REMEMBERING THE OFFICIAL REPUBLICANS
by
Bob Purdie

It was in Glasgow in about 1963 or 1964 that I first became aware of the developments that were to lead to the Republican split of 1970. Selling left wing papers round the pubs in Gorbals I met a couple of young members of Clann na hÉireann, the British wing of the Republican Movement, selling the United Irishman. They were friendly and eagerly told me that the Movement had adopted socialist policies. They were very enthusiastic about the new direction.

I had been interested in Ireland for a long time and had read the Connolly Association's Irish Democrat on a few occasions. My fascination with Ireland had been stimulated in 1961 when, at the age of twenty, I moved to Glasgow and realised that Irish conflicts and divisions were a significant part of life in the city. As an Edinburgh born socialist, I admired James Connolly and was present in 1968 when his daughter unveiled a plaque under George IV Bridge, on the centenary of his birth. But I didn't have any significant involvement in Irish issues until 1969, by which time I was living in London.

When the civil rights marchers were attacked in Derry on 5th October 1968, Irish exiles in Britain organised to support the civil rights movement. The Irish Civil Rights Solidarity Campaign (ICRSC) consisted of a number of Irish leftists, mainly the remnants of Géry Lawless's Irish Workers Group and the London Branch of the Peoples Democracy (PD), together with British far left organisations: principally the International Socialists (later called the Socialist Workers Party) and the International Marxist Group (IMG), to which I belonged. As Organiser of the London Branch of the IMG, I assigned myself to political work in the ICRSC and I became aware of the Republicans as part of the civil rights movement and of Clann na hÉireann as part of the solidarity movement in Britain. But I knew little about internal developments in the Movement and Clann, which was strongest in Birmingham, didn't seem to have a presence in London at the time.

I learned about the 1970 split from an American Trotskyist, Lennie Glaser, who had just arrived in London from Dublin where he had attended the Ard Fheis at which the Provisionals had walked out. His analysis was the one generally adopted by the British left; that it was a left/right division and the Provisionals represented an outdated and ossified version of Irish Republicanism. Glaser was a sympathiser of the IMG's counterpart in the USA, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP; no connection to the British SWP); the SWP's promotion of this line was influential within the IMG
and on me personally. I had formed a close political alliance and personal friendship with Géry Lawless in the ICRSC and he also influenced me in adopting this analysis.

Lennie also told me that the Officials had sent a Volunteer in black beret and combat jacket on tour, to drum up support from the American left. The uniform had been very effective because it resembled that of the Black Panthers and communicated the idea that Catholics in Northern Ireland suffered from discrimination similar to that against Black people in the US.

In the 1970-72 period the Officials were keen to work with the far left in Britain and the IMG developed good relations with Clann na hÉireann. I attended joint meetings in Birmingham and got to know some of the Clann activists. But aspects of the organisation puzzled me; we were invited to participate in an Easter commemoration in Birmingham and I expected a British lefty type demonstration. When I arrived with a small contingent from London we met the Nottingham IMG who had turned out in force and were nonplussed to find what was more like a Catholic religious parade with traditional Hibernian and Foresters' banners; they wondered whether they had got the details mixed up. However we met some of the Clann people, who didn’t have a banner and, with misgivings, we fell in behind.

On another occasion I was invited to sit on the platform at an Official Republican rally in Trafalgar Square. Again I was puzzled because I didn’t recognised any of the platform party nor the people who were running the event, in fact I don’t recall seeing any of the Clann members I knew. It seemed that the organisation operated on more than one level and that my Birmingham friends were not necessarily important or influential. One of the main speakers was Eoin Ó Murchú, to whom I was introduced. His extreme coldness was the first indication that not everyone in the Officials was keen on Trotskyists. At another meeting in London the President of Clann, a white bearded man whose name I don’t remember, said that they didn’t need Communism or Trotskyism, “we have our own Republicanism.”

