

McCullagh, Francis

by Patrick Maume

McCullagh, Francis (1874–1956), journalist, was born 1 May 1874 at Omagh, Co. Tyrone, one of five children of James McCullagh, publican, from Gortin, Co. Tyrone, and his wife Mary. Omagh was a garrison town and Francis grew up amid tales of Nana Sahib and the Indian mutiny. He was educated at the CBS, Omagh, and St Columb's College, Derry. He began his journalistic career in Glasgow on the *Scottish Catholic Observer*, after unsuccessfully applying to several Dublin newspapers. He also worked at Bradford before moving to Ceylon to work on the *Catholic Messenger* (Colombo) and then to Siam to write for the *Siam Free Press*. He became Asia correspondent of the *New York Herald*. In 1903 he joined the English edition of the Tokyo *Japan Times*. Wishing to see all sides of the contest for power in Asia, he next moved to the English edition of the Russian paper *Novi Krai*, in Port Arthur (Lüshun). This provided a grandstand view of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5). He scooped the greatest journalistic coup of his lifetime when he found himself on a British steamer quarantined just outside Port Arthur during the surprise attack by the Japanese. The steamer escaped to a nearby port, where McCullagh spent £1,000 telegraphing his account to the *New York Herald*. He accompanied Russian troops during the Manchurian campaign, and was taken prisoner after the battle of Mukden; his experiences are described in his first book, *With the Cossacks* (1906).

McCullagh then moved to north Africa and eastern Europe, where he covered the disintegration of the Ottoman empire. He observed the Young Turks' revolution of 1908 and collaborated on a collection of Turkish folk-tales. In 1910 he reported on the Portuguese revolution for the *New York Evening Post*; he became fond of Portugal and returned there often. In 1911, while reporting for the *Westminster Gazette* on the Italian conquest of Libya, he publicised atrocities against Arab civilians (*Italy's war for a desert*). During the first Balkan war, which he covered for the *Daily News*, he was accompanying the Turkish army when he was captured by the Bulgarians; he narrowly escaped execution. In Serbia he was made a Knight Commander of the Order of St Sava. At the outbreak of the first world war he was with the Russian army in Poland at the battle of the Masurian lakes; he shortly returned to Britain and, in December 1914, joined the Worcestershire regiment as a lieutenant.

McCullagh transferred to the Royal Irish Fusiliers and went to the Dardanelles with the 10th Irish division in July 1915 as a company commander. After the 10th division withdrew to the Balkans, he became a divisional intelligence officer in Serbia and Macedonia. He accompanied General Arnold Knox's British military mission to Siberia in July 1918. He participated in the White Russian investigation into the murder of the Romanovs and interrogated participants; Trotskyites later quoted his praise of Trotsky's harsh discipline admiringly. (McCullagh's attitude to the

Russians combined wistfulness at their resemblance to 'my own folk, the merry, melancholy Gael', with disgust at what he regarded as their dirt, incompetence, narrow-mindedness, and corruption.) During the White debacle McCullagh disguised himself as a peasant and evaded capture by employing his knowledge of Russian. He eventually spent almost a year in the custody of the Cheka (described in *A prisoner of the reds* (1921)); released under the O'Grady–Litvinov agreement he returned to Britain on 22 May 1920.

In 1922 McCullagh returned to Moscow as correspondent for the *New York Herald*, but was expelled in April 1923 after reporting a show trial of Russian catholic priests. He lectured extensively on Bolshevik religious persecution, and published his findings about it in *The Bolshevik persecution of Christianity* (1924). In the 1920s McCullagh also campaigned against the persecution of the catholic church in Mexico, and against American support for the Calles regime; he travelled extensively in South America, sailed the Amazon by canoe, and re-entered Mexico clandestinely across its southern border. His dispatches and the book *Red Mexico* (1928) aroused catholic indignation against Calles and remain a useful though biased source for the history of the Mexican *cristero* uprising. On visits to Ireland in 1928 and 1933 he was received as a catholic hero (except by leftist republicans, who denounced him as a British agent). He also wrote occasionally for the *Irish Independent*.

McCullagh covered the early stages of the Spanish civil war as a freelance journalist, getting more extensive experience of nationalist Spain than better-connected correspondents. *In Franco's Spain* (1937) combines interesting references to the Irish brigade of Eoin O'Duffy (qv), romantic eulogies of Franco, and breezy complaints about bureaucracy and petty censorship. This was McCullagh's last book; his style of war journalism was now self-consciously old-fashioned. For most of his career McCullagh operated from his London club and a Paris flat, but later he moved to New York. In 1953 he was found wandering in New York's financial district after losing his memory. He died of a cerebral haemorrhage at White Plains, New York, on 25 November 1956.

McCullagh's persona combines attractively dry self-deprecation with bursts of emotive rhetoric; his work exemplifies a type of war journalism that flourished when weak communications and the dominance of print media gave eyewitness accounts from 'our man on the spot' paramount importance and enabled war correspondents to become part of their own stories. He combines assertions of Irishness with pride in the achievements of 'we English' in India, and his work is tinged with anti-Semitism and orientalism. His view that developing countries require authoritarian rulers, such as 'bluff, honest old Porfirio [Diaz], the Mexican Mussolini', weakens but does not invalidate his denunciations of the tyrannies and persecutions he witnessed. He was a citizen of the world and an eyewitness to history. His papers are preserved in the Richard Pares collection, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London (PAR/6/9, PAR 6/15/1.), the Ian Hamilton papers, Liddell Hart Centre, King's College London (HAM 7/1/15), and the archives

of *America* magazine at Georgetown University, Washington, DC (box 19, folders 1–2).

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Francis McCullagh, *With the Cossacks* (1906); id., *The Bolshevik persecution of Christianity* (1924); id., *Red Mexico* (1928); id., *In Franco's Spain* (1937); *Irish Independent*, 28 Nov. 1956; *Ir. Times*, 28 Nov. 1956; *Ulster Herald*, 1 Dec. 1956; *Times*, 3 Dec. 1956; *WWW*; Judith Keene, *Fighting for Franco: international volunteers in nationalist Spain during the Spanish civil war, 1936–39* (2001)

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