

**Tony Birtill talk. 21st Oct 2022.
Heritage Room, Irish Centre, Liverpool.**

Greg Quiery.

Thank you Tom for that introduction. It is an honour to be asked to present this, the first lecture in memory of Tony Birtill at the invitation of Conradh naGaelige, Liverpool.

Go raibh maith aguv as theacht chuig an chaint seo. Tá súil agam go mbeidh sé suimiúil daoibh. Tá muid anseo chun cuimhneamh a dhéanamh ar Anton Birtill. Rinne Tony an oiread sin rudaí anseo i Learpholl. Rugadh i Learpholl é, agus bhí sé ina chainteoir líofa Gaeilge

You are all very welcome to this talk in memory of Tony. You will have the opportunity to make your own contributions shortly, and maybe correct any places where my own memories of Tony are not accurate.

I can't recall when I first met Tony Birtill, but it was probably at the at the Irish Centre in Mount Pleasant around 1976. We were certainly both enrolled in the Irish language evening class at the Liverpool Collegiate school in Shaw Street.

Tony had developed a keen interest in Irish from an early age, having heard it spoken occasionally by his mother Julia, - who was from Garlow Cross, Co Meath— in conversation with his aunt Greta, and amongst Christian Brothers teaching at Cardinal Godfrey school.

Our teacher at the Collegiate was Dr Brian Stowell who was, like Tony, an inspirational figure, and very influential on us both. He was a doctor not of Irish but of nuclear physics and indeed head of physics at Liverpool Poly (now JMU). He was fluent in many languages, including Manx, Irish, Scotch Gallic and Welsh. He had good knowledge also of a number of other European languages. Brian was from the Isle of Man, had compiled a Manx dictionary and recorded traditional songs in Manx, accompanying himself on the accordion.

He taught us much about the history of the Irish language in Liverpool with stories particularly of Kuno Mayer, who had been a Celtic scholar at Liverpool University College in 1890s and was influential in academic circles until he backed the German side in World War one. Little did we realise at the time that Tony would become such an expert in this topic.

Brian would sometimes speculate how you might devise a vocabulary for nuclear physics in Irish. How would you say, for example, radioactivity, as Gaelige. Or nuclear fusion. And so on. Then when one of Brian's students, Shahid Sud, from India applied to Limerick for further research in the department there. Brian received the reference form , which could be completed in Irish or in English. I would love to have seen the expression of the face of the professor of physics at Limerick when he found this reference

for a position in nuclear physics for an Indian student who studied in England, written in Irish.

Another figure in that circle very influential on Tony was Desmond Greaves, originally from Birkenhead, biographer of James Conolly, a leading member of the Connolly Association and editor of their magazine *The Irish Democrat*.

Although I left the class, Tony committed to learning Irish in that single minded manner, with which anyone who knew Tony will be familiar. He began passing state examinations in Irish and going to Irish speaking districts in Ulster to improve his command of the language. Brian Stowell eventually left Liverpool, and nuclear physics behind, to take up the position of language and culture advisor to the Manx parliament, a position he held until he died. When Tony asked Brian who would take over the Irish teaching, Brian replied, 'You will, Tony.' And Tony did. It was a big step up for Tony and a big commitment. He took a course in teaching Irish. Tony's teaching was always more down to earth than Brian's more academic approach. And for years Tony stuck to the task he had set for himself, of making sure that there was always the opportunity in Liverpool to learn Irish.

In the following decades, under Thatcher's premiership and with the Troubles continuing, the atmosphere amongst the Irish community in Britain was very different from what we have become accustomed to today.

