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WP Ireland on the Centenary of the Birth of Tomás Mac Giolla

Tomás Mac Giolla 100 Years On

25 January 2024 marks 100 years since the birth of Tomás Mac Giolla, a legendary figure in the history of the Workers Party, and in the history of working-class politics in Ireland. Over a long and influential political life, he was on our Party Executive from 1956 until his death, President of our Party for 26 years (1962-1988), a councillor in Dublin from 1979 to 1998, a TD for Dublin West from 1982 to 1992, Lord Mayor of Dublin 1993-1994, and a committed, loyal, and active member of the Workers Party until his death.

Under his leadership, our Party transformed itself from a narrow, nationalist, militarist organisation to a party of and for the working class, unambiguously committed to revolutionising Irish society, to defeating capitalism and sectarianism, and to creating a genuinely democratic, secular, socialist Republic on the island of Ireland.

Unlike many of his comrades, Tomás Mac Giolla was not born into a family that raised him with republican politics. His uncle had been an Irish Parliamentary Party MP, and his father active in home-rule circles. Instead, he came to his politics through his own experiences and educating himself. His earliest political activity, both during and after his time at UCD, was motivated by Irish independence. Having joined the Anti-Partition League in 1949, he became disillusioned with its lack of concrete politics, and joined the-then Republican Movement in the early 1950s. Elected to the Ard Comhairle in 1956, he was imprisoned and interned a number of times during the Border Campaign.

In 1961, he married May McLaughlin, the daughter of two members of James Connolly's Irish Citizen Army, and herself a committed socialist who stood squarely in the tradition of Dublin working-class socialist politics within the republican tradition represented by her parents and comrades such as Cathal Goulding. Like Tomás, May was a dedicated, active, and loyal member of our Party until her own death in 2018.

Tomás Mac Giolla played a vital role in the New Departure launched by the new leadership that emerged in 1962 and after, consisting of himself, Cathal Goulding, Seán Garland, Liam McMillen and others. Mac Giolla understood early the need for

fundamental change ideologically, organisationally, and strategically. He had a deep knowledge of Irish history, and of the writings of revolutionaries like Wolfe Tone and James Connolly. He was also interested in developments internationally, during an era of decolonisation, and debates about how to develop countries affected by imperialism and neo-colonialism.

Along with Goulding, as President, he led a process of re-engagement with the ideas of those (like Tone, Lalor, and Connolly) who understood that genuine freedom meant more than independence, it meant reorganising society to place power in the hands of the majority, the working class, politically, socially, and economically. When Tomás spoke, as he often did, of the need for the Re-Conquest of Ireland, he was not speaking about territory. Like Connolly, he was speaking about the working-class taking control not just of the government, but also of Ireland's natural resources and their use, of agriculture and industry, and of the wealth that had been and was still being generated by the working people of Ireland, and that been stolen from them over the centuries, a process that continued in both states.

As he noted in his Presidential speech in 1968, "True Republicanism and true socialism are identical". Socialism, he noted, "is part of the Republican tradition since the founding of the United Irishmen, was deeply rooted among the Fenians, and was the driving force behind the 1916 Rebellion". Mac Giolla understood the continuing relevance of Tone and the United Irishmen, of the importance of forging the unity of Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter if Irish society was ever to be revolutionized and socialism be established. It was no accident that amongst the earliest flowerings of the Goulding-Mac Giolla agenda was the programme organised by the Tone bicentenary committee, which emphasised anti-sectarianism, and Tone's revolutionary thought. Nor that the Wolfe Tone Societies became a vehicle used for advancing their agenda among progressive opinion generally across Ireland.

There are those who would downplay the significance of Tomás' ideology and of his role in the creation and development of the Workers Party, either from hostility to him and his politics, or to cover their own retreat from those politics. In reality there is no doubt, and the very suggestion given his position as President renders it ridiculous. He committed himself at the very start to the project of transforming the-then Republican Movement into a truly revolutionary force seeking to create a socialist Ireland, and understood immediately that this required the transformation of Sinn Féin into a political party with an ideology reflecting not just the insights of Tone and Connolly, but also of Marx and Lenin. He never deviated from that position.

