

Briscoe, Robert Emmet

by Lawrence William White

Briscoe, Robert Emmet (1894–1969), republican, Zionist, and businessman, was born 25 September 1894 at Lower Beechwood Avenue, Ranelagh, Dublin, third child and second son among four sons and three daughters of Abraham William Briscoe, merchant, native of Zagar, Kovno, Lithuania, and Ida Briscoe (née Yoedicke), native of Frankfurt. His father, an immigrant to Dublin at age 14, worked at various occupations and enterprises, meeting and courting Briscoe's mother on business trips to Germany for a brush factory that for a time he owned. In Robert's infancy the family moved into quarters above the Lower Ormond Quay premises of Lawlor Briscoe, a furniture manufacture business of which his father was partner and eventually sole owner; in his adolescence, as the business prospered, they moved to 58 Upper Leeson St. Reared in strict observance of the Jewish orthodox tradition, he imbibed Irish nationalism from his father, a steadfast Parnellite whose identification with Irish nationalism was typified in Robert's name, and that of a brother, Wolfe Tone Briscoe. Educated at Strand St. school, Kildare St. national school, and St Andrew's College (the presbyterian secondary school), for two years Robert attended Townley Castle School, an exclusive Jewish public school in Ramsgate, London, before returning to St Andrew's, leaving in 1912. While apprenticing in the large Berlin import–export firm of Hecht Pfeiffer, he also studied business methods and electrical engineering in a commercial school, and Hebrew religion and history in a rabbinical seminary. Briefly detained by Austrian authorities at the outbreak of the first world war while en route to join his parents who were holidaying in Carlsbad, he was allowed to return to Ireland after signing an undertaking not to take arms against the central powers.

Emigrating to the USA (December 1914), he worked in the shipping department of a New York import company before becoming partner in a small firm manufacturing Christmas-tree lights under a General Electric patent. Aroused by news of the Easter rising, he attended meetings of Clan na Gael, meeting Liam Mellows (qv), who influenced his return to Ireland (August 1917) to join the headquarters staff of Na Fianna Éireann (of which Mellows had been chief scout). The decision caused a breach with his father, a constitutional nationalist firmly opposed to physical force, in the months before the latter's death (November 1917). The men's clothing factory that Robert Briscoe opened at 9 Aston Quay, and a subsequent second workshop in Coppinger's Row, both served as headquarters for clandestine Fianna and IRA activities before and during the war of independence. Unknown to government authorities owing to his lack of prior political involvement, and evading suspicion because of his not fitting the profile of a physical-force nationalist, Briscoe engaged in arms-and-ammunition procurement and transport, and gathering of intelligence. Transferred to IRA headquarters staff (February 1920), he was dispatched by Michael Collins (qv) to Germany, where, with his knowledge of the language and

country, he established and oversaw a network of arms purchase and transport, operating widely throughout Germany, and between Germany and Ireland, under the cover of foreign agent for a Ballinasloe import–export firm that was an IRA front. He maintained a steady flow of *matériel* after the July 1921 truce, and from 1922 to the anti-treaty IRA, with which he maintained links for some years after the civil war. Moving back to NY late in 1922, he established a small import business, and engaged in pro-republican propaganda work. Returning to Ireland after the 1924 general amnesty, he managed Dublin operations of Briscoe Importing, a firm already established by two of his brothers.

A founding member of Fianna Fáil (1926), he served on its first executive committee, and worked on constructing the party's national constituency organisation, transporting party workers countrywide in his recently purchased motor car. Defeated in the June 1927 general election and in an August 1927 by-election occasioned by the death of Constance Markievicz (qv), in the September 1927 general election he was elected to Dáil Éireann, becoming the first Jewish TD, and commencing an unbroken tenure of thirty-eight years, representing Dublin South (1927–48) and Dublin South-West (1948–65). Varying the formula adopted by Fianna Fáil deputies on assuming their dáil seats, when pushing aside the Bible he declared that even if he swore upon that book he would not be oath-bound, as it was not the testament of his religion. Benefiting electorally from the consistently large surpluses of constituency colleague Seán Lemass (qv), up to 1937 he regularly secured the second Fianna Fáil seat. In 1928 he sold Briscoe Importing, and persuaded his brothers to abandon their lucrative foreign business operations as inconsistent with the Fianna Fáil programme of economic self-sufficiency. Residing at successive addresses in south Dublin city and county (including Somerset, Stradbrook Road, Blackrock (1930s), 12 Herbert Park, Ballsbridge (1940s–50s), and 23 Leinster Lawn, Clonskeagh (1960s)), he practised a series of business ventures with varying degrees of success. He was among the first five Fianna Fáil representatives elected to Dublin corporation, serving as councillor (1930–36), alderman (1945–50), and councillor (1950–67). He served as courier between the Dublin cabinet and the team that negotiated the 1938 Anglo–Irish agreement.

