

Memories of MICHAEL McINERNEY



At the memorial service for Michael McInerney, held in January 1980, in Trinity College, Dublin, it was stated that he was a saint. The speaker was Conor Cruise O'Brien. I could not restrain a smile at that description. If Mick could have heard, he would have let loose a gale of laughter at the very idea. He was a man who could see the humour of things. But the first socialist saint - the very idea of an Irish St. Michael!

During a serious illness some years ago, the woman from next door called to see Mick. She told him that the neighbours had arranged for a mass to be said for a speedy recovery or a happy death. "Well", said Mick, "please concentrate on the first and forget about the second wish".

He was a man who expressed a passionate indignation against all that was wrong and unjust in the Ireland of his day. In short, he was a warm and generous person - too inclined sometimes to overpraise. Maybe that is not a bad fault, for we have always had an abundance of begrudgers in this country. That is the worst I could say about Mick.

I first met Michael McInerney in London towards the end of the 1930s. We had corresponded before I left Belfast and, shortly after I arrived at the centre of the Empire, he wrote inviting me to speak at a Connolly Association meeting in Wealdstone in West London. The meeting was held at a street corner on a cold damp Saturday night.

At the appointed time there was a vacant platform, the chairman, Mick and myself to open the proceedings - and no one else, not a supporter, or even a heckler in sight. Mick apologised profusely - he was nervous, as he had just had all his teeth extracted, and he whispered: "If anyone shouts gummy at me I'll collapse". Just then, we noticed the Salvation Army at a street corner, further down the road. Not a solitary sinner paused, or stop-

By Malachy Gray

ped to listen, as the speaker gave testimony.

We decided there and then to shout the odds as well as the Salvation Army. After all, if we could not save sinners were we not trying to save Ireland? Away we went and in no time at all there was a crowd of several hundred. The local Connolly Association lads had leafleted the pubs, clubs and trade union branches in the district to some purpose. We had a good reception, sold all our literature and got a fair collection. We also recruited some new members. Mick was delighted, and he insisted on we going back to his flat in Islington, North London, where we talked and laughed and argued all night long. Michael McInerney was never a drinking man, so much to my regret, we drank only tea, but we got to know each other.

We found out how much we had in common. Limerick and the Falls Road in Belfast were then about the most Catholic strongholds in Ireland. Both places were strongly influenced by the Redemptorist confraternities. Well organised annual missions and regular public processions were held, to demonstrate devotion to their conception of Christianity. We had both reacted strongly to sermons on hell fire and damnation, coupled with denunciations of communism, socialism and free love, at a time of mass unemployment, misery, poverty and emigration in both parts of Ireland.

The writings of James Connolly had fired our minds with new ideas and ideals. Our guiding thought was Connolly's dictum, "Ireland without her people means nothing to me". For a generation after 1916, Connolly was praised as a great patriot, while his life's work for socialism and trade unionism was conveniently forgotten or played down - even by people in the labour movement. As our good friend Desmond Ryan wrote at the time, "James Connolly was embalmed on a

postcard".

We were also greatly influenced by the writings and speeches of Peadar O'Donnell and Sean Murray, who were trying to apply the essence of Connolly's teachings to current problems. We had welcomed the short appearance of the magazine **Ireland Today** and the trenchant anti-fascism expressed by young men like Charlie Donnelly and Donat O'Donnell.

We were young men in a hurry to bring about political and social change, though I had to advise Mick that great care was essential in advocating Connolly's ideas in Belfast. It had been a salutary experience for me to speak in public at the Custom House steps and to learn how to deal with a deeply divided community.

Both Protestant Action and Catholic Action were blunt to the point of extreme rudeness in questioning the legality of my parentage, along with the advice that I should take the shortest possible route to Moscow. And these were only some of the milder suggestions!

London and England were a different type of experience and challenge. In the Connolly Association it was a question of volunteering to do the work. Mick was general secretary, treasurer, editor of the monthly paper **Irish Freedom** (later to become the **Irish Democrat**) and the main public speaker. I moved into the flat and took over the running of the paper and so gave Mick a chance to breathe. We were joined by Jim Prendergast from Dublin. The sparks began to fly as Jim, in so many ways like Brendan Behan, added a new dimension to our digs in Islington.

