Peadar O'Donnell and the Spanish Revolution

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Peadar O'Donnell (1893–1986), the novelist and political activist, is a major figure in the history of the Irish left. Born in Donegal, he left teaching (and a prominent role in the Donegal branch of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation) to become a full-time organiser with the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in 1918.

His mother, a fervent Larkinite, and her brother Peter, a member of the Wobblies (the Industrial Workers of the World) in Butte, Montana, had instilled a strong syndicalist sensibility in the young Peadar and its fruits emerged in an active burst of union organising, which included the successful strike at Monaghan asylum in January 1919 when he led the workers in a week long successful occupation of the institution. With the outbreak of the war of independence O'Donnell joined the IRA. He opposed the Treaty and was among the IRA executive when the Four Courts were shelled in 1922.

Imprisonment and hunger strikes followed before he escaped from the Curragh in 1924. For the next ten years he served on the Army Council and Executive of the IRA, arguing that class politics should be the dynamic of republican politics and the IRA should adopt the role of a Connolyite citizen army. As editor of An Phoblacht from 1926 to 1929 he pursued his left republican agenda, focussing particularly on the land annuities campaign, which he himself initiated as a grassroots popular campaign. The revolutionary left was monopolised by the 'orthodox' communists at this time and O'Donnell was aligned to many of the Comintern groupings that emerged in the late twenties and early thirties, particularly the Irish Working Farmers' Committee movement, a branch of Krestintern, the communist Peasant International.

A leading figure in the failed 1931 Saor Eire experiment, when the IRA rhetorically embraced a socialist programme, he eventually split from the IRA with the formation of the doomed Republican Congress in 1934. He went to Spain on a writing holiday in 1936 and was accidentally caught up in the revolution and civil war. His experiences formed the basis of his book *Salud! An Irishman in Spain*. Although no longer a member of any political organisation, O'Donnell remained an important figure in Irish political and cultural life.

He helped found the liberal Bell magazine in 1940 and edited it from 1946 to 1954. He was associated with most of the progressive campaigns in post-war Ireland and was a seminal figure in groups like the Anti-Apartheid Movement and CND. He was prominent in the Save the West

campaign of the 1960s, and in the National Land League which agitated for the break up of large estates. He also continued his lifelong support of Irish emigrants abroad, particularly in Britain. He published the last of his 7 novels in 1975, and died aged 93 in 1986.

Salud! An Irishman in Spain (Methuen, London, 1937), Peadar O'Donnell's book detailing his experiences in Spain in the early months of the revolution and civil war in 1936, is a little-known account of these events by one of Ireland's best known and respected radical figures. It is particularly interesting for Irish anarchists, given its sympathetic treatment of the anarcho-syndicalist contribution by a long-time 'fellow traveller' of the orthodox Irish communist movement, which has always set out to denigrate that contribution.

Not suprisingly, O'Donnell's account and impressions of anarchism in action in Spain in the summer and autumn of 1936 are never referred to by mainstream and Stalinist writers. They are notably ignored by the Communist Party of Ireland's Michael O'Riordan, who fought with the international brigades, in his book *The Connolly Column* and in the numerous talks he gives on the topic. For the likes of O'Riordan, Peadar O'Donnell had impeccable credentials, so to accommodate his portrayal of and sympathy with revolutionary Spain would be to undermine the official Stalinist line. Far easier to focus on and dismiss George Orwell, with whose account and impressions in *Homage to Catalonia* O'Donnell's tally, because of his direct involvement with the supposedly 'counter-revolutionary' POUM and his subsequent anti-Communist work for British Intelligence, fuelled by his hatred of Stalinism.

The tone of O'Donnell's book differs from that of Orwell's, being the account of an engaged (and accidental) observer rather than that of an active participant. It is uneven and obviously rushed, written with the immediate purpose of countering the anti-(Spanish) republican propaganda that was dominating public discourse in Ireland. It is regrettable that he did not subsequently write a more reflective piece with the benefit of hindsight, but this is typical of an activist who declared his pen to be merely a weapon to be used for immediate political purposes, and who always moved quickly on to a new cause.

Unlike Captain Jack White, O'Donnell did not 'convert' to anarchism in Spain. He was frequently critical of anarchist anti-clericalism, utopianism and 'pet theories', yet displayed a self-proclaimed 'enthusiasm' for the anarchists, which was at odds with the attitude of his republican socialist circle, which tended to take the Moscow line. This sympathy and enthusiasm was noted by contemporaries and comrades, including Frank Ryan, who led the Connolly Column to Spain; in a letter to the CPI's Sean Murray in September 1937 Ryan makes reference to "Peadar's friends (the Anarchists)". While it is evident in Salud!, his positive view of the revolution does not feature in his journalistic accounts and comments on his return to Ireland. Instead, he fell in with the CPI line — that bourgeois democracy rather than socialist revolution offered the bulwark against fascism — which dominated the pro-republican/anti-fascist campaign in Ireland.