Around this time I spoke, together with Official Republican spokespeople from Ireland, at four or five meetings in London and Birmingham, organised in support of the civil rights movement. They included Dessie O’Hagan of the Republican Clubs - the equivalent of Official Sinn Féin in the North, and Kevin McCorry, the Organiser of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA); also Seamas Ó Tuathail, editor of the United Irishman but not actually a member of the Officials. Their attitude was warm and they welcomed my presence as an indication of solidarity from the British left.
In July 1970 the IMG sent me to Ireland, which I had never visited, to make contacts, gain knowledge of what was happening on the ground and to write about the situation for our recently launched paper *The Red Mole*, edited by Tariq Ali. I went first to Dublin where I spent about three days. After contacting local Trotskyists, I called in at the Officials’ HQ in Lower Gardiner Street. I can confirm the American writer George Thayer’s impressions from a few years earlier: "... airless, unpainted and dusty; and they reek of disinfectant. Scattered throughout the two small offices are old pieces of furniture, ancient maps of Ireland, ragged banners and stacks of yellowing literature...". (See my *Politics in the Streets*, p.43)

I had a very friendly conversation with Séan Ó Cionaoith, while helping him to stuff envelopes with their newsletter. He was dressed in a tweed jacket and looked more like a 1950s schoolteacher than the long haired revolutionaries I had left behind in London. I also met Mairín de Burca, to whom I had a letter of introduction from Géry Lawless. She was friendly and reassuringly militant; very like the feminists I knew in London. At Trinity College I met Dalton Kelly (known nowadays as Daltún Ó Ceallaigh), a rising star amongst the younger Officials. He told me he expected that the movement would become completely political and the IRA would be disbanded. On my last day in Dublin I was sitting in a pub with some Trotskyist comrades when I was told that two CS Gas canisters had been thrown onto the floor of the House of Commons. I travelled to Belfast the next day and that fixes the date of my visit as 24th July 1970.

I had been given an Official Republican contact and arrived at Great Victoria Street Station, a ten minute walk from my destination in Ton Street. I walked down Grosvenor Road and turned into Cullingtree Road. I found myself in the Lower Falls, with its grid of small streets, bounded by Grosvenor Road, Albert Street, Divis Street and Falls Road. The normality of Belfast city centre disappeared; there were sandbagged army posts, armoured cars and foot patrols everywhere. To my surprise I wasn’t challenged; this was just as well because in my bag I had Republican books and pamphlets bought in Dublin, including the political writings of Padraig Pearse. I turned into Ton Street, which had the “T” painted green the “O” left white and the “N” painted orange. I knocked on the front door of a small “kitchen house” and my contact, Kitty O’Kane, took me in and asked me to wait while she made arrangements for me. Ten minutes later she was back, having fixed up board and accommodation a few doors down the street. My host was introduced to me as “Billy.” I learned later that his surname was “McMillen”.

He was small and stocky with an open, weathered, face and we quickly struck up a rapport. He was like the trade unionists I had known on Clydeside and we had an unspoken understanding of each other, as from similar cultures. I had grown up in a
close knit working class community in Edinburgh, in an enclosed area of terraced houses, and I felt very comfortable in the Lower Falls. In fact I felt much more at home than I did amongst the middle class lefties of London. Billy took me to the National Club in Queen Street, where we met some other Official Republicans. I was impressed by their internationalism and they struck the proper chords on Vietnam and the Palestinians. They liked the copies of Red Mole I had brought, despite the fact that in design and content it was an “alternative” newspaper like Oz and IT and not like other British left wing papers, or the rather old fashioned format of the United Irishman.

I stayed in Billy’s house for three or four days, sleeping in one of the two tiny upstairs bedrooms. He lived alone and Kitty O’Kane came in to cook for us. I woke up several times that first night and watched army patrols and armoured cars racing around the narrow streets. The house seemed to have been inherited from Billy’s parents and was a throwback to the 1950s, with its walls hung with Sacred Heart and other Catholic religious pictures. He had a constant stream of visitors; some he spoke to in front of me, some he spoke to in low tones outside; with some he asked me to go upstairs and with others he spoke in Irish. It dawned on me that he was a significant person, but it was not until I was back in London that I understood that I had been living in the house of the OC of the Official IRA in Belfast.

