

## Bewley, Charles Henry

by Michael Kennedy

Bewley, Charles Henry (1888–1969), barrister and diplomat, was born 12 July 1888 in Dublin, eldest son among four children of Henry Theodore Bewley (qv), MD and quaker, and Elizabeth Eveleen Bewley (née Pim), a member of the Church of Ireland. Bewley's younger brother Kenneth (qv) entered the British civil service, serving in the treasury. His youngest brothers, Geoffrey and Thomas, studied medicine at TCD. Charles was educated at Park House (1898–1901), and, on a scholarship from Park House, at Winchester (1901–7), where his brothers were also educated. In 1907 he went up to New College, Oxford, graduating (1910) with a second in literary humanities. At New College he had won the Newdigate prize for English verse (1909) for his poem 'Atlantis'. An Irishman had not won this prize since Oscar Wilde (qv) had won it in 1878, but Bewley's final degree result shows that he never fulfilled his academic potential. Whilst at Oxford, Bewley, born a quaker, was attracted by the anglo-catholic movement and converted to catholicism. In later life he wrote many articles for the catholic press. The desire to be diametrically different to established conventions and to be awkward were to be character traits through Bewley's life. Not only did he change his religion, but being brought up in a strongly unionist family, he became an ardent Irish nationalist, supporting the Boers and condemning the anglicisation of Ireland. This desire to oppose norms and to be uncompromisingly different came through in other ways, as through his life Bewley was known for his studied superior air and his arrogance, and he was regularly commented on as being unpopular among his contemporaries for these traits.

After graduating from Oxford, Bewley returned to Dublin and was admitted to King's Inns in 1911. He was called to the bar in 1914. He practised on the Connacht circuit and between 1916 and 1921 defended republican prisoners in the crown courts and was a prominent barrister in the republican courts. Later, during the civil war, under John A. Costello (qv), Bewley relentlessly prosecuted republican prisoners. During these years he also contributed to various Sinn Féin papers and for a short period was acting professor of law at UCG.

Bewley's diplomatic career began when he was posted, in an unofficial capacity, as Irish trade representative to Berlin in 1921. He considered that his posting lacked purpose and found his duties mundane. In 1922 he was delegate from Germany to the Irish Race Conference held in Paris. During his period in Berlin Bewley's anti-Semitism came to the attention of the Irish government as a result of his derogatory remarks to Sinn Féin activist Robert Briscoe (qv), who was Jewish, but he remained in position, receiving only a verbal reprimand for his conduct. On his own initiative, Bewley left the diplomatic service and returned to Ireland in 1923. After an unsuccessful attempt to enter politics, he recommenced his practice on the Connacht circuit and was called to the inner bar of the Irish Free State in 1926.

Bewley was recalled to the Irish foreign service in July 1929, being posted to the Holy See as minister plenipotentiary and envoy extraordinary. He acquired many useful contacts among the Irish religious orders in Rome and worked to improve relations between Dublin and the Irish College in Rome, which had been badly damaged over the treaty split. However, Bewley found that as the representative of a small state his position was of little importance to the Vatican. He left Rome in 1933, having been awarded the Order of St Gregory by Pope Pius XI.

In a controversial move, given his well known anti-Semitism, Bewley was appointed minister to Germany in August 1933, seven months after the Nazis had taken power. He had long coveted this post and stressed his pro-German sentiments when he praised the rebirth of the German nation under Hitler on presenting his credentials to President von Hindenburg in September 1933. From Berlin Bewley initially provided useful accounts of the development of Nazi policies; however, his anti-Semitism and admiration for Germany and the Nazis soon led to more lop-sided reporting to Dublin, in which he accentuated what were perceived as Nazi achievements and downplayed Nazi racial policies, in particular attacks on the Jews. His superiors in Dublin became increasingly worried at the standard and content of Bewley's reports, as his pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic beliefs became more and more pronounced as the 1930s progressed. Events came to a head with Bewley's submission of a report on *Kristallnacht* (9 November 1938), in which he argued that there had been no deliberate cruelty perpetrated against Jews in Germany and that, among other matters, Jews ran the international white slave trade and were a demoralising influence on the communities in which they lived. Judged to be incompetent in fulfilling his duties, he was recalled to Dublin in the summer of 1939 on the pretext of an investigation into certain financial irregularities at the Berlin legation, but he did not return to Ireland. He refused to serve at the new grade to which he was assigned in Dublin, and – by effectively going absent without leave from his post – was deemed to have resigned from the Irish diplomatic service on 1 August 1939.

