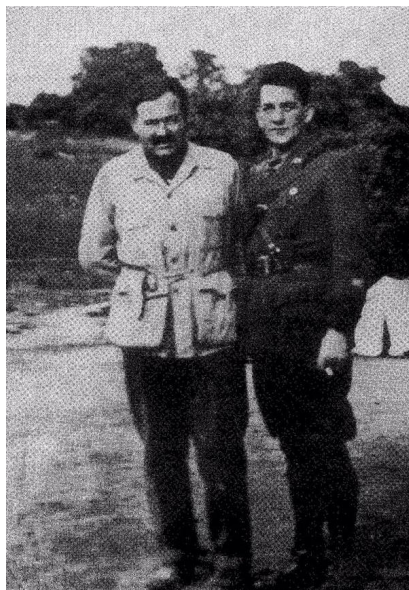
It was early on the 27th December that Brigade Commander General Walter visited the Battalion:

“Walter was Polish and had a special smile for the Irish. He told Kit Conway that he had studied the two periods, the two battles for O’Connell Street, and Kit then called Jack Nalty forward to shake hands with the General. Kit told how Nalty had been by the side of Cathal Brugha in the Hamman Hotel.” This conversation aside, it was not a social visit. The men were being moved to the frontline.

The Cork born Brigadier Michael O’Riordan had an amusing story of the last moments before they moved off:

“There was a wait for food that was delayed in coming. O’Reilly and Nalty saw a herd of goats nearby, and proceeded to milk them, procuring almost a quart of that delicious liquid, making the best use of the Spanish words they had, they succeeded in getting it heated, but never succeeded in drinking it, as the draft then moved off and they had to go ‘on the double’ to join in.”

Joe Monks picks up the story: “As it is in all wars, a lot of time was spent in waiting and on the morning of the 27th December we had to settle down to wait on the lorries. Ralph Fox, seated on one of the stanchions explained to us that we had a very easy task to perform. It was simply matter of taking back the next pueblo, Villa del Rio, which was needlessly



Frank Ryan (left)  
with author Ernest  
Hemingway

lost by an inefficient Spanish unit on the 24th December. Nathan ordered the quick march. No Lorries apparently were available so we set out to march to the firing line...the marching men began to chant in time with the step:

*So left, two, three; so left, two, three; to the work that we must do,  
March on in the workers' united front for you are a worker too,  
Fascist bullets, fascist bombers make our land a smoking mass,  
Hurrah for courage, hurrah for bravery. At Madrid they did not pass!"*

### **“OUR BAPTISM OF FIRE”**

Monks continued the story: “Before reaching the main road the Company swept past an old shepherd. He stood beside his donkey. His sheep were huddled in a ditch by the side of the road. We saw that the peasant’s smock stretched down to the knees of his trousers. His stumps of teeth were tobacco stained; but his eyes were bright and full of admiration for us. He lifted his clenched fist.

“‘Salud Companeros.’

“His smile crinkled the whole of his face which was as dry and as gray as the soil itself.

“‘Ask yer man where he got the hat?’

“All who heard the question and understood it laughed. Captain Nathan laughed. The Dublin teenager who asked the question and his companions could see for themselves that the old man’s face beneath the broad-brimmed Cordoba hat remained unchanged. Again the old man shouted “Salud Companeros!”, and they liked to think that he had a stake in the fight, and wished them to win.

“Crossing the main road, we learned from a directional sign arrowed to the west that it was 74 kilometres to the city of Cordoba. We took the highroad going south. Three antiquated trucks met us on the way. The drivers turned them about and the H.Q. Section with half the Irish Section soon

filled these small 30 cwt. vehicles. Nathan ordered the remainder of the Company to keep marching; the trucks would do the necessary trips to get everybody forward. Instead of going on directly to Lopera the route took a right turn and we were deposited on the approach to Villa del Rio where a sunken road went south to link up with the road that connected Villa del Rio and Lopera.

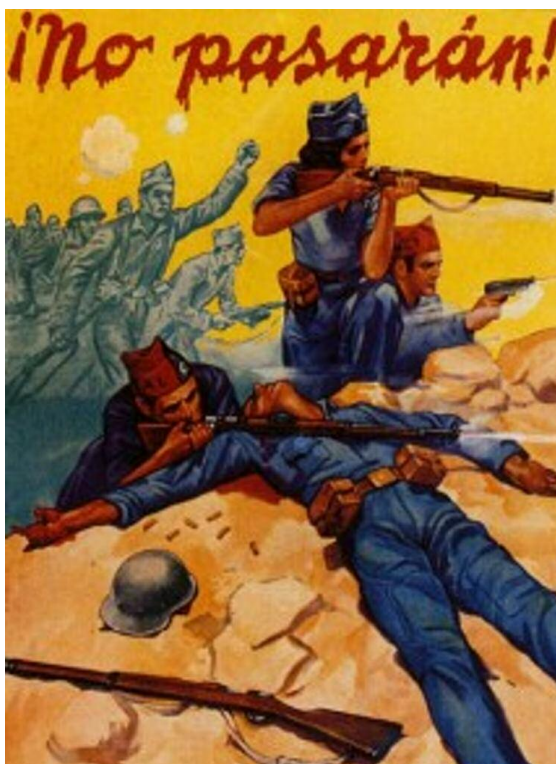
“Our baptism of fire took place when enemy planes came into the area and strafed the road with the neighbouring olive plantations time and time again...

“The planes continued to strafe, and two Comrades Newsome and Segal, were killed. A group of Dubliners that had got friendly with the Londoner Segal were beside him, beneath the same tree, at the time. He was killed outright. It shocked them that death had come to him instantly and that without a murmur he was gone from them. They lifted his body onto a blanket and rested his head upon a satchel. But, like lightning, Captain Nathan came among them. Taking a quick look at the dead volunteer he asked seriously if anybody needed a pair of boots. He herded the Dubliners out onto the road remarking that there was no time to have an Irish wake.”

It was during an advance under fire that Jack Nalty was briefly placed in a leadership position by Kit Conway:

“Captain Nathan was at the head of affairs. He was unperturbed by the rifle fire. Playing it by ear, as it were, he knew that the bullets were harmlessly going high

“For a little while he let the Sections come into line to rest



‘¡No Pasaran!’:  
Republican  
propaganda poster  
from the Spanish



on high ground where a windbreak of tall trees gave them cover. The men, each out of breath and sweating, cast off poncho-blankets or greatcoats whilst shoals of bullets raked the branches, showering them with twigs and leaves.

“Then, gesticulating vigorously with his stick, Nathan led a race downhill to a stream that flowed past the base of a mighty ridge. We leaped across the water and, again out of breath, reached the lee of the ridge.

“Gaining its crest, Nathan went over the skyline on his belly like a lizard. Elsewhere on the slopes he was mostly to be seen on one knee, using his field glasses. At one point during this advance the Irish were first to gain the crest of one of the ridges, and Kit Conway called for a volunteer to scout ahead. The general attitude was please let us have a breather and on the instant none volunteered. Taken aback Conway instantly handed the command over to Jack Nalty and, upholding the precept that a leader should not ask his men to do what he was not prepared to do himself, set off to scout the ground. However, he was soon back and Nathan, having reached the crest, ordered the general advance to continue.

“Low on the next down slope, safe from the bullets, Captain Nathan stopped. From the crouched running position he rose to his full height and, by spreading his arms, he called upon the men to halt.

“‘Cheer!’ he commanded. ‘Give them something to fear!’

“Standing in ordered Sections they did raise a mighty cheer.

“‘Charge!’ Following him and the stick that he swung above his head, they went in a rush over the intervening hollow and, moving at speed, started climbing the next slope. On the next crest he, with Cunningham, Conway, Fox and Hinks, got down to the prone Position and carefully looking over the crest surveyed the position whilst bullets like hailstones thudded upon the ground.”

Donal O'Reilly, another Dublin Republican and trade unionist remembers: “The fire is terrific. The language is terrific. Joe Monks is hit. Prendergast's and Dinny Coady's guns are shot to pieces. Bits of guns fly and we think we're all hit.” Their forward momentum continues.

## “JACK IS BADLY HIT. I THINK HE IS FINISHED...”

At dawn, they were just 350 yards from their goal of Villa Del Rio. They held back briefly, waiting for artillery support. As the shells begin to fall, they advanced. However, many of the shells were failing to explode and the fascists counter attacked. It is at this stage that Jack was caught in a burst of machine-gun fire.