My visit took place less than three weeks after the Lower Falls Curfew of July 1970, and Kitty O’Kane told me stories about British Army excesses and showed me the smashed up outside toilet of one house. Billy had been in jail and released only two or three days before I met him. We were walking past the sandbagged post in Cullingtree Road, which was manned by a Black soldier. I asked if they had tried to “get at” the soldiers, meaning had they tried to propagandise them, as the US anti-war movement was doing with GIs. He immediately became very evasive and said, “I’m only out of jail and I haven’t got myself turned round yet. Anyway they always go around in patrols.” I realised he had misunderstood “get at” and explained my meaning. He stopped dead and said “that’s a good idea”.

I met one of Billy McMillen’s key lieutenants, Malachy McBurney and his brother Billy McBurney, who ran the Outline Record company. I visited Billy in his shop in the old Smithfield Market and he presented me with a recently pressed recording of civil rights songs, an album of songs about James Connolly, sung by Eugene McEldowney, and two LPs of Republican songs. The latter featured the singing of Frank Cards, who as Prionsias Mac Áirt became the OC of the Provisionals in Belfast. (I still have these records).
Dessie O'Hagan invited me to an open-air meeting in Divis Street and, turning into Albert Street, I got my first and only faint, peppery, whiff of CS gas. The meeting consisted of about thirty or forty local people; I felt it was rather small for a movement that was leading the resistance in the Lower Falls and the speeches from Dessie and another couple Officials were fairly abstract and didn’t really seem to be connecting with the people. Dessie told me that he expected internment to be introduced soon and that it was going to knock the whole civil rights movement back.

I met Michael Farrell of the Peoples Democracy on Royal Avenue, where he was selling the PD paper. At this time the PD were anti-nationalist and were trying to unite Catholic and Protestant workers on the basis of economic grievances. He was very dismissive of the Officials and said the hospitality they had shown me was part of their military tradition of “billeting;” but I saw it in another way. I was still very close to my roots, I had ceased to be a factory worker and taken up full time political work only four months previously. I recognised it as part of a culture of hospitality of the working class. Because I understood this I was able to get on much better with the Officials in the Lower Falls than most IMG members would have done. One reason was that they thought my Scottish accent was just as quaint and attractive theirs seemed to me. And the culture of the far left in Britain was rooted in student life and it was normal to “crash” in a friend’s “pad”, where it was taken for granted that food was common property. I knew that politeness and proper expressions of gratitude were not asked for by my friends in the Lower Falls, but were very much expected.

Looking back I realise that, for the Officials I met on that visit, the Provisionals were a very small cloud on the horizon. Dessie O’Hagan’s prediction about internment was predicated on the Unionist government suppressing civil rights agitation, not on an IRA insurgency involving conflict with the British Army. On my return to London I wrote a couple of articles for the Red Mole and an internal briefing document for the IMG. (I think there is a copy of the latter amongst the papers I deposited in the Modern Records Centre of Warwick University; or there may be a copy in the IMG deposit held there).

My next visit to Belfast was the following Spring and I remember a conversation between Malachy McBurney and Billy McMillen in which Malachy, in a shocked voice, said that the Provisionals were deriding the Officials for using self-adhesive Easter Lilies, instead of the traditional ones fixed by a pin, and they were calling their rivals “Stickybacks.” I got the impression that my Official friends were surprised at the success of the Provisionals and were uncertain about who in their own ranks might be susceptible to the appeal of their more traditional form of Republicanism.
Seamus Collins of Clann na hÉireann gloomily told me, around this time, that most of its members were Provisionals at heart.

Malachy McBurney told me about the practical difficulties of carrying on open political agitation at the same time as maintaining an illegal army; as soon as activists took part in an election campaign, or even a demonstration or picket, they could be identified by the police and this compromised their security as IRA members. He also told me that, fortuitously, almost none of the IRA Quartermasters had gone over to the Provisionals and so had not handed over arms dumps. If they had, there would have been serious conflict, because the Official IRA could not allow another group to take over its equipment. Neither IRA could allow another armed group to operate in territory it controlled, but there was no challenge to the Officials in the Lower Falls at that time. So I deduced that conflict was limited by the fact that the Provisionals armed themselves from new sources and recruited the bulk of their membership from inactive IRA members or people who had not been members at all. The Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) did take Volunteers and arms dumps from the Officials in 1975; this is why the feud was so much more vicious and cost Billy McMillen his life.