Irish boys and girls, who came mainly from the rural areas, were cruelly exploited on the building sites, and in the bars, hotels and restaurants. The invasion of the Irish nurses was yet to come. Long hours and low wages were the constant complaints we received. We began to campaign, particularly through the Transport and General Workers Union, for the organisation of these thousands of

young people. Domhnall Mac Amhlaigh has written elsewhere of the relatively high wages earned by the Irish during the war and post-war years. But in the 'thirties, low wages were the order of the day.

We had to overcome the hesitations and suspicions of young people who had been warned repeatedly by the bishops to beware of communist and socialist agitators. However, we persisted in our encouragement of the Irish immigrants to join the trade union movement. Many years later, Frank Cousins, then general secretary of the TGWU, remarked to me how much pleasure and interest he took in the large numbers of delegates from all parts of Britain with Irish names and accents, who spoke at union conferences.

Michael McInerney was prominent in the Railway Clerks' Association, and was able to make contact with many trade union leaders in London, the Midlands, Lancashire and Scotland. It was work that took a long time to bring results, but the benefits obtained proved to have lasting value. Mick was the inspiration and driving force in our quest for trade union organisation.

Political action, however, was our main concern. The IRA bombing campaign in Britain commenced. In our monthly paper, and at the public meetings, we condemned the bombings as counter-productive and against the interests of Irish people at home and in Britain. If we had met opposition before among the different republican groups, it was nothing to the animosity we had to face then.

We never budged in our insistence that the British people, and particularly, the British labour movement, had to be convinced of the need to understand the problems of the Irish people. They had to be won over in support of our objectives. Our theme was: You cannot win people to a point of view by blowing them up. History has given an opinion on the results of that bombing campaign.

Jim Prendergast, former sergeant in the International Brigade, was appointed organiser of the campaign in Britain for the release of Frank Ryan from Burgos Prison in Franco's Spain. Michael McInerney pitched in with all his great energies on behalf of his fellow Limerick man. Frank Ryan had been sentenced to death after capture, but, under pressure, this sentence was later commuted. After considerable publicity, through public meetings and agitation in Ireland and Britain, the de Valera government used diplomatic contacts to safeguard Ryan. The Irish High Commissioner in London, John Dulanty, was of great assistance. At his office he told us of the preliminary steps that were being taken to get Ryan out of Spain.

Despite, or because of, our argu-

ments and controversies at that time, we attracted some distinguished contributors to our paper. Liam O'Flaherty, Sean O'Casey, Jim Phelan, Ben Farrington, Peadar O'Donnell, and John de Courcy Ireland all wrote articles and gave us financial assistance. It was Desmond Ryan, above all, who made a lot of this possible. To have Patrick Pearse's secretary and historian, and a man who was also the historian of Connolly, as our mentor and regular feature writer, was a flip to our amateur journalism. There is no doubt that Mick developed then the skills that he was later to display in the **Irish Times**.

We made a serious political mistake in having our paper printed on the premises of the British Communist Party's **Daily Worker**. Despite our best efforts to attract the exiled Irish, we found it difficult to overcome the taunts of being a communist front organisation. There was a crying need for our type of activity, but the CPGB was the only political party to give any practical support. It is important to record that individual members and branches of the British Labour Party were also of great assistance, particularly Dr Lena Jeger, who later became M.P. for St. Pancras.

The Connolly Association, and Mick personally, were closely identified with the main anti-fascist and anti-imperialist organisations in Britain and Ireland. The covert support for the actions of the German nazis in Spain, Austria and Czechoslovakia by the Chamberlain government outraged Mick's generous and sympathetic nature. We took part in all the protests and demonstrations but war did come to Britain, even if at first it was the period of the phoney war.

I returned shortly afterwards to Belfast, and in just one year Mick and Jim Prendergast were back in Dublin. The whole nature of my association with Mick was about to change for an entirely unexpected reason. Mick, on holiday in Dublin, was prevented from returning to London under wartime legislation. Despite appeals to Herbert Morrison, then Home Secretary in the Westminster coalition government, he had had to stay in Ireland. It was no surprise to find out that Morrison developed close ties with the Ulster Unionist leaders in the post-war period - they had a similar mentality.

Mick came to Belfast and received employment as a railway clerk. It was characteristic of him that he never expressed bitterness or recrimination about the shabby treatment he received at that time.