During the 1960s, he relentlessly promoted the idea that it was only by engaging in social and political struggle that the Party could become a force capable of leading the revolutionary transformation of Irish society. He threw himself into this work. As he put it in 1970, "Our objective is the re-conquest of Ireland from the Ground Landlords, the river barons, the speculators, the cartels and the monopolies and the struggle against

them will now be intensified. If needs be, we must be prepared to win back our country farm by farm, river by river, mine by mine, shop by shop, and factory by factory.” Trade unions, community organisations, Housing Action Committees, ground rent and river campaigns, tenants’ associations, workplaces, sports clubs, cultural associations – he argued that all these were legitimate sites of revolutionary action, and work in them essential if progress were to be made. Militarism and elitism had proven isolating – what was needed now was engagement and political and social activism. Work on the ground was supplemented with serious Marxist analysis of who owned what in Irish society, and how the elite functioned.

The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was one of the most successful aspects of the New Departure. The-then Movement was central to founding, organising, leading, and mobilising the civil rights campaign, and in driving democratic change in Northern Ireland onto the political agenda. Tomás was on the first civil rights march. The violent response of reactionaries, including within the Stormont regime and security forces, revealed its true nature, and rendered its continuation unsustainable. Many of the major demands of NICRA were achieved by 1970 before violence and sectarian conflict closed off the space for the type of mass politics by which NICRA had achieved so much. Tomás Mac Giolla was central to the Party’s role in the civil rights campaign, which was linked to the broader strategy of social and political agitation. The demands for democracy in Northern Ireland were linked to the campaign to save proportional representation from Fianna Fáil in the south, as well as the exposure of the corruption of An Taca. And he realised it was no accident that Fianna Fáil helped the opponents of the New Departure organise and form themselves into the Provisionals.

What the civil rights campaign showed, as Mac Giolla himself noted in 1972, was that reformist demands can have revolutionary consequences. Noting that the civil rights movement was never intended as a smokescreen for launching a military campaign, he stated “Our objective was the achievement of democracy and civil rights. We recognised that in the society which existed in the North, the purely reformist demands of the Civil Rights Movement were in themselves revolutionary and would if achieved, change not only the political structures but the whole of society ... We knew that the civil rights struggle would be only a beginning, but we knew it would be the beginning of a revolution”.

Mac Giolla never forgot the tragedy that was the response to the civil rights campaign and the swamping of it by violence, and he never forgave those responsible for what their actions cost the Irish working class in lives, injuries, division, and lost opportunities.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the civil rights campaign, and the mass protests against internment and the rent and rates strike ensured that the Stormont regime as it existed before autumn 1968 was unsustainable and disappeared forever. A raft of

new laws and practices, such as fair employment legislation and the Housing Executive, replaced much of the bigotry and discrimination that had been part and parcel of life in Northern Ireland and its governance.

Tomás practiced what he preached. And this proved essential to his later electoral successes. He worked hard on the ground, representing people in their dealings with local and central government, with landlords and the police. He secured many families homes, and saved many families from evictions. He gave a voice to people all too often ignored by state agencies, fought for their interests and delivered for them. They rewarded him with their trust and their votes. Tomás ensured that the Workers Party gave a voice to PAYE workers at a time when the combined rural and urban capitalist class went almost unchallenged in Irish politics. The Party played a crucial role during his Presidency in pushing for secularism, such as during the 1983 referenda, and in pushing an agenda of reconciliation and democratisation, such as with Articles 2 and 3.

Tomás Mac Giolla, having played an important role in bringing to the end the dominance of a corrupt regime in Northern Ireland, played a vital role in putting an end to the cosy corrupt rule of the likes of Haughey when his interventions in the Dáil ultimately produced the Beef Tribunal, which exposed the corruption of Irish political life in new and undeniable detail. Not just Larry Goodman but the property speculators and their dealings with politicians via brown envelopes came under much-needed but insufficient scrutiny.

Unfortunately for the Irish working class, that scrutiny did not extend to the relationships between banks and property speculators and politicians, and a heavy price was paid in 2008.

Passion was a defining feature of Tomás's political life, and he was never more passionate than when expounding on the need for anti-sectarianism, to oppose sectarianism in all its forms and from whomever it came, and to never compromise on this issue. It was for him a principle from which no deviation could be possible. As he noted at Bodenstown in 1991, "Tone and his brilliant Society of United Irishmen have always been the sheet anchor of my political philosophy and the base on which I built my ideology".

He understood and appreciated the sacrifices standing up for anti-sectarianism required of Party members, especially in Northern Ireland. Promoting what he termed "our revolutionary creed of anti-sectarianism and the unity of the working class against the landowning and business class – the unity of the people of no property against the property-owning class" was something that the Party did "against all the odds". While others abandoned Northern Ireland and their responsibilities to oppose sectarianism, Tomás made it a point to visit regularly, to attend the Northern Ireland Regional Conference, and to engage with a wide cross-section of political opinion, something

which earned him respect amongst both Party members and political opponents. And, in line with his own humanity and sense of humour, he enjoyed reminding Party members facing difficult times of Tone's own humorous account of being chased out of Rathfriland for challenging sectarianism. But he never underestimated Tone's resilience or that of his comrades.