So, even at this early point, there were contradictions in the Officials' strategy. But, apart from the conversation with Dalton Kelly, I got no indication that they were thinking of giving up armed struggle. In fact they seemed to think that they could still eclipse the Provisionals as a military force. On this second visit I interviewed a group of Official Republicans in Billy McMillen's house; it included Billy himself, Malachy McGurran and Kevin McCorry. Billy stressed that, during the Lower Falls Curfew, the Official IRA had been responsible for the most sustained confrontation with the British Army since the Black and Tan War.

I stayed in Stranmillis with Tony Rosato. He was a former Ruskin student who had been close to the IMG in the College and I had known him in the ICRSC. He was now a student at Queen's and was active with the Officials in the Markets. He led a group of students who were photographed on the balcony above the main door of QUB Students' Union; they wore combat jackets and black berets and stood with clenched fist salutes. The photograph was published on the front page of the Belfast Telegraph and created a scandal.

In January 1971 I attended the Official Sinn Féin Ard Fheis in Liberty Hall, Dublin, where they agreed to abandon the tactic of refusing to take parliamentary seats if elected, the issue that had caused the 1970 split. The leadership also launched their "national liberation front" strategy; the term was borrowed from the NLF of South Vietnam. It implied co-operation with a wide range of groups; not only trade unions
and small farmer organisations but also the Irish Communist Party and groups to its left. In his keynote speech Cathal Goulding, Chief of Staff of the Officials, defended working with young people who offered “extreme solutions to an extreme situation” and was warmly applauded. I didn’t get to speak to him, but I was standing with a group when he came up to talk to one of our number; he smiled at me and said “how’re you doing?” He was short and burly and had tangible charisma and personal presence, but he was not domineering. I got the feeling that there was a genuine collective leadership.

Amongst the speakers I remember were Derry Kelleher, a bit like a bumbling professor; Mairín de Burca, a barnstorming militant; Roy Johnston, one of the least charismatic speakers I have ever heard and Seamus Costello, an impressive speaker but important mainly as a local leader in Bray, Co. Wicklow, where he was an Official Sinn Féin councillor. I don’t remember the North figuring very large and I was struck by the localism of their interests. Speech after speech was about local campaigning; for example a delegate from Tuam, Co. Galway, described a successful campaign by his local cumman and triumphantly declared “and Fianna Fáil in Tuam began to get worried!” It seemed as if the NLF strategy was the pursuit of a host of local and single issue campaigns, which would gradually coalesce into a national movement led by Republicans. Roy Johnston’s speech was a very technical one about how links could be made between different interest groups; he stressed the key role that could be played by people in the Irish language movement. This is what made sense of Dalton Kelly’s belief that there was no need for the IRA; the strategy required intensive, open, political work, not training on remote farms. I have a clear memory that Seamus Costello was fully in support of the strategy, and I was surprised when he emerged later as leader of the INLA.

There was much decorative use of Irish; my Clann friends were unsure about the venue because Liberty Hall was referred to on their directions as “Halla na Soairse.” Almost all the delegates gave the name of their local cumman in Irish, although almost all spoke in English. Sometimes there would be a few sentences in Irish followed by a speech in English. There were one or two speeches entirely in Irish, which were listened to patiently and warmly applauded at the end; although they were not punctuated with applause for particularly telling points, as the English speeches were. Tony Rosato got disapproving looks when he raised a point of order, complaining that delegates from the North couldn’t understand Irish. In the evening there was a ceilidh in the Gaelic League hall in Parnell Square. I had come from a very anti-national Scottish left and I was surprised to find these Irish left-wingers enjoying what looked like hopelessly reactionary Scottish country dancing. However, after a few hospitable Irish whiskeys, my disorientation subsided.
I kept up my contacts with the Officials in Belfast and visited every six or nine months. I would call in at the NICRA office in Marquis Street to find out what was happening and what they were thinking. The late Madge Davison, the Secretary of NICRA and a member of the Communist Party, sat at her typewriter scowling darkly, but Kevin McCorry would greet me warmly and talk freely. I was a bit concerned that his preoccupations seemed increasingly to be about working with "respectable" allies and he seemed distinctly reformist; but I was there to listen and not to argue.