The entry of the Soviet Union into the war following the invasion by the Germans galvanised the whole Labour movement into greater activity in 1941. For example, by 1943 the Communist Party had about 2000 mem-

bers in Northern Ireland. During this period Mick was appointed editor of the weekly paper **Unity** and industrial organiser of the party. I served as chairman of the industrial committee.

Week after week, the paper stressed that the ending of the war through the defeat of fascism would bring greater democratic rights for the ordinary people, and that the building of a strong trade union movement would be the essential element in safeguarding the rights of the workers. But, given the political background of Northern Ireland, it was a daunting task for the labour movement to try to work towards these objectives.

The courageous actions of the unemployed workers, known as the Outdoor Relief Workers' Strike, in 1932, had created a great degree of unity among hungry Protestants and Catholics. The Unionist Government received a real scare. But by 1935, after consistent sectarian propaganda a pogrom atmosphere was created in Northern Ireland. The old slogans triumphed as workers fought workers. Trade union organisation, weakened by mass unemployment, was further crippled. This was indeed the sorry background in which we had to operate and where Mick showed his originality.

In the pre-war period, left wing activity in the trade unions meant that small groups met together to plan concerted action in the workshops and the union branches. Now all of that changed. Masses of workers, men and women, poured into war industries and trade union membership soared. The unofficial shop stewards' movement, which had been initiated by two outstanding communists, Tom Crothers, and John Higgins, grew rapidly in strength and influence. In a very short time, there were shop stewards committees in all the main industries in Northern Ireland.

The old traditions whereby trade union officials negotiated and took most of the decisions on wages and conditions were changed in a radical fashion. More and more the ordinary members became involved in decision-making through the holding of work-shop meetings. The shop stewards then reported these decisions to officials and district committees for ratification. On one occasion I was threatened with arrest for breaking the ban on holding a mass meeting on Belfast harbour property, inside Harland and Wolff's shipyard. That threat was only used once as the shop stewards organisation ensured that their leaders would be protected.

Mick had the foresight to emphasise that much of our activity should be linked to the future. He wrote a pamphlet on the future of the shipbuilding industry in Northern Ireland. Many of the ideas and proposals he put

forward were put into effect, particularly on the amalgamation of the skilled craft unions. He was of enormous assistance to me when I drafted a memorandum on the future of the aircraft industry for the joint production committees.

We were inseparable during those war years in Belfast in our political and industrial activities and our limited social life was spent together on the rare occasions we could escape from meetings. It was during that time we confided to each other our aspirations for the future of our country. Above all, we hoped that the defeat of fascism would weld together all the democratic forces of Northern Ireland and assist in breaking down the divisions that had been cultivated between unionist and nationalist sections of the people.

There were to be many disappointments and setbacks. During 1944, a serious division in the trade union movement took place. I was a delegate to the annual conference of the Irish Trades Union Congress at Drogheda in that year, when the resolution to attend a proposed World Trade Union Conference was passed. The Irish-based unions objected strongly and afterwards withdrew from the Irish TUC and set up the Congress of Irish Unions. This action was a serious reversal in the work of building a strong movement, North and South. Mick pointed out in various articles that the real issue of the split was who was going to control the policies and organisation of the Irish-based unions. He was bitterly disappointed at this development, as he realised how badly it would damage the struggle for working class unity.

Shortly after the end of the war in Europe, elections were held for the Stormont Parliament. Mick acted as election agent for the communist candidate in Cromac. The nationalist people of the Markets' area, a Catholic enclave, solidly voted on an anti-unionist ticket. The traditionalist unionists did not vote for change - the middle classes from Malone and Stranmillis voted almost 100% for the Unionist candidate. We thought wryly about Churchill's comment about the dreary spires and steeples of Tyrone and Fermanagh, after the first World War.

Mick worked like a trojan organising meetings, writing leading articles, and leaflets and helping to draft the election manifesto. It was in raising funds that he was most successful, through his mass meetings, personal contacts and workshop collections. It is worth recalling that in Belfast a majority of votes were cast against the official Unionist Party but the opposition was split into a variety of groups. In the rural areas the Unionists were able to win with little real opposition.