Bewley held that communism and the Soviet Union were a greater threat than Nazism and believed that the Nazis could save Europe from the Soviets. He continued to hold these views into the post-war years of the cold war, writing in the preface of his biography of Hermann Göring that 'National Socialism, whatever its defects, saved first Germany and later Spain from becoming bulwarks of communism; that the western powers under Roosevelt's guidance did everything possible in the pre-war years to drive the German leaders to extremes; that the Roosevelt–Churchill policy of annihilating Germany as a military power served the interests of communism and of communism alone; that the "war crimes" were the work of a small band of fanatics; and that the German people as a whole were guilty of nothing more criminal than defending their country in time of war' (Bewley, *Göring*, p. xv). This quotation encapsulates much of Bewley's political beliefs, both in what it says and what it leaves out. His pro-German sentiments were matched by a strong anti-Britishness. He believed that Ireland should adopt a more anti-British foreign policy. He had never held Éamon de Valera (qv) in high esteem and was

critical of Ireland's support for Britain at the League of Nations over the application of sanctions against Italy following the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, and for the Anglo–French policy of non-intervention in the Spanish civil war. Bewley was in many ways more anti-British than pro-Irish.

Bewley's memoirs, *Memoirs of a wild goose* (1989), which should not be considered a wholly reliable source, were published posthumously and record a personalised and sanitised portrait of his time in Nazi Germany, with coverage of waning aristocrats and rising Nazis. Although Bewley toned down his virulent anti-Semitism, he wrote in withering terms about his colleagues in the Irish diplomatic service and about his minister, de Valera.

Bewley remained on the Continent on the outbreak of the second world war, restarting his journalistic career. He led a shadowy existence through the conflict, travelling through Europe, his passport showing stamps for entry into Germany and Sweden. Bewley placed himself at the disposal of the Nazi government and provided information on Ireland for the German intelligence services during the second world war. However, he was not regarded as a reliable source by the Germans, who thought him lazy and timid. He wrote occasionally, attempting a biography of de Valera, portions of which later emerged in his memoirs. A collection of short stories, *Ladies and gentlemen* (Berlin, 1944), served as thinly veiled Nazi propaganda and was intended to illustrate the inadequacies of the English.

On the cessation of hostilities in May 1945 Bewley was living in the South Tyrol, where he was arrested by the US military as a Nazi propagandist. Suspected as a collaborator, he was interned by the allies from May to December 1945. Though at one stage in danger of execution, he was released without charge on the intervention of the Irish authorities working through the British representative in Dublin, Sir John Maffey (qv).

On his release from custody Bewley settled in Rome. He continued to write but did not involve himself in politics. He also collected art works and porcelain and was known in Roman high society for his connections with various aristocrats and for spending his time playing bridge and drinking coffee in the city's piazzas. His sympathetic biography of Göring, *Hermann Göring and the Third Reich*, was published in Europe in 1956 and in the US in 1962. The US edition sold 10,000 copies. Though based on family records and completed with the help of members of Göring's immediate family, it is not clear from the biography, or from his memoirs, how well, if at all, Bewley actually knew Göring.

From 1945 Bewley had no contacts with the Irish diplomatic service, either through the Rome embassy or the embassy to the Holy See. However, in the late 1960s junior diplomats at the Rome embassy encouraged Bewley to renew contact with them, and he began attending St Patrick's day celebrations at the embassy.

He died 1 February 1969 at his home at 44 Via Antonelli, Rome. He was unmarried and left his main legacy, two million lire, to Agostini, his chauffeur.

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Department of Foreign Affairs archives; Charles Bewley, *Hermann Göring and the Third Reich* (1962 ed.); *Ir. Times*, 3 Feb. 1969; J. P. Duggan, *Neutral Ireland and the Third Reich* (1985); Charles Bewley, *Memoirs of a Wild Goose*, ed. W. J. McCormack (1989); Brian P. Murphy, *John Chartres: mystery man of the treaty* (1995); Ronan Fanning, Michael Kennedy, Dermot Keogh, and Eunan O'Halpin (ed.) *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, i (1998), iii (2002); Michael Kennedy 'Our men in Berlin: some thoughts on Irish diplomats in Germany 1929–39', *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, x (1999); Andreas Roth, *Mr Bewley in Berlin* (2000); Catriona Crowe, Ronan Fanning, Michael Kennedy, Dermot Keogh, and Eunan O'Halpin (ed.) *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, iv (2004); Mervyn O'Driscoll, *Ireland, Germany and the Nazis: politics and diplomacy, 1919–1939* (2004)