



DEBATE has always surrounded Ireland's flirtation with fascism in the 1930s under Gen Eoin O'Duffy's Blueshirts. **PATRICIA FEEHILY** rereads Maurice Manning's book, *The Blueshirts*, which has just been reprinted

Limerick catalyst in short life of the Blueshirts

NEARLY 74 years ago, on October 9, 1932, all hell broke loose during a political meeting in the town of Kilmallock.

The pitched battle that continued intermittently throughout the day left many people wounded and bleeding on the streets, and dozens of shop windows had been smashed during the rioting.

Earlier in the day, the rioters had scattered when War of Independence and Civil War veteran, Cmdt Ned Cronin, a neighbour's child, fired two shots over the heads of the rioters.

But later, a large jagged piece of flint stone narrowly missed the head of former Ceann Comhairle, Deputy Michael Hayes as he addressed a crowd from the back of a lorry. The rock, however, struck one of Gen Richard Mulcahy's bodyguards full in the face.

Gen Mulcahy himself addressed the Cumann na nGaedheal meeting, not just from the back of the lorry but from the top of the driver's cab, "silhouetted against the sky and completely ignoring his opponents," according to a Limerick Leader report of the

riots.

At the same time a rival meeting was being addressed just 50 yards away by the chairman of the East Limerick executive of Fianna Fail, another Michael Hayes.

There aren't many people alive today who remember that turbulent day and place, but a new paperback edition of Maurice Manning's *The Blueshirts*, published this week, brings it alive again for a new generation.

According to Mr Manning "the Cumann na nGaedheal meeting ended at 4.30 in the afternoon, and at 5.15 the battle broke out again and lasted for over an hour. The fighting was even more fierce this time with hurleys, sticks and stones being freely used. Although it subsided around 6.30, the lorry load of ACA (Army Comrade Association) members from Limerick were unable to leave the town until a military escort, armed with rifles, arrived at nine o'clock...."

For two miles out of town the lorry was followed by a huge crowd, hooting and jeering.

If Mr Manning is correct then it could

fairly be said that Kilmallock, one of the first disturbances and certainly the most serious in the tense final months of 1932, was a catalyst.

From there the hitherto reputedly benevolent Army Comrades Association "blossomed" into a major political force and very shortly into the controversial Blueshirt movement, described simplistically in several of our histories as Ireland's flirtation with European fascism.

In retrospect, it's hard to even imagine the fear and tension that gripped the country as the strange figure of Eoin O'Duffy breathed fire into a new militaristic movement fuelled as well by a fascination with a Papal encyclical and the shortcomings of parliamentary democracy by at least two well known academics. Then to cap it all, news of a coup reaches the ears of Government leader Eamon De Valera.

I first read Maurice Manning's account of the Blueshirts when it was originally published in the 1970s and I wish I could, even now, be as dispassionate as the



Cmdt Ned Cronin addresses a Blueshirt meeting in Charleville in April 1934

author, a past pupil of Glenstal Abbey and a former Fine Gael Senator and TD.

My father, a highly intelligent, thoughtful, compassionate man, was a Blueshirt, and I never got to ask him if he was proud of it or otherwise. Over a decade before that he had been a teenage volunteer in the Tipperary Number 1 Brigade of the Old IRA, and in 1971 when Mr Manning's book was published, he had just died after a brief battle with cancer, requesting that no flag be placed on his coffin. This was strange, because every veteran of the fight for freedom was being carried in a flag draped coffin to his or her final resting place.

So I suppose I was looking for an apologist for the Blueshirts, which all my life had been and still is, a term of opprobrium and political offence.

I couldn't understand what my father was doing in either the Blueshirts or the Old IRA. His regular party piece was a stirring blast of *The Red Flag*, and his vision was always universal. And he'd often laugh at the recollection of getting up one morning after failing to come home from a rally in Thurles the night before, in time to milk the cows, and finding that his older sister had put his blue shirt in the fire.

But when I read the new paperback edition of Mr Manning's book this

week, complete with new material from much improved archival resources, I realised that it is a story that needs to be remembered and brought to new generations especially in Limerick, which features prominently in Mr Manning's story, having been one of the main agricultural counties hugely affected by the so called Economic War.

Depending on where you stand, the Blueshirt movement can be viewed variously as a threat to democracy or a defence of democracy. It can be seen as a hysterical fight against the spectre of communism, which never really threatened the conservative nation or a defence of farmers' livelihoods and property rights.

Or it can be viewed as a nationalist movement containing people who weren't quite as nationalistic as their very protagonists in Fianna Fail and the IRA. But the big question, the question that has plagued me all my life, is this. Was it a fascist movement?

Maurice Manning weighs the question very carefully from the evidence he has collected of the short four-and-a-half-year history of the Blueshirts and the political, social and economic circumstances in which the movement was born and in which it briefly flourished. He concludes that while it looked like and had "many of the external trimmings of fascism" it

lacked some of the basic features, mainly opposition to democracy, a commitment to violence almost as an end in itself and a belief in dictatorship.

"It is probable," he says, "that the majority of Blueshirts never saw their movement as a fascist one."

Does that make me happy? Not really. From my prejudiced heritage I will probably never see it as anything other than a necessary catharsis and a response to the threat to free speech.

Mr Manning himself describes it as the last chapter in the bitter and divisive civil war of a decade earlier and the rancour and distrust that lingered on both sides. After the Blueshirts the air seems to have cleared allowing the fledgling democracy to prevail.

But I also like to look on the phenomenon as a colourful expression of our theatrical exuberance even in conflict. Even Dev himself, during the introduction of a Bill banning uniforms at political rallies, said that he had no objection to the colour blue or even to the Blueshirt salute itself.

"I always thought," said Dev, "that it was a manly salute, a much better salute than the mere doffing of one's hat."

The Blueshirts, by Maurice Manning, is published this week in paperback by Gill and McMillan.