In his momentous speech at Carrickmore in July 1972, Tomás Mac Giolla laid bare the realities of the situation in Northern Ireland that had to be confronted by revolutionaries. No amount of revolutionary-sounding language could change these realities, nor hide the reactionary consequences of sectarian violence and politics. "The Irish revolution ... demands the support of the Protestant working class." Attempting to bomb 1 million protestants into a socialist republic would be "the ultimate contradiction and the ultimate stupidity". The Carrickmore speech exposed the damaging impact of the Provisional bombing campaign, of sectarian violence by various paramilitaries, and of state brutality and violence. It applied a class analysis to the situation in Northern Ireland, and focused on what was needed to provide the space for progressive politics. Many of those things, such as a bill of rights, remain to be won, even if the main demand, peace, has been largely achieved.

Mac Giolla used his deep understanding of the republican past to create the ideology needed for the revolutionary future. He confronted established pieties and myths. An internationalist seeking to persuade others to abandon narrow nationalism, he pointed out in 1966 that "the revolutionaries have always succeeded in broadening the horizons of the Irish people by making them look to friends in Europe and beyond. Tone absorbed the democratic ideas of the American and French Revolutionaries and applied them to Irish conditions. Connolly absorbed the social philosophies of the European socialist movements and gave Marxism his own individual stamp when applying it to Irish conditions." He supported the Party's efforts to provide solidarity to Vietnam and to other liberation movements, visited the Soviet Union and other socialist countries while Party President, and welcomed many foreign comrades to Ireland.

His progressive internationalism also lay at the heart of his scepticism about much of the rhetoric emanating from those who sought to limit the Irish people's democratic control of politics and the economy via the European Economic Community and its successors, or by trying to push the Republic into NATO. He understood that creating a socialist economy requires democratic control, something which the EU seeks to prevent. He was fiercely committed to Irish neutrality and opposed all moves towards a European army with Irish involvement. He understood all too well that the purpose of what is now the EU from its inception was about making things easier for international capital, and had little to do with the interests of ordinary people and rhetoric about peace. He opposed imperialist wars throughout his political life, and in leading a walkout of Workers Party TDs when Ronald Reagan was addressing the Oireachtas provided a striking image of a progressive vision for Ireland and its place in world affairs.

Mac Giolla always defended the importance of Ireland's revolutionary past to our politics. In 1991, while there were those in the process of seeking to push the Workers Party to abandon its fundamental principles, he not only reasserted the importance of learning from the men and women of 1916 but also of ignoring the propaganda spread about them by the bourgeois political and academic establishment. He pointed out quite correctly that 1916 was not the rising of poets so often depicted in schools, books, and government speeches, but was in fact the act of the Dublin working class, rooted in a desire for freedom and equality, and material as well as political progress. He never tired of pointing out that nationalists had fought republicans in the Spanish Civil War – with the republicans on the side of democracy, social justice, secularism, and anti-fascism.

Tomás Mac Giolla's commitment his political principles led him to reject the liquidationist efforts of De Rossa and his allies that ultimately saw them leave and found Democratic Left after the membership had rejected their programme. As he noted, "The Workers Party which I am proud to have helped in building was the finest political organisation of the working class that ever existed here". He lamented that having defied all attempts to break it from the outside, it had been seriously damaged from within. "The Workers Party was a powerful political machine for the working class, with clear policies which everyone understood and which daily confronted those who own and control the wealth of this country and who dispossessed and destroyed the lives of hundreds of thousands of our people. This move was designed to smash that political instrument. I intend to stand by these people and by their political organisation; The Workers' Party".

Tomás, and May, Mac Giolla stood by those people and stood by the Workers Party for the rest of their lives. 100 years on from the centenary of his birth, we remain committed to the same vision and principles that motivated Tomás – an Ireland where workers control the government, economy, and society and live in genuine freedom, where sectarianism has been defeated and replaced by unity. We look at the example of Tomás as we seek to rebuild the finest political organisation of the working-class Ireland has ever seen, remotivated when we reflect on his life and achievements. We conclude with Tomás's own words at Bodenstown in 1991 on why he continued the revolutionary struggle begun by the United Irishmen:

"We carry on that struggle not because we have any duty to those long dead or because we owe any debt to the past but because we have a revolutionary duty to the living, as they had in their time, a duty to the dispossessed, the exploited, to those who are unfree, politically, socially, or economically".