

The Belfast Ghetto Leader

In Tribute to Billy McMillen

By Gerry Foley

Liam Mac Maolain, commander of the Belfast Brigade of the Irish Republican Army ("Officials"), was shot April 28 in Belfast by unknown assailants. He was forty-seven years old and had been in the republican movement since the age of seventeen. He was gunned down in the presence of his wife, to whom he was married only a few months.

Thousands of mourners followed Mac Maolain's coffin to Milltown Cemetery on April 30, where Cathal Goulding, chief of staff of the "Official" IRA at the time of the 1969 split and in subsequent years, gave the funeral oration.

It was also Goulding who gave the funeral oration for Seán Fox, a member of the "Official" IRA who was shot February 25 in a clash with members of the Irish Republican Socialist party (IRSP). At that time, the "Official" leader leveled threats against the rival organization. At the Mac Maolain funeral, his remarks were even more violent:

"An Orange junta sent Liam McMillen to prison because he fought for separation. The Provisional Alliance attempted to assassinate him because he held his socialist principles and fought for civil rights. The RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] and the British Army of occupation harassed and hounded him because he was a socialist republican. A small, mad band of fanatical malcontents, the sewer rats of Costello and McAliskey [i.e., the IRSP], finally laid him low."

IRSP representatives have not denied that members of their organization were responsible for the Fox shooting, although they claim that they acted in self-defense. The new organization, however, has denied any involvement of its members or supporters in the assassination of Liam Mac Maolain. IRSP representatives said that the "Official" commander had been killed just before he was scheduled to issue a new statement on the conflict between the two organizations, a statement that they expected would end the violence.

A few weeks after the shooting, Tomás Mac Giolla, president of "Official" Sinn Féin, the political wing of the "Official" republican movement, confirmed that Mac Maolain was preparing a peace initiative at the time of his death.

The IRSP argued that the Belfast "Official" leader was probably killed by a British "counterinsurgency" team encharged with



United Irishman

BILLY McMILLEN

inciting conflict between the two organizations.

In contrast to its attitude after the Fox shooting, the "Official" organ, the *United Irishman*, said in its May issue: "We sincerely hope that there will not be a series of reprisals which would feed the flames of hatred in the North."

Unfortunately, the membership and local leadership of the "Officials" seemed to be more responsive to the tone of Goulding's statements than to the specific recommendation of the *United Irishman*. Incidents between the "Officials" and the IRSP escalated qualitatively after the Mac Maolain shooting. By mid-May more than thirty "Officials" had been caught carrying weapons by the British army, apparently as a result of the conflict with the IRSP. Weapons charges carry draconian penalties in Northern Ireland, and such losses could not help but be very serious for the shrinking and already demoralized "Official" movement.

The "Officials" claimed that Mac Maolain's assassins fled to the Divis flats, a complex of high-rise housing projects at the foot of the Falls Road regarded as an IRSP stronghold. No further basis was offered for claims of IRSP involvement.

The "Officials" have been quick in the past to blame their political opponents for any attacks on them. When Seán Garland,

the organizer of "Official" Sinn Féin, was wounded on March 1, a statement was issued within twenty-four hours blaming the IRSP. "Official" representatives claimed that the would-be assassins had been "positively identified," and privately they even named the persons they considered responsible. These claims proved to be without any basis whatsoever.

On the other hand, since the escalation of the conflict in Belfast, Séamas Costello of the IRSP has said that his organization would accept the protection of shadowy armed groups that have developed out of the breakup of the "Official" organization in Belfast but that have not joined the IRSP or subordinated themselves to its discipline. This move greatly weakens the political credibility of the IRSP and creates favorable conditions for provocateurs and uncontrollable elements.

Nonetheless, as yet no evidence whatever has been produced that the IRSP or its supporters were responsible for the Garland or Mac Maolain shootings or that they have played an aggressive role in the conflict.

In their statements, the IRSP leaders have consistently opposed violence between the two organizations, called for peace talks, and maintained a moderate tone toward their political opponents. The same cannot be said of the "Officials," who have hurled sweeping unproved charges, including certain specific accusations with no direct bearing on the incidents, which are scandalous from the standpoint of revolutionary principle. They have engaged in fanatical diatribes and personal invective.

Nor is the "cleverness of Séamas Costello"—alleged by loyal but factionally blinded "Official" representatives—a reasonable explanation for the difference in tone between the statements of the two organizations. The "Official" leaders must recognize at some level, moreover, that their constant portrayal of Costello as the "evil genius" of a plot to destroy the IRA and ignite a disastrous civil war is an incitement to murder. In fact, he was almost killed a few weeks after Mac Maolain's death when a murder squad machine-gunned his car. To his credit, Costello has not made personal attacks on the "Officials" nor singled out any of them as a villain.