Tony was very involved in the various campaigns during that unsettled time including the Campaign against the Prevention of Terrorism Act, along with Molly Sale, mother of Alexi Sale, and Mandy Vere of News From Nowhere. The Labour Committee On Ireland was another campaign group, which was the only organisation in Britain recognised by Sinn Fein at the time. Tony and myself were active in both groups. Dave James, was the chair of Labour Committee on Ireland locally, and is here tonight. We spent years making the case for justice and equality in Ulster. Our meetings were in the Trade Union Centre, Hardman Street, a short distance from the Irish Centre. You could have a good political argument in either venue any night of the week. When Margaret Thatcher banned Sinn Fein from being heard on British airwaves we brought Sinn Fein speakers such as Daisy Mules to Liverpool to address meetings at the Irish Centre.

One of the biggest meetings in the Irish Centre at that time was in support of the Glor naGael, an Irish language organisation providing creche and pre-school nursery services, in Belfast in Irish. Government withdrew their funding, on the grounds that they were suspected of having republicans on their management. A bit like shutting down a fish farm because the fish were getting wet.

We brought Bill Rolston and Noreen Clarke – the campaign organisers – to Liverpool to address a packed meeting. Tony, now confident in addressing meetings in Irish, was one of the principal speakers.

Tony was also active in the campaign around the McBride Principles on discrimination on grounds of religion against workers in N I, which saw the mayor of San Francisco pouring Bushmills whiskey down the city drains. And

the prisoner campaigns of those years, including supporting the Birmingham Six and Guildford Four. I recall him telling me about writing to Irish prisoners in jail somewhere in England, and getting a visit from the special branch and in one case having an officer positioned in a car at the end of the street to keep an eye on him. Locally we organised the Free Moira O'Shay campaign in support of this elderly professional lady who was accused of planning a bombing raid on Merseyside. She was held in the Old Bridewell, Dale Street, in a freezing room open to the sky. We protested outside her cell each night, while the special branch filled their notebooks with our car registration numbers.

At the same time there was a blizzard of anti-Irish comment, and jokes in the British media and even in classrooms. Tony himself took his employer, Skelmersdale College, to tribunal over remarks by a colleague, involving negative Irish stereotypes. The Irish community was, thank goodness, successful in eliminating such practices.

And there were other campaigning organisations including the IBRG and Troops Out, in which Tony was involved.

It was from Tony that I first heard that there ought to be a commemoration of the Great Hunger and its impact on Liverpool. He began raising the issue around 1993. He was the prime mover in calling an inaugural meeting and remained a very active member. In particular he organised the Irish text on the plaques, the memorial and the information sheets. The story of this very successful campaign is told elsewhere.

Just to divert a moment, during that campaign we always knew someone was briefing against us. For example, we were barred from active participation in the commemorative concert *Flight From The Hungry Land*, organised by the Irish Government, at the Philharmonic Hall. We were not even permitted to distribute leaflets there. Sheila Coleman, then chair of the Irish Centre, went to the media, objecting that the local Irish community was excluded from the event. And she was right to do so. What Tony had to say about that is not repeatable in public.

It was only when government papers were released on 29th Dec 2020 we learned of the content of correspondence related to the issue of famine commemoration in Liverpool. Prime Minister John Major vetoed any British govt participation in commemoration of the Famine. Malcolm Rifkind, the foreign Sec feared commemoration would provoke recriminations'. Sir John Chilcot at NIO refused an invitation to concert at Philharmonic organised by the Irish government.

Tony had a great sense of humour. He didn't tell jokes, but he rejoiced in ironic situations, and embarrassments for those in authority. He took great delight in the fact that while the government were opposing Famine Commemoration, the Anglican Chaplain of Liverpool, Nicholas Frayling, one of our supporters, was busy lobbying for a service at the Anglican cathedral in which Britain would ask for God's forgiveness for what happened during the famine years.

Of course it was shortly afterwards that we had the Blair landslide election victory, and the atmosphere was transformed. We received funding from both British and Irish governments and a letter of apology from the British Government. Tony was very active in lobbying Kevin McNamara MP, former Labour shadow NI. Sec and , himself from Liverpool, in that campaign.

With the labour government came the Belfast agreement, and more settled times. Tony joined the board of the Irish festival, and was valued as the Irish language specialist within Festival management. He was such a powerful personality that his presence on both the Festival Board and the Great Hunger Committee ensured that the Irish language was included in all we did.