In a dramatic phone conversation in August 1969, Kevin told me about the incursion from the Shankill into the Falls and described RUC and B Specials going in at the head of a Loyalist mob. I also phoned him when internment was announced. and he told me that Dessie had been arrested but that Billy McMillen had not been at home when the troops raided his house. I learned later that Seamas Ó Tuathail was taken in; he had been on a visit and was sleeping in Billy's spare bedroom. I had expected internment to happen, but had not thought it would be so indiscriminate. I was horrified to learn that Michael Farrell and other PD members, who had no links with the IRA, had been swept up, but that none of the loyalist paramilitaries had been touched. I also got a couple of letters from Dessie O'Hagan, written from Long Kesh. (These are probably with my papers in the Modern Records Centre.)

Internment shifted the balance towards the Provisionals and NICRA was sidelined. By this time it was controlled by the Officials and the Communist Party, who had a close agreement on strategy and tactics. In 1971 I had a discussion in the NICRA office with Malachy McGurran, Chairman of the Six County Executive of the Republican Clubs and also, I believe, Northern Commander of the Officials. He impressed me with his strategic thinking and careful analysis. He clearly had military experience because, while we were speaking, there was a loud bang from a lorry going over a bump. He paused to think about the significance of the sound before resuming our conversation. He told me they were going to organise a series of mass, peaceful, demonstrations against internment, with the intention of making NICRA the focus of campaigning on the issue and enticing Catholics away from support for the Provisionals. The march on Bloody Sunday in Derry, on 30 January 1972, was part of this strategy for reversing the influence of the Provisionals. Its tragic outcome meant that the Provisionals eclipsed the Officials.

On another visit I watched Republican Clubs members selling the illegal *United Irishman* in Castle Street, the funnel that leads from the city centre to Catholic West Belfast; they were not molested by the RUC but they did not attempt to sell round the corner on Royal Avenue. Kevin McCorry invited me to a meeting of his Republican Club; I eagerly accepted because at the time the Clubs were proscribed by the Stormont government. About seven or eight members met in Kevin's living
room in Andersonstown. By that time I was Organiser of the Anti-Internment
League (AIL) in London and I spoke about its work. They didn’t seem to see the point
of people in London campaigning about Northern Ireland instead of dealing with their
own issues. As we came out a British Army patrol was passing on the other side of
the street. One of the Club members said to the man beside him, “shout abuse at
them.” His friend cupped his hands round his mouth and yelled, “ABUSE”.

In the early 1970s I was friendly with a group of Arab Trotskyists who produced an
Arabic language magazine in the Red Mole offices. One of them took me aside and
told me they had contacts who could supply arms from Palestinian sources and he
offered to facilitate a link with Irish Republicans. I told a Clann contact and an
arrangement was made to meet an Official representative in Hyde Park; I was given
half a torn playing card to match up with the other half, to be held by the contact. I
turned up with my Arab comrade and recognised one of my closest Clann friends. We
matched halves and I left them to discuss matters; I never knew the outcome and
didn’t ask.

My experiences and my reading of Irish history led me to develop an analysis which I
set out in my 1972 pamphlet Ireland Unfree. The IMG’s approach to the Irish
conflict was heavily influenced by its experience of work in the Vietnam Solidarity
Campaign (VSC). The IMG supported the national Liberation Front (NLF) of South
Vietnam against the United States forces, despite political differences with the
Vietnamese Communists. Within the VSC the IMG collaborated with others to
support the NLF, even when we disagreed with them about other issues. I carried
over the same approach to Ireland. In Ireland Unfree I argued that Ireland was
oppressed by British imperialism through the maintenance of partition and sectarian
Unionist rule in Northern Ireland. By 1979 I had repudiated the pamphlet and
published an auto-critique in Ireland: Divided Nation Divided Class, the book I edited
jointly with Austen Morgan. But in 1972 my “solidarity” position led me to support
both the Official and the Provisional Republican movements against the British Army
and government. I thought this was a very principled position but, not surprisingly,
my friends in the Officials were not pleased. Visiting the headquarters in Gardiner
Street, Mairín de Burca acidly commented “the Red Mole surfaces” and my contacts
with them declined sharply. When the Official IRA declared a ceasefire I went over
to supporting the Provisionals.