Donal O'Reilly witnessed his companion being struck: “Kit Conway spreads us out. Duff, Nalty and myself are on the edge of the road. We realise we are now fighting a rear-guard action. Cummins and Gough are wounded and move back. Jack Nalty is hit. I won't look. Paddy Duff attends him. I glance and see both sides of Jack's chest is hit. I feel I must cry or act the pig, so I go back to the gun for relief. It's clear Jack is badly hit. I think he is finished... We advise Jack to start making his own way back. We'll cover the ground later perhaps. Jack crawls away”.

Frank Ryan, in a letter sent a few weeks later (while he was recovering from a bullet wound in his arm) commented: “Jack Nalty was caught in machine gun fire. He had three bullets in his chest and his right arm was broken. He picked up his rifle and slung it on the good shoulder, caught up the broken arm and walked three kilometres to the field hospital. ‘Others need stretchers more’ he said. Of course, a man with such an iron constitution is alive and on the mend today.” In a separate letter he noted “His absence is a great loss to the crowd.”

Eight Irish Brigadiers were killed in this bruising encounter, including 17-year-old Tommy Wood. Several others were injured, including Joe Monks. Jack's record of that eventful month simply states:

“I reached Spain with six other comrades on Dec. 8th '36 and after three weeks training in the English speaking Coy.



Nalty at the seafront during his recovery

We went into action on the Cordoba front on Dec. 27th. On the following day I received three bullets from a machine gun and spent three months in hospital."

### **"EVEN THE OLIVES ARE BLEEDING"**

While Jack was in hospital, his Irish companions continued their campaign and he would never see some of them again. Dinny Coady fell on the Madrid front. His death was described by Frank Edwards who was wounded in the same incident:

"We were lying in position on a ridge. Dinny Coady lay near me with another Irishman, Pat Murphy, between us. A shell landed between Coady and Murphy. I immediately felt a sharp pain in my side. Murphy screamed. I glanced towards him; He was enveloped in a cloud of smoke and dust. But I could see his face – he was ghastly pale. I got up and walked down to a ravine where our Company Headquarters section was posted, and told them to send up a stretcher at once. I thought Murphy had been badly hit. Then I got a Red Cross man to rip my clothes off. I had a very deep wound under my left armpit and a slight scratch on my leg. While I was being dressed the stretcher-bearers came back with a body. Someone pulled back the blanket, and I saw his face. It was Dinny Coady. I got a hell of shock – perhaps because I had known him longer than any of the other lads."

He was buried at Torredodenes, with his comrades. Kit Conway fired three volleys over his grave. Frank Ryan described him as "A true man and a fine soldier."

In February, Charlie Donnelly and Kit Conway were among the men who lost their lives at the Battle of Jarama, a key engagement which halted the fascist advance on Madrid.

A Canadian Brigadier witnessed the last moments of Charlie Donnelly's life:

"We ran for cover, Charlie Donnelly, the commander of an Irish company is crouched behind an olive tree. He has picked up a bunch of olives from the ground and is squeezing them. I hear him say something quietly between a lull in machine gun fire: Even the olives are bleeding."

Minutes later, Donnelly was caught in a burst of gunfire. He was struck three times, in the right arm, the right side and the head, falling dead instantly. His body lay on the battlefield for days until it was recovered by Waterford man Peter O'Connor. He was buried in an unmarked grave with several of his comrades.

James Prendergast described the passing of Conway:

"I reach the hill-crest where Kit is directing fire. He is using a rifle himself and pausing every while to give instructions. Suddenly he shouts, his rifle spins out of his hand, and he falls back. He is placed on a blanket. No stretchers left now. His voice is broken with agony. 'Do your best boys, hold on.' Tears glisten in our eyes. Many are from other companies. But all remember Kit at Cordova and Madrid. His gallant leadership then and today won them all. Kit is taken away. I see Ken Stalker. He is the only experienced man left. I run to him and he takes command. In the ambulance I meet Kit. He is in terrible agony and can talk little. 'How are the rest?' is his constant question. Next morning they told me our great leader was dead."

Ken Stalker from Dundee would himself die later that day, shot through the head.

*The Worker* newspaper remembered Conway:

"A fascist bullet has robbed this country of a great Irishman, a gallant soldier of liberty, a fighter for democracy and freedom against Fascist tyranny. It has deprived the building trade workers, the labourers especially, of a doughty warrior for trade union rights. The Irish Transport Workers' Union has lost a devoted member and the Irish Communist Party one of its men of promise. But our gallant Comrade has not died in vain. His life of sacrifice and struggle for his country and class, his death on the battlefield facing the mercenaries of Franco and O'Duffy Fascists will call forth hundreds of men to fill his place. With



(From top) Charlie Donnelly, Dinny Coady and Kit Conway

Comrade Conway fell another Dublin worker, Mick Nolan, a devoted adherent of the republican and working-class movement.”

Captain George Nathan would also fall, struck by shrapnel during an aerial bombardment during the Battle of Brunette on 17th July 1937.

### **“...THE CAUSE OF DEMOCRACY MUST WIN”**

After his three-month recovery in hospital, Jack was posted to the officer training school in April. On the 10th of May, he rejoined the British Battalion which included a handful of other survivors of No. 1 Company from the Cordoba front. In July, he was ordered back to Dublin to work on gaining more support for the Spanish Republican Government. Before returning to Dublin with Paddy Duff, he received a commendation for his bravery. Also before his return, he had a final encounter with Frank Ryan, on the occasion the iconic group photo was taken. In a letter to Dublin Frank Ryan wrote: “I’ve spent several days back at base with Edwards, Prendergast, Monks and Nalty. They are on the road to you now. We had beer – and that’s an event in this country. And we had our photographs taken- I sent it to the Democrat yesterday. Down here it’s boiling weather, no cooling breezes.”

In Dublin, Jack worked with others to spread the truth about the situation in Spain and generate support for the Republican Government.

This is from a report on a meeting he addressed in Dublin, where along with others he “gave vivid stories of their experiences at the front and their impression of the heroism of the people of Spain.”

“A packed audience in the Hatch Street Hall, Dublin, last Friday, gave a rousing welcome to the members of the Irish Unit of the International Brigade, who have been recently invalided home from Spain.

“The meeting was held under the auspices of the Women's Aid Committee of the Irish Friends of the Spanish Republic, Mrs H. Sheehy-Skeffington presiding. A letter expressing re-





gret for being unable to attend was read from the Rev. Michael O'Flanagan.

“A resolution was passed declaring that the present war in Spain is a conflict between the forces of Spanish democracy against the agencies of a brutal Fascism, Spanish and international, condemning the inhuman barbarities inflicted on the Spanish people by the Fascist forces and German and Italian intervention against the Spanish Republic, calling on the Twenty-Six County Government to re-establish proper diplomatic relations with the lawful Government of Spain, and take its stand against the foreign Fascist invasion of that country; calling on the Labour and Republican movements of all shades to unite their efforts in a common struggle against all attempts by Irish reaction to set up an Imperialist-Fascist dictatorship in Ireland and for the support of Irish democracy for the gallant fight of the Spanish people for freedom.”

In October, along with other injured Brigadiers, he put his name to a manifesto calling for more support from Ireland for the struggle.

“We, the undersigned, wounded members of the Irish Unit

Back left standing:  
Val Moran (USA),  
Archie Dewar  
(Scotland), Peter  
Daly, Frank Ryan,  
Paddy O'Daire, Jock  
MacCrae (Scotland)  
Jack Nalty, Arthur  
Ollerenshaw  
(England) and Frank  
Edwards

Front row left:  
Nathan Tobias  
(England), Joe  
Monks, Jimmy Pren-  
dergast, Fred  
Warbrick (England)  
and Albert Neville  
(England)

serving under Frank Ryan with the Spanish Republican Army, feel that it is now necessary to raise our voices in a direct appeal to the Irish nation. In the name of our fifty comrades whose graves dot the Spanish battlefields, in the name of our comrades still in action, we speak on behalf of their cause.”

And after detailing the truths of the conflict it concluded: “We call on the Irish people, then, to rise up against the press lords and unscrupulous politicians who are misleading us now as they misled us before. We call on the Government of the Free State to end its subservience to this powerful and noisy group, and to grant the Spanish Republic the full recognition it had before the conflict.”

“We demand this in the name of our comrades who have died to redeem this nation's honour, in the name of our comrades who are ready to die, and in the name of the traditions handed down by our National Fathers.”

