

Bulfin, Éamonn (Edmond)

by John Gibney

Bulfin, Éamonn (Edmond) (1892–1968), republican activist and civil servant, was born in Buenos Aires on 22 September 1892, the eldest of five children of the journalist William Bulfin (qv), editor of the *Southern Cross*, and his wife Annie (née O'Rourke), originally of Ballymore, Co. Westmeath. The family returned to Ireland in 1902, residing at the paternal family home of Derrinlough House, Birr, Co. Offaly. Bulfin was enrolled in St Thomas Aquinas College, Newbridge, before attending St Enda's School (Scoil Éanna) in Cullenswood, Rathmines, from September 1908. He impressed the headmaster, Patrick Pearse (qv), who noted his aptitude for Irish, French and English, though also that he was weak at mathematics. Bulfin enthusiastically engaged with the ethos of the school, acting in dramas, contributing short stories to the school review, *An Macaomh*, and captaining the St Enda's football team in 1909–10. He was enrolled as a student at St Enda's until 1910 but remained as a boarder at its new location in Rathfarnham; he became close to the Pearse family. Bulfin enrolled for a science degree in the National University of Ireland in 1911. While at university he won both Sigerson and Fitzgibbon cups (in football and hurling respectively) on a number of occasions, captaining the NUI football team that won the Sigerson Cup in 1915.

In 1912 Bulfin was recruited into the IRB by Arthur O'Connor (qv), and later claimed to have proposed Patrick Pearse for membership. He joined E Company, Fourth Battalion (Rathfarnham) of the Irish Volunteers after its foundation in 1913. By 1915 he was involved in organising the volunteers in Dublin and Co. Meath, and in manufacturing munitions and explosives in St Enda's. The latter activities continued up to the Easter rising, and just prior to the rising he helped Kathleen Lynn (qv) transport these weapons to Liberty Hall and was promoted to the headquarters staff of the volunteers. During the rising Bulfin was stationed in the GPO and claimed to have hoisted the 'Irish Republic' flag above the building: 'an ordinary Irish flag, green with the harp, and in white letters (inscribed) across the middle were the words "Irish Republic"' (BMH WS 497). There is confusion on this point, as R. H. Walpole stated that he and Seán Hegarty raised this flag, while another witness, Fintan Murphy, stated that he saw Bulfin and Willie Pearse (qv) raise a 'second tricolor on the Prince's St side' of the GPO (BMH WS 370); Bulfin's own version of the incident admitted to uncertainty on a number of points, which may have led to the conflation of details. Later in the week he took part in the escape from the GPO to Moore St, building barricades and tunnelling through the walls of the eastern terrace of buildings on the street. Bulfin was held overnight in the grounds of the Rotunda Hospital after the republican surrender, before being detained with the rest of the GPO garrison in Richmond Barracks.

Bulfin was sentenced to death after the rising, but this was commuted to imprisonment. He was held in Stafford Jail in May 1916 before being transferred to Frongoch on 29 June 1916. He was released with other internees in December 1916 and resumed his activities with the Irish Volunteers in both Dublin and Co. Offaly. In February 1917 he became vice-commandant of the Birr Battalion of the volunteers, with responsibility for demolitions; he was involved in training the rank and file, and organising raids for weapons. In December 1917 he acted in Pearse's play, *The singer*, in the Foresters Hall on Parnell Square, Dublin. Bulfin took charge of the Irish Volunteers who assisted Arthur Griffith's (qv) campaign in the East Cavan by-election of 1918. He was arrested (along with his brother Frank) on 18 July 1918 in the 'German Plot' arrests, being detained in Durham with other republican prisoners.

In the immediate aftermath of the Easter rising Margaret Pearse (qv) had interceded on Bulfin's behalf with the Argentinian consul in Dublin and he was issued with an Argentinian passport. On 21 March 1917 Bulfin was informed that he was to be deported to Argentina and was released on parole until 30 April. He planned to go on the run but was dissuaded by Michael Collins (qv), whom he had come to know in Frongoch and who informed Bulfin that he was going to be appointed as a republican emissary to Argentina. Bulfin apparently played for Drumcullen in the Offaly hurling final on 20 April, defeating Birr, before being re-arrested and detained in Liverpool in early May. Margaret Pearse delivered him a sum of money from Collins and a letter from Éamon de Valera (qv), confirming his appointment as the dáil government's representative in Argentina and promising him a salary of £500. Apparently, Bulfin never received these monies.

