



O'Donnell abú?

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Dónal Ó Drisceoil. *Peadar O'Donnell*. Cork University Press, 164 pages.

One aspect of the Irish left's weakness is our tendency to seize on people and idolise them. The canonisation of Connolly is well documented but, whatever his faults, he at least is a truly heroic figure. Some who couldn't get in the same league if they tried, however, have also had uncritical hero-worship bestowed upon them. The fact that Noel Browne stuck to his guns over the Mother and Child scheme, for instance, leads many to disremember his political egotism and his years as a Fianna Fáiler.

Peadar O'Donnell has been on the receiving end of similar treatment. Wistfully recalling the days of the street fighting man has too often served as a weak antidote to the difficulties involved in the neither popular nor profitable pursuit of working for socialism in Ireland since. Tributes were pouring in well before he died: his penultimate year even saw him turned into the theme for a Patrick MacGill Summer School. A decade earlier Michael McNerney's *Peadar O'Donnell: Irish Social Rebel* appeared, a hagiography that leaves the reader with the distinct impression that O'Donnell's shite didn't stink. Thankfully, the critical balance has been recovered in recent years, and Dónal Ó Drisceoil's accomplished biography hides neither the author's admiration for his subject nor his willingness to criticise his shortcomings.

O'Donnell was a local boy made good, rising through a scholarship from humble origins to become a national teacher. He became an organiser for the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in 1918 and "blazed a trail of glory clean across Ulster", as the union's paper boasted (p 11), bringing its strength in the province from three branches to 31 in two years. The mushrooming of the union, combined with the radical atmosphere of the times, outgrew the Liberty Hall bureaucracy's control: "organizers like O'Donnell worked almost autonomously, developing tactics... on their own initiative" (p 17).

There is no better example than Monaghan town in 1919, when the workers took over the asylum. A 93-hour week in the mental hospital brought the staff out on a strike which adopted militant tactics after a few days. They occupied the building, ran up the red flag, and proclaimed the hospital a soviet in imitation of the Russian revolution. After armed police attacks failed, management soon conceded a reduction of 37 hours and a hefty pay rise – O'Donnell holding out for an equal rise for the women workers.

The tactic of seizing workplaces spread through the country, and the ITGWU established a firm base in Monaghan among both Protestant and Catholic workers. After another strike that same year virtually closed the town and won another increase, O'Donnell commented (p 15): "The proletariat have fought shoulder to shoulder under their own flag. The capitalist game of 'divide and conquer' met with a serious reverse when all the town workers abandoned their fancy colours and united under the Red." This unity was indeed impressive, but went nowhere when there was no force trying to bring it beyond bread and butter issues to tackle thorny political issues like the dominant question of the day: national independence.

O'Donnell "went with the flow," writes Ó Drisceoil, "hoping, indeed believing, that the labour leaders would come out eventually to take the lead in the developing struggle for independence" (p 17). He attempted to organise workers into what was left of two organisations Connolly had led, the Socialist Party of Ireland and the Citizen Army. But, precisely because the leadership of the workers' movement stood at one remove from the

independence struggle waiting to see which way the cat would jump, such organisation was short-lived. Only joining the IRA gave O'Donnell the chance to take part, and in 1920 he became a full-time volunteer.

His sense of autonomy came to the fore again when the rebel republican courts tried to prove their respectability by protecting landlords against small farmers seizing land. O'Donnell refused to send his men to enforce such decrees, and the courts' writ didn't run in his part of Donegal. He saw the class tensions of the period behind the truce and treaty negotiations of 1921 (p 22): "The middle classes are the nervous peace seekers, who fear the advance of proletarian power more than they abhor the old tyranny." He fought with the republicans in the civil war, enduring imprisonment and hunger strike but, even as the Four Courts were being bombarded, he had a notion that their cause was lost: "I'm in the wrong war!" he said (p 26).