In the election campaign, the Communist Party seriously overspent its

funds and this led to a financial crisis in 1946. This, allied to a split inside the party, meant that drastic decisions had to be taken. There was overwhelming bitterness at the return of a Unionist Government, despite the tremendous activity of the war years, and the party became depleted in membership.

Acting on the advice of Bob Stewart, a leading member of the British Communist Party, the four full-time officials of the party, including Mick, were paid off. He received two weeks' wages, and left for Dublin. So much for the services of the main fund-raiser. In fact, the local Communist Party had beheaded its own leadership, as no one was in a position to carry on the day-to-day organisational work. Despite Mick's bitter disappointment at this arbitrary treatment, he never publicly complained, but he confided his private feelings to me.

It was a blessing in disguise for Mick. There was little chance of a job in Belfast, as the whole political situation had changed now that the Nazis were safely defeated. The first murmurs of the Cold War began to be heard. When Mick went to Dublin, he began to do freelance reporting for the **Irish Times**. His contacts, experience and knowledge of the trade union movement were invaluable in writing about industrial affairs. In a comparatively short time, he became industrial correspondent of the paper.

It was about this time we came to appreciate the vision and leadership of Jim Larkin Junior. I was elected to the National Executive of the Irish TUC and for a period of three years I met Mick in Dublin every month. We exchanged views on how to heal the trade union split and so create a united labour movement, with a strong political base, North and South. Young Jim, as a Labour TD and leader of the Workers' Union of Ireland in succession to his father, was expressing similar ideas with great force and eloquence. (For the student of Irish labour history it should be mentioned that his essential thoughts were stated to the 1949 Annual Conference of Irish TUC, held in Belfast). Ultimately these ideas prevailed and a united body, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions was formed. Mick's writings in the **Irish Times** had helped in preparing the ground.

In the 1950s Mick came to the fore in the National Union of Journalists and served as the union's Irish Executive Officer for many years. We continued to keep in touch and our Belfast association was warmly renewed in 1969 when Mick, then political correspondent of the **Irish Times**, came to the city to write a series of articles (later reprinted as a booklet) on the peace-keeping role of the unions.

Shop stewards and union officials paid tribute to Mick's sympathetic reporting. The wheel had turned at

least part of the cycle — his work in Belfast had not been in vain.

The last time I saw Mick was the weekend on which I appeared on the **Late Late Show** in a confrontation with Sir Donald Mosley. Mick relished the fact that the old fascist leader was exposed in a T.V. show in Dublin. It brought back memories of the period when the British Union of Fascists tried to break up our meetings in London. By this time, Mick had become something of a political pundit because of his regular television and radio work.

We exchanged some happy memories of our halcyon days - it was not all politics and trade union work. The memory is etched in my mind as we recalled how much we had enjoyed and appreciated the role of the Young Covey in Sean O'Casey's **The Plough and the Stars**. We both had had our fair share of arguments with doctrinaire socialists.

I was forcibly reminded of our last conversation on the day of the memorial service for Mick. When I arrived in Dublin, I contacted the historian of the Communist Party of Ireland to see if he would join me in paying his respects to our dead comrade. But he had no intention of going if it meant listening to Conor Cruise O'Brien - and that was that.

The lecture hall in T.C.D. was packed with representatives of the main streams of Irish political and cultural life - except for the Communist Party. It seems to me that the grandchildren of the Young Covey are still alive in Dublin and in Belfast.

Mick died in Dublin in the city where his real political education began. As a young railway clerk, he had been transferred from Limerick. He was soon involved in political argument, when he found lodgings with a strongly republican socialist family. It was Chris O'Farrell who told me of Mick's early days. He prayed that Chris would change his left wing views. Instead, it was the close friend of Peadar O'Donnell, and Eamon Martin, an uncle of Chris Farrell who set Mick on a new course in life.

So there was a life spent to great purpose in three cities. These few words have only scratched the surface of his achievements. His life's work was, and is, of great help in widening the vision of social awareness in the present generation. It is a source of great pride to me that we were close friends and comrades for so many years.

Present at the memorial service, with Mick's widow Nancy, his daughter Helen and his sister Nellie, was a contingent of socialists from the McInerney home city of Limerick. Mick had been gratified that he had lived to see the emergence of a socialist movement in his native city, and had contributed to its development.