There is also a suspicious similarity between the shootings of Seán Garland and Liam Mac Maolain. Both incidents were decisive in escalating the conflict between the two organizations. Garland is one of the most respected, most intelligent, and most sincere revolutionists of the "Official" leadership. His death could be expected not only to evoke a strong reaction from the membership and local leaders but to remove the figure in the leadership most likely to have the stature and objectivity to rise

above the factional frenzy that has gripped the "Officials." Furthermore, Garland is one of the very few who would have sufficient authority to change the disastrous course of the organization.

Mac Maolain was not of similar stature. He did not have Garland's national reputation, his political breadth and flexibility, or his grasp of socialist principles. But he had an essential quality that seems gravely absent now in the "Official" leadership—realism. And he had the toughness and organizational skill to resist emotionalism.

That is not to say that Liam, or Billy McMillen, as most knew him, did not deceive himself at times, as the other "Official" leaders have been wont to do in the last two years in particular. I remember him trying to convince me that the "Officials" really had more support in Belfast than the Provisionals when it was obvious to everyone that they were rapidly losing out to their rivals in the Catholic ghettos.

But Billy McMillen was bound up completely with the Belfast ghettos. He would not have survived as a local leader for so long if he had not been. He could not have failed to recognize the aberrant character of the "Official" line that the Protestant terrorist gangs have a "primitive" form of working-class consciousness or how disastrous attempts by the "Officials" to turn these gangs against the IRSP would prove to be in the Catholic ghettos.

In the 1972 congress of "Official" Sinn Féin, McMillen was one of the leaders of a move to get the organization back on the track on the national question. He sponsored a narrowly defeated resolution that would have defined the Protestant gangs as reactionary, an essential step toward realism, not to say sanity.

McMillen grasped in an instinctive way the disastrous logic of sacrificing the unity of the oppressed people in hope of ingratiating sections of the Protestant workers: "We're not getting any Protestant workers," he told me at the time. "And we're not getting what we should be getting from our traditional supporters either."

When Billy saw that the Communist party would not and could not use the positions it had won by opportunistic methods in the Northern Irish trade unions to assist the struggle of the oppressed Catholic people, he drew the realistic conclusion: "The CP hasn't produced what it promised, so fuck the CP." If the "Official" leadership as a whole had been capable of facing that reality, it would not have followed the Stalinist leaders of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association into oblivion.

McMillen did not accept the downgrading of the national question and national consciousness that came into the movement from Stalinist advisers and was inculcated into the middle leadership by Stalinist-

inspired educational programs. That was one of the things that stood out in him when I first met him in July, 1970, just after the Battle of the Falls between the "Official" IRA and the British army.

I had been to a march by Catholic schoolchildren protesting the repression. They were carrying the Irish national flag and singing the national anthem. That infuriated the Stalinist civil-rights activist who was with me. "The stupid fuckers . . ." will "alienate the Protestant workers." But McMillen thought it was wonderful. "We try to encourage patriotism."

McMillen was a product of the Catholic ghetto and a nationalist fighter through and through. That was his strength and it made him worth immeasurably more than all the centrist and Stalinist "socialists" who came into the movement looking for a bigger bandwagon than the Communist party of Ireland, although because of his own political weaknesses he apparently began to defer more to this element in the last period of his life.

In the funeral oration, Goulding tried to weave a web of proletarian romanticism around him. That reflects Goulding's own formation as a Dublin radical and the extreme economism the "Officials" have developed since 1972, as they have tended to collapse into a sect. It was what the new generation of "Officials" has been trained to expect. But it had a rather false ring. Proletarian romanticism is still a fairly exotic style in Belfast.

Despite the overuse of certain traditional devices, Goulding's introduction in the Irish language rang truer. Perhaps part of the reason was that these introductions, which are a standard feature of republican oratory, tend to be general evocations. Thus it was not so distorted by the heavy-handed dogmatism Goulding tried to put across in the portion of the oration, given in English, that could be expected to be more generally understood.

