



In the early months of 1916 Hannah Bracken, widow of J.K. Bracken, a monumental stonemason and sculptor, sent her fifteen year old troublesome son, Brendan, packing to Australia. Although his teachers had admitted that he had 'brains to burn', the boy had resisted all attempts to educate him. He had also, to his mother's consternation, become involved with an Irish republican youth movement. For Hannah Bracken, this was the last straw, as she had seen the effects on her late husband's health and business of his involvement in the Fenian movement. With the connivance of her cousin Patrick Laffan, whom she was later to marry, and his brother Father Tom Laffan, Brendan Bracken was thus parted from his mother, whom he was to love, in his own fashion, all his life, and forced to brave the U-boat-infested seas on the long journey from Ireland to Australia. Although neither son nor mother knew so at the time, it was to be a voyage of discovery for Brendan Bracken in which he was to throw off his Irish nationality, his religion and culture and take on a completely new identity.

Had J.K. Bracken lived longer, he might have had a stabilizing influence on his son, who might, as a result, have stayed in Ireland and used his considerable gifts and fine intelligence in the development of his native country, and this story would have had a different ending. As it was, Brendan Bracken's enforced emigration set off a complex combination of feelings of isolation and alienation from his family, his religion, and country. If his family and friends had rejected him, he also, in time, would come to reject them and the country of his birth. Not only that, but his talents and intelligence would come to be used in the services of England, the country his father hated so much.

Joseph Kevin, or J.K., as he was usually called, was a commanding figure of over six feet and of athletic build. His red hair, high cheekbones, square jaw and his deeply cleft chin proclaimed him a man of strong will-power. He had been actively involved in the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

In 1884 he was denounced from the pulpit in Tullamore by the parish priest for his Fenian activities. Some years later, police reports to Dublin Castle described him as a 'warm advocate of physical force'. He had refused to stand as a candidate in the general election of 1892, on the grounds that he did not want to violate his Fenian oath by taking an oath of loyalty to Queen Victoria. He was also to carve himself a small niche in Irish history as one of the

Brendan Bracken: The Emergence of an Imperialist



Ardvullen House, near Kilmallock, Co. Limerick, where the Bracken family came to reside in 1902.

by Patsy Harrold

seven men who founded the Gaelic Athletic Association in Hayes' Hotel, Turles, County Tipperary, on 1st November, 1884. His strong nationalist sympathies were to benefit his stonemasonry business, and he was awarded numerous contracts in Co. Tipperary and surrounding counties for the erection of monuments to the memory of Irish patriots.

The stonemasonry work of the Bracken family, in churches and graveyards, extended over three generations. J.K. was a master stonemason and carver, and the name 'Bracken, Templemore' on stone and marble memorials, usually decorated with shamrocks, guaranteed the highest standards in craftsmanship. It could well be said that the many Celtic crosses, tombs and headstones that bear the Bracken name are not only memorials to the people they commemorate, but are also monuments to their own craft.

In 1889 J.K. Bracken married Mary Agnes Matthews, of Newtown Mahon, Limerick City, and they had two daughters, Mary Cora and Eileen. It

was a short and unhappy union; she left him after about two years, and returned to her native city, where she died of tuberculosis on 24th September, 1894, aged 24 years. She is commemorated by an imposing memorial beside the chapel in St. Laurence Cemetery, Limerick.

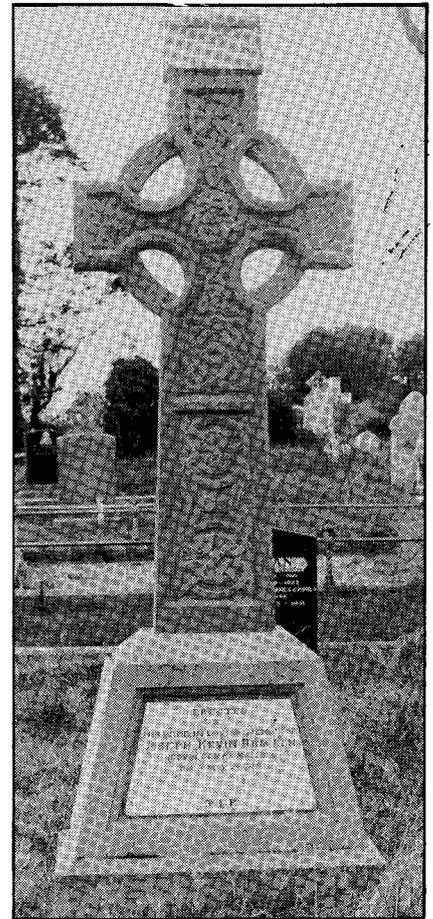
J.K. Bracken married his second wife, Hannah, on 17th February, 1897. She was twenty years younger than her husband, and came from a prosperous farming and business family in Borrisoleigh, Co. Tipperary. They had four children: Nancy, born in 1898, Peter in 1899, Brendan on 15th February, 1901, and Kevin in 1903.