In these years Tony began writing and broadcasting in Irish, evidence, were it needed, of his command of the language and the issues related to it. He was a regular contributor to Irish language publications including *Foinse*, *Lá*, *Beo* and *Tuairisc*. He broadcasted frequently on Radio Merseyside, RTE News, Radio na Gaeltachta and Radio Ulster.

In another remarkable development Tony, who was a qualified mountain leader, began conducting guided hill walks at the Oideas Gael summer school in Donegal. When I was invited by Liz and Liam to sort through the materials in the house, amongst the many boxes there was one dedicated to the Oideas Gael walks. It gave me an insight into his research methods and thoroughness. I don't know how long the walks were but there was enough material I that box to keep you going for weeks. There were booklets notes and references and cuttings relating to the history, geography, archeology, mythology, flora and fauna in the area around Glencolumcille. And it was from this material that Tony generated his walks, renowned for being both entertaining and informative.

In June 2002 Tony got us all on a bis and we went down to Frongoch near Bala where we witnessed the unveiling of a stone to mark the site of the Frongoch internment camp. As far as I am aware Tony was the driving force behind that, though Gwyn will be able to tell us more in a moment.

Some time after joining the board I applied for and obtained two Heritage Lottery Grants. The second was a large grant that provided for dance, drama, story telling and oral history. It also funded people to carry out their own project, which was when Tony came forward with his work on the Irish language in Liverpool. It was a watershed moment. We used lottery funding to produce a short publication, a pamphlet. Which proved very successful. Tony always knew he would need to come back to the projet and continued his research. We banked the proceeds from the first publication to contribute to the second.

Tony was aware that the presence of the language in Liverpool and the extent of its usage was never recognised in contemporary historiography. The established view was that there had never been much Irish spoken in Liverpool. Tony was outraged by this, as only Tony could be. And he set about refuting this inaccuracy. To do so he dedicated himself to several years

work, He would have made a great barrister. He tracked down every piece of evidence that supported his case.

- that in the 1830s 24,000 put their names to a petition to Rome for Irish speaking priests, as 'large numbers could not go to confession.'
- That the pledge administered by Fr Matthew in Liverpool the 1830 was in Irish. *Gabhair De, gan aon sort olachain mheisceamhail a dheanamh aris go brath.* I promise, with gods help, to abstain forever from alcoholic drink.
- Abraham Hume's finding that in 1847 of 1580 catholic families in the St Stevens district, 869 spoke Irish
- Of the 89 households in Lace Street, in the 1840s, 78 were Irish speaking.
- remarks from clergy in Catholic diocesan records on the need for priests to hear confessions in Irish

All this information was available to those who might look. But to prove his case, Tony needed to gather it together in a coherent narrative. Which he did.

Tony repeatedly refers in the book to how the language has been regarded in its long journey down the centuries to the present day. How it was ignored by the catholic hierarchy, how Irish speaking priests, according to Peter Doyle in his book *Mitres and Missions*, were, 'persecuted'. How evictions, assisted passages and forced migration, impacted disproportionately on Irish speakers. How Irish was excluded from public life and the education and legal systems under British administration.

I remember Tony telling me about Brendan O'Fiach, who in 1984 was arrested for insisting in speaking only in Irish at an RUC road block. In the magistrates court he asked for an interpreter, which was refused. He was fined £50. A couple of years later I met Tony in Glecolumcille when Kathleen and myself were on holiday with my mother, having a meal in a crowded GAA club there. Tony came over to speak to us. He spoke in a very low voice, asking how we were enjoying our holiday. 'Tony, why are you whispering', I said. He said, 'Do you remember the guy who was fined £50 at Belfast magistrates court for insisting he speak only Irish to the police? That's him at the next table.'

And in more recent years Tony was also much amused when he told me about a young man stopped during disturbances, who was arrested as he would only address the police in Irish. As they took him to the police station to be charged, one of the RUC officers in the land rover began talking to him... in Irish.

