

Go raibh maith agat Tom. Thank you Tom for your introduction. It is good to be here with everyone this evening and to have an opportunity to share our memories of Tony together.

Ba é Tony mo dheartháir, mo chara agus mo comrádaí

Tony was my brother, my friend and my comrade.

He was born in Walton hospital on 20 January 1954.

Our mum Julia was from Navan, County Meath and our dad Joe was from Leyland, Lancashire. There were six children in our family. Tony was the 4th child and 18 months older than me. We went to Blessed Sacrament primary school and Tony later went on to Cardinal Godfrey Technical School in Everton.

Tony was incredibly funny throughout his life. As a child, you could hear his big laugh a mile down the road. He was very fiery and we often fought when we were little, but he was also protective towards me. I remember him waiting outside my class to thump a boy who was bullying me. Tony also had freckles. Thousands of them.

We grew up in a close Liverpool Irish community and many of our friends had Irish backgrounds. After he was born, our mum took him and Tony's older siblings to stay with our friends the Moloney's in Orrell lane. His older sisters Mary and Sheila remember Baby Tony sleeping in a drawer, a story Tony **loved** to tell as an adult with his crazy loud laugh to follow.

We played outdoors a lot in our childhood and Tony was very adventurous, roaming all over Liverpool with our older brother John and their friends, playing in Rice lane recreation ground (we call it the rec) and climbing over a wall into Walton Park cemetery where Robert Tressell (Author of the Socialist classic *The Ragged Trousered Philantropist*) was buried in a paupers grave. *Years later Tony was involved in a campaign to have this Irish author's grave recognised and commemorated. It was one of many campaigns he was involved in to give recognition and visibility to working class people.*

Walton prison was very close to our home, and you could hear the prisoners banging their tin mugs on the walls at Christmas time. Tony used to collect cigarette butts for the prisoners who were working in the nearby prison officers gardens. I remember our mum getting us to kneel down and pray for a man who was being hung in Walton prison. This was August 1964 and the prisoner was one of the last two victims of capital punishment in this country. The other man was hung in Wandsworth prison on the same day.

Capital punishment aside - Walton was a good place to grow up in. We had a little garden which backed onto a railway embankment. We picked blackberries here in the summer and watched the steam trains go by. Poor Tony got picked up by the Transport Police once for trespassing on the railway bank. It was the beginning of Tony's involvement in Right to Roam.

Keeping the land free and accessible was something Tony believed in passionately

all his life. It led him as an adult to take on Everton FC developers when they tried to take over Walton hall park *for their training ground*. He stood up to a Donegal farmer who obstructed the walkers Tony was leading as a guide in Glencolmcille, with the same determination.

Running throughout our neighbourhood was a network of entries and footpaths that were brilliant to explore. We used a pathway alongside Walton prison to get to Rice lane rec and Walton library. When this and other pathways were gated off by Liverpool City Council years later, Tony fought a long battle trying to get them restored. *Lewis Lesley was involved in this campaign and is here this evening.*

I remember Tony being very fearless when he was young and he could always think on his feet. When I was about 10 and Tony was 11, we were walking along the beach at Waterloo one Sunday and saw some other kids stuck in sink sand and screaming for help. I reacted by running towards the kids and stopping as I began to sink myself but Tony raced along the beach and alerted some men who pulled the kids to safety.

Our family belonged to Blessed Sacrament parish. We took part in the May processions and sometimes went on parish outings. Tony was fascinated seeing loyalist murals on walls and hearing the occasional Orange Lodge bands. He wrote about these experiences in articles for the Irish Post years later.

Family meant a great deal to our mum. She would sit down once a week and write letters to her siblings. She would get the Meath Chronicle and Sacred Heart Messenger sent over from Ireland. When our aunt Greta visited, Tony remembered them speaking Irish together. He also listened to the Christian brothers talking Irish amongst themselves in his secondary school.

In our teens and before mum died in 1977, we spent many enjoyable evenings in the Liverpool Irish Centre in Mount Pleasant. Mum started buying her papers there. In his book 'A Hidden History, 'An Ghaeilge i Learpholl' Tony mentions the Irish centre as being one of the few places in the city with Irish signs- such as 'Baill amháin' (members only). It was to become one of Tony's favourite places.

I'm not sure at what point Tony started to become my comrade as well as my brother. I think it happened gradually as our politics converged, particularly in relation to events unfolding in Northern Ireland. Our family always watched the news on telly and Tony was an avid reader of the Liverpool Echo, even in his teens.

The British Army Paratroopers killing of 14 unarmed civil rights demonstrators in Jan 1972 sent shock waves throughout Ireland and the wider Irish diaspora. Tony was in his last year at Cardinal Godfrey and I was 16 at Broughton Hall school and remember everyone talking about it. Bloody Sunday was a watershed moment in the same way as the 1981 Hunger Strikes. It forced you to sit up and act. Always Tony would fight for justice for the victims of Bloody Sunday and always Tony would support the right of the Irish people to self-determination.

