

Frank Ryan film pulls back from controversial thesis

Reviewed by Manus O'Riordan

“Queen’s set for Nazi occupation” was the headline in the Irish edition of the *Sunday Times* last September when reporting that Queen’s University Belfast had been festooned with Nazi insignia to represent wartime Berlin for a film being made by Desmond Bell, of that same university, entitled “The Enigma of Frank Ryan”.

The report quoted Bell on the declared purpose of the film: “What we are really trying to do is to present to the audience the kind of enigma that Frank Ryan was – how he started out on the left and ended up working for fascism.” The film’s historical consultant was stated to be fellow Queen’s academic Fearghal McGarry, author of “Frank Ryan” (2002), with one character-assassinating chapter headed: “Collaborator, 1938-44”.

The completed film was premiered at the Jameson Dublin International Film Festival on 18 February. The publicity material generated for its marketing contained the same message. “Wartime Berlin comes to Queen’s” was the proud boast of the press release from Queen’s University itself, which continued: “Academic and film-maker Professor Des Bell and historian Dr Fearghal McGarry, both from Queen’s, are taking on one of their biggest assignments to date with the production of a film on the enigma that was Frank Ryan. Ryan was a republican socialist of 1930s Dublin and International Brigade volun-



“Enigma”: Frank Ryan.

teer who fought fascism in the Spanish Civil War, and ended his life working for the Nazis in wartime Berlin.” (My emphasis – MO’R)

The film received a second showing on 26 February, followed by a debate organised by the journal *History Ireland*, in which both McGarry and I participated. My original review refuting McGarry’s thesis is online at [www.irelandsw.com/docs-Ryan2.htm] and I again took issue with him in the February debate.

Notwithstanding the character assassination that continues to be deployed by Bell in promoting his film, however, I was pleasantly sur-

prised that the actual screenplay had pulled back from the McGarry thesis and treated Ryan’s period in Germany in all its complexity, demonstrating that he most certainly was not a collaborator.

It was, in fact, the film’s superficial treatment of the Spanish Civil War itself that turned out to be its most disappointing feature. There was a caricature of Ryan’s internationalist handling of national tensions in the British Battalion, along with a portrayal of the Battle of Jarama that is historically unrecognisable. And there was a failure to seize the dramatic opportunity that the film had open to it if only it had gone on to re-enact Ryan’s great rally of Brigadistas of all nationalities by leading them, with a mass rendition of “The Internationale”, to recapture territory previously yielded up in an earlier retreat.