I wrote the pamphlet while I spent a few months in Glasgow in 1971-2. During this
time I tried to work with the Glasgow branch of Clann na hÉireann, led by a Donegal
man called Gerry Docherty. The Glasgow branch of the Irish Solidarity Campaign
(ISC), which was more or less an IMG front, met in the Clann office in Royal
Exchange Square. The nameplate was spelt in Scottish and not Irish Gaelic, “Clann na
h-Eireann.” But relations with Clann, and between myself and Gerry Docherty, declined sharply, I returned to London in the Spring of 1972 and shortly after, I became Organiser of the AIL.

The pamphlet coincided with a shift by the PD towards a left-wing nationalist position and they liked my analysis. They had set up a headquarters in a disused shop on Cromac Street, in the Markets, and I was surprised to see the window full of copies of my pamphlet. They invited me to attend a weekend school in a hotel in Castlebellingham, Co. Louth, and it was here that I met Billy McMillen for the last time. By coincidence there was a meeting of leading members of the Officials in the hotel and in the bar I met Billy, who was on the run from the RUC and the British Army. He was well groomed and wearing a smart suit and a clipped moustache. He looked like a prosperous small businessman and it was quite an effective disguise. We exchanged a few words; he was friendly but reserved.

I was alienated by the campaign the Officials launched to explain the emergence of the Provisionals as the consequence of a conspiracy by sections of right wing nationalism in Fianna Fáil. I considered the support they had gained to be much better explained as a response to the experiences of Catholics of British Army counter-insurgency methods, of interment and Bloody Sunday. I challenged Tomás Mac Giolla, then President of Official Sinn Féin, when he spoke in London, but didn't get what I considered a satisfactory answer.

Another factor was that my pamphlet and the coverage the Red Mole gave to the left wing Republican splinter group Saor Éire, got tangled up in a dispute within the world Trotskyist organisation, the Fourth International (FI). In April 1969 I attended the Ninth World Congress which took place in Rimini. I can fix the date because I learned about Bernadette Devlin’s election in Mid Ulster from Tariq Ali, walking on the beach there; he said “she’s close to us!”

Until the Congress I had been enthusiastic about the American SWP, but I became disillusioned by their dogmatism, which contrasted with the much more imaginative French Trotskyists, who had played a major part in the May-June events of 1968. I also resented their determination to lay down the line for all the English-speaking sections of the FI.

Livio Maitan of the Italian section presented a document that advocated Trotskyist participation in guerrilla warfare in Bolivia, together with the remnants of the column which had been led by Che Guevara. The strategy was heavily influenced by Regis Debray’s book, Revolution in the Revolution, which argued that a revolutionary situation could be created by a small armed group taking on the forces of a
repressive state and giving the workers and peasants the courage to fight back themselves. It was a theory that was tested to the rapid destruction of the Bolivian section, probably including a Bolivian comrade with whom I got very drunk on Vino Bianco on the last night.

The SWP argued strongly against the document, supported by the Canadians and the Chinese Trotskyist exiles. The Europeans and the Latin Americans supported it and the IMG delegation sided with them. I voted for it mainly because I had become opposed to the Americans; which is a good argument for not allowing someone as stupid as I was to vote on such an issue. After the Congress the Americans used their money, their press and their full-time staff to organise a faction within the IMG. They characterised the decision on Bolivia as a “guerrillaist deviation” and it was inevitable that Ireland would become part of the argument. My pamphlet was combed for evidence that I was making the same theoretical mistakes as the European leadership.

The SWP’s main expert on Ireland was Gerry Foley, a linguist whose portfolio of languages included Irish. We were called to a meeting of the International Executive Committee of the FI in Brussels, presided over by the intellectual leader of the FI Ernest Mandel. At this meeting the disagreements over Ireland were debated, fairly inconclusively, between myself, Pat Jordan, the then National Secretary of the IMG, and Tariq Ali on one side and Gerry Foley on the other. He had a copy of my pamphlet, which he had annotated. Tariq swiped it while he wasn’t looking and gave it to me; I still have it. Gerry Foley developed a close relationship with members of the Official leadership, particularly Seán Garland. I remember that a Dublin comrade showed me a copy of an internal SWP document in which he described Garland as “the man closest to Trotskyism in the Officials’ leadership.”

