

In 1919 a group of men barely out of their teens, poorly armed, with no money and little training, renewed the fight begun in 1916 to drive the British out of Ireland. Dan Breen was to become one of the best known. At first they were condemned on all sides. They became outlaws and *My Fight* describes graphically what life was like 'on the run', with 'an army at one's heels and a thousand pounds on one's head'. A burning belief in their cause sustained them through many a dark and bitter day, and slowly support came from the country.

The Treaty in December 1921 did not bring the full and complete separation from Britain that Dan wanted, though he tried desperately to avert the Civil War. When that threat loomed up he was in San Francisco. He had a premonition that he was going back to meet his death, so on the train from San Francisco to New York he jotted down the rough draft of his life, which became *My Fight for Irish Freedom*. The fact that it was written at white heat in such a short time, gives it a swiftness, almost a breathlessness of movement, rare in historical memoirs. It was first published in 1924 and revised and enlarged from tape recordings made by Dan for the first Anvil paperback in 1964.

Dan Breen, who represented Tipperary in Dáil Éireann, retired from politics in 1965. He died in December 1969.

CHAPTER ONE

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

I was born on 11 August 1894 in my father's cottage at Grange, one mile south of Donohill, Co. Tipperary. I received the name Daniel at my christening, which took place two days later at Solohead parish church. My parents were Daniel Breen and Honora Moore. My mother was a native of Reenavana, Doon, Co. Limerick. The children born to them in order of seniority were Laurence, Mary, John, Winifred, Catherine, Patrick, Dan and Laurence (Junior). The first-born, Laurence, died when I was about four years old. He was eighteen at the time of his death. He and two other lads of about the same age had spent some hours fishing the Multeen brook on a night of dense fog. All three of them contracted pneumonia and died a couple of weeks later. A superstitious old woman spread the tale that the young fellows had watched a hurling match between two teams of fairies in the rath field and thereby forfeited their lives.

My father died from blood-poisoning at the age of sixty. A thorn pierced his finger when he was scaring a fence. The wound turned septic and he was laid up for more than one year before his death. He was a pleasant-looking, bearded man of middle height. I was about six years old at the time of his death and I have only a faint recollection of him. I remember one sunny day when he took me by the hand and led me through the fields. When I got tired he lifted me on to his shoulders and brought me home pick-a-back. I have a distinct memory of the coffin being brought into the room in which he was waked. The womenfolk set up such a keening that Martin Breen, my father's cousin, ordered them to go down to the kitchen.

My father's death must have been a great blow to my mother who had to provide for a houseful of children, the

youngest of whom was still in the cradle. My mother was a midwife and managed to make ends meet even though she was hard pressed at times. Her meagre earnings were supplemented by Mary and John. Mary was hired as a general servant in a neighbour's house at a wage of six pounds a year. John went to work for a farmer. They brought home every penny that they earned.

Even though I was very young at the time of the Boer War, I can still remember the neighbours sitting round the fire, listening to someone reading aloud the news from *The Irish People*. I recall their exultation over the victories gained by the Boer Generals, Cronje and de Wit, and how thrilled they were by the British defeat at Spion Kop.

I remember the last eviction which took place one mile from Grange. Michael Dwyer Bán, a relative of ours, was ejected from his home and died on the roadside. This event left an indelible impression on my mind.

The Land Act of 1903, which enabled tenants to purchase their holdings, brought great joy to the farmers. They seemed to have entered an utopia where the threat of famine no longer existed. In a short time, however, they began to complain of the high rent, £2 to £2-5-0 an acre. I often heard my godfather, Long Jim Ryan, and my uncle, Lar Breen, talking about this high rent and also the poor price paid for milk delivered to the new Cleve's factory. They considered that threepence a gallon was not an economic return. I did not know the meaning of the word 'economic' but I received the impression that everything was not tinted with a colour of rose. Their chief grievance was that no 'back-milk' was given to the suppliers.

Our family barely existed above the hair-line of poverty. Most of the neighbours were in a similar plight. Potatoes and milk were our staple diet. On special occasions we had a meal of salted pork but the luxury of fresh meat was altogether beyond our reach.