During this time, J.K. Bracken was actively involved in the public and sporting life of Templemore. He was a progressive businessman, and expanded his monumental sculpting and stonemasonry work to include road and building contracts.

It is difficult to establish the reason for the family's decision to leave Templemore and to move to the town of Kilmallock in Co. Limerick, in 1902, a year after the birth of Brendan. The decision may have been precipitated by J.K.'s declining popularity and the pressure



The inscription on the memorial stone of J.K. Bracken's first wife at St. Laurence Cemetery, Limerick.



The Celtic cross over J.K. Bracken's grave at Tancardstown Cemetery, Co. Limerick.

of legal, financial and political wrangles. He had already resigned from the urban council, following a dispute over a roads' contract.

J.K. took a lease on a large Victorian mansion, surrounded by an estate of 60 acres, outside Kilmallock. It was here that Brendan Bracken spent the first years of his childhood, playing and running wild through the fields. A fall from a horse badly damaged and disfigured his nose, and he was to suffer from sinus for the rest of his life. His thatch of bright red hair, his dented nose and his ungainly appearance gave him a distinctive appearance.

While the family lived in Kilmallock, J.K.'s health declined rapidly, and he died of cancer on 2nd May, 1904. By this time he had ceased to take an active part in politics, and he was buried without fanfare in Tancardstown Cemetery, near Kilmallock. (In 1984 the Limerick Gaelic Athletic Association fixed a plaque to the Celtic cross over his grave to honour him for his work for that body).

Soon after her husband's death, Hannah, then aged 32, moved with her family to the town of Tipperary. Brendan went to school for the first time to the Convent of Mercy, and later went on to the Christian Brother's school.

In 1908 the Brackens moved again, this time to Glasnevin in Dublin. Next followed a succession of schools, including St. Patrick's National School, Drumcondra, and the C.B.S. O'Connell Schools in North Richmond Street, and Brendan gave a poor account of himself as a student. He was mischievous and lazy; his practical work was sloppy and untidy; he disrupted classes, and played practical jokes on the teachers,

who were united in their assessment of one thing about him: 'he had brains to burn'.

After a street brawl, during which Brendan threw his assailant into the canal and almost drowned him, his mother finally decided that he needed a firmer hand than she was able to give him, and, in February, 1915, she sent him to the Jesuit College at Mungret, just outside Limerick City, as a boarder. The pupils at Mungret at that time were a mixture of boys who intended to go on for the priesthood and the sons of farmers, businessmen and professional people. They came mainly from rural backgrounds, and were not as gregarious as boys from an urban background. The loud, talkative, shrill-voiced Dubliners that Brendan Bracken had become did not settle too easily into Mungret. He was clumsy, and had little interest in games – a decided disadvantage in a Jesuit school, where rugby often ranks not too far below religion.

The few people who took the trouble to probe the intelligence beneath Brendan Bracken's loutish exterior became quite fond of him. One of these was Dr. John F. Devane, the college doctor. In his privately published **A History of St. John's Hospital, Limerick**, Dr. Devane recalled Bracken's stay in the hospital after an operation to have his appendix removed:

Brendan Bracken, a lad from County Tipperary, was referred to me at St. John's from Mungret College where he was at school. He was an intelligent little chap with a very inquisitive mind. During his convalescence he wandered all over the hospital chatting with everybody, and even into

the theatre wanting to know the why and the wherefore of all the gadgets there – sometimes to the annoyance of poor Mother Ambrose, the over-worked Matron-Theatre Sister-Administrator of the hospital. She often said to me 'For goodness sake, take that little lad with you on some of your country calls and keep him out of mischief's way'. I did so on many occasions, and enjoyed his amusing chat and interesting comments during those long journeys.

