

THE BOXING PARSON

KILLED IN BATTLE OF RIO JARAMA
(AND THE OCI EX-PRESIDENT – ON THE OTHER SIDE IN SPAIN)

By Séamus Ware

OLYMPIANS AND WAR

The Spanish Civil War brought together a varied collection of people whose views and background spanned the social and political spectrum. Among them were Irish groups who fought on each side, Nationalist and Republican. These included two Irish Olympians, both of whom lived varied and eventful lives. Hereunder, I give short accounts of these two, starting with the one-time President of the Olympic Council of Ireland.

General Eoin O’Duffy (1893-1944) was a prominent and controversial figure in Irish life over two decades – politician (he was President of a political party, Fine Gael, for a short time in the 1930s.) soldier (Chief-of-Staff of Army of Irish Free State while only 29 years old), Commissioner of ‘Garda Síochána’ (police force), sports administrator. He was active from his youth in the Gaelic Athletic Association (controlling native sports of Hurling, Gaelic Football, as well as track-and-field athletics), became President of the National Athletic and Cycling Association (an offshoot from the G.A.A) and of the Handball (Irish version) Association.

He was elected the 2nd. President of the Olympic Council of Ireland, where he served from 1931 to 1935. In that capacity he headed the small Irish team which travelled to Los Angeles for the 1932 Olympics. Having been Director of an Irish Fascist organisation (“Blue Shirts”), O’Duffy in 1936 organised an Irish Brigade to go to Spain to fight on the Nationalist side, “in defence of Christianity”. The 700 men returned a year later not having participated in much fighting.

The second Irish Olympian to have taken part in the Spanish Civil War was a very different character. **Robert Martin Hilliard** led a short life (1903-1937) which encompassed several unusual and contradictory aspects – a republican from a Protestant business family, boxing champion, atheist, journalist, Church of Ireland (Anglican) priest, communist, brave soldier.

His namesake, Stephen Hilliard (no relation, but also a journalist who became a Church of Ireland priest) wrote : “R.M. Hilliard was a man of action, not I think, a deep thinker”.

Born in Moyeightragh, Killarney, into a successful business family in the town, he was educated at Cork Grammar School and Mountjoy School, Dublin. He won a Read Sizarship and Matriculated into Dublin University (Trinity College) in 1921. In his entrance papers to the College, he described his father, also Robert Hilliard, as “employed in a shop” – he did not apparently mention that the family owned the shop ! From an early age, he was interested in republican politics (unusual for someone with his background) and he maintained his links with republican activism while in College, being involved in the last stages of the Irish Civil War (1922-1923). A biographer, Denis Carroll, states that “Hilliard’s espousal of radicalism led him to become a Marxist in politics and an atheist in philosophical views”. While in Trinity College, he was a founder-member of the Thomas Davis Society, noted for its pro-republican stances, and he was an enthusiastic participant in college activities.

R.M. Hilliard was also a noted athlete and boxer. Despite extreme myopia (short-sightedness), his courage and determination (also to be evident later in other fields) brought him notable success in the boxing ring. He won an Irish (I.A.B.A.) Championship in 1923, and was British and Irish Universities’ Champion. He was the Irish representative in the Bantamweight division in the 1924 Olympic Games ; there he obtained a bye in

the 1st. Round, and was beaten on points by Pertuzzio (Argentine) in the 2nd. Round. Thus ended his Olympic career after one fight.

Robert Hilliard married Clementine Robins of Grayshott, Surrey, England, and in the Summer of 1925 left Trinity without obtaining a Degree. He went to London and engaged in a career in journalism. Hilliard then became associated with the "Oxford Group", led by Frank Buchman of "Moral Rearmament", an international evangelistic movement. This re-awakened his Christianity and led him to resume his studies in Trinity College. He was conferred with a B.A. Degree in 1931, and having taken up theological studies, he obtained a Divinity Testimonial the same year. That year he was also ordained Deacon and obtained a part-time post as Curate-Assistant in Derriaghy Parish, County Antrim, Diocese of Connor. Robert continued study at T.C.D. until 1933, was ordained Priest in 1932, and was appointed to full-time ministry in the Cathedral Mission, attached to St. Anne's, Belfast.

During his second period in College, Robert was editor of "T.C.D." magazine 1931-2. He also resumed his boxing career, but was defeated for the College bantamweight championship in November 1931. While working among the working-class in Belfast, he demonstrated his strong social concern, but apparently his commitment to the Christian ministry began to fail. In late 1934, Hilliard resigned from the Cathedral Mission, and left his wife and their four children (they were later supported by Robert's mother). He returned to London, worked again in journalism, and now joined the Communist Party.

After the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, the International Brigade was formed to fight on the Republican side. The 15th. Brigade was recruited from volunteers from English-speaking countries in late 1936. There are conflicting accounts of whether R.M. Hilliard joined a British or an Irish contingent, the latter being composed mainly of republican (I.R.A.) veterans. At a training camp at Madrigueras in early 1937, he was described as :

“..an ex-Anglican parson,
a Communist, a great drinker,
one who had friends
of all classes”

“an ex-Anglican parson, a Communist, a great drinker, one who had friends of all classes”. At the battle of Jarama south of Madrid in February, the Spanish Republican Army was helped by the International Brigade in trying to halt Nationalist (pro-Franco) troops attempting to cut the road from Madrid to Valencia. Hilliard was one of four men with only light weapons who fought against tanks to cover their colleagues' retreat. All of this group were killed, Robert surviving his wounds for just five days in an improvised field hospital.

Thus died the “boxing parson” (as he was known), described as “an idealist who maintained radical social commitments”. In 1972, Christ Church in Derriaghy, where he had ministered, was celebrating its centenary ; Joseph Boyd, a former comrade of Hilliard's in the International Brigade,

presented a Holy Communion Chalice, Paten and Cruet to the Church in his memory.

Both of these fighting Olympians are mentioned in a song by the Irish singer/songwriter Christy Moore :

“Viva La Quince Brigada” – for full text see “The Christy Moore Songbook” (Brandon, 1984) or the album “Ride On” (1984, WEA). I quote a few lines hereunder.

“From every comer of the world came sailing
the Fifteenth International Brigade....

Bob Hilliard was a Church of Ireland pastor

From Killarney across the Pyrenees he came...

Many Irishmen heard the call of France,...

Propaganda from the pulpit and newspapers

Helped O'Duffy to enlist his crew.”

Acknowledgements: I thank Dermot Sherlock (Hon.General Sec. of O.C.I. and formerly Asst. Sec. of T.C.D.) and Church of Ireland Library and Archive, for their assistance with information on Hilliard; and my niece Catherine Ware for bringing the words of the Christy Moore song to my attention.