A philosopher with a slow smile

Peadar Macken 1878 – 1916

THE MOST comprehensive and longest pen picture of Peadar Macken was published in the 1930s by Desmond Ryan:

“There, too, in this inferno of Boland’s Mills fell the gentle Peadar Macken, a philosopher with a slow smile, a house painter who had spent his life wandering around Ireland at his work from lonely lighthouses to the great cities, through any district where he might catch some new phrase or dialect of the Irish language, twin enthusiasms of his with the Labour Movement, for he had been Vice-President of the Dublin Trades Council in his time; dark, thick set, florid; stretched beneath a tricolour by a stray bullet; . . .”

Macken died of gunshot wounds on Thursday 27 April 1916. He was 37 years old and for most of his adult life had been involved in Dublin’s working class politics. For all that has been written on the period 1900-1916 he has been almost totally ignored, rarely rating comment other than in footnotes, or in lists of names usually given as background information.

He is mainly remembered through the street in which he died being named after him and a plaque, with others, on a house in Pearse Street. The Dublin house painters’ trade unions jointly erected a tombstone in the 1920s. Ryan’s pen picture only refers to some of Macken’s activities; the issues he was interested in have dominated Irish life since.

The reasons why this multi-faceted character has been ignored to date are undoubtedly related to the manner in which he died and the scarcity of information related to him. Indeed, so scant is the extent of information that it is necessary to rely to a great extent on what is known of his activities in order to piece together some image of the man. Unfortunately we only have pieces of information. Inadequate as they are, they are worth recording.

Peter Paul Macken (later known variously as Peadar O Maicín and Peadar Macken) was born on 29 June 1878 at 13 Nassau Place. He was the youngest of the family and had two sisters. His parents Anne and George Macken were originally from Portarlington, County Laois. His mother’s name was Shanahan before marriage. His father was a house painter by trade and was a life-long active member of the Regular Operative House Painters’ Trade Union. He was treasurer of this union in the late 1870s and president of its successor, the Dublin Metropolitan House Painters’ Trade Union (DMHPTU).

The conditions in which the Mackens lived were quite different to that of their contemporaries. Nassau Place was a short street that ran between Frederick Lane and Nassau Street. The street no longer exists: the site is now occupied by the Setanta Building. A pedestrian walk exists where the street was. Almost all of the buildings in Nassau Place were occupied during Macken’s lifetime by the mineral water works of Cantrell and Cochrane. Of the 18 buildings on the street most were stables and warehouses.

There was one tenement house occupied by 26 people in 12 rooms. The only other house was occupied by the Mackens, which in contrast to the neighbours, had eight rooms. By 1911 they were the only family in the street. It is not clear whether George Macken was the owner or tenant of the house. He was, however, the registered ratepayer.

The living conditions of the bulk of Dublin’s working class would have been similar to those of Macken’s neighbours. Macken lived at this address all his life. The district in which he lived was also different in that it was largely a sedate, mixed residential and commercial area, still occupied by the middle and upper classes.

The constituency of which Nassau Place was part was one of the few in southern Ireland to return a Unionist MP at the 1900 general election.

We know almost nothing of Macken’s childhood or youth other than the fact that he attended the nearby Christian Brothers’ school at Westland Row. He most probably left school at age 13 or 14 and became an apprentice house painter. As was common for apprentices he attended evening classes at the Metropolitan School of Art. He may also have attended trade classes at the technical school in Kevin Street when they started in the 1890s.

From his early years he developed a life-long interest in the Irish language, an interest kindled most likely by the Christian Brothers. He was the same age and attended Westland Row at the same time as Patrick Pearse and although they worked together as adults we have no evidence they were close as youths.