He was a small, solemn looking, owl of a man, with large glasses. Once we were picketing opposite the German Embassy and Gerry was on the other side staring intently. He had a large briefcase by his side and was standing in front of a tall fence that screened the Embassy garden. Near him was a contingent of the Metropolitan Police. One of Géry Lawless’s supporters, a Dublin house painter called Brian McCabe, suddenly stopped and shouted to him “ROIGHT GERRY! - TROW IT OVER DE RAILINS NOW!” The police swung round and poor Gerry cringed, picked up the briefcase, and hurried off.

In 1972 Ernest Mandel was invited to Dublin speak in a debate at the Trinity College Historical Society. I went over for the occasion and was told that some members of the Official Republican Movement had asked to see him for a discussion. He was concerned about his personal security and asked my advice; I assured him that he
need not be concerned and I was present when he met them in his hotel room. I remember three of four, none of whom I had met before and whom I did not recognise as leading members of the Officials; I remember their accents as Southern and not Northern. They tried to convince Ernest that the IMG was wrong to support the Provisionals because their insurgency had prevented an historic rapprochement that would have united the Northern Ireland working class. They had been on the point of reaching an agreement with the Loyalist organisations but this had collapsed when the Provisional IRA offensive began. I argued that this was unconvincing; it underestimated the depth of Loyalist sectarianism and that if they really had been on the point of achieving such an agreement, there would have been much more public evidence for it.

Ernest listened, but did not commit himself. He was not knowledgeable about Northern Ireland and probably saw it through assumptions about the national question in Belgium; he was a Fleming and supported the Flemish language rights movement. In 1969 he had contributed an article, written in French, to a pamphlet about the Irish question published by the Belgian Section. Years later, when I had learned some French at Ruskin College, I puzzled my way through it and was aghast at his misunderstandings. For example he described the Apprentice Boys of Derry as “Protestant youths.” In any case he was mainly preoccupied with holding the FI together and not provoking the Americans into fomenting a split.

Through the AIL I began to develop close relations with the Provisionals in London, although I never had the same contacts with the leadership in Belfast as I had with the Officials. All that is another story, but I did get a couple of interesting glimpses of the Officials through Provisional eyes. Brendan Magill, the leader of the Provisionals in London, told me that the first money disbursed to Republicans from Dublin government sources had gone to Cathal Goulding not to them. And I took a coach trip from West Belfast to a Provisional conference in Mullingar, Co. Westmeath. There was a crowd of young people from Andersonstown who were fairly lively; they sang:

This old man, he played one,
he shot a soldier with a Thomson Gun.

With a knick-knack paddywhack, give a dog a bone
This old man came rolling home

This old man, he played two,
he shot a soldier with a twenty-two.
With a knick-knack etc.

This old man, he played three,
    He shot a soldier with a thirty-three.

With a knick-knack etc.

This old man, he played four,
    he shot a soldier with a forty-four.

With a knick-knack etc.

This old man, he played five,
    he shot a soldier with a forty-five.

With a knick-knack etc.

This old man, he played six –
    UP THE PROVIES DOWN THE STICKS!

In the Autumn of 1974 I began a two year history course in Ruskin College. Here I began my trek away from Trotskyism towards democratic socialism and scholarship. But the Officials came back into my life in an unexpected way. One of my fellow students was from Belfast. She had been very active in the civil rights movement and also in the Officials and the Communist Party. I first noticed her when she successfully opposed a motion to support the Troops Out Movement (TOM) at a students union meeting. I was annoyed because the TOM had been my brainchild. However I made a point of not being personally hostile and enjoyed talking to her about Belfast and mutual acquaintances. I was moving away from my old dogmatism anyway, and beginning to realise that Provisional violence could be counterproductive and harmed the people it claimed to be protecting. When Billy McMillen was assassinated by an INLA member in 1975 I was the first to tell her. I was genuinely upset because I had liked and admired him as a person and this drew us closer together. Much to my surprise I found that I had fallen in love with her and I was even more surprised to discover that she reciprocated. (The relationship ended in 1979, although we remain good friends).

