

THE PATRIOT GAME BY BRENDAN GISBY

It is 1961, forty years after the end of Ireland's War of Independence. In a village in the north of County Longford, Eire, an elderly man recalls the part he played in that War.

*Come all ye young rebels, and list while I sing,
For the love of one's country is a terrible thing.
It banishes fear with the speed of a flame,
And it makes us all part of the patriot game.*

Dominic Behan, *The Patriot Game*

I see that fella Dominic Behan has written a new song. You know the fella I mean. Brother of Brendan Behan, the playwright. Likes the drink, does Brendan, so I hear. A bit like me, I suppose, except I'm not the toast of New York City these days. Not that I've ever been the toast of anywhere, of course – not even here in Moyne, my own village, despite what I did for my country, despite what I went through for dear ould Ireland.

Anyway, that song by the brother, Dominic. I'm just after hearing it being sung down at McCloskey's. Brought a tear to my eye, so it did. And brought back all those memories from the War – not that the memories are ever far away, mind you. Aye, it's a grand song. *The Patriot Game*, it's called. Apparently, it's about the young fella who was killed during that IRA raid across the Border a few years back, the New Year's Day raid on the RUC barracks up in Fermanagh. '57, I think it was. There's already been a song written about the raid, *Seán South of Garryowen*. You're bound to know it. It's sung in all the pubs.

Now, what was the name of the young fella again? O'Hanlon, that's it. Fergal O'Hanlon. Aye, it's in the song: *My name is O'Hanlon, and I've just turned sixteen*. I joined the IRA when I was about the same age, but that was more than forty years before young Fergal did – and of course I didn't get myself killed. It might have been better if I had, you know, if the Tans had taken me out the back of that gaol and shot me, like they did the others. It would have saved me and a load of other people a lot of trouble...

Ach, but that's just stupid talk. One Bushmill too many at McCloskey's, making me feel sorry for myself again. Of course it wouldn't have been better if the Tans had shot me. Where would all my beautiful children have come from, eh? And grandchildren now, I believe. Grandchildren I'll probably never see. I'm sixty-one now and very ill. That operation in Dublin a few years ago was meant to fix the problem, but I think it's done for me. I doubt if I'll live long enough to celebrate my next birthday.

I shouldn't be dwelling on all that, though. It's the song I was talking about, *The Patriot Game*. Sure 'n' it took me right back to the day I joined. It was 1917, the year after the Rising. I was seventeen, and a smaller, skinnier and more gangling boy you couldn't have come across. After what they did to the leaders of the Rising, the whole country was on fire. And the fire burned brightest among us young lads. We all wanted to fight for the cause.

You know, when the Rising took place, most of Ireland, and particularly the Dublin folk, thought it was a nuisance, the work of some lunatics that would be put down quickly. And that would have been that, the whole incident forgotten about after a few years. But, no, with

their usual arrogance the Brits decided to execute the leaders – to teach us all a lesson, they said. And what a fuckin’ botch they made of it. The story was that yon sick, ould man Tom Clarke was shaking in agony after surviving the firing squad and that an officer had to put a bullet in his head to finish the job. And what about Connolly, eh? He was already at death’s door and also in agony from his wounds. He couldn’t stand, so they strapped him to a fuckin’ chair before they executed him. It was just like in Behan’s song: *They told me how Connolly was shot in his chair, his wounds from the fighting all bloody and bare.*

Aye, a total botch it was. What was it Yeats wrote in his poem? *A terrible beauty is born.* Those executions were what made me want to fight. Forty years later, I’ve no doubt those same stupid actions by the Brits were what inspired young Fergal O’Hanlon to join the IRA. A terrible beauty, for sure.

Anyway, back to that day I went to see Seamus Brady, the Commanding Officer of the 5th Battalion. He looks me up and down with those cold grey eyes of his before saying, “And how is a skinny runt of a farm-boy like you goin’ to be of any help to us in the struggle? Fuck, never mind the Brits, the first strong wind that got up would blow you over.”

I have to admit I was trembling with nerves and stumbling over my words, but Jim McNamee, our neighbour and a second-lieutenant by that time, put in a good word for me.

“It’s all right, Seamus,” he says, “I’ll vouch for young Pat here. I know his father Hugh well and his uncle Patrick. They’re both good men, loyal to the cause. And this skeleton of a boy might bend with the wind, but he has some special qualities. He’s a genius with his hands. Sure ’n’ he built that motorcycle of his with his own hands. And he knows about guns, all types of guns.”

Well, Brady looked at me with fresh eyes after that. It was the motorcycle that did it, I think. Up here in North Longford, they needed riders who could move quickly round the countryside, delivering messages and the like between the different Companies. And they needed men who knew the countryside like the backs of their hands. Sure ’n’ didn’t I know every inch of the Three Corners – every inch of the country where County Longford meets County Leitrim and County Cavan?