Alerted to the plight of European Jewry while on business trips and government trade missions to Germany during the 1930s, he became involved in the Zionist movement. Visited in Ireland (1938) by Vladimir Jabotinsky, founder of the Zionist right-wing Revisionist Party, which was linked to the paramilitary Irgun in Palestine, Briscoe advised on training and organisation of a physical-force insurgency, and the strategy and tactics of guerilla warfare. Serving on the supreme body of Jabotinsky's New Zionist Organisation – a militant, ultra-nationalist breakaway from the mainstream movement – Briscoe was prominent in the clandestine 'coffin-ship' operation of 1939–40 that transported European Jews to Palestine in defiance of the immigration restrictions of the British mandate. He undertook successive six-month tours of the USA, and of South Africa and Rhodesia, seeking support for Jewish settlement in Palestine, and raising funds for the transport operation.

While supporting Irish neutrality as being in the national interest, he travelled regularly to London during the second world war, lobbying British MPs and European governments-in-exile to approve post-war establishment of a Jewish state. Although he made representations to Irish authorities in specific cases on behalf of Jewish refugees, he strenuously denied later claims that he assisted illegal smuggling of wartime refugees into Ireland. In the post-war period he was instrumental in securing a limited number of temporary and permanent visas for refugees, against the persistent hostility of the Department of Justice toward Jewish immigration. Supporting the post-war armed resistance to continuing British rule in Palestine, after establishment of the state of Israel (1948) he counselled Irgun leader Menachem Begin to emulate Fianna Fáil by abandoning further armed struggle for constitutional politics.

Although a close friend of Éamon de Valera (qv), whom he accompanied on a visit to Israel in 1950, despite his lengthy dáil career Briscoe never held ministerial or secretarial rank. After an ebbing of his personal vote through the latter 1930s and 1940s, occasioned by lengthy absences from constituency and country on Zionist and business activities, the 1950s marked the height of his electoral popularity. Through his last four general elections he topped the poll, twice returned on the first count. Twice lord mayor of Dublin (1956–7, 1961–2), he made a spectacularly successful whistle-stop tour of the USA (1957) – the first of several official visits, trade missions, and speaking tours – lauded by Irish- and Jewish-Americans as Dublin's first Jewish lord mayor. He was the subject of an American television play, 'The fabulous Irishman', starring Art Carney (1957). In 1962 he was appointed to the council of state. While his autobiography, *For the life of me* (1958), should be treated guardedly in matters of detail and interpretation, it is noteworthy as one of the few memoirs by an Irish politician of his generation. Briscoe married (30 April 1919) Lillian Isaacs; they had four sons and three daughters (one of whom converted to catholicism and became a nun). He died 29 May 1969 in Dublin.

He was succeeded in his dáil seat by his son, Benjamin (Ben) Briscoe (b. 1934), TD for several Dublin constituencies (1965–2002). At seventy-five years, the Briscoes claim one of the longest unbroken family tenures in the history of Dáil Éireann. Ben Briscoe also served many years on Dublin city council (1968–9, 1974–2000), and was the city's lord mayor (1988–9), elected during the year designated to mark Dublin's putative millennium.

Thom; Robert Briscoe with Alden Hatch, *For the life of me* (1958); *Ir. Times*, 30–31 May 1969; *NHI*, ix (1984), 564; Walker, ii (1992); Dermot Keogh, *Jews in twentieth-century Ireland: refugees, anti-semitism, and the holocaust* (1998); Houses of the Oireachtas: members, www.oireachtas.ie (accessed 19 Jan. 2007); Internet Movie

Database, www.imdb.com (accessed 23 Jan. 2007); Dublin City Archives (lord mayor biographies, corporation diaries)

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