On one occasion I had a call to County Kerry and took Brendan with me. The patient lived in a farmhouse at the end of a bohereen off the main road. I left the car on the road in charge of little Brendan. After we had seen the patient, the family doctor and I returned to the main road accompanied by the patient's husband who courteously came with us, and whilst I was having a few last words with the doctor and the husband about the patient, and perhaps trying my best to look the part of the heavy consultant, I was completely debunked by my little friend Brendan popping his head out the window of the car and shouting to me in a loud voice: 'Hi, doctor, how much did they give you?' I was hard put to keep from laughing but I enjoyed the antic-



limax enormously. It was perhaps a forecast of his subsequent success in financial matters.

Brendan Bracken's friendship with Dr. Devane continued throughout his adult life. When later, as a famous politician, he was to treat most of his former Irish acquaintances with contempt, he kept up a warm, friendly correspondence with the doctor and frequently invited him to stay at his home in Lord North Street, London.

The erratic pattern of Bracken's education was to continue at Mungret and his stay at the college was cut short in September, 1915, when the car which was returning him to to the college halted on the way. He decided to make a bolt for it, and disappeared. He was missing for nearly four months. The only indication that his distracted mother had of his whereabouts was a series of unpaid hotel bills that kept dropping through her letterbox. It is not certain where Bracken spent all his time during this period, but he managed to find employment as a cub reporter with a Limerick newspaper. One wonders if his journalist colleagues at that time ever afterwards recalled the ungainly, precocious boy who came to work in their office in the autumn of 1915.

His mother continued to search for him and eventually tracked him down as he was strolling nonchalantly along O'Connell Street, Limerick, dressed in a dark suit and a bowler hat, which she had some short time previously received a bill for. Without further ado, she took the next train to Dublin, with her son firmly in tow.

Much of Hannah Bracken's energies at this time were directed towards getting a dispensation to marry her cousin,



The inscription on the Celtic cross over J.K. Bracken's grave.

Patrick Laffan. She also had property and business interests and her other children to look after. But by this time she had had enough of her near-delinquent son and was greatly relieved when her cousin, Father Tom Laffan, offered to take the boy to Australia. Dr. Harty, a professor at Maynooth College, and an influential friend of the Bracken family, provided letters of introduction, including one to Archbishop Daniel Mannix of Melbourne. So the boy set off for Australia, and in the next three years completed the process of making himself an orphan.

Brendan Bracken arrived in Echuca, in the Murray Valley, Victoria, in March, 1916. The £14 his mother had given

him on his departure quickly ran out during his stop off in Melbourne. He visited Dr. Mannix and his coterie of Catholic nationalist friends, which included the Coady family from Kilkenny. In his typical way, he did not leave Melbourne until he had got to know everybody who was worth knowing there. He then went on to visit Ballarat, where he called on the local bishop, Dr. Foley, a cousin of Dr. Mannix.

When at last he arrived in Echuca, he was so shabby and down-and-out that Fr. Laffan gave him a coat and some money and put him up in a boarding-house. Two other priests gave him a pair of trousers and boots. Nearly fifty



In the 1915 Mungret College class Brendan Bracken is second from the right in the third row.

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years after, one of the priests, Fr. Griffin wrote an account of his meeting with the boy:

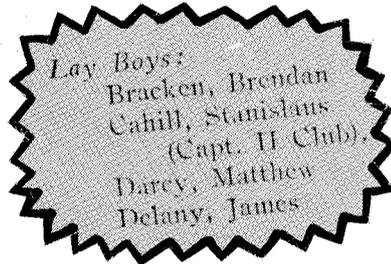
In appearance I thought the most raw, uncouth, awkward looking amadaun you could find in the back bogs of Ireland, even in those days. He was a inveterate talker, but slow and with a drawl, which would get on your nerves. But you were not long in his company before you realised that he had brains to burn, and that he had an extraordinary amount of knowledge for a lad of his years.

