



Matt Merrigan **A marvellous legacy**

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Matt Merrigan has written on his early days, and I'm hoping to get the work published. He was born in the Dolphin's Barn area of Dublin in 1921. I know he took an interest in the Spanish civil war, and was aware of what was happening at the time. He came from a large family and his father died when he was very young, so he knew what poverty was like as a direct experience in his life.

However, the poverty of the area and these experiences could not explain his commitment to a socialism which lasted his whole life and never dimmed. He was in a variety of organisations, but his consistency is there through the whole lot of them, and that can't simply be explained by the poverty. He made a commitment in his early life to the socialist movement and he never varied from that. He was unusual in the sense that in the 1930s he considered the October revolution to be the greatest thing that happened in the twentieth century. He was committed to the Left Opposition: he never changed his views on that. Not with the massive advance of the Soviet Union after the war, with the huge advances of all the Communist Parties – it never dimmed Matty's view that the Soviet Union needed more democracy and participation, and this view stayed with him in a variety of organisations right through his life.

He was certainly involved with socialists in Belfast in the late 1930s and early 1940s. He was also a committed trade unionist from the time he started to work in Rowntree Mackintosh, and he lived in the period where there were two congresses in Ireland, because the trade union movement split after the war, partially over the influence of Communism in the World Federation of Trade Unions and partly over the existence of what were called British-based unions here – not a term I ever use, but what some people called British-based unions. That split lasted fourteen years, and he was involved as a shop steward in trying to get an agreement in the other congress and push that situation forward.

He saw Larkin speak when he was very young, and it made quite an impression on him. I always remember him telling me that it was a Saturday afternoon outside some shop. His mother said to him: "Remember this." Years later he would say to me that work finished in those times (in the 1930s) usually on Saturday afternoon. Larkin was still working, and it impressed him. Of course he would have been involved, and known and seen Larkin, probably, in the last great campaign of his life, which was the Standstill Order on wages in the war years. Larkin, as was his way, burnt the declaration at a demonstration in, I think, College Green. There was a big meeting there, one of the biggest meetings ever, and Larkin spoke at that, and Matty would have been involved.

He had in himself some of the spirit of the old Larkinites who, if you talked to them, never called a union official an official, but called him a delegate. They used that language on the basis that he's someone you can recall and someone you can control. And he had some of that in him, because he had known some of these people who were called, in Dublin at the time, Larkinites: people like Christy Ferguson and others who Matty would have been active with in the Labour Party in the 1940s. And of course, the Labour Party made massive advances in Dublin. It was almost the largest political party in Dublin in the 1940s. But that was quickly to be torn asunder once they went into coalition. What's new...?

There is no doubt about it, Matty really enjoyed himself in the ATGWU, because he was able to advance his own politics: he never found it a detriment, something that held him

back. And of course, if the union had a different policy to Matty, he simply went ahead with his own policy on a personal basis. Indeed, occasionally he fell out with some of his colleagues in the union, but basically, I think, the structures of the union allow for a higher level of participation. He had a belief in the shop steward system, he believed in empowering them. He pushed that all his life.

Of course, he was responsible for the union affiliating to the Labour Party. The ATGWU in 1949 disaffiliated from the Northern Ireland Labour Party, and indeed the Labour Party in the Republic, on the basis that the Northern Ireland Labour Party at the time supported the constitution of Northern Ireland. Although we didn't do an awful lot about it, we never formally endorsed the constitution of Northern Ireland, and Matty would have been involved and active in the union at that time, and I think he fought very hard to get the union affiliated to the Labour Party, because he didn't agree with non-political trade unionism. Even though he was the scourge of the leadership of the Labour Party, he was also very committed to it. He was, of course, expelled twice from the Labour Party. Most people only manage to do this once, but he was expelled twice. Once in the period of the early 1940s when a lot of communists were expelled, he was expelled with them; and secondly, he was expelled over Noel Browne in the 1970s, when he went out and tried to set up the Socialist Labour Party, which was shortlived and only had one TD. He was president of the party.

He was shop steward in Rowntree Mackintosh until he became a full-time official. He became a full-time official fairly young—he was 35—and he was only two years an ordinary official before he became Republic of Ireland district secretary, and he held that post for approximately 26 years. So that's 26 years when he would have been in the leadership of the union, and in the leadership of the Labour Party. He was on the Administrative Council of the Labour Party and, really, he was active. I don't know of any political cause that was going in Dublin, or indeed anywhere in Ireland, at the time that he wasn't associated with.