“All right, you’re in,” says Brady. “But don’t you be letting me down, you hear?”

That was it. I was now in the Irish Republican Army. I was a member of what became known as Moyne Company, 5th Battalion, Longford. And so began my glory years with the bold fighting men.

Part Two – On Active Service

When I look back now, I think the years between me joining the IRA in ’17 and the Truce in ’21 were probably the best years of my life. Everything since those years has been a blur. It’s been like a life without a purpose, a wasted life. Ach, for Jesus’ sake, will you listen to me now, all maudlin again?

Anyway, ’17 to ’21. Those were exciting and dangerous times, for sure. Young as I was, I

was a part of it, a part of the struggle, with my own role to play. And the details of that role are very clear to me, even forty years later. That's mostly because not so long ago I had to remember all the details and write them down. Bear with me and I'll explain why.

About a half-dozen years back, I was in a pretty poor way. I was well into my fifties and doing the odd labouring job here and there to keep me in food – and drink, of course. Then one day I found that I couldn't labour any more. My old body was past it. Which meant that I had no money coming in at all. Now, the boys down at McCloskey's kept saying to me that I should be applying for one of those Military Service Pensions on account of my IRA service during the Black and Tan War. Well, you know me: I can't abide authority – even if it is our own Irish boys running the authority – and I can't be doing with paperwork, so naturally I didn't do anything about it. But by that time I had no choice in the matter and I went ahead and applied. Jeez, though, what a rigmarole that was. Apart from having to put down every detail in the application form, I had to go and ask some of the senior men I served with to testify on my behalf. The whole thing took years, but I got the pension in the end – and a medal into the bargain. Not that it's of much use to man nor beast, but the medal is around here somewhere – a medal with bar for rendering active service during the period of the War.

Aye, for rendering active service. *Continuous* active service, it was. You know, for the best part of four years I was on duty during every single military operation by our Company. That fact only hit home to me after I had filled the form in.

And that form. Well, for each of the four years it wanted to know things like the Districts I operated in and who the commanding officer was in each District. Then it asked for actual particulars of the military operations I took part in and the services I provided each time. Those "services" were manifold, I can tell you, so much so that I was after writing "other duties too numerous to mention" all over the form. It also only struck me afterwards about the sheer amount of work I did during those four years.

It wasn't like that to begin with, of course, when the Army network was still being put together. In that first year or so, my principal duty was as a rider, a messenger. Aye, me and my motorcycle travelling all over the Three Counties at all hours, delivering messages from Company to Brigade HQ and from Company to Company. That was how I met the Commander-in-chief, the great man himself, Michael Collins. Mick was up in this neck of the woods a lot in the early years, helping to organise things. Most of the time, he stayed at the Longford Arms down in Granard. I took many messages to him and delivered as many for him, and we became good friends. He used to say to me, "Your my right-hand man up here, Pat, you know." But I knew that wasn't the case. It was only Mick's way of encouraging us young fellas.

Now, a lot of people – not just the Brits and Ulstermen; that Anti-Treaty crowd as well – they used to call The Big Fella a thug and a murderer. But I swear to you a kinder and more gentle giant you couldn't hope to meet. As for being a murderer, I don't think he ever killed

anybody or even shot a gun in anger. Then the Republican morons had to go and murder him in an ambush down in Cork in '22, the greatest leader of a free Ireland that ever drew breath. And what did we get in his place, eh? De Valera. The Long Fella, all right. The long streak of putrid shite that we call our noble President...

But, sure, I'm getting ahead of myself there. I was talking about my duties during the War. After a while, it wasn't just my motorcycle the Company wanted. There was also the business of the guns. As Jim McNamee said on my first day, "He knows about guns, all types of guns." And so I did – how to fire them, maintain them, keep them clean and repair them. Sure 'n' what lad from a smallholding out here in the country didn't know about guns back then? Not if he wanted to put food in the family's larder with a bit of hunting and poaching.

Next thing I'm being asked to repair some guns. Then it's to clean some others and hide them. In no time at all, I'm in charge of storing and maintaining the Company's whole arsenal of guns and ammunition and explosives. Not only that, but I've become the official arms instructor – and not just for Moyne Company; for Dromard Company as well. Sure 'n' by the time I turn twenty, I'm holding the rank of lieutenant colonel. And on top of all that I'm the rider for both Companies, delivering messages all over the place.