Not many republicans, especially in the North, learn Irish to the point of fluency. But many among the mourners must have responded to the traditional phrases, the Gaelic poetical forms, and the mythological references. It was the language of Irish nationalism and the only one that could be used to offer a fitting eulogy of Billy McMillen. Only a small part of its evocative force can be transferred into English:

"We are here to mourn a Gaelic hero, Liam Our Beloved Mac Maolain, and that is a bitter, sad task. Because it is not an ordinary man that we are burying today but an exceptional man in every sense, a keen, calm leader with a great store of experience in all forms of revolutionary activity, a great hero in battle, a wise seasoned hero as a revolutionary leader, a great defender of the struggles of the common folk of the Gael, a great defender

of our language and our native culture, a gentle, warmhearted, kind man.

"This is a great loss for us. But it is a greater one by far for you, the armed warriors of Belfast, because, believe me, there will never be the like of Liam again. The savior of the Cause of the Republic is dead. Our hero, our Champion, our shield in battle has fallen. Let us stand our ground nonetheless, facing our ancient enemy, although the traitor dogs snap at our heels. Soldiers of Belfast, before you the tumult of battle. But you must fight according to the words of our fair and noble Liam.

"Soldiers and people of Belfast, the task now is yours. Our hope is in you. Not soft or easy the task before you without Liam Mac Maolain as chief over you. You are now like children without a father, like the Fianna without Fionn."*

McMillen was one of the patriot visionaries who have preserved the national tradition of the Irish people and carried it from generation to generation through all the disasters of the conquest and imperialist exploitation of the country. In every Catholic ghetto in the North there are men and women like him who have struggled against poverty and oppression to learn the difficult old language of the Irish people that has been driven back into a few remote corners of the country by centuries of subjugation to the English.

Billy McMillen spoke Irish fluently and with relish, although without losing any of the pungent twang of his Belfast English. He seemed anxious to speak specifically Ulster Irish, which he called "our dialect," although Irish for him as for generations of Belfast Catholics was a learned language. But in a way he maintained the link going back to the time when the Falls Road was the Bothair na bhfál, the road of the hedges, the native Irish settlement outside the garrison city of the invaders.

McMillen's strength of character, like that of most Northern nationalists, did not lie in a consciousness of the power of the workers as a class. Most of the Catholic workers are unskilled and without security of employment; a high proportion of them are permanently unemployed. Their confidence has not been built up by great industrial victories.

McMillen's strength lay in his consciousness of the tradition of the Irish people and his confidence that one day they would regain their heritage. He was aware that the Catholic people were overwhelmingly proletarian and poor and that the only allies they could find were other workers and poor masses. He did not believe that there was such a thing as a "Green bourgeoisie," at least not in the North. But he never became a proletarian romantic. He

*Fionn Mac Cumhaill, the legendary leader of an order of Gaelic heroes.

was a very practical person, and his goal was national liberation.

McMillen was not a romantic of any kind, although he was devoted to a fugitive and rather mythologized national tradition. That tradition was the sword and the buckler of the outcast in Belfast, the pride and sustenance of the lowest layer of the proletariat and the poor. He was a seasoned leader of a ghettoized people, shrewd, realistic, quietly brave, as well as ruthless and rather narrow.

Outside Belfast, he was like a fish out of water. During his exile in the period after the internment raids until the "Official" cease-fire in May 1972, I hardly recognized him. All his weaknesses were magnified, and his strengths were barely visible. He could not, it seemed, readjust to a wider field of activity.

Billy never seemed to really regain his footing. For one thing, under the smoke-screen of an "antiterrorist campaign," British capitalism had bulldozed his Belfast virtually out of existence. The old, tight-knit Catholic communities of the lower Falls Road were replaced with an urban jungle of high-rise flats and sprawling housing estates.

And then, he was particularly unlucky. He was charged with possession of "illegal documents" just before the internment raids and so he was unable to take advantage of the relaxation in the repression after April 1972 to operate openly.

Besides this, Billy returned to Belfast at a time when the "Officials" were starting to go into a rapid decline, as a result of their gravely wrong line on the national question and the aberrant misestimation of the dynamic of the Protestant paramilitary groups that went with it. All of his shrewdness and tactical acumen could not halt that decline.

Furthermore, as their political activity stagnated and all perspective for effective political action was lost, the "Officials" tended more and more to become a business operation, an empire of drinking clubs. This process apparently did not bring out the best in any of the "Official" leaders.

When the "Official" movement in Belfast began to crumble, Billy apparently tried to defend it like a military commander leading a retreat, by sharp sallies against the "enemy" and the ruthless application of "discipline" against "defectors." He told me in April before his death that anyone who "talked against the republican movement" or "tried to destroy it" would be "dealt with."