In December, he was the main speaker a public meeting in Cork:

“Jack Nalty, who fought with the Irish Unit of the International Brigades in Spain, and is well known in Dublin Republican and Labour circles, gave a lecture to a very interested audience in Cork last Sunday. Mr. Nalty dealt with the events leading up to the Fascist rebellion, the persistent provocative acts and statements of leading fascists, which finally gave way to open rebellion. The people of Spain and the cause of democracy must win, said the speaker. A democratic victory in Spain would be a blow to Fascism the world over. He appealed to those present to show in every possible way their sympathy for the Republican cause in Spain, and particularly to develop inside their different organisations in a strong anti-fascist spirit.”

By early 1938, the tide of the war had moved in favour of the Fascist forces. The Soviet Union had, from an early stage, pledged support to the Republic. This comprised of military expertise, armaments and vital artillery pieces, tanks and aircraft. However, under the terms of the ‘Non-aggression Pact’, other European countries had made it difficult for this support to be delivered to Republican Spain. On the other hand,

Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy were free to give their full support. The Nazis in particular were using Spanish battlefields to test and innovate tactics and equipment they would use to devastate Europe a few years later. The aerial bombardment of the Basque town of Guernica was the first such targeting of a civilian population and Nazi war planes were used with devastating effect against Republican troops and positions.

The Irish Brigadiers were bolstered by more volunteers from home but continued to suffer injuries and fatalities. In March of 1938, the Irish volunteers would receive a morale shattering blow with the capture of Frank Ryan by Italian fascists.

Ryan had just returned to the front-line. Maurice Levitas described the incident: "We were walking up to an established front line to relieve somebody else; when down the centre of this road came these Italian whippet tanks in great number. My little group had a machine gun, and we had small arms, and we moved over into the field...We were surrounded by Italian fascists." They had no option but to surrender. The summary execution of prisoners was commonplace but Franco had become worried about the number of his troops captured by Republicans and had ordered that Internationals be kept alive with the hope of orchestrating prisoner exchanges.

Max Parker, from New York recalled Ryan's uncompromising attitude towards his captors:

"Captain Ryan then demanded loudly to know when we would be fed and given water. I acted as his interpreter, speaking Spanish to an Italian officer who approached us. Frank repeated his demands for food and water... At this point,

Frank Ryan in fascist custody after his capture



another officer joined us. He was German - Gestapo. He told us who he was. He got into a discussion in English with Ryan... He wanted to know why Frank was fighting in Spain instead of in Ireland. Frank told him it was the same fight in both places... Frank told him, spelled it out for him; then asked the Gestapo officer what he was doing in Spain... After several minutes the Gestapo man told Frank 'You're a brave man', wished him luck, and left."

Frank Ryan was never to see freedom again. A high profile prisoner, he was eventually handed over to the Nazi regime and died in Dresden in 1944.

## "IT'S MARVELLOUS WHAT MEN CAN ENDURE"

From the early days of the Spanish anti-fascist war, many

realised that a greater conflict was looming.

Hyman Katz, a New York Jewish volunteer wrote home to his mother: "If we sit by and let them grow stronger by taking Spain, they will move on to France and will not stop there."

Canute Frankson, a Jamaican born US resident and International Brigades volunteer described their responsibility as: "a great progressive force, on which rests the responsibility of saving human civilisation from the planned destruction of a small group of degenerates gone mad in their lust for power. Because if we crush Fascism here, we'll

Spanish anti-fascist poster drawing attention to the international alliance of Spanish Phalangists, Germans Nazis, Italian Fascists and the Catholic Church hierarchy



save our people in America, and in other parts of the world, from the vicious persecution, wholesale imprisonment, and slaughter which the Jewish people suffered and are suffering under Hitler's fascist heels."

Ernest Hemingway had written: "For a long time me and my conscience both have known I have to go to Spain... This is the dress rehearsal for the inevitable European war and I would like to write anti-war correspondence that would help keep us out of it when it comes."

Appeals to Britain, the United States and France to come to the defence of democracy had fallen on deaf ears. However, by 1938, Hitler's expansionist actions had alarmed France enough that they relaxed border restrictions and military equipment could now be transported into Catalonia. This gave the Republican forces renewed hope that they could engage in offensive action, hold their positions and possibly capitalise on changed circumstances, including the now inevitable European war that was expected to erupt very soon.

Jack, of course, would have been devastated by the news of the capture Frank Ryan and he soon returned to the Spanish war-zone. His family, particularly his mother, had not wanted him to go back. In March he travelled through Liverpool to London, from where he wrote to her:

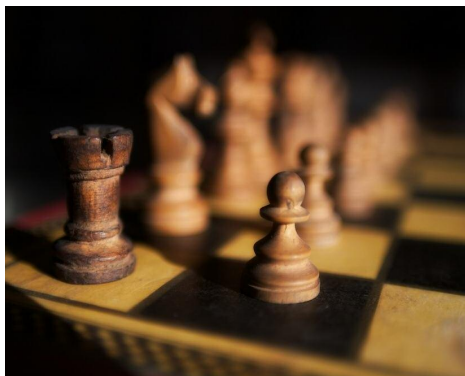
"I arrived here safe enough and am looking around for a bit. I went to see the Grand National on Fri. and then to see Jack Doyle that night at a theatre. I came from Liverpool the same night to here by bus. It's a long run, about 10 hrs. so I had no sleep yet, but will make up for the loss tonight. London is just the same as when I was here last year... I will write again in a week or so and tell you what I am doing. Hope all are well. Jack."

On 10th April, he rejoined the British Battalion of the XV Brigade. He was immediately promoted from Adjutant to Company Commander. His record from this

A 1938 letter from Nalty to his Mother







The preserved chess set that once belonged to Rory O'Connor and which Nalty and Frank Ryan played on

time notes that he was “One of the original No. 1 Coy. With splendid military and political record. Very good type in every way”. One of the men under his command recounted in his memoir that he was “assigned to the company of the able and courageous Captain Jack Nalty from Dublin, who had fought with the No. 1 Company under Nathan at Cordoba.”

At the end of August, Jack wrote to Jeannie Gannon, at No. 7 Mountjoy Square. It was here, a few short years earlier he had played chess with Frank Ryan on the set that had once belonged to Rory O'Connor:

“We are back in the line again ...and what heat, avion [airplane] and artillery. It's marvellous what men can endure in support of an ideal. The fascist infantry is not so hot though. Old Pat Duff got a 'blighty' a few days ago. Shrapnel in both arms but not very bad. I helped to dress him and scam out of it.”

This was a reversal of fortune from Cordoba when Duff had attended to Nalty after he was wounded and sent him on his way. The letter, which also thanked Jeannie for “your welcome and cheerful letter” was dated August 24th 1938. Almost exactly a month later Jack would die in combat. His death was more poignant and tragic as it occurred in the final days of battle after it had already been announced that the International Brigades were being withdrawn from active service.

## “TONE WAS HONoured WELL INTO THE NIGHT”

By April of 1938, the Fascist forces had reached the Mediterranean, essentially splitting the Republican held territories in two. The offensive then moved southwards towards Valencia with the aim of encircling Madrid and the centre of the Republican Government. The British Battalion

and others gathered on the Catalonia side of the Ebro River and trained in preparation for a crossing of this natural boundary and the launching of surprise assault against the Nationalist forces. Amidst the preparations, the men had a short time for some diversions and entertainments.

At the end of June, a celebration was held to coincide with the annual Wolfe Tone commemoration at Bodinstown. Brigadier Michael O’Riordan recalled that “to make it a worthy occasion a special committee was set up” who were “helped in their task by two other Dubliners, Jack Nalty and Paddy Duff from the heavy Machine Gun Company.” O’Riordan, in his classic account *Connolly Column. Irishmen in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* recalled the celebration:

“Food was very scarce, but the Irish did not draw down any rations for two days in order to provide the invited guests from other units with a ‘banquet’ of black rice-bread and mule meat. These were washed down with copious draughts of ‘vine rojo’ which had been collected earlier in the evening in a well scrubbed ash-bin from the nearby vinery at Marsa. Concern was expressed at the overdue arrival of the wine but eventually the two deliverers arrived, none too steady, with the explanation that the bin was found to be too heavy when full, so they had to lighten the load!

“The celebration was opened by a speech from Bob Conway (Scotland), the Battalion Political Commissar. He emphasised the national and internationalist aspects of Tone’s life and teachings, and proposed the toast to ‘The Father of Irish Republicanism’. Thereafter many toasts were drunk, and a combined Spanish fiesta, Irish ceildhe and International folk song night developed. Jim Stranney sang a favourite song of Belfast’s Falls Road, ‘The Four Flags of Ireland’, another sang about the ‘Boys of County Cork’ who ‘Beat the Black and Tans’, there were a number of flamencos, and a noteworthy Cuban song by Domingo Morales who was to be killed the following month. Tone was honoured well into the night...”

