Robert Briscoe
Sinn Féin Revolutionary, Fianna Fáil Nationalist and Revisionist Zionist

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This biography makes the case that Robert Briscoe, the Irish state’s only Jewish TD for nearly four decades (1927–1965), was one of the most important Irish politicians of the twentieth century, as well as being one of the most undervalued and under-researched. To support this argument, the book will primarily focus on Briscoe’s political evolution from a youthful Sinn Féin activist in the Irish War of Independence, to a senior Fianna Fáil representative in the early 1950s. This chronological methodology will illustrate how Briscoe evolved from a Sinn Féin revolutionary to become a member of Michael Collins’s personal staff and an IRA gun-runner in Weimar Berlin, before becoming a founding member of Fianna Fáil (Soldiers of Destiny) and valued political confidant of Éamon de Valera. If this were not impressive enough, the next stage of the book examines how Briscoe through tragic circumstance in the 1930s became an active member of the New Zionist Organisation (Revisionists) and senior aide to Ze’ev Jabotinsky, the organization’s charismatic leader, in a desperate attempt to save a remnant of Europe’s Jews from Hitler’s murderous onslaught.¹

However, despite his immense contribution to revolutionary Ireland, and perhaps in part because of his association with radical Zionism, his patriotism and loyalty was oftentimes questioned by compatriots in an

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overwhelmingly Catholic nationalist parliament. The foundation for this mistrust was the dominant Catholic dogma of the era, which depicted Jews as deicidists, and imparted in its obedient flock a suspicion that Jews were the progenitors of an atheistic Bolshevism intent on global domination. Consequently, throughout his long career as a nationalist politician, Briscoe was treated with suspicion and contempt by a considerable number of his peers. This was confirmed in the release in October 2014 of pension records by the Irish Military Archives. Briscoe’s statement was made at the height of his Zionist evolution in October 1937, and showed that a number of Briscoe’s colleagues in War of Independence Sinn Féin had attempted to delegitimize his contribution to the formation of an independent Irish state. Briscoe’s sworn deposition made it clear that he had been subjected to:

Accusations, insinuations and unfair suggestions made about services given freely, readily, and without hope of a reward and at very great personal risk. I am quite aware that many would like to prove I made no contribution to the national cause.

Therefore, I was somewhat taken aback at the reaction from friends and colleagues when I first flagged my intent to write a political biography of Briscoe. I received a number of puzzled looks, which seemed to suggest that I had taken on a project that, at best, would only appeal to a small demographic interested in Jewish Ireland. Their comments ranged from the mundane (asking who would be interested in reading about the life of someone who was essentially a backbench politician) to the slightly provocative (asking whether it was a good career move, given the global anti-Israel ethos of the minute, to be writing about anyone or anything with a Jewish element or content).

After a period of reflection, I could to a degree understand their queries and reservations; they were based on the available public information

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2 Ronit Lentin, ““Ever and always alien”: From Jewish Refugees to Swastikas on the Museum Wall”, in Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh (eds), Ireland, Racism and Globalisation (Metro Éireann Publications, Dublin, 2006), pp. 117–120.

3 Irish Military Archives, Military Service Pension Collection (Hereafter IMA MSPC) Ref 297. 11 October 1937.
on Briscoe or, as I put it to my somewhat sceptical friends, the accessible documentation that has been the foundation of ‘the Briscoe myth’. This myth was grounded in existing accounts of Briscoe’s pre-war endeavours, which were singularly lacking in either insight or appreciation of his global significance as a senior member of the Revisionists and close confidant of Jabotinsky’s.

These accounts oftentimes focused on Briscoe’s infamous Berlin clash with the rabidly anti-Semitic Charles Bewley in 1921 or his largely unsuccessful Jewish immigration endeavour in the 1930s, which were more often than not written from the perspective of an Irish policy position. This is not, however, surprising; such scholars were working with a limited amount of archival material, which in the main consisted of the severely limited Robert Briscoe Files in the National Library of Ireland, which contained tantalizing hints of his immigration endeavour and Zionist activities. Their analysis was oftentimes reinforced by an over reliance on Briscoe’s ghosted and overly romanticized 1958 memoir, *For the Life of Me*, which was, as is typical of the genre, exaggerated for commercial purposes. Consequently an historical narrowness has defined the existing Briscoe historiography, which has only begun to change in recent years, when access to a wealth of new archival material began to challenge the existing narrative.

For example, although Dermot Keogh in *Jews in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Antisemitism, Refugees and the Holocaust* gives a reasonably comprehensive account of Briscoe’s position in a nascent Irish political culture and immigration efforts on behalf of German Jews, he only once briefly mentions Briscoe’s involvement with the Revisionists and Jabotinsky.