Indirectly, through her, I had another encounter with Dessie O'Hagan. I was staying in her mother’s flat in Andersonstown and she told me that Dessie had said, “Bob Purdie better not show his face in Belfast again.” I agreed to talk one of her Republican Club friends who wanted to know about the impact of North Sea oil on
Scotland. He turned out to be the man who had shouted “ABUSE” a few years before. He took me to a pub used by the Officials, which was in the last remnant of the Lower Falls. My stomach turned over when Dessie walked in. He glanced my way, recognised me, and said in a friendly voice, “Hello Bob, how are you?”

I moved to Belfast in the summer of 1980 to research my PhD thesis. I now strongly opposed the Provisionals, not only because of the consequences of their military campaign but also because I had become deeply alienated by the conspiratorial character of Irish Republicanism. I found myself agreeing with many of the positions of the Workers Party, the successor to Official Sinn Féin/Republican Clubs, and I voted for them on a few occasions. But I never considered joining because I wasn’t sure how much of their Republican past they had discarded. In 1981 I attended the Official Easter commemoration in Milltown Cemetery and heard a black-bereted orator speaking about “the Republican Movement” as if nothing had changed since 1970. I asked a Workers Party acquaintance for an explanation, but it was fairly convoluted and unconvincing. In 1986 the Unionist MPs resigned from Westminster in protest at the Anglo-Irish Agreement and precipitated by-elections. When the Workers Party election address for South Belfast arrived it claimed that the issues in the election were jobs and housing: I voted Alliance and never gave the Workers Party a vote or a first preference again.

By this time I was involved with Paddy Devlin, Billy Blease and others in an unsuccessful attempt to revive Labour politics in Northern Ireland. As a spokesperson for the Labour Party of Northern Ireland I was invited to take part in a symposium in Queen’s University, with other left wing organisations. Two of the other speakers were Dessie O’Hagan and Gusty Spence of the Progressive Unionist Party and former Commandant of the Ulster Volunteer Force. To my surprise I found that I had more in common with Gusty than with the others. And I particularly disagreed with Dessie who, in vivid language, decried Solidarity in Poland as reactionary. I intervened to tell him that I would like to be included in his denunciation; he shrugged his shoulders in disgust.

In January 1988 I moved to Oxford to take up my post as Tutor in Politics in Ruskin College; but I was still not finished with the Officials. In Belfast I had lived on the Lower Ormeau Road and my living room window looked out on a lamppost which, during the frequent elections, was decorated with posters of Gerard Carr, the Workers Party candidate. I became weary of looking at his face and was glad to get away from it. A few years later I was asked to consider an application from a Gerard Carr of Belfast and found I had to look at him in real life.
In the mid-1990s, I organised one of the Lipman Seminars I ran with Austen Morgan. It took place in the Ulster Peoples College in Belfast and I invited Gerry Carr, who was home for the vacation, to attend. One of the speakers was Jim Gibney of the Provisionals, who spoke under an assumed name and arrived with an entourage of minders. While he was speaking a mini-bus drew up outside the window. Four men got out and, in single file, trotted briskly in and took seats. One was Gerry and another was a man I recognised as a leading member of the Belfast Workers Party. Gibney signalled frantically to Fergus O’Hare, one of his minders whom I knew as an old friend and former member of the PD. Fergus, ashen faced, beckoned me outside the door; when I told him who they were his relief was palpable and, on being told, Gibney settled down. Clearly by that time the Provisionals did not consider the Officials to be a physical threat. But Gerry Carr never explained why they had come in that way.

That was the last direct encounter I had with the Officials, but about three years ago, at a Corrymeela event in the Ballycastle centre, Gusty Spence’s biographer Roy Garland, told me that in 1970, while Gusty was ill and alone in Crumlin Road prison, Billy McMillen had visited him in his cell. It was a gesture of humanity and because he reckoned he must have something in common with another member of the Belfast working class. Roy told me that he believed Gusty’s change of heart had begun at that moment. I realised it must have happened only a few days before I first met Billy. Roy had never met him but had been impressed by what he had learned about him; he was fascinated by my memories. Of all the people I met in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s, Billy McMillen was the most likeable and impressive. However foolish I was and however much I regret supporting causes I now think were wrong, I am glad to have had the privilege of knowing Billy as a friend.

Oxford,
June 2006.