One of the first times I met him, I was active in the Dublin Housing Action Committee, and we had great difficulties. But I remember going around to Abbey Street, and I walked in to where the clerks were, and I said: "Is there any chance of seeing Matty Merrigan?", and they just picked up the phone. He said: "Who is it?" They said: "Someone from the Housing Action Committee", and he said: "Tell them to come up." It was just as straightforward as that. I said: "Will you speak on our platform? We're having a demonstration on Saturday", and he said the immortal word: "Yes", and he turned up and spoke. He was the first trade unionist to do that: it was unheard of at the time, and he made no big song and dance about it. He just got up and said his speech, and he supported us, and he was always there at the demonstrations, always around. And, as I say, would find time in a very busy life to associate with a group like that—and I can tell you, it was neither a popular nor a profitable organisation to be in at the time.

Anyway, Matty was one of the people who were associated with that, and was associated with a whole lot of other things that happened outside of the trade union movement. He identified with the women's movement. He identified with the struggles of republicans in the North in the long, long years when censorship took place, when nobody would stand on Sinn Féin platforms. I remember Matty supporting the hunger strike. It was very difficult for Matty to support the hunger strike because we have a big membership in the North of Ireland. But he never flinched, because it was his view that they were political prisoners, and that they should be treated as such, and he never apologised to anyone for that, and he stood on their platform. I remember at one stage he was chairperson of the National H-Block/Armagh Committee. Now that's not an easy thing to be. Several people lost their lives who had been associated with the hunger strike. There were lots of assassinations—I knew Miriam Daly who was murdered in such a situation, so it's not something that should be just lightly gone over. He had the courage of his convictions.

I remember just before the British troops entered Northern Ireland, there was a special meeting of the trades council. It was held on a Sunday morning, and I remember Matty making a call for the Irish government to send troops across the border, and that was very controversial at the time. He wanted them to occupy part of the six counties, because he believed that would internationalise the conflict, and the United Nations would intervene because it was an argument between two democratic states, Britain and Ireland, and the whole basis of the Northern conflict would have been resolved in a different way.

I didn't actually agree with that at the time—I remember arguing with him over it. But, looking back on it now, maybe he was right. Maybe if the United Nations had intervened in 1969 there would have been a very different situation. You have to remember, at that time, there were riots in Derry, there were thousands of people on the streets in Dublin, the Soviet foreign minister was banging the table in the UN demanding intervention, the conflict was being hugely internationalised as never before. The eyes of the world were on the Northern state, how it was treating its citizens. And remember, the demand of republicans and the Civil Rights people at the time was not for a united Ireland, but simply for the application of British rule and rights throughout the North of Ireland. And this, of course, had a huge impact on the Unionist leadership, and split them. They've never really recovered their composure since.

In the 1970s there were several strikes in the motor industry, including one in G H Brittain's which Matty supported. It lasted eight and a half months, and we not only stopped the company producing cars but we blacked every spare part, every imported car, the length and breadth of this country, and we actually won that strike. We campaigned over membership of the Common Market, and because of that we got a special protocol which protected car workers' jobs from the time of entry in 1972 until 1984, and employers had an obligation to sit down with us and try to develop suitable alternative employment.

What happened was, in 1984 the Chrysler corporation negotiated with Desmond O'Malley, who was then Minister for Industry and Commerce. And our membership had the right to go and apply for jobs in Semperit, which was a tyre manufacturer at the time. We rejected this as, firstly, it didn't guarantee that they would get jobs, and secondly, we didn't regard it as suitable employment, because it was already there. Now that would have meant that all the car workers would have been sacked, and they would have been allowed to import cars into this country freely—that wasn't the situation then. So we endorsed and made the strike official.

There's a famous judgement on this strike which you can't find anywhere because it's not written down. The only person to have written it down was actually the correspondent from RTE, Pat Sweeney, who, as far as I know, has the only record of the Talbot decision. But basically, the judge found that the Transport Union was guilty and responsible for the sum total of losses of the Chrysler corporation for the duration of the dispute, and we refused to accept that judgment. We blacked cars, we occupied the factory, and Matty was threatened with going to jail. Now, arising from that, when we got that information, we threatened to bring out our entire membership in the ESB and close the power stations, whereupon the pragmatist of all times, Mr Charles J Haughey, intervened in the dispute, and we negotiated an agreement with him, and basically the agreement was: all our members in Chrysler were made redundant, and each and every one of them were given jobs in the civil service. So if you see strange-looking civil servants around Iveagh House or Government Buildings, who don't really look like normal civil servants, they are all these car workers.