So you'll see what I mean now when I said I was on duty for every military operation. I had to be. It was my job to issue the guns and explosives for each engagement. And to collect them afterwards. I also needed to be there to collect and store any guns that were captured. It was exhausting work, I can tell you. But it was all worth it. Up here in the Three Corners, it seemed like we were winning the War. I was there in '20 when the 5th Battalion captured the Barracks at Arva just up the road in County Cavan. And it was only months later a few miles south of here when the bold boys of the North Longford Flying Column drove the British Army out of Ballinalee and stopped the bastards from burning down the village. Three hundred IRA men up against a force of nine hundred soldiers. What a momentous victory that was!

Now, I don't know if I had grown too cocky by then or if I was just plain tired and wanted to get home, but one night in the Spring of '21, I slipped up badly. I was on my way to one of my arms caches to return some guns that had been used in an engagement earlier in the night. Not thinking properly, I decided against riding along one of the back lanes and took the main road instead, which was quicker. And of course I ran straight into a bunch of Auxiliaries in an armoured car, with a truckload of Black and Tans in tow. I was done for.

Part Three – Betrayal

I was well and truly caught. With four rifles and six revolvers bundled up and strapped on the back of my motorcycle, it was red-handed at that. The Auxies and Tans were on their way down to Longford town, and that's where they took me. The Auxies kept the guns and the Tans put me into the back of their truck. The Tans gave me a few punches and kicks to begin with, but that was all – they must have been ordered to make sure I was still in one piece for my interrogation. Sitting on the floor of the truck at the feet of those brutes, there's no shame in admitting that I wept – for myself, for what was about to pass. In all my young life, I had never felt so small and frightened and lonely.

In Longford, I was taken to the police building, where two of the Tans dragged me down the stairs, threw me headlong into one of the cells and planted another couple of hefty kicks on me. Then they left me there on my own. Nothing happened for a while. Occasionally, I could hear screams coming from the floor above. And twice I heard footsteps out in the corridor – men marching, dragging something, the back door being unlocked, a single shot ringing out. Neither time did the executed man utter a sound – no whimpering or wailing, no plea for mercy. I prayed to God that I would have their courage when it came to my turn.

Eventually, the same two Tans returned for me and took me back up the stairs to the interrogation room. All there was in the room was an old wooden table with a chair at either side of it. I was pushed down into one of the chairs. Then two more men came into the room. One was a gaunt young officer, a stiff upper lip type with one of those pencil moustaches. He looked totally bored, and that's a fact. The other I can only describe as a thug. He was Scottish – from Glasgow, I think. It was said that Churchill emptied Barlinnie Prison of all the thieves and rapists and murderers when he formed the Black and Tans. And this specimen was surely proof of that.

The officer sat down across the table from me. He asked what I imagine were the usual questions – you know, wanting information about me and my comrades in the IRA, all that sort of thing. And, of course, he was after knowing where I was coming from and where I was going to with a bunch of guns in the middle of the night. When all I told him was my name and the name of my village, he sighed, stood up and nodded to the thug.

“Have it your own way then, Paddy,” he said to me.

Then he dragged his chair over to a corner of the room and lit a cigarette. He sat there smoking during the rest of the proceedings.

That's when the thug took over the interrogation. But using a pair of pliers instead of words. Jesus, though, didn't he relish his job? Having your fingernails ripped out is not something you ever want to experience. The pain is excruciating. And I don't mind saying that I squealed like a stuck pig with each nail. After the third one, I felt like I was dying. I wanted to tell them everything.

Sure 'n' wasn't it the Big Fella himself who told us not to be martyrs if we were captured?

“There’s too many of you young lads getting yourselves killed during interrogation,” I remember him saying. “All I would say is not to be stupid about it. Hold out for as long as you can, for sure. But remember your absence will be noticed by the men in your Unit, and they’ll take steps to make sure they’re not captured as well. So when you’ve had enough, go ahead and tell them. Tell them what you know. But try and mix the real information with some made-up stuff. The bastards are confused enough at the best of times; confuse them even more with some false trails. Have the fuckers running about the countryside like blue-arsed flies. But don’t die into the bargain, you hear?”

Well, I surprised myself and held out until all the nails on my right hand had gone. But when the thug went for the left hand, that’s when I talked. I did as Mick advised. I gave some real names, but I also threw in the names of a couple of fellas who I knew were dead. It was the same with the guns. I told them the locations of some of my caches, as well as the locations of a couple of caches that didn’t exist.

The officer wrote everything down in his little notebook and left the room. And then the thug started on my left hand. You see, it didn’t matter to him. None of it fuckin’ mattered. The sadistic bastard was always going to have his way whatever happened.

After it was over, after the thug was finished, the Tans dragged me downstairs and put me back in the cell. I really did want to die then. It wasn’t just the pain, though that was awful enough. It was the shame as well. No matter that Mick had told us to do it, it was the shame of having betrayed the men in my Company.