One of those he "dealt with" was nineteen-year-old Hugh Ferguson, the chairman of the Whiterock club of the IRSP. He sent a punishment detail to shoot Ferguson in the legs. He was not unhappy with the result: "Unfortunately he was a game kid and wouldn't take it lying down. He put up

a fight and was killed by accident."

The IRSP say that the "punishment detail" did shoot Ferguson in the legs but that one person on the squad deliberately shot him dead as he lay on the ground after he threatened revenge. It would have been an understandable response in the context of internecine ghetto warfare.

Billy had no idea that he had no right to punish Ferguson or of the results it would lead to. He was the "Officer Commanding" and that was what you had to do to maintain order "in the army." He was not an inhumane man, but he had to be "tough" to survive in Belfast and to preserve "the army," to "protect the people."

The obscure death of Billy McMillen is symbolic of the whole tragedy of the "Official" leadership. Perhaps that explains the emotional tone of Goulding's funeral oration, although it does not excuse its bitter, partisan, provocative spirit, which could only deepen this tragedy. The tragic implication was made explicit by the phrase, "there will never be the like of Liam again." It is an echo of a statement by one of the last members of the Gaelic-speaking Blasket Island community about the extinction of their way of life.

The "Official" leadership set out on the most difficult political path there is, the path of building a socialist movement, of leading the Irish people into a qualitatively higher historical stage, without any guide but crude pragmatism. As a result, it mistook a few commonplace nostrums for the whole truth of socialism. It was misdirected by bad advisers and lost its way. It was driven into a corner by terrible pressures, the constant threat of death, mutilation, and repression, continual heavy human losses, the wearing out of the small group of experienced leaders, a growing feeling of helplessness in the face of impending disaster.

It was unable to reorient itself. As a result, a team cemented together by long years of common experience was torn apart. Most of the components did not have the political training to understand what was happening to them, much less know how to resolve the fundamental political differences in a constructive way. What few elements did have a little scientific training were swept away by the flood of factionalism and did not contribute any objectivity. Inevitably the most distorted personalities, the most dogmatic, the most fanatical, the most violent, the most paranoid, began to set the tone and to transform the movement into their image.

In an armed movement based largely on the permanently unemployed, the irregularly employed, and individual adventurers, violence is never far from the surface. Once the bonds of brotherhood in arms are broken, anything is possible. That is one of

the reasons why harsh discipline is essential. That is probably also why the "Official" leadership fear Costello so much. They come out of the same tradition and they know what they might do if they were in his position. Furthermore, of all of them, Costello was apparently the most ruthless, the least bound by the ties of comradeship and personal loyalty. That apparently is why he was able to break from a policy and from leaders that had been proved wrong in practice and the rest were not.

Goulding was mistaken about the howling he heard behind him. It was not the yelping of "traitor dogs." It was more like the *mór-rioghna*, the devils of militarism that the old Irish believed drove warriors mad in battle. It was the fears that come out of a tradition of militarism, and from false ideas that, when they are not corrected by an honest look at reality, become paranoid delusions.

Another devil is Stalinist dogmatism. Although the threat of violence in political disputes is part of the republican tradition, the virulent dogmatic factionalism displayed in the "Officials'" attacks on the IRSP is completely alien and unknown to that tradition. The idea that the greatest danger to revolution is revolutionists with "wrong ideas" and that political opponents are always manipulated by the enemy has one classical source in our time—the ideology of Stalinism.

But Billy McMillen's ghost should not become one of the devils that are driving Goulding, his followers, and no one knows what others, to destruction. McMillen deserves better than that. He was like the elder brother in a slum family, who, although he himself could not overcome the pressure of his environment, has made the breakthrough for those who will come later. He was really a seasoned old warrior. Goulding's comparison with Fionn, the wise old chief, and of all the Irish mythological heroes, the one with the most human weaknesses, was an apt one. It is hard to believe that Billy was only forty-seven years old when he was killed.

I remember sitting in his living room in the Lower Falls in 1970 and watching one youth after another come in and ask advice. He had a vast experience, especially with the ways of the courts and the police.

I remember how sharp a political sense he had, how reasonable and well balanced he was, how open to new ideas. He was like many "Official" leaders in those days after the Provisional split who were thinking about how to build a socialist movement in Ireland. Many of them gathered in the same living room. It was a time full of possibilities, few of which were ever realized, unfortunately. Events moved too quickly, and the "Officials," unable to adjust, withdrew into a dogmatic shell that made a mockery of their positive achievements.