There were to be some other light hearted occasions. In his memoir, British Brigadier George Wheeler writes of the events at a fiesta held by the British Battalion on 18th July. He describes how the British, Canadian and American Battalions

gathered together on the parade ground in the village to hear rousing speeches from their commanders. The men guessed from their words that they would soon be going into action again. A football match and other sports took place during the morning, then after a meal of beans and stew, they received special rations of chocolate and cigarettes. The main attraction in the afternoon was a machine gun competition with two crews competing each time to run with the gun to a certain spot, then assemble it, load and fire it at a target. A few days later the last major offensive by the Republican forces began.

The evening before the crossing of the Ebro was to begin, the gathered men sang a variety of International revolutionary songs. This included a rendition of 'The Soldier's Song', familiar to all the English speaking volunteers. The Scottish men sang 'Rebel Song' written by James Connolly:

*...our march is nearer done  
with each setting of the sun,  
And the tyrants might is passing  
With the passing of the years...*

Volunteers from the  
British Battalion  
marching





A rarely seen selection of images from the British Battalion fiesta in July 1938





## “...THE LONGEST DAY OF MY LIFE”

On the 26th of July, a large force of Republican troops had successfully crossed the fast flowing river during the night using rafts and small boats and laying down bridges to allow the passage of vehicles, tanks and men. They pushed on towards Gandesa, and within four days, a force of 25,000 men had gathered around the strategically important town. While the strength of the offensive had caught the fascist forces by surprise, they soon responded with a furious aerial bombardment, with 250 aircraft deployed, seriously hampering the movement of tanks and troops across the river. As the opposing forces faced off, along a 25 kilometre front, engaging in a series of attacks and retreats, the British Battalion was ordered to capture “Hill 481” (*Puig de Aliga*). Heavily fortified with barbed wire, trenches and bunkers, this was soon to be re-named the Hill of Death by those fighting there. Their initial attack was beaten back and for six days the assault continued, slowly gaining ground and getting within grenade-throwing distance. At the beginning of August, they were within yards of their objective when it was decided that the odds were too great, and they were pulled back from the battle.

Edwin Rolfe (poet and Lincoln Brigade volunteer) recalled:

“The place stank of corpses...enemy bombers returned to our position in the valley killing the wounded being evacuated by the stretcher bearers... the bullets whistled over our heads, red traces which seemed to move slowly through the air...it was the longest day of my life.”

For the next few weeks, a brutal battle of attrition continued in the gruelling sun and the unforgiving barren environment, the heat, airplanes and artillery were described by Jack in his last letter to Jeannie. As the month progressed, the Abraham Lincoln and Canadian MacPaps were devastated. The Republican forces were no match for the nationalist offensives launched on the 19th August and an even bigger push at the end of the month. The latter was comprised of eight divisions (including 300 artillery pieces, 500 aircraft



and 100 tanks), but the Republicans continued to mount a stubborn resistance to the fascist progress.

On 21st September, it was announced to the League of Nations that the International Brigades were to be withdrawn from the conflict. The decision was made by the Republican Government in the belief that this would force the European powers to demand the reciprocal withdrawal of Hitler's and Mussolini's forces. This of course did not happen but it was in the knowledge that they were to be pulled back from action that the men of the Brigades fought their last battles and suffered their final casualties.

The very same night, the American and British Battalions (including the Irishmen) were called back to the front to face an advance of enemy tanks along the Ebro line. They went without hesitation. In haste, they were ferried forward in a few trucks, through heavy shell fire to the rear of the threatened sector. The British Battalion moved into trenches still partly occupied by the remnants of a Polish battalion. Fascist forces held most of the surrounding high ground and had the strategic as well as logistic advantage.

Just before 10a.m. on the morning of the 23rd September, a major fascist offensive was launched. Nationalist artillery opened up a massive barrage and all hell broke out across the entire sector. The British Battalion headquarters counted one shell each second landing on its section. Two hundred and fifty enemy bombers and planes came across in waves all day long, some bombing, some strafing the lines without cease, creating a landscape of flying metal and huge low hanging clouds of smoke and dust. After five hours of this maelstrom, the enemy advanced and closed in on the British positions as five tanks thundered down the road. The company also resorted to close-quarter hand-to-hand combat but were overwhelmed. It was during this afternoon that Jack was killed.

### **“...OUR MARCH IS NEARER DONE”**

The Manchester International Brigade Memorial Committee published an account of this last day:

“The International Brigadiers were meant to be withdrawn



Looking towards the battlefield where Nalty fell

were cut off by the Nationalist advance.” Jack returned into danger to get these men who had almost been left behind. Syd Booth remembered that day clearly: “Bill Feely and I were nice and snug in our machine gun post, firing away when suddenly Bill said ‘there’s something bloody wrong here. They are advancing and nobody seems to be firing back at us. Go outside and find out what’s happening’ I went outside into the trench leading from the gun-nest and found it empty. None of our gun team was there. I had a quick look around the hill and it was bare of occupation. So back I went and told Bill the position. ‘Come on’ he said’ lets break down the gun. We have to get it out of here quick.’ Just then, Jack Nalty our commander came into the nest and started to help. ‘Look sloppy’ he said ‘we’ve had to retreat and I’ve had to come back for you two.’ We disconnected the gun in rapid time. I carried the gun carriage, Bill the barrel and Nalty the ammo cases, and downhill we galloped. At the bottom of the hill, we came to a small group of trees where two or three others had taken shelter for a few minutes. We had only a few dozen more yards to go and we would have been back with the Battalion on comparative safety. But in the mean-

The Nalty family headstone in Glasnevin Cemetary



time the fascists had arrived at the hill we had just vacated and started to fire at us. Jack Nalty got shot through the head; Bill Feeley was wounded in the leg... I had seven bullet wounds.”

Fellow Dubliners Liam McGregor and George Green also fell in this, the last battle of the British Battalion. The Battalion finally withdrew successfully the following evening. Two hundred of the 377 men had been killed, missing or taken prisoner.

Jack’s body was never recovered. Bill Alexander wrote: “It is impossible to say precisely where he was buried (if at all! The fascists paid scant attention to our dead).”

His name has been added to the family headstone at Glasnevin Cemetery.

Jack’s name appears on a list of International Brigade recommendations for action at the Ebro Crossing – Sergeant J. Nalty, Company Commander “For his sangfroid and bravery at every moment at the head of his men.”

## **“WITH EACH SETTING SETTING OF THE SUN...”**

The Battle of the Ebro officially ended on November 16th with the loss of all the captured territory and the withdrawal of the Republicans to their initial positions on the other side of the river. The battle was later compared to the worst of the trench warfare in World War I. There were 60-70 thousand dead or wounded. As the Fascists now held the former positions, the fate of many would remain unknown.

A new fascist offensive was soon launched and in 1939 Barcelona fell. In March, the fascists finally took Madrid. On April 1st 1939, Franco announced the surrender of the Republican Army. Spain did not enter World War II and would remain under the control of Franco and his fascist dictatorship until his death in 1975. In addition to all those who died between 1936 and 1939, thousands more would die in the years of Francoist rule. A recent investigation by the United Nations Working Group for Human Rights revealed that estimated 114,226 Spaniards “disappeared” during this period.

In 1936, the International Brigade leader Frank Ryan had



Above: Nazi rally in Nuremberg, 1937

Below: The mass grave of Jewish victims of the Nazi concentration camp at Bergen Belsen, 1945

explained the importance of the Spanish anti-fascist conflict:

“War’s hell. There’s little glamour in it when you are there, especially when you see what’s left-after shell and the heat- of fellows you were joking with a few hours before. But this one has got to be done and won so that the makers of war can never again cause Guernica and Almerias and Bilbao.”

Within months of the Fascist victory in Spain, World War II began. The brutality and barbarism of Hitler’s policies plunged the Europe into conflict and the tactics, machinery and armaments the Nazis tested in Spain were now unleashed on other nationalities. The fight for the Spanish Republic and the sacrifice of men like Jack Nalty was part of a battle for humanity against barbarism, and

the world would suffer due to their defeat.