Bulfin was arrested on his arrival in Argentina on suspicion of being a communist (a reason given by the British for his deportation) and was conscripted into the Argentine military. He served in the army before transferring to the navy, being released after ten months as his mother was a widow, and he thus qualified for an exemption from military service. Working as a bookkeeper in Buenos Aires, on 19 June 1920 he was elected chairman of Offaly County Council *in absentia* (he officially held the post until 14 June 1921). Bulfin was in direct contact with Collins (possibly due to membership of the IRB), and at Collins' request was involved in procuring arms and ammunition for the IRA. His communications with Dublin were, however, intermittent. In March 1921 he was classed as one of the dáil's trade representatives; Bulfin had opened an office in Buenos Aires and was involved in organising numerous events during his stay in the country, including at least one production of Pearse's drama. His principal duties consisted of raising awareness of the Irish independence struggle, especially (though not exclusively) within the substantial Irish Argentinian community, and, following the arrival of Laurence Ginnell (qv) in August 1921, organising a loan campaign for the dáil in Argentina (along similar lines to the republican bond campaign initiated in the US).

By August 1921 Bulfin was advocating the production of a news bulletin in Spanish, based on the *Irish Bulletin*. The Irish community in Argentina was the largest

in South America, and Bulfin felt it was essential to promote Ireland's claim to independence to them; this, in his view, might also help to mend factional rivalries within the Irish community which he felt were detrimental to their cause. While his family connections proved useful, resources were scarce and his attention was taken up by other duties. The dáil agreed to fund the propaganda bulletin in September 1921, with P. J. Little (qv) joining Bulfin and Ginnell to establish it; he was assisted by Bulfin's sister Anita, who had travelled to Argentina for health reasons. Bulfin himself was largely preoccupied by preparations for the bond drive, but by November Ginnell noted that Bulfin was overworked, and his responsibilities dealing with correspondence and propaganda left him with little time for managing it. The loan was finally launched in late 1921 but local factors (such as the seasonal departure of wealthy Argentines to holiday resorts) and the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty ruined its prospects. Bulfin, like Ginnell, opposed the treaty and he resigned on 13 April 1922, feeling that the political situation in Ireland made it impossible to carry out any meaningful role in Argentina. The British consul refused to issue a visa to Bulfin as his deportation was still in effect but, having wound up the affairs of the Irish delegation, he finally returned to Ireland in July 1922. Bulfin was apparently deeply affected by the death of Michael Collins in August 1922. In September 1922 he handed over £600 outstanding from the Argentine mission to the anti-treaty forces and informed them he would take no part in the civil war; he also claimed to have declined a commission in the National Army.

Bulfin subsequently resided at Derrinlough House, and on 16 February 1927 married Nora Brick (Nóra Ní Bríc) of Tralee, a former member of Cumann na mBan, in an Irish language ceremony in Drumcondra, Dublin (his occupation was recorded as a farmer). They had four children: Edward, Jeanne, Blanaid and Michael. Bulfin's younger sister Catalina married Seán MacBride (qv). Bulfin joined the Revenue Commissioners as a tax collector and was later responsible for the administration of old age pensions in Birr. He was awarded a military service pension in 1936. Both he and his wife were active in Muintir na Tíre, and he continued to farm; amongst his pastimes were coursing and shooting. In the early 1950s, while sorting through his father's effects, Bulfin rediscovered papers belonging to Patrick Pearse that Margaret Pearse had asked him to safeguard from British raids on St Enda's. These included an unfinished play in Irish, *Eoghan Gabha* ('Owen the blacksmith'), set in the Jacobite era. He donated this material to the National Library of Ireland.

In later life Bulfin was apparently reluctant to speak of his revolutionary activities, but he was involved in public events in Offaly marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter rising, after which he retired from farming and moved to 6 Smith's Cottages, Donnybrook, Dublin. He died of a cerebral haemorrhage in the Meath Hospital, Dublin, on 24 December 1968, and was buried in Eglishe Cemetery, Co. Offaly.

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1911 Census; NLI MS 15,004; NAI DFA ES (Argentina); GRO (marriage, death); MSPC WMSP341098, W34D427; BMH WS 218 (R. H. Walpole and Theo Fitzgerald), WS 370 (Fintan Murphy), WS 497 (Éamonn Bulfin), WS 1769 (Patrick J. Little); *Midland Tribune*, 4 Jan. 1969; Ronan Fanning, et al. (eds), *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy, Vol. I* (1998); Michael Kennedy, "Mr Blythe, I think, hears from him occasionally": the experiences of Irish diplomats in Latin America, 1919–23', in Michael Kennedy and Joseph Morrison Skelly (eds), *Irish foreign policy, 1919–66: from independence to internationalism* (2000); Elaine Sisson, *Pearse's patriots: St Enda's and the cult of boyhood* (2004); Dónal McAnallen, *The cups that cheered: a history of the Sigerson, Fitzgibbon and higher education competitions* (2013); Brian Pey, 'Eamonn Bulfin of Derrinlough', *Offaly Heritage*, 9 (2016), 111–43