So I lay there in that cell, praying for them to come soon and take me out the back and shoot me like I had heard with the others. But it seemed like days passed and nothing happened. And when they did come, Jesus wept, it was for to release me. Now, I still don’t know to this day why I was released. Maybe it was because the Truce was about to be declared and the Tans had received orders to unload their prisoners. Or maybe they just wanted to cause trouble, making me out to be some kind of traitor. If it was the second reason, it certainly worked in some quarters, I can tell you. But sure ’n’ I’ll come to that in a minute.

Anyway, before they finally let me go, the Tans had a little surprise up their sleeves – a sort of parting gift, if you like. A group of them drove me into Moyne. We got out at the start of the village, where they tied a big Union Jack round me. Then they made me march along Main Street, with them following and one of the galoots beating a drum so as to attract everybody’s attention. Aside from the torture, I hadn’t eaten or drunk anything since being captured, so I was very weak and I stumbled rather than marched. I fell a couple of times, but a few dunts from their rifle butts on my back and shoulders had me up again soon enough. Then, when we got to the other end of the street, they just left me there, still wrapped in the Union Jack. I was on my knees and crying in front of the whole village. The final humiliation.

My mother and father came for me and took me home. And that’s where I stayed hidden

away and recovering for weeks, months. By that time, the Truce was in force and the War, for me at least, was over. But only for another one – the Civil War – to start up. That war, with all those people killed in it, was the fault of just one man – that slimy American gobshite De Valera. Aye, him and Churchill – two fuckin’ American gobshites together. I was on Michael Collins’ side, of course, a Free Stater, but I didn’t have the stomach to get involved in the fighting, going up against my own countrymen, many of them good friends from the 5th Battalion.

Thankfully, the fighting didn’t last long. The Staters came out on top and Ireland became a free country, but with De Valera as President and not the Big Fella. The fuckin’ irony of it! And the lanky bastard’s still there after all these years, still strangling the life out of Ireland.

Anyway, when things settled down after the Civil War, I tried to get on with my life in Moyne. But it was impossible. There were fingers constantly pointing at me. The two men who were murdered back at that gaol in Longford happened to come from the village. It was no coincidence that I had been caught as well. We had all been returning from the same engagement that night. We had all been betrayed. Unfortunately, the families of the two men were convinced I was the traitor. I knew and God knew that the men were captured long before I was, but there was no talking to those people. They just wouldn’t listen. I had to get out of there, so I left to stay with a relative over in Arva. I was twenty-three by then and needed to start my life again.

And so I did. It wasn’t long before I met the dark and sultry Kate. Nor was it long before we were married. We had six children – three fine sons and three beautiful, raven-haired daughters. And we had a good life, with me doing a job as a carpenter, working with my hands again. But as the years passed, I became restless. There was something not right, something eating at me. And do you know what it was? It was this country. It seemed that the whole of Ireland – with a lot of help from De Valera, of course – just wanted to forget everything that had happened since the Rising in ’16. Now, I could understand why people would want to erase the Civil War from their memories. But not the War of Independence. Not all the deaths and sacrifices and suffering that were involved. Surely not that.

Fuck, it’s only been in recent years that they brought out those pensions and medals for the men who served in the IRA. After all that time, they began to remember the heroes of their country. And there’s even talk of some kind of celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the Rising. Ach, but it’s all a bit late for me. I don’t suppose I’ll live long enough to celebrate that anniversary.

Anyway, back then I became so depressed about the whole matter that I took to the drink. I stopped working. I neglected my family. And then disaster of all disasters, Kate fell ill. It was more mental than physical, you understand, and probably caused by my drinking. The poor woman was put in a sanatorium. I was incapable of looking after the children, so they were farmed out to other members of the family. As for me, I eventually returned here to Moyne and I’ve been limping along ever since.

So that's my sorry tale, I suppose. Kate's still in that sanatorium, but I haven't gone to see her in many a year. And I hardly ever see any of my sons and daughters. Two of the boys are serving in the Army, the legitimate Irish Army – now, isn't that something to be proud of? Ach, but I don't blame the children for staying away from me. I was a poor father to them. And a poor husband to Kate. To my credit, though, didn't I fight for my country's freedom and didn't I suffer as a result? Did I mention, by the way, there was no place in that pensions form for me to write down that I was beaten and tortured for Ireland?

At the end of the day, I don't know which was worse. Me betraying my family. Or my country betraying me. What was the line in that Behan fella's song again? *For the love of one's country is a terrible thing.* Sure 'n' I can vouch for that.

Patrick died the following year, alone and unmourned. Four years later, his arch-enemy Éamon de Valera presided over Eire's celebrations to mark the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising. De Valera went on to live for almost another decade, dying in 1975. They say the Devil always has the last laugh.

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