

O'Higgins, Brian

by Patrick Maume

O'Higgins, Brian (1882–1963), republican, author, and manufacturer of greetings cards, was born 1 July 1882 at Kilskyre, Co. Meath, youngest of fourteen children of Patrick O'Higgins, farmer, and his wife Anne (née Fox). The memories of his rural catholic family (whose nationalist traditions reached back through Parnellism and the Fenians to 1798 – his grandmother had witnessed famine clearances) underpinned his lifelong political ideals; his verses in praise of 'Glen na Mona' became so popular that 'Glen na Mona' was accepted as a postal address for Kilskyre. He was educated at Kilskyre national school, 1886–96, and thereafter became a draper's apprentice at Clonmellon; he sought relief from work that he disliked in writing for local newspapers. In June 1901 he went to Dublin, where he worked as a barman and joined the O'Growney branch of the Gaelic League. His health broke down in 1904; while recuperating at Kilskyre he co-founded the local hurling club, whose grounds were later named in his memory (Pairc Ui Huigín).

O'Higgins became the Gaelic League's answer to poet and performer Percy French (qv), whom he detested; he created a stage shoneen in top hat and evening dress, lamenting in pseudo-English accents Gaelic encroachment on Rathmines. As with many separatists, his satire resentfully contrasted prosperous and pretentious 'West Britons' with the patriotic poor. After attending an Irish-language summer college at Ballingearry, Co. Cork, O'Higgins received a language teacher's certificate in 1906; he worked as a (poorly paid) travelling Gaelic League organiser in Meath and Cavan. O'Higgins published thousands of verses on religious, humorous, historical, and political themes; modelled on the street ballad, these often achieved widespread oral circulation. Much of his work appeared under the name 'Brian na Banban', which he took from a poem by Alice Milligan (qv) on Brian Bórama (qv). Working in the Young Ireland tradition, O'Higgins saw language (English and Irish) as a transparent medium for political messages; he despised those, such as W. B. Yeats (qv), who explored its other functions.

In 1915 O'Higgins founded a satirical propagandist paper, *Irish Fun*, written by himself under various pseudonyms; it vanished after the 1916 rising but reappeared in 1917–18. He also founded a boys' magazine, *St. Enda's*, in 1918. During the rising O'Higgins fought at the GPO; afterwards he published an account of his experiences, *The soldier's story of Easter week* (1925). O'Higgins was imprisoned at Stafford jail and at Frongoch in Wales; his incarceration caused him acute mental suffering. On his release in 1917 he became secretary of the Gaelic College at Carrigaholt, Co. Clare. He was rearrested in May 1918 during the 'German plot' scare.

At the general election in December 1918 O'Higgins stood for West Clare; his candidacy was unopposed, despite some local misgivings about representation by the 'Meath poet'. O'Higgins sat in the second dáil. Under his direction West Clare pioneered the Dáil court system. After death threats were issued against Sinn Féin judges in West Clare, the national leadership kept O'Higgins in Dublin (1920–21) as a propagandist. His brothers Frank (a noted traditional musician) and Joe were IRA activists. O'Higgins adamantly opposed the treaty. In the 1922 general election he and the other Clare Sinn Féin candidates were returned unopposed. O'Higgins was interned in 1923–4; after twenty-four days on hunger strike he almost died and he permanently lost his singing voice. Despite gaining a minuscule first-preference vote, he was elected on Éamon de Valera's (qv) surplus at the August 1923 general election. He remained with Sinn Féin after the establishment of Fianna Fáil and lost his seat in June 1927.

In 1926, with the artist Michael O'Brien, O'Higgins founded a firm that manufactured greetings cards, the success of which underpinned his later career. Under his direction artists produced brightly tinted Celtic designs for cards, calendars, prayerbooks, and other items, adorned with O'Higgins's verses; these were popular with many who opposed O'Higgins politically. O'Higgins's fervent catholic devotion coexisted with his belief that the bishops had been British stooges since the foundation of Maynooth in 1795. In his hero worship of T. W. Tone (qv) he ignored conservatives' denunciations of Tone's hostility to catholicism, and employed indistinguishable devotional terminology for Erin and the Virgin Mary. His catholicism led him to oppose socialist and Marxist trends within Sinn Féin and the IRA. He resigned from Sinn Féin in 1934 in protest against allowing state employees to retain party membership, but he continued to attend meetings of the party's former TDs, which supposedly kept the second dáil alive. In 1938 he was one of seven former TDs who transferred authority to the IRA army council until such time as a 'legitimate' dáil was elected.