## “JACK ALWAYS GAVE OF HIS BEST”

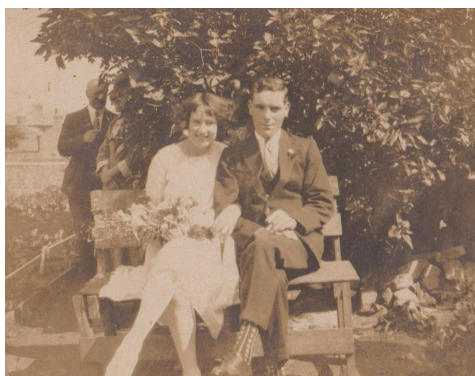
Peader O’Donnell would write: “It is my privilege that I knew him well. Human nature can achieve its own miracles. Surely in these days it is a wonderful thing that in the midst of all the selfish strivings young men can lay their lives as Jack laid down his. His first going to Spain was a grand gesture. His second going to Spain was beyond words. In face of such happenings we can only stand silent.”

Jack’s friend Paddy Feehan recalled him as “a wonderful character who dressed well and made a neat figure”, while members of his family noted that “he was very popular with the women.”

His generous nature was noted by another family member: “[his Mother] would ask where such a jacket, or other item

of his, had gone, and he would say somebody needed it more than he did.”

The annual record of the Dublin Harriers states: “Our season closed on a sad note when the Club members learned of the death of Jack Nalty in Spain, Sept. 23rd 1938. Jack always gave of his best; his name adorns many of our club trophies. R.I.P.”



Nalty and friend in happier times

## LA LUCHA CONTINUA

Earlier this year (2018), Friends of the International Brigades Ireland (FIBI) held a trip to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Battle of the Ebro and the retreats. Among the locations visited were Gandesa, the Ebro River, many of the places where the Brigadiers gathered for the final time and the land on which many of them died.

Eddie O’Neill (PRO FIBI) wrote in the commemorative booklet:

“It is poignant and sad that so many brigaders were to die during September 1938. Many were in the process of withdrawing and were ordered back at short notice to bolster a defensive line that was in danger of being overrun. Some of those who died on the last days of combat had fought through the entire campaign. One of these was Jack Nalty, who was wounded at Villa del Rio near Cordoba, in 1936. There is little doubt Ireland would be a different, and a far better place, had men like him lived to continue their struggle.”

*Steve Nugent and Joe Mooney*

Notice for the memorial meeting for Nalty and Liam McGregor, 1938

**IRISH FRIENDS OF THE SPANISH REPUBLIC**  
(Women's Aid Committee)

**A MEMORIAL MEETING**  
for  
**JACK NALTY and LIAM MCGREGOR**  
Who fell fighting for Liberty and Democracy on  
the Ebro Front on September 23, the eve of the  
Demobilisation of the XVth (International) Bri-  
gade, Spanish Republican Army.

WILL BE HELD ON  
**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 15, at 8 p.m**  
IN THE  
**Banba Hall, Parnell Square**

---

Collection in aid of those returning from the Irish Unit



## THE NALTY FAMILY



Mick Nalty married May Graham in 1951 and they lived at 25 Fairview Strand until their deaths in the 1980s.

Clockwise from top right: Mick during his seafaring days; A youthful May Graham; May and Mick Nalty in the early 1980s; Kathleen Nalty with nephew Jim Nugent.

B. E. F.  
France  
20.12.17  
My Dear Mother,  
I received  
your letter and parcel  
yesterday; the parcel came  
all right and never  
got crushed. The cake  
was splendid. I found  
P. Brennan at last. He  
came to see me two days  
ago and he is going  
on leave either to-day



Peg Nalty married Barney Nugent, and had two sons (Jim and Stephen) before her death at a very young age.

Clockwise from top right: Letter from Stephen (Staffie) Nalty to his mother from the Somme 1917; Peg Nalty; Jack's nephews Jim and Steve Nugent; The Nugent family stables at Church Road; Barney Nugent (top right) on his communion day.



## FIGHTING FOR A REPUBLIC

### THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE BRITISH EMPIRE AND EUROPEAN FASCISM

When Jack Nalty joined Na Fianna Éireann during 1917 he became part of a republican movement that was on its way to becoming the dominant political force in Irish society. By the time Nalty graduated to the IRA in 1919, the political expression of republicanism, Sinn Féin, had won 73 seats in the 1918 general election, making it the largest party in Ireland. In January 1919 those Sinn Féin TD's not in jail or on the run had gathered in Dublin to establish Dáil Éireann.

The First Dáil declared Ireland's independence, based on the Republic declared in 1916, and asked for recognition from the great powers at the post-war peace conference in Paris. With Britain one of these same powers, such recognition was never likely, and instead the military forces of the Dáil, the IRA, were soon fighting a war for independence. Dublin was one of the centres of this struggle, which involved not only ambushes and gun battles but also prison protests, general strikes and election campaigns as Sinn Féin became the biggest party in the city.

But the republican movement was not just a mass movement, but also a coalition, in which many agreed only on the objective of independence, not on the type of Ireland that might follow British withdrawal. After July 1921 as much of the public welcomed the Truce as a break from the violence of the previous three years, republicans soon began to divide over what form of compromise might be reached between the movement's leaders and the British. That compromise, the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921, split the IRA and Sinn Féin.

Many activists like Nalty could not accept anything less than a united Irish republic. By the summer of 1922, as British forces slowly began to leave what became the Free State, former comrades were at war. The new Free State government carried out more executions and jailed more of its opponents than the previous British administration had done

between 1919-21.

There was intense fighting in Dublin during the early stages of that conflict and then a savage clandestine struggle which saw republicans killed after capture while others were tortured while imprisoned. The Anti-Treaty IRA was forced to concede defeat

in May 1923. Many republicans emigrated, while others abandoned politics altogether. Nalty was one of those who sought answers to why their movement had gone down to defeat.

One of the Anti-Treaty leaders, Liam Mellows, himself executed in December 1922, had debated these questions with comrades such as Walter Carpenter and Bill Gannon in Mountjoy during the early stages of the war. These men, influenced by the fledgling Communist Party, had concluded that not only had the 'stake in the country people' betrayed the republic but that the Anti-Treatyites had failed to rally support among 'the men of no property' by their neglect of social and economic policies. But a significant section of Sinn Féin and the IRA, while agreeing with the need for political policies, opted for the populist nationalism of Eamon de Valera's Fianna Fáil, launched in 1926.

By 1927 that party had taken seats in the Free State parliament. Nevertheless, the IRA continued to maintain a close relationship with their former comrades in de Valera's party for several years. The Free State suffered badly during the Great Depression with mass unemployment and increasing poverty. Republican leaders such as Peadar O'Donnell increasingly looked to the ideas expounded by Mellows during 1922, arguing that the IRA should give a lead in social agitation. Many republicans agreed and in Dublin, in particular, IRA volunteers and communists in the Revolutionary Workers Group often cooperated. In 1929 the IRA Army Council



Frank Ryan speaking  
at a rally on College  
Green





IRA volunteers  
training in 1933

even sent greetings to the Soviet Union 'to express Congratulations on the anniversary of the Revolution which freed them from economic slavery and exploitation ... The Revolution has given hope and confidence to all peoples who are striving to free themselves from political and economic servitude, and exploitation by the Imperialist regimes.'

The IRA increasingly intervened during strikes and land disputes. During 1931 it decided to launch a new radical socialist party called Saor Éire. The IRA's Chief of Staff Moss Twomey asserted that 'if it is commu-

nism to undo the conquest ... to destroy landlordism ... to end robbery and exploitation by a privileged minority, then Tone, Emmet, Mitchel, Lalor, Connolly, Pearse and Mellows were communists and the Irish Republican Army is a communist organization.' But the Free State government reacted to republican activity with a major security clampdown, accompanied by a 'Red Scare' and a denunciation of communism by the Catholic Bishops, who declared that you 'cannot be a Catholic and a Communist: one stands for Christ, the other for Anti-Christ.'

Being called 'communists' caused great unease for many within the IRA and some demanded that the Saor Éire policy be abandoned. These debates were initially hidden from public view as Fianna Fáil, supported by the IRA, came to power in the general election of 1932. With a 'republican' government in power, IRA prisoners were released and many expected a conflict with Britain. Left-wingers within the IRA warned that the new administration would be a disappoint-



ment, but with increased recruitment and freedom to organise, the IRA leadership moved away from identification with socialism.