The following year, Tony attended the Republican funeral of our Uncle Jimmy in Navan. Jimmy was married to our Auntie Ailey and had led the Navan branch of Fianna Eireann during the War of Independence. He and our Mum's brother Joe,

another active Republican were Prisoners of War in The Curragh and Portlaoise prisons in the 1950's campaign.

The oppressive political climate in this country during the 1970's and 80's did not deter Tony from organising around Ireland. He was active in the Troops Out Movement from its earliest days and he took part in numerous Troops Out delegations to Northern Ireland over the years.

While a student at East Anglia University, Tony and his comrades picketed the RAF when they attempted to recruit on campus.

When he was training to be a teacher in London and later working in Harlow, Essex, Tony, my partner Steven and I attended the annual Bloody Sunday Rallies together. We also took part in the sit down protest on Kilburn High road the weekend before Bobby Sands died. I remember the police fiercely attacking this protest and responding to our chants of 'Bobby Sands MP' with 'Bobby Sands Ex-MP'. The Special Branch observed more quietly the silent vigils held in Kilburn Square as each of the ten Hunger Strikers died.

Tony never forgot the support that a handful of socialist politicians gave to the Irish cause in those years. He respected the leader of the GLC, Ken Livingstone and Labour MP's like Joan Maynard and Jeremy Corbyn who called for the release of the Guildford 4 and Birmingham 6. Tony later backed Jeremy Corbyn when he was elected Leader of the Labour Party in 2015.

When Steven and I first moved to London and had nowhere to live, Tony kindly put us up until we found our own place. I remember him getting up at the crack of dawn to support the Grunwick pickets (mostly Asian and Afro Caribbean women) who were fighting for union recognition and against poor pay and working conditions. Tony was a socialist and trade unionist all his life and would always support workers struggles-whether it was the Miners' strike in the 1980's or the Liverpool Dockers Strike in the 1990's. He later took his own employer to the cleaners for their anti-Irish racism and union victimisation.

I was sorry when Tony moved back up North. We had great times drinking in the pubs on Kilburn High Road, but then Tony was good to drink with wherever he was living. I was always pleased when he visited us in London, turning up for family occasions (like when his younger brother Paul's plays were put on) and sometimes with his friend Dave James for the Bloody Sunday marches.

We invited Tony to speak at our Easter Rising Commemoration rally held in London's Irish centre in Camden in 2016. Tony's talk '*Conradh na Gaeilge agus 1916*' went down a treat and an article praising him appeared in the local Irish language newsletter 'Scéal' under the heading 'Official: Tony Birtill Spotted in London!'

Tony's work in the following decades was **phenomenal**. He taught economics at Skelmersdale college and Irish here in Liverpool. He wrote for the Irish Post, Beo and other Irish language publications. In 1990 he became a hill walking guide at Oideas Gael in Glencolncille bringing joy to hundreds of walkers over 30 years. He

was involved in countless campaigns as Greg Query described in his marvellous talk last year. Tony also became a proud father when Liz Hanson, his former partner, gave birth to their son Liam in 1999. Tony adored Liam and he was delighted when Liam became a talented footballer. He and Liz were Liam's biggest fans and they went to all his games at his local team Runcorn Linnets, then in Liam's teenage years, Frodsham Town and Pilkington F.C. Tony was **forever** talking about Liam's goals.

A Liverpool fan all his life, Tony was also pleased when Liam became a fan too. He liked nothing better than to watch Liverpool live or on telly with his son.

It was funny for our family watching Liam influence his dad. Tony wasn't a cool dresser but once Liam's shoe size matched his dad's, he started handing down the latest trainers to Tony to wear, and Tony suddenly became very trendy.

He still managed to embarrass Liam at times. Socks with sandals was a regular sartorial choice.

Family was important to Tony. He loved seeing his nieces and nephews and tucking into his sister Mary's big Sunday dinners in Hightown. He enjoyed having tea on Thursdays with his sister Sheila in Waterloo, before he set off to teach his Irish language class here in this centre. Tony was dependable and good company but he could drive you mad sometimes with his stubbornness.

When Tony's cancer was deteriorating during the pandemic I visited him and his partner Grace, but I stayed in the Orrell Park hotel for fear of spreading COVID. Tony **insisted** on seeing me back to the hotel in the evenings. I tried to explain that he was supposed to be dying but he was having none of it. I don't know what the hotel manager thought.

Tony worked with others in Conradh Na Gaeilge to make the contribution of Irish emigrants to this city and to Ireland visible by erecting plaques and holding commemorations and parades. The unveiling of a plaque marking the birthplace of Trade Union leader Jim Larkin was just one of many examples .

I remember taking part in the first commemoration they organised at the Fenian monument in Ford cemetery, for the Liverpool Republicans who had taken part in the Easter Rising. As I was waiting by the monument for Tony and the other organisers to leave the pub, I got talking to an old man who told me about the commemorations that had been held in the cemetery when he was a child. He just couldn't believe his eyes when suddenly Tony's group finally arrived with their banners and proceeded to revive a ceremony that had meant such a lot to this man in his past.