Tony puts Conradh Na Gaelige at the centre of the revival movement. Agus, Rinne sé athbheochan ar Chonradh na Gaelige i Learpholl. Tony re-established Conradh n Gaeilge in Liverpool, visiting Sean McNamara to get the original group stamp, to establish an important link with the past, and bring again to life a proud and long standing tradition..

The references in my book *In Hardship And Hope*, to the language revival in Liverpool in the 20th century were all drawn to my attention by Tony. And of course Tony deals with the topic in much greater detail.

He brought together, for the first time, I think, an account of the importance role Liverpool speakers played in the language revival of the early 20th century. The leading examples were:

- Cesca Trench, born Tuebrook, whose paintings are in the National Gallery in Ireland, and who provided illustrations for Clive Solas, the Conradh Na Gaelige newspaper when Paraic Pearse was editor.
- Norma Borthwick, born in Bebington, went on to become secretary of the Gaelic League and editor of their journal.
- Piaras Beaslai, born in Breck Road. Long before he wrote Hidden History Tony had campaigned for a plaque in memory of Piaras, a leading Irish language activist, and founder member of the Irish Volunteers who whose death sentence for his part in the 1916 Rising was later commuted. I always thought that it was not just that Beaslai was - like Tony - a north ender, that attracted Tony. They had much more in common, for Beaslai was single-minded about the language, deplored the standard of Irish speaking in Liverpool, and insisted at meetings that no English whatsoever be spoken. Thank god he is not here tonight. I am sure Tony admired such uncompromising attitudes.

It was one evening at the weekly session in the Edinburgh that Tony told me of his diagnosis. We decided on the spot to publish the book as a matter of urgency, and set the deadline for completion of the text as August 2019, with the actual publication date in the following year. Tony completed his research even though his health was declining rapidly. All this came just after the last campaign in which Tony worked together with his campaigning colleagues in Liverpool, commemorating the 1916 republican rising with an exhibition at the museum of Liverpool and a plaque in St Anthony's church.

Tony's passion and commitment shine through in Hidden History, a book of outstanding clarity and narrative force. If you've not read it, I would recommend that you do. History can be a dry subject, and the history of a language even more so,. But Tony brought his subject to life.

Tony understood that although Ireland achieved independence, and a good measure of self-governance, and although that independence has been expressed in literature, sports, and often through Catholicism. And although There has also been a stunning revival in music dance and song, The language question remains unresolved. The process of de-colonisation has turned out to be more protracted than simply establishing a parliament in Dublin. The loss of a language is the loss of a culture, consisting not just of songs, poetry, history and stories, but also of a way of looking at the world, the culture of a people, their identity. Tony was outraged at how the Irish language has been treated. Marginalised, persecuted, denigrated, humiliated, outlawed. But it has not died. In recent decades it has been undergoing another revival. Thanks to people like Tony.

How will Tony be remembered?

He had many qualities we should admire. His singlemindedness. His dedication. His environmentalism. His campaigning on walking rights of way,

in street alleys in Walton, footpaths at Oglet, and walking the footpath alongside Aintree racecourse on grand National day.

But what I will remember most is how Tony had the intelligence to turn this outrage and frustration to something positive. A project. A vision. And although his life was cut short, he realised that vision fully before he died. He endowed himself with the Irish language. He re-established Conradh in Liverpool. *Bhíodh sé ag múineadh ranganna Gaeilge anseo ar feadh blianta fada agus rinne sé taighde agus scríobh ar stair na teanga i Learpholl.*

He taught many to return to Irish, even if, like myself, we have only *cupla focal*. He wrote a fine history of the language in Liverpool cementing its place in the city's historiography. We should all admire these achievements. And indeed, the library here will remain as a testament to them. We also owe him a debt of our thanks for what he has left us. But most important of all, there is an obligation on us to carry on and build upon what he has achieved. *Ba e, cinnte, an buachaill beo.*