By the late 1890s Macken had founded a branch of the Gaelic League, the St. Patrick’s Branch, and was teaching Irish in the ‘98 Oliver Bond Club at their rooms at 41 Parnell Square. During the same period he also attended meetings of the Celtic Literary Society at their rooms 32 Lower Abbey Street. This society founded in 1893 (the same year as the Gaelic League) by William Rooney was an attempt to recreate the Young Irelanders of the 1840s and was the forerunner of Sinn Féin.

Labour History News 5
In these and similar bodies that used the same offices, Macken was in the same company as James Connolly, Maude Gonne, W B Yeats, Douglas Hyde, Frederick Ryan and many other reformers, revolutionaries and literati, later to gain national and international reputations. His main interest at the time appears to have been the language and he is recorded as a member or supporter of Connolly’s Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP). As already noted he was a member of the ’98 Oliver Bond Club and not the ISRP’s Rank and File ’98 Club.

There is evidence that Macken was a member of the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). At the time of the visit of Queen Victoria in 1900, a row developed within the council of the IRB because its secretary, Frederick Allan, would have to perform public duties connected with the visit in his capacity as a corporation employee. The fact that Macken worked at the Viceregal Lodge was cited as justification for Allan performing his duties and thereby not jeopardising his job. Unfortunately, it is not clear if they were referring to Macken as an ordinary member of the IRB or as a member of council.

By his early twenties, Macken had identified most of the issues that were to be lifelong interests. We have evidence to suggest that Macken felt incongruous in the ‘salon’ format of much of the political and revival activities of the time. Very shortly he was to find himself part of an organisation in which he felt more at home: one that provided a platform, and eventually other platforms for his activities.

In 1898 the employers in the painting trade in Dublin became organised for the first time. This was the direct result of the first industry-wide strike in the trade in 1896. During that summer strikes and lockouts involving plasterers, bricklayers, carpenters and painters were successfully fought between May and August. The painters won an extra ½d per hour, bringing the rate to 7½d.

They were however obliged to agree to a ratio of 10% non union labour. Although they were severely criticised for this by Connolly’s Workers’ Republic, it was in fact an improvement on their position as the union had never achieved full organisation in the trade. The question of ‘free labour’ was an issue in the disputes and one of its advocates was T C Harrington, a councillor and nationalist MP.

In the summer of 1899 the employers challenged the new found strength of the DMHPTU when they provoked a major dispute. By the end of the year the union and the two branches of the amalgamated union were forced to seek an ‘amicable settlement’. At the beginning of the dispute Macken, along with 47 others joined the DMHPTU. At the time he was 21 years old and would have just completed his apprenticeship.

It was his first opportunity to join as apprentices were not eligible for membership under the rules, a rule not changed until 1905. These disputes and his membership of the DMHPTU were undoubtedly the formative experiences that led to a working class commitment in politics. From the turn of the century until his death Macken was active in the union in various capacities.

The DMHPTU was a trade union concerned with issues common to other craft unions: hours, wages and working conditions, the provision of benefits, controlling the use and abuse of juvenile labour and the exclusion of non-union workers from the trade. It was more than that, however, it had a continuous existence from 1814 at least. It was ultra-democratic, had its own hall and band and provided a range of services that played an important part in the lives of its members.

It enthusiastically joined in most of the political campaigns of the nineteenth century. Very much a political organisation, it had supported and later opposed O’Connell; it publicly supported the 1848 Paris rising and later on the Fenians. It participated in the demonstrations occasioned by the McManus and O’Mahoney funerals of 1861 and 1877 respectively.

It played its part in the amnesty campaign on behalf of the Fenians. It also supported, to some extent, the Land League and to a much greater extent Parnell and his party. It generally supported anything connected with the Home Rule cause and in that context the Liberal Party. Although it was fiercely independent it co-operated with other unions but resented the establishment of the amalgamated union in Dublin in the 1890s.

The union when Macken joined it, was still a strong Parnellite body participating, usually on the instigation of Macken’s father, in the various Parnell commemorations. Despite lack of funds following the 1899 lock-out it commissioned new banners for the Parnell commemoration of that year. The union was an affiliate to the Dublin Trades Council & Labour League (DTC&LL) and the Irish Trades Union Congress, sending delegates to both bodies.