Following the civil war, he pushed the republican movement towards involvement with social struggles, and the issue of the land annuities seemed tailor-made for him. At the turn of the century the British government had allowed Irish tenant farmers to buy their land, paying in annual instalments, but for years many had refused to pay due to poverty, resistance to Britain, or both. The Free State government agreed in 1926 to collect the annuities for Britain, and were sending in the bailiffs to evict farmers and seize their livestock. O'Donnell used the IRA paper *An Phoblacht* to publicise and promote the campaign of non-payment.

Others had different reasons for opposing the annuities: Fianna Fáil senator Maurice Moore made detailed arguments questioning their legality. Although this clearly entailed "sucking the class dimension, so crucial to O'Donnell's conception, from the issue" (p 50), he formed an alliance with Moore. This opened the door to Fianna Fáil, who took no part in non-payment and put up a purely legalistic opposition. O'Donnell made a virtual gift of the annuities campaign to de Valera, for whom it proved a useful stepping stone to power. Once there, he stopped sending the annuity payments to London, but kept them in his own state coffers rather than abolishing them.

The height of O'Donnell's influence in the IRA, and that of the republican left generally, came in the early 1930s. The movement's aim, he said at Bodenstown in 1930, was "to break the connection with England and vest all power in a free Republic in the Irish working class and working farmers" (p 66). The following year the IRA launched Saor Éire, an organisation with the kind of socialist programme that would make a present-day Sinn Féiner's hair stand on end.

But this was a top-down initiative under IRA control rather than republicans playing their part in the workers' own struggles. It suffered the fate of other attempts to put a left spin on the republican message: like someone learning a new language, fresh concepts were badly translated into the language they knew best, and eventually the learner wasn't up to the effort involved. Saor Éire sparked off a serious state crackdown on the republican movement, which came through it but quietly buried the troublesome project. The left's stock had fallen considerably within the IRA: O'Donnell's contributions to *An Phoblacht* were censored, his proposals were rejected within the organisation, he lost his place on the army council, and volunteers were banned from expressing views contrary to official policy.

In 1934 most of the republican movement's left wing broke away from the IRA—which didn't stop the IRA court-martialling and expelling them subsequently! They set up the Republican Congress, which spent that year taking an unprecedented lead in working people's struggles—strikes in the towns, land agitation in the country, fighting the Blueshirts, campaigning against the Dublin slums, winning real support from workers in Belfast's Shankill. And, as Ó Drisceoil notes, "the focus of Congress activity was open, mass, participatory politics—a unique development in republican history" (p 85).

But the Congress came to a Behanesque end, with the split being the first item on the

agenda. Having originally proclaimed that “a Republic of a united Ireland will never be achieved except through a struggle which uproots Capitalism on its way”, a small majority now declared their aim to be “the Irish Republic” rather than “a Workers’ Republic”. The argument was that uprooting capitalism wouldn’t be on the political agenda until the stage of national independence had been reached, but Ó Drisceoil acquits O’Donnell here: “O’Donnell’s contributions never suggested a bourgeois stage”, he says, and his position “was certainly not a version of a ‘stages’ approach” (p 88).

While avoiding the cruder formulations of it, O’Donnell’s argument certainly was a version of a ‘stages’ approach. “We dare not jump through a stage in the fight,” he told the Congress, “raising now the slogan ‘Workers’ Republic’, and leaving Fianna Fáil to escape, saying that they are standing for one kind of Republic, but that we stand for a different one.” The success of the Republican Congress, however, was built on just that: winning people to a very different kind of republic to de Valera’s kind. Working people who supported Fianna Fáil had to be won over, of course, but that could only be done by posing a distinct conception of freedom, instead of trying to take on Fianna Fáil on their own ground.

O’Donnell insisted, then and afterwards, that the struggle for the republic would determine what kind of republic it would be: if it arose from the battles of workers and small farmers, then it would be a workers’ and small farmers’ republic. But history is full of revolutions fought and republics established with the blood, sweat and tears of working people – and yet those working people didn’t end up in control. For that to happen, workers have to be conscious of their objective, be clear just what they are fighting for, and that does mean raising now the slogan ‘workers’ republic’.