I went to Garryshane school at the age of four. Even though the building was in the village of Donohill, the national school had to take its title from the name of the field on which it was built. The Protestants objected to the school being called

Donohill National School; they claimed exclusive right to the prefix Donohill because it was the official name of their parish.

The school was a drab two-storey building with no playground for the pupils. The girls occupied the upper floor, the boys the ground floor. The principal of the boys' school was James Power, a kinsman of the Breens. He died about the time that I was in the fourth class. Charlie Walshe, a Kerry-man, was appointed to act as substitute teacher pending the appointment of a new principal. He was better known in later years as Cormac Breathnach, Lord Mayor of Dublin. Charlie had been engaged by the Gaelic League to teach Irish in the rural areas. He did relief work in several national schools of our district. It may be of interest to learn that he also taught Seán Treacy, Dinny Lacey, Packy Deere, Seán Hogan and a lot of my pals who are now dead. Some of those lads did not belong to our parish, but all of them lived within a two-mile radius. He did not confine his history lesson to the official textbook. He gave us the naked facts about the English conquest of Ireland and the manner in which our country was held in bondage. We learned about the Penal Laws, the systematic ruining of Irish trade, the elimination of our native language. He told us also of the ruthless manner in which Irish rebellions had been crushed. By the time we had passed from his class, we were no longer content to grow up 'happy English children' as envisaged by the Board of Education. To the end of his days Charlie was in the habit of boasting of his rebel past pupils.

When I reached my fourteenth year, my schooldays came to an end. I had to go out and earn my bread. Father Martin Ryan, our parish priest, gave my first job on the renovation of our old school. Laurence Dwyer was foreman and carpenter, Pat O'Neill did the plastering, Mylie Carew and I did the rough labour. Father Ryan paid me nine shillings a week, no mean sum in the eyes of a young gossoon. I was a proud boy on that first Saturday night when I handed my pay-packet to my mother. When the renovation of the school had been completed, I worked for farmers in the district.

In the spring of 1913 I got a job as linesman on the Great

Southern Railway. My wages were eighteen shillings a week, plus a living-out allowance of nine shillings (even in Dublin lodging-houses we got the best of grub at nine shillings a week). My work took me to Mallow, Cork and Dublin, because the maintenance gangs had to move from place to place as their services were required. My work made me familiar with the railway network and this knowledge served me well in later years when I was an outlaw. I was employed at the laying of the yard at Inchicore when the Great Strike of 1913 occurred. I walked round the streets of Dublin after the day's work had finished and saw the police wielding their batons in frenzied charges, felling strikers and sightseers indiscriminately.

CHAPTER TWO

SWORN IN BY SEAN TREACY

Sickened to death by British duplicity, cant and humbug, and by all the sham talk about a home rule measure that would give only a vestige of self-government to my country, I decided to join the Irish Republican Brotherhood. I was sworn in by Seán Treacy. I was Seán's most intimate friend and we shared all our secrets. I am concerned that full justice has not been done to his memory.

Seán was still in swaddling clothes when his father, Denis Treacy, died. His mother took the little lad and moved to Lackenacreena near Hollyford. When her brother, Jim Allis, got married, Mrs. Treacy changed residence once more. She and her son, now aged eleven, went to live with her sister, Maryanne Allis.

Seán attended the Christian Brothers' school at Tipperary, and was marked down as a very promising pupil who showed a special proficiency in the Irish language. He was an eager student of the history of his country. Seán's aunt did not approve of his budding patriotic sentiments. While my mother taught me to love my country and be prepared to fight for its freedom, Maryanne Allis tried to put a brake on Seán's youthful zeal. She had a hard outlook on the world. For this I do not blame her, because she had to toil and moil from morning to night for a mere existence.

Seán thought out all matters by himself. Of him we might use the term, a self-made patriot. Maryanne blamed me for leading her nephew astray. There was not a man on this earth who could lead on Seán Treacy to any course which he did not wish to follow. The truth is that in the matter of patriotic endeavour he was the leader, and I was his willing disciple.

Even though our houses were less than one mile apart, we did not meet face to face until we were in our eighteenth year.