Following on the local government reforms of 1898 the union contested local elections. In that year the secretary was nominated for the Ushers Island ward without success. In the same election a painter named Fleming was returned in the North Dock ward. Fleming was almost certainly a member of the amalgamated union.

For the first four years of the century Macken did not play an unusually active part in the union’s affairs. He served on a benefit committee, he was to the fore in support of strikes involving bricklayers, labourers and bakers: in the latter case ‘in their struggle against capitalism’. In 1904 he was delegated to represent the union at the unveiling of the ‘98 memorial at Baltinglass.

During this period he seems to have concentrated on Gaelic League affairs. The leagan an t-Itire, the union’s newspaper and at Macken’s instigation the union participated in a Gaelic League demonstration. In 1903 he won teaching certificates at the Oireachtas. In 1904 he won a scholarship sponsored by the Keating branch of the league and attended Ballingarey College.

He won silver and gold medals in the lower and higher ‘Courts of Romance’ and certificates in the third, fourth and fifth year of the Fleming Championships. To further his knowledge in Irish he sought work in the gaelacht areas most probably with the Commissioners of Irish Lights and the Congested Districts Board.

There was a clearly identifiable but small group of radicals active within the DMHPTU and Macken, if not their leader, was amongst the most prominent. In 1904 Macken was appointed the union’s second delegate to the DTC&LL. Here he was brought into direct contact with the most advanced nationalists, trade unionists and socialists in Dublin.

Immediately he became involved in a dispute within the DTC&LL concerning trades council support for an international trade exhibition. P T Daly and W P Partridge led the section of the council who were in favour of the national exhibition and were supported by Macken. In the event the international exhibition was supported by the council.

The Labour Electoral Association set up in 1899 to contest corporation elections was not a success although it won seven seats at the first election. Between 1900 and about 1910 several bodies claimed to represent the labour interest: some nationalists and the emergent Sinn Féin party. The labels applied to candidates and the fact that individuals were members of different political groups at the same time makes the particular politics of candidates difficult to identify at this distance.

Macken fought his first election in 1906. He stood against the sitting councillor T C Harrington MP. Harrington had taken a stance against the union in the 1896 strike and had occupied the office of Lord Mayor from 1901 to 1903, a perennial cause of annoyance to the DTC&LL. At a meeting of ‘Burgesses’ of North Dock, ten people in all, one of whom was the councillor, W P Partridge. Macken stated in Irish:

“If the outgoing councillor was a genuine labour representative he would not
oppose him he would only be working for his own class, but while he would always uphold the interests of labour, he would never allow them interfere with his principles as a nationalist who believed in the right of Ireland to be a sovereign and independent nation and who would carry out these principles on all occasions.”

Another nationalist candidate, P J Rooney, on learning that Macken was a candidate withdrew from the election. The DMHPTU and the DTC&LL backed Macken. The union struck a levy of 6d on all members to meet his expenses and called on the ‘working class electors to elect him’. Macken was defeated by 684 to 779.

The placing of class issues in second place to national independence goes a long way towards explaining Macken’s subsequent activities. A position, it may be added, adopted by most labour activists then and later.

With the foundation of the ITGWU in 1908 and the influence of James Larkin, most of the Sinn Féin/DTC&LL steadily moved towards a real labour party position. We know little of Macken’s activities within the DMHPTU for the period 1906-1911 as their records have not survived.

He remained active on the DTC&LL and in 1909 when the council considered sponsoring a student to Ruskin College, Oxford, Macken was considered as a likely candidate.

Following on the collapse of the ISRP and James Connolly’s departure for America in 1903 a political void was left that was filled with the emergence in 1904 of the Socialist Party of Ireland (SPI). In May of that year Macken was invited to attend the party’s annual commemoration of the Paris Commune. At the meeting held in June 1909 in the Trades Hall, Capel Street, Macken proposed that the party’s name be in Irish.