This disappointed volunteers like Nalty, who continued to cooperate with those who re-organised as the Communist Party of Ireland during 1933. But in broader Irish society, urged on by the Catholic Church, hostility to any form of left-wing thinking became intense. Mobs wrecked communist offices in Dublin, left-wing meetings were routinely attacked and James Gralton, a Leitrim socialist, deported from Ireland. At its 1933 convention the IRA leadership barred communists from membership.

During that debate Bill Gannon asserted that he was 'a communist' because 'Communism stands for the smashing of the Empire. Every good Irishman should be in an organization which is out for the breaking up of the Empire.' Gannon and a number of others were forced to leave the organisation. In June 1933 the IRA formally condemned communism for its 'denial of God and active hostility to religion.'

Nevertheless a number of senior IRA leaders, such as O'Donnell, Frank Ryan and George Gilmore, remained within the movement urging it to return to the policies of Saor Éire. They also argued that the IRA should play a leading role in confronting the Blueshirt movement. At its 1934 convention these issues emerged again. O'Donnell and his supporters called for a congress of republican and labour organisations that would take a lead in social and economic campaigns. Despite winning substantial support they were forced out of the IRA and in April 1934 established the Republican Congress.

The Congress had a brief but vibrant existence, taking a leading role in housing agitation in Dublin, building links with radical protestant socialists in Belfast, supporting strikes and fighting the Blueshirts. It also alerted Irish people to the dangers of fascism in Europe and helped reestablish the Irish Citizen Army. Despite fragmenting over policy during late 1934, many of its members, such as Nalty were ultimately to continue their fight in Spain after 1936.

## **“WE ARE GOING OUT TO FIGHT FOR THE WORKING CLASS”**

### **TOMMY WOOD (1919 – 1936)**

At only 17 years-old, Tommy Wood was the youngest Irishman to be killed in action fighting against Franco in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

Thomas Bernard Wood (known to his friends and family as Tommy) was born in Dublin on 21 July 1919. He lived with his father John Wood, a moulder, his mother Sarah-Ann Wood (née Doyle) and eight siblings at 16 Buckingham Place off Amiens Street in the north inner city.

Tommy joined Na Fianna Éireann at the age of seven and was later active with B Company, 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade IRA in the mid 1930s. His brother Sean was a member of the same company and the Plumber's Union. A plumber's fitter's apprentice, he was electrocuted and killed aged 21 while installing a sprinkler on the premises of Messrs. Paul and Vincent on Sir John Rogerson's Quay in 1938.

As a toddler, two of Tommy's maternal uncles were killed by the British during the last four months of the Tan War.

Patrick 'Paddy' Doyle (29) was hanged in Mountjoy Jail on 14 March 1921. A member of F Company, 1st Battalion, Dublin Brigade, IRA, he was arrested in Drumcondra on 21 January while preparing for an ambush of Crown Forces. He was employed as a carpenter and lived at 1 St. Mary's Place, Upper Dorset Street with his wife Louisa and two young children.

Six weeks after Paddy's execution, Seán 'Jimmy' Doyle (30) was mortally wounded on 25 May 1921 during the IRA's attack on the Custom House. He was cut down by a British Army machine gun while trying to escape from the building and died of his wounds five days later in the Mater Hospital. Doyle, who fought in the North King Street area during Easter Week 1916, lived at 55 Amiens Street with his wife Elizabeth and baby daughter Kathleen. He was employed by Dublin Corporation but left his post to join the city's first

full-time Active Service Unit (ASU). His widow Elizabeth died in 1985 outliving her only child Kathleen who passed away two years previous.

Oscar Traynor (BMH WS 340) wrote of his last hours:

“As he lay on his deathbed (the nuns) said his one worry was, ‘Are the boys beaten?’, and that night as the sound of nearby explosions shook the air, Sean’s face, wreathed in smiles, turned to the Nun who was attending him, and he feeble whispered, ‘Thank God, Sister, the fight goes on’.

Tommy Wood left Dublin for Spain with Frank Ryan’s group on 11 December 1936 without telling his family where he was going. He wrote to his mother:

“I am very sorry for not telling you where I was going. I am going to Spain to fight with the International Column. Please forgive me for not letting you know. I got my wages in the Gas. Co. alright. I left a message to be delivered on Sunday. We are going out to fight for the working class. It is not a religious war, that is all propaganda. God Bless you.”

Tommy was mortally wounded in the leg and head just eighteen days later at the Battle of Cordoba.

Frank Ryan wrote to his parents with details of their son’s last days:

“He was wounded on the Cordoba Front on December 29 last. I was talking to two comrades who brought him to the dressing station. He was hit above the left knee and then as they were bringing him in, he and one of his comrades was hit again. This time the bullet hit Tommy in the head, but the two lads with him thought it was only a graze as he was conscious all the time. He was brought to Andujar Hospital and the first report from there was very favourable, then we could get no more news of him. It is only now that we have found out why.”

Frank Ryan went onto write that the

Obituary for Sarah Wood, Tommy’s mother

## Mrs. Sarah Wood

Mrs. Sarah Wood, 11 Swilly Road, Cabra, and late of 16 Buckingham Place, who has died, was sister of Mr. Patrick Doyle, Dublin Brigade, Old



I.R.A., who was executed by the British in Mountjoy Jail in March, 1921, and of Mr. Sean Doyle, Dublin Brigade, I.R.A., who died from wounds received in action at the destruction of the Customs House in May, 1921.

Mrs. Wood was wife of Mr. John Wood, Department of Local Government. One of their sons was

Mr. T. Wood, who was killed when fighting on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War in December, 1936. Another son, Mr. Sean Wood, was electrocuted at the North Wall while employed there in 1938.

The funeral took place after Mass at the Franciscan Church, Merchants’ Quay, to Glasnevin.

The chief mourners were: John Wood (husband); Messrs. Patrick, Donal, Bernard and Seamus Wood (sons); Misses Ellis, Kathleen and Frances Wood (daughters); Mrs. M. Martin and Mrs. F. Deevey (sisters).



Tommy Wood remembered on the family headstone Glasnevin Cemetery

name Woods was confused originally with a Dutch comrade named Wools who was in the same hospital. His letter continued:

“His comrades here wish to be associated in rendering you their sympathy. Tommy was universally liked during the time he was with us here. I want to emphasise that his life was given in a great cause. He did not come looking for adventures nor for reward. He believed in the cause for which the people of Spain, helped by men such as himself, are fighting. He has given his life not only for the freedom of the people of Spain, but of the whole human race and he will be remembered and honoured equally with those who gave their lives for freedom in Ireland.”

On 13 January 1937, the *Irish Independent* reported:

“News has reached Dublin that natives of Dublin serving with the Reds at Albacete – T. Woods (aged 17 years), of Buckingham Place, is suffering from shell shock, and C. Gough, of Cabra, is in hospital with a neck wound. Both casualties were sustained in an air raid on Albacete.”

Tommy Wood is buried in the city of Corboda in Andalusia, Spain and his name is inscribed on the grave of his parents and brother Sean in Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin.

*Sam McGrath*

# MICHEÁL O'RIORDAN AND JACK NALTY

## COMRADES-IN-ARMS

My brigadista father, Micheál O'Riordan, had been initially due to travel to Spain in 1937, but an attack of appendicitis resulted in hospitalisation, and he missed out at that juncture. So, it was the eve of May Day 1938 before he finally arrived in Paris, en route for the Spanish battlefield. In Paris the International Brigade organisers - headed up by the future Yugoslav Partisan leader Tito - gathered the various volunteers together, and brought three "very badly wounded French comrades in to try to show the brutality of the war and the conditions they'd face". At this point, the recruiting officers offered the men one last chance to withdraw with honour, and three of them did. My father climbed over the Pyrenees and went on to fight in the battle of the Ebro, alongside Jack Nalty and other comrades.

Yet their paths had already crossed mid-way through that Spanish anti-fascist war. Nalty had been fighting since December 1936, but was badly wounded on the Andalusian front on December 27, requiring three months hospitalisation. Later in 1937, he was sent home to Ireland for recuperation, but not for much rest, as he threw himself into a series of meetings designed to generate Irish solidarity with the besieged Spanish Republic. As the *Irish Democrat* reported on December 11, 1937: "Jack Nalty, who fought with the Irish Unit of the International Brigades in Spain, and is well known in Dublin, Republican and Labour circles, gave a lecture to a very interested audience in Cork last Sunday... The people of Spain and the cause of democracy must win, said the speaker. A dem-

The author with the Mayor of Gandesa and the portrait of his father crossing the Ebro at Vinebre, July 2018







Above: The British Battalion crossing the Ebro at Vinebre, July 25, 1938

Below: The author at Vinebre 80 years later, July 2018

ocratic victory in Spain would be a blow to Fascism the world over. He appealed to those present to show in every possible way their sympathy for the Republican cause in Spain... Mr Michael O’Riordan presided.”