We won that dispute, and for years spokespeople for the Labour Party, particularly Barry Desmond, were criticising Haughey, insisting that he made a pragmatic decision to give us jobs and to yield to what we were looking for. The truth is, he should have criticised Dessie O'Malley, who made a worse decision: to allow Chrysler to sack all the membership and bring the cars in without extracting jobs for us first. So maybe everything that Charlie

Haughey did wasn't wrong. Maybe he sometimes did the odd thing that was right in his life.

There was a visit to the Soviet Union once in which Matty was shown around the museum which is dedicated to the October revolution. Of course, the history of the time notwithstanding, a lot of people would have been airbrushed out of history, and Matty would have had knowledge of the particular photographs concerned because he knew a lot about Soviet history. I wasn't there, but I did speak to people who were, and they told me that the curator left the museum when Matty finished giving his alternative talk—who was commissar for war and wasn't commissar for war, and who was in this photograph. He knew all of the Bolsheviks who met their different fates during the Stalinist era. He knew of them, he knew the photographs they were in, he knew the positions that they held, he knew what the official line of the Soviet Union was on them. So he left this man in a very difficult state, and that was his way. You couldn't falsify history with Matty, because he knew too much about it.

People certainly regarded Matty as a Trotskyite. I think that's far too narrow a definition of him, myself. I prefer to see Matty as someone who supported the Left Opposition, not simply the works and position of one person, because he wasn't that kind of a guy. He was certainly influenced by the writings of Trotsky, there's no doubt about that, but the writings of Connolly just as much, the influence of Larkin, the influence of Lenin. He read fairly widely, actually, and he wasn't the kind of person who was narrow or dogmatic in his analysis. He could read situations. As I said at his funeral, he was a very catholic person, in the sense that he could wake up in the morning, meet the shop stewards, talk to other full-time officials, deal with the bureaucracy of Congress, give a speech on women's liberation, and meet the republicans late at night—he was a catholic person. He spread himself widely over a huge number of movements and causes, and to say that he was simply a Trotskyite is, I think, to misread the totality of his life.

Because also, I can say that amongst the people that he most admired in the later period of his life were the leadership of Sinn Féin. He had nothing but the highest admiration for them, and it would be true to say that he had a big falling-out with the Workers Party, and those in Democratic Left. He thought they abandoned the nationalist people in the North. He wasn't someone who would have agreed with Sinn Féin on everything, but he thought that the peace process was worth supporting, he thought it had the germs of the potential to possibly lessen sectarian tensions, and possibly to bring Catholic and Protestant workers together, a thing he was committed to all his life. And I'm bound to say that, as someone who was a republican, the unionist membership of our union had the height of respect for him. Because whatever else—they might have disagreed with his views politically—they knew that if he was to take up their cause with the employer, you never scratched your head and tried to figure out what side he was on.

That was always abundantly clear when he came into a room. He saw himself as a representative, not as a buffer between workers and employers, as somebody who would try to find a solution. He saw himself as the representative of workers, and he saw himself as somebody who represented that view—independently. Now, like anyone else, if he was in a boat that was sinking, he would quickly tell you to find another way forward. He was no fool. He could handle himself around, be quite pragmatic. He knew that advancement for workers didn't go in a single direction, it wasn't always forward, there were detours sometimes on the way, and he could get very annoyed with people if they didn't accept his advice on what particular detour to take. Nevertheless, in the core of all that was absolute commitment to your cause, and I've seen him numerous times talking to workers and they always understood that. And really, that meant that always he was halfway to a solution, because they believed in him.

Maybe the biggest thing I learned from Matty was his view that you could pursue a united Ireland, you could pursue socialism, you could pursue high wages, but he would

always say: "Make sure you enjoy it as you go through life, because you only get one chance at this." And of course, Matty had the same religion as myself: he was a baptised atheist. He enjoyed his life. He left a legacy of unselfish dedication to the working class, the people of Dublin, whom he loved—he was a real Dub. At his funeral there were lots of people down from Belfast, where he made acquaintances throughout the years. When I looked down at the assembled gathering at his funeral, I don't know who else could bring together republicans, socialists, trade unionists, bureaucrats, people who were active in the women's movement, and also people who were active in the retired workers' movement.

I remember him saying, when he finished as a full-time official in the ATGWU, that he was going to do what he was doing before, as an unpaid agitator for the working class. He carried that promise out. He was active in the Pensioners' Parliament. He was active in anything he was ever asked to do. He kept the pensioners' movement going in the Transport Union: he was president of our pensioners' society. Active in the union, interested in everything, in every aspect of life. I can only say that it's a marvellous legacy to leave to the world, to basically have a lot of people say: "He done a grand job", have a lot of people say: "He stuck by his principles", and say that, basically, Matty Merrigan had a rich life, a very happy life. And that's the message. If you ask me, that's the most important thing.

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