O’Donnell “was increasingly a fellow-traveller of the ‘official’, i.e. Moscow-led, communist movement... that had effectively become a policy instrument of Stalin and the Soviet Union” (p 1-2). His position in the Republican Congress debate clearly owed something to these connections, and he was often to be found on the executives of Communist front organisations in Ireland and Europe. In 1930 he publicly denied that religious believers were persecuted in Russia, and welcomed the action of Communists who broke up a rally against unemployment in Dublin because it was organised by the ‘social fascist’ Labour Party.

The intriguing exception to his Communist sympathising comes from his experiences in Catalonia in 1936. What engaged his attention there was not just the resistance to Franco, but the way urban and rural workers combined this with establishing new social relations. He was fascinated by the seizure of landed estates to be shared out or worked collectively. The approach of the anarchists appealed to him and Communist-controlled Madrid paled beside Barcelona, where the anarchist point of view held sway. His empathy with the rural revolution in Catalonia was a logical extension of his lifelong commitment to something similar in Ireland: that the ranchers’ land be taken off them by the poor, with the support of urban workers.

O’Donnell was no theoretician, nor ever claimed to be: “Theory with me is the interpretation of the situation as it bursts in my face” (p 1). While flexibility and a bit of pragmatism are no bad things, making it up as you go along is a dangerous way to set about a revolution. For one thing, it can make it easier to cross over from revolution to reform, a journey O’Donnell clearly made from about 1940 on.

A successful career as a writer, helped along by his wife’s inherited wealth and his shrewd investments in the business world, separated him to a large extent from the struggles that had been his lifeblood. He became a well-paid advisor to the government on the moral temptations facing migrant Irish workers in wartime Britain. While there is nothing wrong with wanting to give your kids a good start in life, sending his adopted son to the exclusive Belvedere College – where, instead of proletarian riff-raff, he rubbed shoulders with the future Sir Anthony O’Reilly – was not the act of a socialist.

The depressing vista facing Irish socialists in these decades provides precious little excuse. Ireland saw a wave of workers' struggles during the war, but O'Donnell took no part in it. The unemployed movement in Dublin in the 1950s did attract his support, but in a manner far removed from his earlier activism: he solicited "contributions to campaign funds from his business contacts, whose willingness to help highlighted the non-socialist nature of the campaign, which presented unemployment as 'a national disgrace' and later (fatally) sought the support of the arch-reactionary Archbishop McQuaid" (p 117).

His politics now fitted comfortably into a reformist mould: "the problem is not how to achieve great revolutionary change, but first steps of a progressive character" (p 113). He described his immediate goal as "an 'advance within the boundaries of capitalism'. He... was primarily contemplating and advocating a push on de Valera and the native bourgeoisie to offer a solution, resulting in a 'thickening of the defences of capitalism'" (p 102). A fatalistic belief in the arrival of revolution one fine day – "I believe in the historical process" – allowed him to relegate it beyond the realm of present activity: "he accepted that reform and progressive change were all that could be achieved until, 'somewhere out the road in history', the revolution would eventually and inevitably come" (p 2-3).

As he settled into the role of "grand old man of the Irish left and something of a patron saint of progressive causes" (p 117), O'Donnell still fought the good fights. He was a strong voice opposing the American war against Vietnam, and the nuclear arms race. When the republican movement split in 1969/70, he annoyed both wings by telling them that neither could do the job and that they would have to follow a movement arising from the working class.

But that picture, the photograph of a stately O'Donnell calmly reflecting in his twilight years, is not the one to put in the album. The cover of this biography chooses a photo of O'Donnell in 1930 staring determinedly ahead, looking for all the world like he's about to leap out at you. That picture, of Peadar O'Donnell the revolutionary, the man who scared the rich and powerful of his Ireland, is worth looking at, learning from his triumphs and his failures.

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