Yet a month before my father's own arrival in Spain, Jack Nalty was back there again. As my father said of him: “The only brave men are those who went back twice; they knew the horrors of war.” My father would also write in the July-August 1986 issue of *New Hibernia*: “They were heroes, not so much as for a spectacular deed or deeds, but for sheer commitment.

Such were men like

Michael Lehane of Kerry, Paddy Duff and Jack Nalty of Dublin, who were wounded in the early stages of the war, received inadequate medical treatment, returned to Ireland for recuperation, and as soon as they could, set out again quietly to make the nightmare journey across the Pyrenees, and back to the war that they knew could not be won. Jack Nalty in fact died in the last hour of the last battle of the 15th International Brigade.”

Jack Nalty was fighting in the ranks of the British Battalion. That Battalion was like no other British armed force in history, for it was anti-imperialist. The Battalion's last Commander, the Manchester-Irish Sam Wild, came from a Fenian family background, and my father always remained particularly impressed by Wild's commitment to advancing anti-imperialist consciousness throughout the Battalion. Indeed, that

June, the 140th anniversary of the 1798 United Irishmen Rising was commemorated by the British Battalion as a whole, just a month prior to the battle of the Ebro. On commencement of battle at Vinebre, each of the Battalion's companies was instructed to carry the flags of both the Spanish Republic and Catalunya across the river, my father being among those carrying the latter. Sam Wild further said to him that, in the light of the national questions in both Ireland and Catalunya, it was particularly appropriate that an Irishman should carry the latter's national flag. One week later, in the fierce fighting on Hill 481, my father would be wounded in action on August 1. I am particularly proud of the citation for bravery accorded him by his Battalion officers: "He carried his light machine-gun into every action, and when he was ordered to withdraw, he waited until the whole of the company had done so. He said that his weapon was worth a dozen men. When he was wounded, he refused to leave his position until the others had to leave it. Even then he did not leave until he was ordered by the Commander and Commissar."

Jack Nalty would, however, be among those making the supreme sacrifice. This year I have had more than one occasion to remember both him and his comrades on the Ebro battlefields themselves. Last May, included in the FIBI (Friends of the International Brigades in Ireland) 80th anniversary Ebro tour were tributes at Vinebre, where the British Battalion had crossed the river on commencement of battle on July 25, 1938, and outside Corbera d'Ebre, where both the Lincoln and British Battalions fought their last engagement on September 23, 1938. And in July, I was back again for the unveiling, in Gandesa Museum, of a portrait of my father carrying that Catalan flag at Vinebre. On the eve of the ceremony, I revisited both that crossing point, and the Hill 705 British Battalion memorial, where Jack Nalty is among the names of the fallen inscribed thereon. I salute his memory and that of his comrades.

*Manus O'Riordan*

## “A TRUE MAN AND A FINE SOLDIER”

### DENIS ‘DINNY’ COADY (1903 – 1937)



Joe Mooney and Jimmy Doran of Friends of the International Brigades Ireland place flowers in memory of Jack Nalty and Dinny Coady at Kit Conway memorial, Jarama Valley 2017.

A copy of *The Connolly Column*, signed by the author Michael O'Riordan and dedicated to Rita L'Estrange, neice of Coady

TO THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER,  
WHO, BECAUSE OF THE PROPAGANDA AGAINST  
THE SPANISH REPUBLIC IN IRELAND,  
DID NOT AGREE WITH MY GOING TO SPAIN,  
BUT WHO DISAGREED MORE WITH OUR  
"COMING BACK AND LEAVING YOUR COMMANDER,  
FRANK RYAN, BEHIND."

To Rita Coady L'Estrange

In proud memory of  
her Uncle Denis who died  
in action in defence of the  
Spanish Republic against  
Franco-Hitler-Mussolini  
FASCISM at Las Rosas, January,  
1937 ¡Salud!

From Michael O'Riordan  
September 28<sup>th</sup> 1995.

Dinny Coady was a Dublin labourer, living at Waterford Street in the North Inner City. The street no longer exists, but once lay between Marlborough Street and Lower Gardiner Street. In 1934 his brother John Coady and his wife Mary (*née* Denny) moved to a newly built Corporation house on Caledon Road, East Wall. His niece Rita L'Estrange (*née* Coady) still resides here, with other descendants also living locally. A contemporary newspaper report on the death of Dinny noted in error that he had a wife and two children; he was in fact single.

Dinny was a comrade to both Jack Nalty and Kit Conway. The three men were active in the republican and workers' movement and were jailed together during the Bacon shop strike in 1934. Among the earliest Irish volunteers in the International Brigades, all three would give their lives in defence of Spanish democracy and the fight against European Fascism. Dinny died in an artillery strike near Madrid in December

of 1936. The *Irish Worker* newspaper, in a piece recording his death, ended with this call: "His gallant death must spur every lover of liberty in Ireland to greater effort in the struggle against Fascism and for support for the International Column."

The names of all three comrades are remembered with pride on memorials which can be seen at the National Museum (Collins Barracks), Liberty Hall and on a new plaque in East Wall erected in 2018.

Rita L'Estrange



### Dinny Coady - One whom I knew

*We who live to remember -  
we who live to die eventually,  
feel a fierce consolation  
in deaths like this.  
It is not simple;  
it is something that was sunk deep,  
torturously down through the centuries -  
this emotion we feel  
at the death of men we knew,  
killed in such an action.  
Emotion heavy with centuries of suffering  
and struggle and sacrifice  
of oppressed peoples everywhere.  
We know that he must have died.  
We know that he should not have died.  
There contorts the mangled mind of man:  
the simple mind of man,  
knowing what is good and noble,  
faced with a thing called Fascism - killing men who  
would have lived  
ordinary happy lives:  
men like Dinny Coady.*

Thomas O'Brien  
(Published in the *Irish Democrat*, April 1937)

## THE GANNON FAMILY, THE 'NALT'Y CHESS SET' AND THE COMRADESHIP OF HEROES

Most people in Ireland grew up with a picture of the Pope, Padraig Pearse or JFK in pride of place on the wall. The Gannon family had a picture of James Connolly in their houses over three generations. My Great Grandmother Mary Leonard originally hung it in Jane Place off Oriel Street, from where her husband Johnny had joined Jim Larkins Union and was locked out. The same portrait was hanging in the Gannon home on Middle Mountjoy Street in 1936 when Jack Nalty & Frank Ryan played chess the night before they off for Spain.

The chess set had belonged to Rory O'Connor and was given to Bill Gannon in Mountjoy Jail. Both had been in the Four Courts at the outbreak of the Civil War and subsequently jailed together. On 8th December 1922 O'Connor was executed alongside Dick Barrett, Liam Mellows & Joe McKelvey. Having played on it the evening before his death, he handed the set to Bill saying he wouldn't be needing it now. The man who signed their death warrants (and a total of 77 executed Republicans) was Kevin O'Higgins, an act that would have fatal repercussions. Bill was part of a three-man IRA group which shot O'Higgins dead at Booterstown five years later.

The 'Nalty Chess Set'



Despite this poignant history, the chess set was always associated with Jack Nalty, not Rory O'Connor nor even Frank Ryan, who spilt whisky on it that last night in Dublin. The family have consistently obeyed the instruction "never clean the stain off that board as it was made by an Irish



hero". My Grandfather always just simply called him Nalty, and the set was known as 'Nalty's chess set' in the family. It was passed to my father Pat Gannon when Bill went to New Zealand before the second world war.

The Gannon's were a well-read Republican family who were involved in the Lockout, the War of Independence, the Civil War, left wing politics and the Spanish Civil War. My father (who is 82) was born the same year Jack Nalty went to Spain. While many anecdotes and passed down memories have survived, this is not a historically researched piece, it is a family history that is worthy of further expansion.

The Gannon family moved from North County Dublin (near Oldtown) to the North Dock. My Great Grandparents Johnny Gannon and Mary (nee Leonard) were described by Mick O'Riordan as "a 1913 striker and a Fenian". Johnny was a carter on the Docks, and according to family lore he wanted to be the first man to join Jim Larkins Union but having gone out celebrating the night before and he ended up being number 7 in line to sign up. Their children, my Grandfather Pat (Pa) Gannon and his siblings Mai, Bridie, Maggie, Bill, and Jack were brought up in a house where politics and progressive ideas were expressed openly.