The Catholics in Echuca were a close-knit community and were mostly Irish, and they looked after the sixteen year old boy between them. He was provided with meals by the convent of Brigidine nuns. They also gave him the run of their library, where he spent most of his spare time.

Even though there was a large Irish Catholic community in Australia, it was still a British colony, and much of the education system, particularly the teaching of history, was British orientated. The nuns had a big British section in the library. It was here that Bracken steeped himself in the history of England, and particularly in eighteenth century politics. He had a fascination for the lives of such statesmen as John Churchill, Walpoole and Pitt. The life of his fellow Irishman, Edmund Burke, also helped him to chart the course he was eventually to take in life. Through his innate appreciation of fine writing, he became an admirer of the works of Cardinal John Henry Newman, and took his admiration to such an extent that for some time he affected Newman as his middle name.

In the meantime he gave the impression of being an ignorant, idle fellow. Mother Ursula, one of the nuns in the convent, took him under her wing. He responded to her warm maternalism, and she succeeded in knocking some of

the rough edges off him. When she died, she left among her possessions, a small book called *A Bird's Eye View of Church History*. On the inside cover Bracken had inscribed his name in pencil: *Brendan St J.B. Bracken, Ardculleen Castle, Kilmallock, Co. Limerick.*



Despite his lack of effort, Bracken featured on this 1915 Mungret honours list.

Fr. Laffan got Bracken a job as a boundary rider, but he turned out to be a reluctant farmhand, spending much of his time in the shade reading books. Eventually his employer, T.J. Ryan, sacked him, much to Bracken's relief, as he had little stomach for physical work. He socialised a good deal among the Catholic families in Echuca, but eventually took himself off to nearby Kyabram, where he was put up by an Irishman named Hugh Ryan, who also gave him the run of his library. Once again Bracken found himself in the company of priests and nuns. But his wide reading of rationalist thinkers was making an increasing impression on his young mind, and he was now shedding his cradle Catholicism.

To everybody's relief, he finally left Kyabram. He then became interested in the life of Cardinal Patrick Moran, who had been Archbishop of Sydney from 1885 to 1911. He planned to write a biography of the cardinal. While doing research, he was granted hospitality

from several religious houses.

He later moved to Sydney and was employed for a time as a teacher with the Christian Brothers. He then abandoned teaching and took a job as an advertising salesman with a Catholic newspaper. He still longed to further his education and applied to a Jesuit College, Riveview, in Sydney, to be taken on as a boarder. However, his wild reputation at Mungret had followed him to Sydney, and he was rejected when one of the priests recognised him. One wonders how the priests must have felt in the later years when the wild Irish waif they turned away from their gates became one of the most famous politicians in the British Empire.

Brendan Bracken's correspondence to his mother was lost after her death, and, as nobody in Australia greatly troubled about him, it is not certain where he went to after leaving Sydney. He claimed that he travelled widely and made a trip to New Guinea. It is known that he went to Orange in New South Wales, and once again took up teaching, this time at a Protestant private school named Wolaroi. Teaching was not easy there, because most of the pupils were farmers' sons from the outback who were undisciplined and uninterested in learning. Bracken was more than a match for them and applied the cane to control them. He became friendly with a local doctor, a Cork Protestant called Joseph Wilson. Wilson was twice his age, but the young man was his intellectual equal, and they walked and talked together in their spare time. Wilson recalled at this time that Brendan Bracken had Sinn Féin sympathies, but they cannot have lasted long. Shortly afterwards he became disillusioned with Catholic nationalism, and as his stay in Australia came to an end, he had no doubt what course his future would take.



Mungret College in 1915.



'He had brains to burn'. Bracken, aged 17 or so, in Australia.

While working with the *Advocate*, a small Catholic newspaper in Melbourne, he had added to his income by giving grinds to slow students. As soon as he had his fare back to Europe saved, and enough to keep him going until he embarked on a more ambitious career, Bracken set sail for Ireland early in 1919.

When he turned up at his mother's home in the spring of that year, there was no fatted calf awaiting him. His mother had married Patrick Laffan and moved to a farm in Co. Meath, and she was at that time in dispute with the rest of the family over her husband's inheritance. She greeted her son's homecoming with dismay. The reports that she had of him in Australia were not good, and now she was convinced that he had come home to cause her more trouble. When he told her that he intended to settle in England, she was much relieved, although she doubted if he would do any better over there.

