

# The Secret Army: The IRA, 1916-1970

## by J. Bowyer Bell

(John Day Company; 404 pp.; \$8.95)

### Sean Cronin

According to one view, the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.) is a ruthless terrorist organization; according to another it is a response to repression in Northern Ireland. Dr. J. Bowyer Bell seeks to clarify the matter in this definitive work, and I think he succeeds. This may be because he is an American without Irish links and can see the I.R.A. clearly.

The I.R.A. was born in the fires of the Easter Rising of 1916. "Revolution is a drama of passion," Mao Tse-tung told André Malraux some years ago. The Easter Rising was certainly that. The I.R.A. tries to make fact the faith of that great drama: "We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies to be sovereign and indefeasible. . . ." The attempt has taken it through some grim struggles: a two-year guerrilla war against Britain from 1919 to 1921; a civil war against the Free State (southern Ireland, now the Irish Republic) from 1922 to 1923; defeat and an uneasy underground existence until Eamon de Valera returned to power in 1932; a never-acknowledged alliance with De Valera until 1934, and then the wilderness again until 1939 when it started a sabotage campaign in England that ended disastrously early in 1940; persecution north and south during World War II amid accusations of working with the Germans—against Britain, naturally; near oblivion in the postwar years until the 1950's when a new generation took up the tattered banner of Irish Republicanism and launched a guerrilla campaign in Northern Ireland that also ended in defeat; ideological wrangling in the 1960's and a new split as Belfast and Derry went up in flames, from which emerged two

wings of the I.R.A.—Officials and Provisionals.

The details are all here and the leaders who rose and fell, the political thinkers and the men of action. The I.R.A. has always been a small revolutionary minority that insisted it spoke with the authentic voice of the Irish nation. It is a large claim. And yet the most biased observers agree—the Nationalists in their ghettos in Belfast and Derry insist—that the I.R.A. is their only defense against a hated government and system. But even as the shield of the poor Catholics, the I.R.A. follows a stern nonsectarian line. It is the enemy of bishops as well as of landlords and industrialists. It is banned in Dublin and in Belfast. It insists that its ideal is a Socialist Ireland, but few follow it on that account. And finally it is not responsible for the present troubles in the North, although the Provisional wing has certainly taken advantage of them.

The Officials hoped to unite working-class Protestants and Catholics against the Unionist government in Stormont. The leaders were doctrinaire Socialists. The Provisionals built their strength in the Catholic working class, thus polarizing the two communities, or so their foes charged. The Provisionals went over to the offensive against the British army while the Officials stuck to defensive tactics. It can be quite confusing for the outsider.

The present troubles in the north of Ireland grew out of the demands of young left-wing activists for Catholic civil rights in the summer and fall of 1968. The I.R.A. was not even in the picture. Militant Protestants under the Reverend Ian Paisley took to the streets in countermarches and brought down the government of

Captain Terence O'Neill, a big landowner, with bombs. When the Nationalist slums in Derry and Belfast were attacked with gunfire and bombs in August, 1969, the Labor government in London sent troops. The Nationalists rejected the authority of the Unionist government and set up their own authority behind their barricades. When the Tories returned to power in June, 1970, they resolved to establish "the rule of law"—which meant a return to Stormont rule. Troops swarmed into the Nationalist ghettos, raided homes for guns; the I.R.A. resisted and gun battles resulted. In August, 1971, the Tories introduced internment—again only for the Nationalists. The Provisional I.R.A. gun-and-bomb campaign moved into high gear, urban guerrilla warfare erupted in Belfast and Derry and Newry, and the toll of dead and injured grew.

Dr. Bell's book does not tell this story, for it ends in 1970. But it is the prologue to it and makes today's happenings understandable. The defects and weaknesses of the I.R.A. do not escape his scrutiny. But he notes its strong points too. Here is his summation:

"It is clear that all the long years of nominal independence [in the Republic] have not greatly transformed Ireland, still a peripheral and exploited province of British interests, still a pale green copy of discarded London fashions and foibles, still a truncated nation not free, not united, and not Gaelic. Some contemporary politicians feel that this is not so unfortunate and is in fact inevitable. Foreign critics look to each generation of Irish radicals to correct the error of their elders; truly to break the connection, actually to achieve an Irish Republic in more than name. . . . If Ireland and the I.R.A. had since 1916 contributed nothing more to the revolutionary tradition of the world than the long, bitter log of failure, missed chances, bad luck, poor judgment, error and questionable compromises, this would still be a vein of most valuable ore—for others if not the Irish. But to dig into the history of the I.R.A. is to uncover not only what to avoid but

how to persist, to endure, to suffer disaster and to maintain the ideals and the organization."

There is more to the I.R.A. than the mystique of the gunman, though without that in a country like Ireland the I.R.A. would be nothing. This time the I.R.A., the Provisional wing at any rate, believes it is on the threshold of victory as Britain talks of plans for long-term unification, and a withdrawal of troops at some

stage appears inevitable. Others are not so sure.