The Gannon boys were students in Laurence O'Tooles on Seville Place, where prominent Irish Republican Brotherhood man Frank Cahill was a teacher. At the outbreak of the War of Independence Bill became involved with the IRA. Frank



Pa and Bill Gannon  
on O'Connell  
Bridge, Easter  
Sunday 1954



Two images from Bill Gannon's funeral in Mount Jerome Cemetery, 1965

Teeling, a neighbour in Jane Place was part of Michael Collins Squad so I assume Bill became active through him. Pa Gannon was also involved but not to the same extent. According to family folklore Bill was 'out' on Bloody Sunday 1920. One account identifies him (with two other men) as bringing a Lewis Machine gun from the city centre to Coolock and then back the next day, possibly in a stolen car. I have also heard that Bill was involved in the burning down of the Customs House, being one of the men who escaped the British cordon thrown up after the initial assault. He put his gun in a bin and went into a barbers or den-

tists on Beresford Place and skipped the queue. When soldiers came in they arrested the man at the end of the queue. Many experienced IRA men were not so lucky. Bill was also in the Four Courts in 1922. Before the age of 20 he had been present at the destruction of two of Dublin's most iconic buildings.

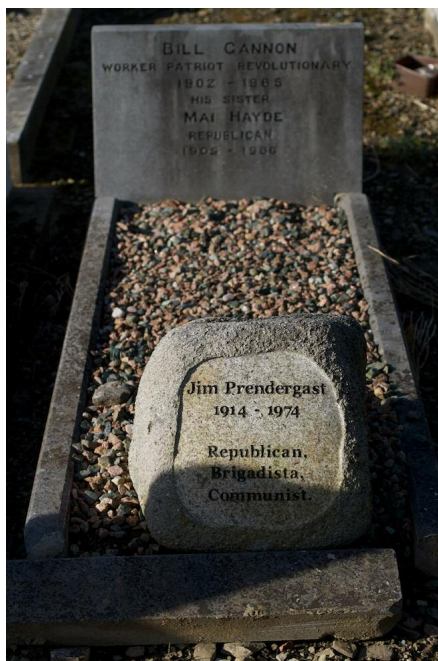
He was also at Connolly Hall on Strand Street when it was firebombed by a mob of anti-communist protestors in the 1930's. Bill's sister Maggie ('Peggy') had by this time married Sean Murray of Cushendall, a War of Independence veteran. Sean had gone to Moscow after the October Revolution and studied at the Lenin school there, and afterwards was a founding member of the Irish Communist Party.

Bill was a bus driver, while 'Pa' was a plumber. 'Pa' would have known Jack Nalty from working on the oil terminals in

the Docks, and through the IRA and other political activity the Gannon's, Nalty and Kit Conway became close friends. One anecdote tells of Kit Conway relieving young Gardai of handguns, which were given to young fellas who passed them onto Bill Gannon who was watching a Matinee (Cowboys and Indians) in the North Strand Cinema.

With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Bill Gannon and Sean Murray were instrumental in organising support from Ireland. According to one account "...the decision was taken to form an Irish unit for the Spanish Republican Army. The Communist Party of Ireland gave the task of recruitment and organisation to Bill Gannon, a Party member who had considerable experience of political work in the Irish Republican Army". Bill was reputed to have wanted to go to Spain but Sean would not let him go as he was married with children. It was preferable that younger, single men like Nalty, Conway, O'Riordan and Tommy Wood would carry on the fight. Many of their friends and comrades would never return.

Jack Nalty never received a burial, but is remembered on the family grave in Glasnevin Cemetery Dublin. Bill Gannon is buried in Mount Jerome Cemetery, Harold's Cross, Dublin. Along with Gannon's sister Mai Hayde, Jim Prendergast, a fellow IRA man and International Brigadier, shares the unconsecrated grave. The funeral of Bill Gannon in 1965 caused upset as both tricolour and hammer and sickle flags were placed on the coffin before his burial. This was front page news in the *Evening Herald* and *Irish Press*, described as an outrage and affront to the national flag. Jack Nalty is still remembered by the Gannon family to this day and each time the chess set is played upon his name is spoken...with pride.



The grave of Bill Gannon, Mai Hayde and Jim Prendergast in Mount Jerome Cemetery

## FRANK RYAN WRITES TO EAST WALL WOMAN

Frank Ryan 63 E. S.R.I.,  
Albacete, Spain. 1911/37.

Hello Marty!

First this wee note to thank you  
for your letter + to apologise for  
not answering them earlier. I wrote  
about a lot + letters are often weeks  
late reaching me. That's what  
happened yours.

Glad to hear you are alive  
and kicking, + that you and Eve  
still keep the world bright. So  
you're still with the loonies?? How  
long until you get out?

I had a letter from Peter O'Brien  
a while ago. He is in good form -  
Romeick of course, but then that's  
nothing new for him. And what is  
the ~~old~~ news of Seán? He never  
wrote me. When you see him  
next ask him: -

(a) when he will write me?

(b) where is Ev's bicycle??!!'

I'm in good humour. Nice, coldish  
weather. No fires. No hot water.  
Plenty of beans. I hear there is a  
war on here. Is that a fact?  
I'm sending you a book to show  
you what Nurses have to do  
here. (I haven't seen one for a  
long while - not being in a  
Hospital, + hoping not to be  
in one - for a guy doesn't get



in without being hit a shell or  
 the like first)

Are you doing you bit for  
 the Spanish Aid Committee, and  
 for the "Democrat"? If you  
 aren't, go right now to the  
 Works + ask them ~~for~~ what  
 you are to do. Every little  
 helps, you know.

Say me to Ev.

Frank Ryan

Hospital

Mr. Frank. Ryan.

E 10/3.

5E3

Plaza Aitago no.  
 Albacete.  
 Spain.

(By air mail via France.)

OW -  
 MORE  
 WHEA

RECEIVED  
 CENSORSHIP UNIT

Published here for the first time, this is a letter sent to Kathleen Pickett by Frank Ryan in 1937. Kathleen's maiden name was Montgomery, (her nickname was 'Monty') and she always claimed she was related to General Montgomery. She was a woman born before her time, a Donegal Protestant, a nurse by profession and a member of Cumann na mBan. Well known in East Wall, she lived at Strangford Gardens and did a lot for the area, including being one of the founders of the Ladies' Club. She died in 1976.

Letter courtesy of Oliver and Maurice Pickett.



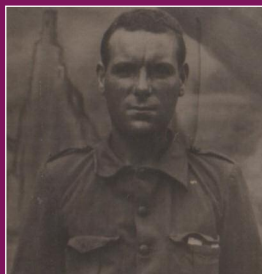
## A COMRADESHIP OF HEROES



Standing (L-R): Jack Nalty (Dublin), Peter Daly (Wexford), Frank Ryan (Limerick), Paddy O'Daire (Donegal), Alec Donaldson (Edinburgh) and Frank Edwards (Waterford). Sitting (L-R): Joe Monks and Jim Prendergast (both Dublin)

Image courtesy of the Nugent family / East Wall History Group.





## Jack Nalty (1902 - 1938)

Jack Nalty was the final Irish casualty of the Spanish Civil War. Having been among the first group of Irish Volunteers to join the anti-fascist struggle he would tragically die as the International Brigades were being withdrawn from combat.

Born in Galway, he had lived most of his life at East Wall in the Dublin Docklands. He joined the I.R.A. in 1919 and served during the the war of independence and civil war. He was a committed republican, socialist and trade union activist, representing 600 workers in Dublin Port oil companies. He was also a champion athlete with the Dublin Harriers.

He was interned during the civil war and jailed in the 1930's for political and trade union related activities. In 1936 when a Fascist coup was staged against the democratically elected Spanish Government Jack joined the International Brigades to defend Republican Spain. On the 23rd September 1938 he died at the Battle of the Ebro, having heroically returned into danger to rescue two British volunteers.

To mark the 80th anniversary of the death of Jack Nalty, this publication tells his story, from East Wall to the Ebro. It also provides details of other volunteers from the Dublin Docklands and North Inner City who were part of the this 'comradeship of heroes'.



Published by East Wall History Group  
in association with  
Friends of the International Brigades Ireland



Comhairle Cathrach  
Bhaile Átha Cliath  
Dublin City Council

Kindly supported by the Dublin City Council Commemoration  
Fund for Communities

Layout & design: Kevin Squires