He left the family farm soon afterwards and went to England, where his teaching experience in Australia enabled him to get employment, first as a tutor, and then as a teacher at a college in Liverpool. During those first few months in England, he realised the value to his future career of an 'old school tie'. When he had sufficient



Winston Churchill and Brendan Bracken step it out.

money saved, and passing himself off as an Australian whose family had been burnt in a bush fire, he persuaded William Weech, the headmaster of a small but historic public school, Sedbergh, to take him on as a pupil. Weech, a clever if eccentric man, was not fooled by Bracken's claim that he was only fifteen, but acting on a hunch, and impressed by the young man's intelligence, he took him on. Weech put Bracken up in his own house and gave him the run of his library. He spent just one term at Sedbergh, but it was sufficient time for him to imbibe enough of the social and political culture of the English middle class, which was almost as important in 'getting on' as the old school tie, which he was now entitled to flaunt.

After leaving Sedbergh, he taught in several public schools and also spent some time in France, where he became fluent in the French language. He left

teaching for a career in journalism, and secured a post with an imperialist journal, the *Empire Review*, in 1922. Most of the contributors were high Tories, and Bracken, whose neck was getting progressively harder as he moved in increasingly conservative journalistic circles, managed to ingratiate himself with some influential politicians.

He also made friends with J.L. Garvin, the distinguished journalist editor of the *Observer*. Through Garvin, he made the acquaintance of Winston Churchill. Churchill took immediately to the tall gregarious young man, with the head that somebody had described as being 'like a Turner sunset'. The feeling was mutual. Churchill's political fortunes were very much in the doldrums in those years, but Bracken hung around him like a faithful dog. Churchill's family became alarmed when the rumour spread that Brendan Bracken was Winston Churchill's

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natural son. Clementine Churchill became downright antagonistic and their wayward son, Randolph, began referring to Bracken as 'my brother, the bastard'.

During all this time Brendan Bracken's career in journalism was blooming. From a fairly modest position with the publishing firm of Eyre and Spottiswoode, he became chairman of a group of financial newspapers, which included the *Financial Times* and the *Financial Review*.

He also became heavily involved in the Tory Party and particularly of that group which favoured British re-armament and were opposed to Chamberlain's appeasement policy. He followed the upturn of North Paddington in 1924. During all this time he had carefully severed his connections with his native country. Once, in the early twenties, he dropped in on Hazel (Lady) Lavery when she was entertaining a delegation from the Free State Government. He ignored them, and they were equally contemptuous of him. Only with his mother did he keep up a regular and loving correspondence, and, when she died in May, 1928, he returned to Ireland, broken-hearted, for her funeral. He stayed, an aloof and lonely figure, in the churchyard in Borrisoleigh until the service was over, and then, without a word to his relatives, left the churchyard and was never seen in Tipperary again.

In the years before the outbreak of the second World War, his political and journalistic career prospered. He continued to be closely associated with Winston Churchill, and also with Lord Beaverbrook, the press baron. When, at the outbreak of the war, Churchill took over from Chamberlain as Prime Minister, he made Bracken Minister for Information in the wartime British Cabinet. During those years he was seldom out of the news.

While on a plane journey to Quebec with Anthony Eden in August, 1943, his plane was grounded for some time at Foynes. He hired a car and took his assistant, Bernard Sendall, on a tour of Limerick. On the following day, Eden, Bracken and their party had lunch with the Earl of Dunraven.

Bracken was a mass of contradictions about his background. Sometimes he welcomed old friends from Ireland, and, at other times, flew into a rage, when remarks were made about his Irish origins. In trying to hide and distort his place of birth and other details of his early years, he became a consummate liar and a fantasist. In the 1945 massive defeat of the Tories, Brendan Bracken lost his seat. Although he was later to return to the House of Commons, he had become embittered and disillusioned with politics. In the 1952 New Year's Honours he



A posthumous portrait of Bracken by Robert Lutyens.

was made Viscount Bracken of Christchurch. From then on he concentrated mainly on his newspaper and business interests.