In September 1937 O'Higgins founded the *Wolfe Tone Weekly* with Joseph Clarke (qv); it was suppressed by the authorities in September 1939. From 1932 to 1962 he published the *Wolfe Tone Annual* (which he started for the purpose of raising funds for Wolfe Tone commemorations). Each issue described a hero or episode of Irish history from O'Higgins's standpoint. The 1944 edition was banned by wartime censors. O'Higgins proclaimed contemporary IRA men such as Seán Russell (qv) and Charlie Kerins (qv) (the subject of one of his ballads) the true heirs of past Irish rebels, while the Gardaí they killed were classed with Major Sirr (qv) and the Black and Tans. He regularly spoke at ceremonies for the reburial of executed IRA men, claiming that, by handing over their bodies, the government effectively admitted that they were not criminals and implicitly vindicated them. O'Higgins claimed that Éamon de Valera, 'His Majesty's Prime Minister', was corrupting Ireland more than a hundred years of British rule had done, leaving it more anglicised and less free than in O'Higgins's youth. He was particularly disgusted by de Valera's praise for character-forming Blackrock College rugby; why, O'Higgins wondered, should

Irishmen play non-Irish games? O'Higgins's anti-cosmopolitanism was sometimes outweighed by his sense of humour; he was a regular cinema-goer who enjoyed the Marx Brothers, and he also had a taste for Gilbert and Sullivan, and the novels of P. G. Wodehouse.

O'Higgins died suddenly during a retreat at St Anthony's church, Clontarf, on 10 March 1963. (For the preceding twenty years he had opened the church every morning before attending first mass.) In September 1908 he had married Annie Kenny (d. 1958). They had seven children, whom they brought up in an entirely Irish-speaking environment; two died in infancy, three entered the religious life. One son, Brian, became a well-known actor at the Abbey Theatre.

O'Higgins's blend of traditionalist catholicism and republicanism retained little of its influence by the end of the twentieth century. However, he was still revered by legitimist republicans such as Republican Sinn Féin; some of his devotional material was treasured by Marian enthusiasts, and some ballads (such as the emigrant song 'A stór mo chroí in the strangers' land' and 'Charlie Kerins, the boy from Tralee') continued to be sung. The bravery, self-sacrifice, and determination which marked O'Higgins's early career hardened into a narrow kitsch politics, which nonetheless attracted in its day a wide readership and tweaked official nerves. O'Higgins was a heretic within mid-century nationalist culture, not an outside critic; his renderings of the nationalist world view questioned necessary but unspoken compromises elided by Fianna Fáil orthodoxy.

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Mary MacSwiney Papers, UCD archives (O'Higgins letters to Mary MacSwiney); *Wolfe Tone Annual*, 1946, 1949; *Ir. Independent*, 11 Mar. 1963 (obit.); Pdraig Ó Tuile, *Life and times of Brian O'Higgins* (Navan, Brian O'Higgins Memorial Committee, 1965); Brian O'Higgins, *The soldier's story of Easter week* (1966 ed. contains personal reminiscences by O'Higgins's son Criodan, and some of O'Higgins's prison letters); David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish life, 1913–21* (1977); Mary Anne Kotsonouris, *Retreat from revolution: the dáil courts, 1920–24* (1994); <http://www.irelandsown.net/women2.html> (a collage in honour of Cumann na mBan; includes O'Higgins's poem 'The women of Cumann na mBan'); <http://www.kilskyrehc.com/BRIANOHUGIN.HTM>; <http://www.hoganstand.com/general/identity/extras/gaels/stories/higgins.htm>; conversation with Dr J. L. Murphy, California