

# The life and death of Peter Graham, 1945-71

By Sean Matgamna

Exactly 25 years ago, Peter Graham died in Dublin at the hands of semi-gangster members of the "Republican" guerrilla organisation, "Saor Eire", of which he was a member. (Its nearest equivalent today would be the INLA and IPLO). He had been beaten with a hammer, subjected to other indignities, and then shot in the neck and left to choke on his own blood. He was 26 years old. An electrician from the Coombe district of Dublin, Peter had joined the Stalinist "Connolly Youth Movement" at 20 and become a Trotskyist a year later.

I knew Peter Graham well, and cared about him. He was marked by high dedication and subordination of everything narrowly personal to his socialist politics. He was one of the most determined militants I have known. He does not deserve to be forgotten.

How did a Trotskyist come to that end? In the late 1960s, guerrilla warfare, as depicted in the experience of the Cuban revolution and the writings of Che Guevara and Regis Debray, had great prestige on the left. Ireland was a place of shadowy — and soon to be all too substantial — secret armies; most of Irish revolutionary politics was the memory of such "armies".

The main Irish Trotskyist organisation, the League for a Workers' Republic, which Peter joined, was a passive and rather sectarian group. But Ireland's own endemic guerrillaist tradition was so pervasive that it found reflection among Peter's sectarian-Trotskyist comrades, even while they ritually crossed themselves and mumbled the standard Marxist caveats about "terrorism".

The middle-class (and very young) leaders of the group repelled him with their dry painting-by-numbers "orthodox-Trotskyist" passivity, while simultaneously shunting him towards "the anti-imperialist militants" of Saor Eire by their open moral awe before them.

Trotsky wrote somewhere that the pre-revolutionary Russian Social Revolutionary terrorists operated in an atmosphere of sustaining moral approbation from the middle-class liberals of the Cadet party. So it was with Peter and his "orthodox Trotskyist" comrades. In their press the thrilling physical-force-now Saor Eire revolutionaries were depicted not only as part of a division of labour in Irish revolutionary politics, but as an advanced, heroic and serious part of it.

For the LWR leaders this idea was



not allowed to interfere unduly with middle-class career building. Peter was in earnest.

Beginning with the reasonable idea that it was necessary to learn to use guns where there were hostile private political armies, the desire not to be among the laggards, to be with the vanguard — the same desire that leads luckier people to mere extremes of sloganising — pulled Peter into Saor Eire and then into its "actions".

Saor Eire was a group of dissident Republicans, one or two of whom were ex-Trotskyists. They robbed many banks in the South between 1968 and 1971, and shot Richard Fallon, an unarmed Dublin policeman who tried to stop a robbery. In November 1970 Taoiseach Jack Lynch went so far as to announce publicly that to deal with Saor Eire he had activated the law allowing internment without trial. Then, amidst political uproar, he drew back.

But Saor Eire's ideas made no sense, and their activities even less. This group came to be as tightly sealed off from Irish society and the Irish working class as an airbubble in the bloodstream. Some members were on the run. Politically, as Peter discovered, nothing could be done with such a group, selected on the basis of "action" and not politics.

Some members, like Sean Morrissey, an ex-Trotskyist who would be acquitted of murder and jailed for robbery, were patently sincere, politically honest, and uncommonly selfless people. Others were gangsters.

It is not for nothing that Marxists have rejected the form of "politics" represented by Saor Eire.

Peter joined the Mandeliste international organisation (USFI) some time after he was already involved in Saor Eire. Because we were linked by ties of personal friendship as well as old ties of politics, he worked at maintaining links with Workers' Fight (a forerunner of the

AWL), despite our large political differences. Peter was something of a romantic ecumenicist!

Remarkably cool, Peter was, in his own way, tragically clear-headed. Making and stubbornly holding to the enormous and all-defining political misjudgement which cost him his life, he kept his head clear of the mystifications which lead so many would-be Trotskyists today to weave inappropriate "socialist" fantasies around the activities of the Catholic-chauvinist Provisional IRA. (He did, of course, "back" the Provisionals against the British state, as others of us too felt obliged to).

The last time I saw him, about ten days before his death, Peter and I spent a long afternoon in a fierce and furious political row, and never once did he resort in political self-defence to such all-purpose left-wing abracadabra notions as the idea that Ireland is going through, or can be made to go through a "process of permanent revolution", in which bourgeois nationalist activity will at some point turn into the socialist revolution. Peter had too much self-respect to take refuge in what he knew to be nonsense.

It would, perhaps, be easier to account for him, had he shared such notions or fitted tidily into the standard "Trotskyist-populist" left, but he did not.

Had he survived physically, Peter Graham would have survived politically, and grown. So I choose to believe.

Peter Graham was an honest and brave revolutionary socialist who met a premature and politically useless death in a sordid and meaningless skirmish that never should have happened. Two worlds, at least, separate the Coombe electrician from Robert Gregory, the son of Galway landowners and colonial administrators, about whom Yeats wrote the famous poem "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death", but for me Yeats' poem sums up Peter's wilfulness and his strange detachment:

*I know that I shall meet my fate  
Somewhere among the clouds above  
Those that I fight I do not hate,  
Those that I guard I do not love;  
My country is Kilcartan Cross,  
My countrymen Kilcartan's poor,  
No likely end could bring them loss  
Or leave them happier than before.  
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,  
Nor public men, nor cheering  
crowds,  
A lonely impulse of delight  
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;  
I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of  
breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death.*