He also took an increasing interest in Ampleforth, the Yorkshire Roman Catholic school run by the Benedictines. One of his two biographers, Charles Edward Lysaght, has written:

Bracken, for his part, never, so far as can be ascertained, broached the subject of his immortal soul with them. Somewhere, in the lonely days of his youth he had killed his faith, it was not capable of a renaissance in the civilized old English Catholic atmosphere of Ampleforth.

He could also be less philosophical in his attitude to religion. The inevitable well-meaning clergy who saw it as their God-given right to reclaim Bracken for the Faith of their Fathers got short shrift. According to Father Luke Maddock, who had known him in Australia:

When some of the Brigidine nuns

from Echuca visited him in 1922, he refused to see them. I wrote to him myself from Hammersmith when back from Australia in 1923. I thought I would succeed where nuns failed, but neither did he see me ... The worst thing he ever did as M.P. was to build a Protestant church in his constituency and thereby make himself indifferent to religion.

He remained an unrepentant imperialist to the end. He continued to be consumed with passion for the vanished England of Walpole, the Pitts and Burke. He loved good architecture, well built old houses, period furniture and, of course, books. Bracken's love of beautiful craftsmanship and works of art and his knowledge of ecclesiastical architecture was, at least, part of his family stonecutting heritage. Of his devotion to the British Empire, Charles Edward Lysaght has written:

In Australia, as he had lain reading on the floors of studies and libraries, he

had absorbed into his very being, as only a young man can, the triumphant tale that was England's history ... Perhaps it was this that had inspired him with hope that he could make it in England and could join in the splendour of an Empire that covered a quarter of the known globe.

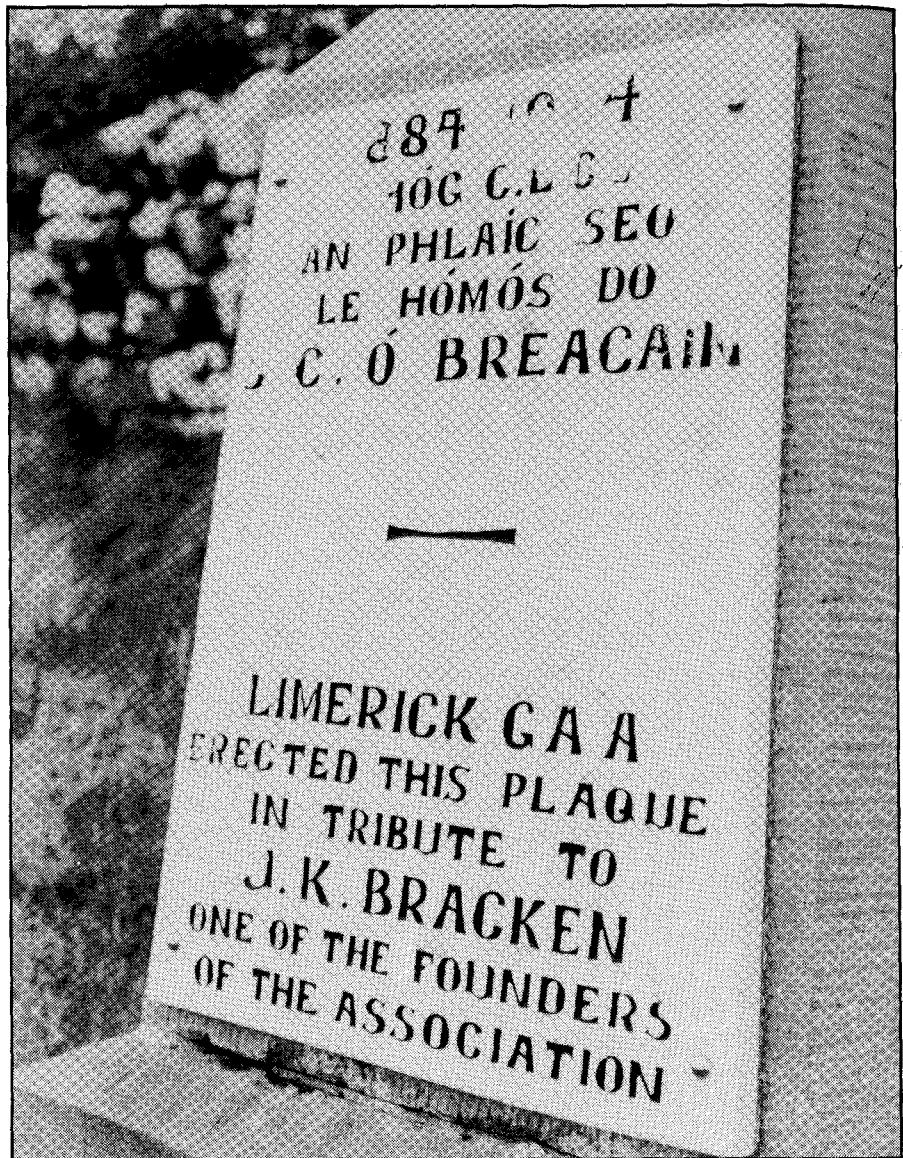
His death from cancer was most painful. In January, 1958, his doctors detected a malignant growth at the base of his throat. In the courage with which he faced his end, Bracken was not sustained by any religious belief. On 3rd July, 1958, he wrote to W.J. Robinson, who was himself a devout Christian: 'I am not in the least daunted by what fate has in store. I am rather strengthened in this by an inability to believe that I shall be provided with opportunities of either harping or stoking in another world'.

