

Desmond Greaves

Desmond Greaves, who died last year, was for half a century a very important figure in Irish left wing politics.

He ran the Communist Party's Irish organisation in Britain, the Connolly Association, and edited its monthly paper, *The Irish Democrat*. For decades that paper was sold on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings in cities like Manchester, Liverpool and London in the many Irish pubs where the uprooted Irish gathered to meet their own kind and drown their sorrows.

It is still sold, much diminished in confidence and influence, and probably in sales.

In Manchester, around 1960, we'd think badly of ourselves if half a dozen of us sold fewer than a thousand *Democrats* on a Saturday night tour with a new issue through the teeming pubs of Rusholme and Moss Side.

Young Irish people coming to England were warned in Catholic Truth Society pamphlets and in speeches from Irish pulpits to beware the lure of 'the Connolly clubs' whose zealots would meet them off the boats and seek to ensnare them in the politics of 'godless Communism'.

Meeting them off the boats was a myth, but for sure we met them in the pubs. Unfortunately the idea that we were preaching communism to them was a myth, too.

If you hadn't been told otherwise, you would have mistaken the *Irish Democrat* for a mainstream Irish nationalist paper, a *Fiana Fail* paper maybe, complete with one of its 12 pages given over entirely to nationalist songs. If you knew your way around politics, you'd be tipped off that it was some sort of Stalinist paper by words like 'progressive', and by such foreign policy angles as praise for the 26 Counties' refusal to join NATO.

People did find their way to the Communist Party by way of the Connolly Association, though the traffic often went the other way too (me, for instance). One of our perpetual complaints was that we couldn't mobilise the CP's Irish members, except for occasional resolution-mongering at trade union branches. They integrated too easily into the labour movement, and were lost to Irish concerns through absorption and assimilation.

Great chances were thrown away to create an Irish communist cadre out of malleable people caught up in the flux of forced emigration from an underdeveloped to an industrialised society which confronted them freshly and starkly with the realities of class slavery. Instead of educating them, the CP and the Connolly Association were merely parasitic on the existing nationalist sentiments of those Irish they reached — rather like the far-left groups today, though with rather more excuse.

Yet Greaves did influence Irish politics, and help shape what has happened in the last 20 years. In his books and pamphlets he preached a sort of left-slanted populist Republicanism, stiffened with Stalinist dogma about a two-stage Irish revolution — first the 'completion of the bourgeois revolution' through unification, then a struggle for socialism. The message was that only the working class and small farmers could be consistent Irish nationalists, and therefore Republicans had to turn to 'the men and women of no property'.

This fusion of Stalinist dogma and Catholic-Irish radical nationalism was first made in the 1930s, when the Irish CP counted for something, and the Republican

movement too. It was championed by a Stalinist-influenced segment of the Republican movement, the 1934 'Republican Congress', which soon declined.

The Stalinist-led London branch of the Republican Congress started Greaves's paper, first called *Irish Freedom*, in the late '30s.

Such politics all but disappeared in the '40s and '50s, when Republicanism was smashed in the South, and what hadn't been smashed was very right-wing. You would find it only in odd memoirs and pamphlets by Paedar O'Donnell and George Gilmore, and, much diluted, in Greaves's publications.

But in the 1960s Greaves's work played a big role in convincing the then Republican movement to try to repair its fortunes by making a fresh populist appeal to the 'people of no property'. That turn helped generate the Provo split in 1969-70; today, twenty years later, the Provo leaders have come round full circle to similar ideas.

And not just the Provo leaders — the idea of populist nationalism as authentic Irish working-class revolutionary politics is dominant also in the far left groups, who thus owe a debt to Greaves, the Buonarrotti, the link man between them and the '30s.

For the Stalinist-populist '30s is, though they don't know it, where much of the politics of the would-be Trotskyist groups on Ireland originates. All they add is a bit of incoherent verbiage about 'permanent revolution' and the assertion (for which no evidence is or can be cited) that it will all lead to socialism, somehow.

Greaves's books testify that he was a man of immense learning in things Irish. He was the author of the first full-scale biography of James Connolly (1961), and of books and pamphlets on Liam Mellows, Wolfe Tone, Sean O'Casey and others. They stand out in a field of left-wing literature characterised above all by the crassest ignorance. Contrast them, for example, with Paul Foot's recent pamphlet, whose author doesn't know that there was a second Home Rule Bill in 1893 and indeed, crams his text with so many errors that you can't be sure that it is a typesetting mistake when he writes of Ireland's 36 counties.

But Greaves's career proved that, necessary though it is, knowledge is not enough.

He remained all his life within the framework of ideas he picked up in the Stalinist movement of the '30s. He never advanced, despite his learning. That was Greaves's tragedy. Insofar as he helped shape radical Republican politics, Greaves's political tragedy is also a part of Ireland's unfolding tragedy.

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