This is replicated in the other major study on the subject, Cormac Ó Gráda’s *Jewish Ireland in the Age of Joyce*, which is equally remiss when it comes to Briscoe’s Zionist engagement. When Briscoe is mentioned, the emphasis is on his role as a Jewish member of the Fianna Fáil nationalist project, or his

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problematic involvement in the 1926 IRA campaign against moneylending.\(^5\) This is also true of a wider Zionist historiography, where Briscoe’s role, although acknowledged, is oftentimes confined to a superficial examination of his part in the 1939 Revisionist American political mission.\(^6\) There is no mention that Briscoe also headed revisionist political missions to Poland and South Africa, or that he also became a senior member of the Nessuit (Revisionist Executive Council), and was involved in formulating policy at the height of the Holocaust.

However, as previously mentioned, the availability of new archival material which had been either unavailable or hard to access, due to isolated location, has enabled new insights into Briscoe’s complex and multifaceted narrative. Recent publications have shown that he had a far more substantive role in the contentious Irish immigration discourse of the era, including a previously unknown and heart-breaking participation in the aftermath Kristallnacht (night of the broken glass). This was the horrendous nationwide German pogrom of November 1938, which finally proved, if further proof was needed, that Hitler was intent on at the very least expelling Jews from National Socialist Germany. His involvement centred on an episode which saw members of the Dublin Jewish community try unsuccessfully to secure visas for more than 130 Jewish children who were fleeing Berlin in the aftermath of Kristallnacht.\(^7\) This singular event became a core


precept of Briscoe’s pre-war Zionist awakening; within a month, he had accepted Jabotinsky’s invitation to lead a Revisionist political mission to Poland, designed to facilitate a mass emigration of its Jewish population to the Palestine Mandate. This was yet another unsuccessful endeavour that would have tragic consequences for Poland’s three and a half million Jews, as well as being deeply distressing on a personal level. In turn, research into Briscoe’s evolving Zionist engagement revealed the extent of his political and personal relationship with Éamon de Valera’s. This alone was worthy of an independent study. 

To recover the full complexity of Briscoe’s multifaceted political reality, it was necessary to reassemble a disarticulated personal archive which was geographically dispersed. This documentation included an extensive Irish-Jewish immigration archive, still the private property of his son Ben, who also became a Fianna Fáil TD after inheriting his father’s seat in the 1965 General Election. This was the single most important step in the writing of this biography. When Ben and his gracious wife Carol became aware of my intent to write about Ben’s father, they invited me to their lovely home in Kildare. After establishing my bona fides, Ben revealed that he still possessed a cache of material not donated to the NLI Briscoe archive. This consisted exclusively of documentation pertaining to Briscoe’s immigration efforts in the 1930s and 1940s; it made for heartbreaking reading, although from a scholarly perspective it was like discovering a previously mythical El Dorado.

This cache confirmed my belief that Briscoe’s significance to both a confrontational and exclusionary pre-war Irish political discourse and a global Zionist rescue effort has been grossly underestimated. On that basis, I broadened my research to include the partially uncatalogued archives in Dublin’s Jewish Museum; the National Archive of Ireland; the Irish Military Archive; the Jabotinsky Institute in Tel Aviv, and the National Archive (GB). These were supplemented by an extensive examination of 40 years of Dail Éireann (Irish Parliament) Debates, and the Hansard (UK Parliament) record. Only when these disparate documents were holistically

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examined did the full extent of Briscoe’s importance to Fianna Fáil and the NZO’s global rescue attempt emerge.

Once this methodological template was established it immediately brought to mind Jacques Derrida’s passionate essay ‘Archive Fever’. In a wide ranging treatise tracing the concept of the archive back to ancient Greece, Derrida argued that a safe, secure and inclusive repository is an essential component of archival integrity that acts as both guardian and shelter for valuable material, thus legitimating reality, rather than an often-times constructed memory:

The archontic power, which also gathers the functions of unification, of identification, of classification, must be paired with what we will call the power of consignation. By consignation, we do not only mean, in the ordinary sense of the word, the act of assigning residence or of entrusting so as to put into reserve ... in a place and on a substrate, but here the act of consigning through gathering together signs. It is not only the traditional consignatio, that is, the written proof, but what all consignatio begins by presupposing. Consignation aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system of synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or secret which could separate (secernere), or partition, in an absolute manner. The archontic principle of the archive is also a principle of consignation, that is, of gathering together. 9

This was certainly the case as far as Briscoe’s complex and multi-layered political reality was concerned, and although Derrida’s essay is highly theoretical, it is evident that he prioritized over all else the necessity of a secure repository to house a complete and unrestricted archive. This is, of course, an essential prerequisite if the historian is successfully to impose a documentary or self-sufficient research model on a project. Only then can the researcher objectively make truth claims based on evidence, rather than supposition. Otherwise conclusions based on constructed and/or incomplete narratives become the norm, and are thereafter perpetuated through reproduction.