In the increasing gloom of later years, one of the best of these leaders told me how he looked forward to having political discussions again in Billy McMillen's living room on Ton Street. It was like a lost golden age. As far as I know Billy never returned to that house after the internment raids. The British soldiers used to hold parties in

it on Fridays to let the neighborhood know who was boss.

Now that hope is gone forever. There can be no return to those days. But there can be a return to the rational thinking of better times if the "Official" leaders stop to think objectively where their course and the logic of their statements are leading them.

In the Belfast of 1970, Billy McMillen told me that a good soldier always keeps open a path for retreat. That applies to politics too. And it still seems like good advice. Perhaps it is the best advice Billy could leave behind him to the leadership to which he remained loyal to the end and defended the only way he knew how. □

Call for International Investigation

Iranian Students Protest Shah's Execution of Political Prisoners

By Majid Namvar

"Since early 1971, more than 200 persons have been executed for political reasons after the semblance of a trial by military courts. Possibly 100 persons have been killed by the police during arrests in the street or at their homes. Several hundred have been sentenced to prison terms of more than fifteen years. Several thousand have been thrown in prison without trial, or for 'short' terms, that is, less than fifteen years."

This is the record of repression under the shah, as summarized by attorney Thierry Mignon in a letter published in the May 15 *Le Monde*. Mignon recently visited Iran as an observer for the International Federation of Human Rights. Her letter was occasioned by the recent disclosure that nine political prisoners had been executed by the shah's police, allegedly "while trying to escape." (See *Intercontinental Press*, May 12, p. 616.)

In an April 29 statement, Amnesty International said everything indicated that the prisoners had in fact died under torture.

The May 15 *Le Monde* reported that the Committee to Defend Iranian Political Prisoners¹ had received information that the prisoners "died in different prisons, which makes it unlikely that they were escaping together."

According to the committee, four of the prisoners died under torture and the five others were executed in cold blood. "They had previously been invited to join the [shah's recently created] single party and to praise the shah and his regime on television. This they of course refused to do."

This brutal act of repression sparked a number of protests by Iranian students abroad, most of which were organized by the Confederation of Iranian Students.

In London, twenty-one Iranian students were arrested by police April 29 as they staged a sit-in at the Iranian embassy. The demonstrators, all members of the Confederation of Iranian Students, were demanding that an international medical team be sent to Iran to determine the cause of the nine political prisoners' deaths.

On May 5, a group of Iranian students in Vienna began a hunger strike, demanding an international investigation into the death of the prisoners.

On May 12, about forty members of the Union of Iranian Students in Paris began a hunger strike. They said their action was intended to express solidarity with 5,000 Iranian political prisoners who, they said, had also begun a hunger strike.

On May 15, while the shah was meeting in Washington with President Ford, more than 500 demonstrators marched in front of the White House to protest the shah's repressive rule.

Despite the shah's repeated claim that there are not more than "3,000 terrorists" in his jails, arrests on political grounds continue to be made. One such jailing that recently became known is that of Nasser Rahmani-Nejad, a widely acclaimed writer and director, and his entire theater group.

According to information released to the press May 9 by the Committee for Artistic and Intellectual Freedom in Iran,² the group was arrested in February as it was preparing to stage Maxim Gorky's play *Parasite* in Tehran. No information on the fate of those arrested has been given by the Iranian government.

SAVAK, the shah's secret police, continues to gun down suspected dissidents. The weekly English edition of *Kayhan* reported April 26 that two persons were killed in a

raid on a "terrorist hideout" in Qazvin, northwest of Tehran. The names of those killed were given as Khashayar Sanjari and Mansur Farshidi.

The government charged that they were responsible for the assassination of two security officials in Tehran. Tehran newspapers had reported in April the shootings of a SAVAK agent and the chief of security at the University of Aryamehr in Tehran.

On May 17 *Kayhan* published the names of three Tehran University students killed in a shootout with police; no date was given for their deaths. The three, Habib-Ollah Momeni, Jafar Sadati, and Ali-Akbar Jafari, were also alleged to have taken part in the shootings of the two police officials.

Although the American press has chosen to remain virtually silent in the face of the shah's repressive measures, it seized the opportunity to give front-page headlines to the recent shooting of two U.S. Air Force officers in Tehran.

On May 21, the two officers, members of the "Military Assistance Advisory Group" were shot and killed by three unidentified persons while being driven to their offices at the Iranian armed forces headquarters in Tehran.

The American embassy reported that it received anonymous telephone calls indicating that an urban guerrilla group, the "Iranian People's Fighters Organization," had carried out the action. According to the embassy, the callers said the shootings were in retaliation for the execution of the nine political prisoners. □

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