O'Donnell went with his wife Lile and some friends to Spain in July 1936 and intended remaining there for a year or two to do some writing, including a booklet on the changed agrarian situation under the new Republican government. His plans were radically altered, however, by the the fascist uprising a little over a fortnight later and he found himself swept up in the turmoil of those early months of revolutionary fervour and civil war.

He arrived in Barcelona with a letter of introduction from a contact in the French Communist Party, assuming that this would give him an entry into the centre of radical politics in the city. He soon discovered the actual situation. He went in search of the Communist Party, but having tried taxi after taxi, café after café, could find nobody who knew the whereabouts, nor even the existence of the Catalan Communist Party. Eventually he met a Kerryman who brought him to the CP offices, hidden away in a drab back street. He realised that it was the anarchists who were the overwhelmingly dominant force among the working class. The anarchist influence was everywhere and in discussions with members of the English speaking colony he was left in no doubt as to their time honoured role as 'bogey men': "To the foreign colonists the Anarchists were not dreamers seeking … to bring government to a standstill so that it might collapse and permit life in the villages to organize itself without interference and allow villages to interweave their social plans to ensure regional welfare, and work out, through autonomous areas, to a federated Spain. The Anarchist was just a man with a gun, or maybe a razor, with a weakness for killing at night time." (The failure of the bourgeois press to identify the strong anarchist influence in Spain was remarked upon by Irish journalist Mairin Mitchell in an article in the liberal journal Ireland To-Day in September 1936. She pointed out that CNT-FAI formed "the most important working class organisation in Spain … I have not seen this important fact stated in any of the English papers." She correctly predicted that the anarchists, "with their adherence to the fundamental meaning of anarchism", had little hope of finding a compromise with the "dictatorial Communists".)

O'Donnell met with FAI representatives, one of whom brought along a press clipping relating to the famous attack on him the previous April by a right-wing Catholic mob, when he tried to address a public meeting from a lamp post in Dublin and was lucky to escape with his life. They discussed plans for overcoming illiteracy and the respective educational theories of Padraig Pearse and Francisco Ferrer. O'Donnell made the fascinating suggestion, in the light of subsequent developments in distance learning, that as soon as the technology permitted the anarchists should pioneer the use of television to bring "the lecture room within sight and sound of the youth of the whole nation. What a fight will be made on that one day!". The end result of the discussions was an invitation to Peadar to attend the FAI-CNT regional conferences being organized to plan the land collectivisation campaign and to put his views in a memorandum that would be discussed.

He was back in his base in Sitges, a fishing village about 30 miles from Barcelona, when the fascist rising occurred. He and Lile immediately returned to Barcelona and immersed themselves in a city in the grip of a glorious revolutionary energy. Echoing Orwell, O'Donnell describes the atmosphere of the streets, saluting "that cityful of people, who preserved such uncanny order even in their first flush of victory". On a visit to the newly formed press bureau at anarchist headquarters, he was brought on board to edit the English language version of their international news bulletin and was given a press pass endorsed by the FAI-CNT and the new Anti-Fascist Militia Committee.

The O'Donnells set off for the Aragon Front with the first column from Barcelona, carried along by the collective passion and energy: "Saragossa must be freed. All Spain must be freed. The whole world must be freed. 'SALUD'. I'm sure I roared it too. I have not the slightest recollection what I did." They returned again to Barcelona — "where workers were in the first flush of their overlordship of industries" — and he describes the various groups insisting on marching under

their own flags — the Communists, POUM, Socialist trade unions, "but above all came FAI-CNT, the real power in Barcelona".

Encouraged by their friends, Peadar and Lile decided to return to Ireland to try and give an account of what was actually happening in an atmosphere of catholic church fuelled anti-Red hysteria. The burning of churches was a particular focus of pro-Franco propaganda and he prepared to defend himself on this front; he recalls joking to a priest in Ireland that the Spanish government had given him a free holiday in Spain on condition that he burned a few churches: "There was a chance that he might have written to the papers in Ireland by this time to give me away." He remained in Ireland in August, writing letters to the press and addressing public meetings on Spain before returning there in September.