The connection between Liverpool and Ireland was a constant theme in Tony's writings, culminating in his brilliant book 'An Ghaeilge i Learpholl' . I love Tony's work -whether he was complaining in the Letters Page of the Liverpool Echo about closed public pathways and pollution on Walton Vale or uncovering a Loyalist gun running plot for the Irish Post, Tony's writings are those of an activist on the ground. When he wrote about the Republican Prisoners of War who were interred in a camp in Frongoch, North Wales following the Easter Rising, he did so while initiating a

campaign to commemorate them. The annual 'University of Revolution' commemorations continues to take place to this day.

Tony's writings and broadcasts for RTE and TG4 also informed readers in Ireland about events over here. Sheila Coleman, Hillsborough Justice campaigner was often contacted by Tony for news of the Hillsborough families courageous fight for justice. He even found an Irish connection for Dr Shipman when he interviewed the Irish priest Fr Dennis Maher, whose parishioners at St Paul's RC church were amongst those who fell victim to Britain's worst serial killer.

Part of trying to change things for Tony meant travelling around with that little note book of his. Sometimes you didn't know you were being interviewed. You would be having a good gab on the phone and then you would realise he was grilling you for something he was writing.

With Tony it was always hard to differentiate between his work and his personal life. He would be walking with his niece Liz Reid and her husband Mike, and cutting brambles back with his secateurs. When we visited our mum and dad's grave in Bootle cemetery (where Tony is now buried) he would point out the colours of the tricolour painted on the WALTON street sign marking the boundary between Walton & Bootle. I always suspected that this was Tony's handiwork.

Tony loved walking and climbing in this country and in Scotland and Wales. Most of all though he loved Ireland's landscape. He was incredibly happy whenever he went over to Glencolmcille. Every summer he would leave instructions with our Mary to water his plants and collect his mail from his home in Walton. He would phone me the day before he set off to Ireland, to wish me Happy Birthday, and he was always in a great mood.

I must admit I dreaded the first time I took part in one of Tony's walks. I'd always struggled to keep up with Tony, especially when he was heading for the pub (and I'd literally **run** alongside him). But I was surprised to discover a very patient side to Tony as I watched him lead groups of very mixed abilities through hills of Donegal.

Tony became a hero in 2007 when he was leading one of his legendary walks, by saving a young collie dog from drowning. The dog was standing on a rock at the bottom of a cliff with the waters closing in around her. Tony scaled down the cliff by rope, picked the dog up and miraculously managed to climb back up the rope with the dog under his arm. With his hikers taking photos of this daring rescue, (*you can almost hear the music in the background*) Tony of course ended up in the national papers the next day throughout Ireland. Liam Óg (Young Liam) and his mum later attended the Donegal Pet Rescue Awards ceremony, where Tony received a cast bronze sculpture to honour his achievement. (I call Tony's son Liam Óg by the way to distinguish him from Liam Ó Cuinneagáin, Tony's friend and the Director of Oideas Gael.)

Tony's guided walks were truly magical. His partner Grace O'Reilly and her friends loved taking part in Tony's walks for many years. They are all here this evening. I met up with Grace in Glencolmcille this summer and we shared our happy memories of Tony : of the places he led his groups that could not be accessed by road, of the stories he told about Saint Columcille and the history of the area – of the gravestones and ancient stone monuments we visited.

Grace and I rambled among the flowers and fauna, whose Gaelic names and environmental properties Tony would explain to his captive audiences. We remembered Tony pointing out seabirds and seals and the pub where the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas drank, all the time telling his funny stories, in Gaelic and English in an Ulster and Scouse accent.

It was good to be back in the place that Tony loved and to meet old friends with equally amazing memories. It was good to see the three trees that Grace, Liam Óg and Tony's friend Siobhán Ní Churraighín, (Oideas Gael's Administrator) had planted at Tony's Memorial weekend last May. It was good to back in Roarty's, one of Tony's old drinking haunts. Most of all, it was good to see Tony's walks carrying on.

The Liverpool Irish Republican Flute Band, of which Tony was a proud member, have described Tony as 'the beating heart of the Liverpool Irish community'. He'd come a long way from his baby drawer at the Moloney's.

Here in Liverpool and in Ireland, Tony was loved by his family, friends and comrades. He represented the radical tradition of the Irish diaspora and his work was exceptional. But Tony also knew that he was part of a movement, that Cesca Trench, Stephen MacKenna and countless other Liverpool Irish speakers had travelled before him. That movement continues.

Last December, Labour For Irish Unity (a group of which I'm secretary) held a webinar on the *Importance of the Irish Language*. Tom and Greg were amongst the guest speakers and it meant a lot to me to hear them both relating the role that Tony had played in today's Irish language revival and to hear that this important work is flourishing. Tony may no longer be with us, but to use a quotation from a Spirit Of Shankly banner that Tony translated for Liverpool fans in 2018.

'Ní shiúlfeadh tú i d'aonar go deo' You'll never walk alone'.

Tony Birtill, mo dheartháir, mo chara agus mo comrádaí

Tony Birtill, My brother, my friend and my comrade.

Go raibh maith agaibh.

Angie Birtill. Saturday. October 21, 2023