The men of the I.R.A. are rebels. Down the years they have been poorly led, pitifully armed, badly trained, hunted and persecuted, even executed by former comrades. A sense of history has sustained them. How much, if any, sympathy they deserve the reader must judge for himself—and there isn't much point in adopting a high moral posture in

this because only those who condemn all bombs, all acts of violence, are in a position to condemn the I.R.A.'s homemade variety. It is easy to be superior about the I.R.A., another besetting fault of those who have written about this remarkable revolutionary organization. Dr. Bell is wise, but not superior or morally condescending. In him the I.R.A. has found a fine and fair biographer, even a sympathetic one.

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## Briefly Noted

### Ain't Gonna Pay for War No More

by Robert Calvert

(War Tax Resistance; 127 pp.; \$1.00)

Through the violence and counter-violence of the sixties, some small groups persisted, and still persist, in their witness of non-violent resistance to war. Robert Calvert, a former convict (jailed for routine apolitical offense), has in recent years been among the foremost proponents of "war tax resistance." His little book is perhaps the most thorough explanation of this growing anti-war tactic. Written with both humor and moral urgency, it includes philosophical argumentation, case histories of resisters, and practical advice for those interested in this approach to peace action. It is an important document for the student of anti-war activity, accurately reflecting one pacifist response to the dilemma of modern warfare. (Available from War Tax Resistance, 339 Lafayette St., New York, N.Y. 10012.)

### Suspect Tenderness: The Ethics of the Berrigan Witness

by William Stringfellow &

Anthony Towne

(Holt, Rinehart & Winston; 177 pp.; \$5.95)

An anecdotal report by Mr. Towne on Father Berrigan's visit with him and Mr. Stringfellow in their Block Island, R.I. home at the time of Father Berrigan's arrest by the F.B.I., August, 1970. Included are several homilies and reflections by Stringfellow on the Berrigan witness, and seventy pages of court documents connected with the indictment (later dismissed) of Towne and Stringfellow for harboring Berrigan. A collection primarily of interest to students of Father Berrigan's personal habits and friendships. As a \$5.95 book it represents a case of suspect marketing.

### Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War

by Raph Uwechue

(Africana Publishing Corp.; 206 pp.; \$8.95)

A former Nigerian diplomat and Biafran partisan, Raph Uwechue first put us in his debt with his 1969 edition of *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War*. This new and expanded edition of that sober analysis includes an examination of the failure of the Biafran leadership, a more thorough outline of his proposal for "an elastic federal union" in Nigeria, and brief biographical evaluations of the leading personalities in the civil war. Since the ending of the Biafran secession, world interest has understandably moved away from Nigeria, but as Mr. Uwechue makes clear, the problems persist. This book throws needed light on the continuing conflict between tribalism and nation-building, a conflict that plagues not only Nigeria but most African nations. The author writes as an insider with definite and explicit commitments, but possesses also a rare capacity to understand developments from the viewpoint of those who do not share his set of loyalties.

### My Life

by Sir Oswald Mosley

(Arlington House; 515 pp.; \$12.95)

An apologetic retrospective by one who has much to apologize for. The admissions of error, however, deal mainly with points of tactics. The prewar leader of British fascism holds fast to the central vision of his cause and, by skillfully selective recall, reconstructs his early proposals for a revitalized Britain and Europe, proposals which he believes have been vindicated by the failure of the course actually taken by those in power. Exercises in what might have been have their own fascination, and Sir Oswald's alternative vision by

which war with Germany might have been avoided deserves the consideration of historians and moralists. Mosley is, as one of his Mitford relations would say, a thoroughly U person, and his autobiography provides a distinctive, and sometimes illuminating, perspective on the English political and social Establishment of the twenties and thirties. The end impression is that of a sometimes brilliant and always energetic public man driven to eccentricity by his passion not to be confused with anyone else. There is no denying the personal interest of Sir Oswald's curious story, but whether it warrants such a lengthy telling is a judgment dependent upon taste and upon one's stomach for the careful exposition of deservedly unfashionable opinion.

### The Closing Circle

by Barry Commoner

(Knopf; 326 pp.; \$6.95)

A refreshingly modest survey of the ecological dilemma written with humanistic commitment and sensitivity to the problematic relationship between developed and underdeveloped worlds. In opposition to the conventional wisdom of the ecology movement, Commoner challenges the proposition that either population growth or affluence, or both, is the source of the eco-system's peril. He accuses, rather, the mindlessly growth-oriented nature of Western technology that has, without regard to the environment, created increased dependence upon synthetic products that cannot be disposed of without violence to man's habitat. Commoner's proposals for controlling technology and for developing the resources of Third World countries will leave the reader dissatisfied, but it is no small achievement of this carefully reasoned book that it locates the right questions and repudiates the wrong ones in the public debate about ecology.