O'Donnell's descriptions of life in rural Catalonia on his return reflect something of the changed mood since the heady days of July, and he detects a certain stagnation in the collectivised villages, with the rural population immobilised and the militias over-inclined "to poke their noses into every grumble that arose". Back in Barcelona he found the Catalan government publicity department "very poor", staffed mainly by foreign exiles from fascist countries "without the local sense of atmosphere which is the very lifeblood of publicity". The anarchists alone ran a readable paper, telling stories of "real happenings" and reflecting "the workaday life in reports from the syndicates". He re-established his anarchist contacts and was invited to address the large agricultural conference that was being held in the city. "I was sorely tempted", he writes, "to send telegrams to a few outstanding reactionary farmers in Ireland to tell them that I would have much pleasure in conveying their greetings to the Anarchist Farmers' Congress".

He devotes a whole chapter of *Salud!* to this congress, indicating, like his later reproduction of the decrees issued by the industrial syndicates in the Catalan town of Badalona, his concern to document the revolution as best he could as it was happening. His account of the speeches and contributions to the conference, centring on the pace of collectivisation, reflect his own views arising from his Irish experience. He instinctively sided with those whose ideas "went deep into the soil, into history", who argued for partial, staged collectivisation.

Compromise was reached to allow those with small farms to continue to work them, derelict farms and those of the enemy were to be collectivised, and no rents were to be paid to landlords. The acknowledgement of the universal peasant "passion for a piece of land" was, for O'Donnell, a victory for common sense and highlights his pragmatic approach to the land question in areas of high small farmer proprietorship like Ireland and Catalonia: strive for the collective ideal while allowing room for individualisation. The small farmer, he wrote in 1930, is "wedged into his holding … guaranteed tenure of the working farmer must continue, for it is that ease and rest of mind that will enable his thoughts to ripen for collective effort".

The talk in the cafes of Barcelona, where he spent much time, was of the shortage of arms, and he joined in the criticism of the government for failing to arm the people and permitting the war "to assume the character of a clash of armies only". He was approached by the militia with a view to securing arms and he wrote them a message to be sent to two people who had experience in gun running in the Irish struggle and agreed to make the necessary introductions if these people were willing to help. He set off for Madrid and immediately noted the Communist influence there in contrast to Barcelona where the anarchists were the driving force. He believed this to be an instinctive reaction to the fascist attacks on Communism: "If Communism was the enemy-in-chief in the eyes of the Fascists then it clearly was a fighting formation to which anti-Fascists should rally. There was also a groping hope of help from the Soviet Union …". He found

that Madrid did not give "that impression of a people set free which Barcelona did" and that it was making a poorer fist of publicity than the Catalan capital "where the Anarchists at least brought glimpses of life into their writing." He saw in the Spanish capital a distortion of the situation:

"Fascists thundered their condemnation of Communism and the ordinary man in the street felt the impulse to give back 'Viva Communismo'. It was easier to see the main line of struggle in the villages, stretching out towards the front [where] the agrarian revolution was put through in a hurry". In discussions with foreigners and Spaniards in Madrid he heard again "this distant-minded judgement of the Anarchists. There was some surprise at my enthusiasm for them, for it was taken for granted that every foreigner coming to Madrid at this stage was a Communist."

After a brief excursion to London to arrange the publication of his account of his experiences in Spain and a few days on the French border observing the smuggling of arms to Republicans, he returned to Barcelona through the villages of Catalonia which he now found "fair and peaceful". Barcelona "was almost as it had been when I had first come into it in July; although anybody could tell now where the Communist offices were to be found." His final impressions are of increasing Communist influence, with the "outlines of Government" coming into view, a push towards Republican 'unity' and the need to defend Madrid. With the International Brigades arriving and the defence of Madrid beginning, O'Donnell returned to Ireland and the book concludes with his description of the propaganda war in Ireland between the powerful supporters of Franco and the marginalised anti-fascists, with whom he vainly struggled against the tide.

A common lament on the left in Ireland concerns the historical appeal of nationalism/republicanism and its impact on the fortunes of the left. Connolly's 1916 gesture symbolised the problem, and Peadar O'Donnell's immersion in the republican movement is similarly pointed to. What is less often remarked upon is the detrimental impact of the virtual monopolisation of socialist politics by the Stalinists from the 1920s to the 1960s, so that a 'gut socialist' like O'Donnell, with a syndicalist background and a natural sympathy for the anarchist project once he had experienced it at first hand, re-immersed his socialism in the stagnant communist pool on his return to Ireland — primarily, it could be argued, because it was the only 'socialist' pool in town. He never joined the party, preferring to maintain his independence, but remained a fellow traveller until his death. An editorial in the Donegal Democrat following his death in 1986 was headed 'Death of a Quasi-Anarchist'. The latter term was used as a synonym for trouble-maker, but the writer might have inadvertently captured an element of O'Donnell missed by many others, an element that never developed due partly to the domination of Irish radical politics for most of the twentieth century by the elitist and authoritarian republican and communist traditions.

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