Shortly after he went back to hospital in June, a priest from Westminster Cathedral, sent by his sister Cora, appeared in the room, only to be told curtly to go. 'The blackshirts of God are after me', he told his friends. In exasperation at the sight of another note from his nephew, who was a Cistercian monk, he wrote briefly on the envelope 'Spare me these pious platitudes', and sent it back unopened. In the small hours of the morning of 8th August, 1958, Brendan Bracken died, at the age of 57.

Here is how Charles Edward Lysaght summed up his life:

... he renounced his faith, posed as an Australian ... made himself a public school man, a London socialite, a high Tory, an arch-imperialist and an ardent lover of England and her institutions. By the age of thirty he had clawed his way into some of the most exclusive preserves of English life and brought into one group under his management what became the finest collection of quality papers in England, including the *Financial News* (later to merge with the pink *Financial Times*) and the *Economist*. ... His achievement is part - sometimes a significant part - of these chapters in the history of English journalism and politics ... Through his life run the themes of alienation from one's background, the sacrifice of identity to human ambition, the force of personality in the affairs of man, the inadequacy of brilliance without industry, the warmth of kindness and loyalty, the loneliness of the celebate, the loss of faith, the emptiness of success and the hallowness in the heart of things.

Another contrast can be made. It is not easy for most Irish people to accept Bracken's rejection of his country, and it is much easier for such people to



A centenary tribute to J.K. Bracken by the Limerick G.A.A. in 1984.

accept the numerous Englishmen who became Irish nationalists. For instance, Patrick Pearse, the son of a freethinking English stonecutter, had rushed to the cause of Irish nationalism. Brendan Bracken, the son of an ardently Irish stonecutter, went the other way.

Sources

Bracken has been well served by his two biographers, Andrew Boyle and Charles Edward Lysaght. Boyle's book *Poor, Dear Brendan: The Quest for Brendan Bracken* was published in 1974 by Hutchinson and Co., London. Lysaght's book, *Brendan Bracken*, was published in 1979 by Allen Lane, London. I also wish to acknowledge the article by Nancy Murphy, 'Joseph K. Bracken, G.A.A. Founder, Fenian and Politician', published in *Tipperary: History and Society*, editor William Nolan,

Geography Publications Dublin, 1985. Nancy Murphy also generously supplied further notes on Brendan Bracken and his father. The *Mungret Annual* for the year 1915 contains a picture of Bracken's class and also lists his name. *History Today*, the magazine founded by Brendan Bracken in January, 1951, published a tribute to Peter Quennell and Alan Hodge in November, 1979. Hodges served as assistant secretary to Bracken when he was Minister for Information during the Second World War, and later as editor of *History Today*. This issue contains some interesting information on the background to the establishment of the magazine. Finally, Dr. John F. Devane's book *A History of St. John's Hospital, Limerick*, published in 1970, contains some delightful descriptions of the life and times of this Limerick doctor, including the account of his meeting with Bracken.