

Breen, Daniel ('Dan')

by M. A. Hopkinson

Breen, Daniel ('Dan') (1894–1969), IRA man and Fianna Fáil TD, was born 11 August 1894 near Donohill, Co. Tipperary, son of Daniel Breen, small farmer, of Donohill, and Honora Breen (née Moore), midwife, from Reenavana, Doon, Co. Limerick. Born seventh of eight children, he went to Garryshane School, which he left aged 14. In 1913 he became a linesman on the Great Southern Railway, his work taking him to Mallow, Cork, and Dublin. He joined the Irish Volunteers soon after their establishment and was sworn into the IRB by his close friend Seán Treacy (qv). He was not involved in the Easter rising, nor was he interned after it. He emerged as a key figure in the establishment of the IRA's South Tipperary Brigade, most of the leadership coming from his local area. He resigned from the IRB during 1918 when approval was not granted for a proposed offensive.

After the end of the conscription crisis, he became increasingly concerned that the Volunteers would become a mere appendage of the Sinn Féin party, and grew critical of moderate constitutional policies. Breen's and Treacy's impatience resulted in their dramatic, independent action at Soloheadbeg, near Tipperary town. On 21 January 1919, after lying in wait for five days, a small party of Volunteers led by Breen, Treacy, and Séamus Robinson (qv), the brigade OC, ambushed and killed two RIC men escorting gelignite to Soloheadbeg quarry. For months Breen and his colleagues were on the run. After one of their number, John J. (Seán) Hogan (qv), was captured, Breen and Treacy audaciously brought about his escape by raiding the train carrying him from Tipperary to Cork prison at Knocklong station. Breen was badly wounded in this incident but still managed to evade capture.

No authority was given by the IRA GHQ for these actions and it was suggested that Breen and Treacy be sent to the USA. Richard Mulcahy (qv), the chief of staff, was later to say that Soloheadbeg was akin to murder. Breen's fame, however, had already been established by his association with the first headline-making events of the conflict. A police notice offered £1,000 reward for Breen's capture, describing his 'sulky bulldog appearance; looks rather like a blacksmith coming from work'. Without any knowledge of such tactics, Breen and Treacy had pioneered guerrilla warfare.

After a prolonged fugitive existence, Breen and his colleagues went to Dublin and worked in Michael Collins's (qv) Squad in its early days. They participated in the attempted ambush of Lord French (qv) at Ashtown (December 1919). Back in Tipperary, Breen took part in successful barrack attacks at Hollyford and Drangan and helped North Tipperary Brigade in its raid on Rearcross barracks. He was also involved in the ambush near Oola when British forces were guarding Gen. Lucas after Lucas's escape from IRA custody. Breen and Treacy returned to Dublin in the autumn of 1920 and after being tracked by British intelligence were involved in a

dramatic shoot-out at the house of Professor John Carolan (d. 1920) in Drumcondra. Breen was again badly wounded in that engagement and was in hospital when Seán Treacy was shot dead outside the 'republican outfitters' shop in Talbot St., Dublin. Breen married (12 June 1921) Brigid (Brid) Malone, a Cumann na mBan activist, in Dublin. He had frequently stayed with the Malone family while on the run.

Breen was opposed to the Anglo-Irish treaty, but with no relish. He spent two months in the US in early 1922, and when he returned he was actively involved in attempts to achieve political and military reconciliation. He signed the 'army officers' statement' of 1 May 1922 which attempted to make a settlement, and he stood (and subsequently failed) as a joint pro- and anti-treaty candidate for Waterford-Tipperary East in the June 1922 general election. In that election, he vigorously urged the Farmers' Party and the Labour Party candidates to stand down, only succeeding in the former case.

Breen led a column during the civil war, but to much less effect than in the earlier conflict. When provisional government troops landed at Waterford in July 1922, Breen's column and others in Tipperary singularly failed to take effective action. Throughout the civil war, republican units failed to cooperate effectively. In early 1923 Breen met Gen. Michael Brennan (qv) in an independent attempt to find some basis for a truce. Near the end of the war Breen was captured (April 1923) during a massive round-up in Tipperary. After a brief participation in the IRA hunger strike in the autumn, he secured his release from jail by signing the pledge to desist from future offensive actions against the Free State. In the August 1923 general election Breen was elected TD for Tipperary.

Breen suffered the effects of his war wounds for the rest of his life, and that may well have been the cause of his heavy drinking. He also had major financial and employment difficulties for the first decade after the war. His autobiography, *My fight for Irish freedom* (1924), sold well and did much to popularise him, but was ghost-written and lacked any detachment. He did not remain in the IRA and joined Fianna Fáil but was always independent in his outlook. He was the first republican to enter the dáil in 1927, before de Valera (qv) made his decision to do so. Breen was rejected by the electorate later in the same year when standing as an independent republican.

In 1929 he went to live in the US, where he ran a speakeasy in New York city, reputedly patronised by Al Capone and Albert Einstein. He achieved Irish-American celebrity status, and promoted tours by Gaelic games teams from his own and other counties. A legendary gambler, he was a familiar figure at American racetracks.

At the time of his mother's death in 1932, Breen returned to Ireland and became a fixture as a Fianna Fáil TD. Despite his fame, his independence and lack of discretion ensured that he never became a member of a Fianna Fáil government. He supported many causes, ranging from the Spanish republic to the support

of Rommel during the second world war, and then the Vietnamese nationalist movement. Eventually he retired with other aged Fianna Fáil members from the dáil in 1965. By that stage he was making something of a career of his revolutionary-era reminiscences, proving an arresting presence on TV with his large head and deep voice. His memoirs were republished in 1964. His last years were spent in St John of God's Home, Kilcrouney, Co. Wicklow. He died 27 December 1969. He was survived by his wife Brid and his son Dr Donal Breen. At the requiem mass, Frank Loughran of Clonmel said that in his last letter to him, Breen asked: 'When are we going to the north?'

Breen was a staunch republican with a sympathy for the underdog, but to call him a social bandit is probably to overrate the coherence of his arguments. With Tom Barry (qv), he remains the best-remembered of guerrilla leaders, but had nothing like Barry's success as a flying-column leader.

---

Dan Breen, *My fight for Irish freedom* (1924); *Ir. Times*, 29, 31 Dec. 1969; Joseph G. Ambrose, *The Dan Breen story* (1981); Michael Hopkinson, *Green against green: the Irish civil war* (1988)