This meeting, held to relaunch a ‘socialist organisation’ must have intended extending the SPI on a nationwide basis. Macken was one of the 15 elected to the provisional committee. At a meeting held in October 1909 Macken was elected to the seven-member General Committee, a five-member Organising Committee and to a five-member Press and Publications Committee.

Throughout 1909 William O’Brien was engaged in an extensive correspondence with James Connolly: both of them trying to work out a means through which Connolly could return to Ireland. In March 1910 Macken chaired the SPI meeting at which a proposed speaking tour of Ireland by Connolly was discussed.

Connolly’s financial support on his return to Ireland as proposed organiser of the SPI was the main problem facing the party. A pledge fund was initiated for his support as organiser: Macken pledged £3, as high an amount as any other individual and much more than most. In the event the fund was insufficient: a development that unintentionally created the circumstances in which Connolly was appointed an ITGWU official in Belfast.

In September 1910 as part of the SPI series of lectures in the Antient Concert Rooms (the Academy Cinema, Pearse Street) Macken spoke on ‘Why Irish Nationalists should be Socialists’ and the following month on ‘John Mitchell, Socialist’. In November, on Connolly’s recommendation as organiser, Macken was proposed by the SPI to contest the Trinity ward. Macken could not do so as he was not on the roll of electors.

Connolly seemed to have great difficulty in contacting him as he was working in the country and their correspondence was conducted by telegram. The month before Macken was working on the lighthouse on Tory island from where he wrote to An Claidheamh Soluis on a matter of Irish grammar. In March 1911 it ‘unanimously decided to remove the name of Peadar Ó Maicín from the roll of members’.

Whether Macken left the party or was expelled remains unclear. The SPI allowed members to hold dual membership with other organisations a policy which apparently, Macken opposed. He may have left the SPI on this issue as William O’Brien in an undated blank page in a diary drafted a letter to Macken asking him to reconsider his decision to resign. This letter may or may not have been sent.

The period 1911-1912 was a busy one for Macken. Over the years as DTC&LL delegé and as an auditor and trustee of the union he had undoubtedly earned the respect of its members. In 1911 the DMHPTU found itself in serious difficulties when two senior officials absented themselves with the union’s books and most likely its funds. Macken was to the fore in putting the union back on to a sound footing and showed a considerable amount of skill in doing so.

Taking on the position of auditor he steered through several controversial decisions. He persuaded the committee, against the advice of the union’s solicitor, not to pursue the issue against the outgoing officers through the courts. He persuaded the members to contribute a levy of six shillings to the Irish union. A member took over the management of the ‘walking fund’ or unemployment benefit: always a controversial and thankless task.

Action was also taken against the tenant of the flat over the union offices for two years arrears of rent. Most importantly he ensured that the union took the necessary steps so that it could become recognised as a competent body for the purposes of the National Insurance Act. The union was also registered for the first time with the Registry of Friendly Societies.

In January 1912 the DTC&LL established the Dublin Labour Party (DLP). The DLP did not make provision for individual members but was composed of affiliated unions. From the beginning the DMHPTU was involved; contributing £5 to party funds and striking a levy of 6d on all members. The officers of the union were delegates to the party but did not serve on its executive.

In early 1912 the alderman for North Dock, Bergin, a nationalist and close associate of Alfie Byrne, resigned. The two sitting councillors were James Larkin and a nationalist, P J Farrelly. Farrelly was the nationalist candidate in the by-election. The DLP decided to run its vice-chairman, Thomas McPartlin, who declined the invitation.

At the following meeting William O’Brien proposed Macken as none of the affiliated unions had proposed any other candidate. Macken was unanimously adopted, being proposed by the party leader, Richard O’Carroll and seconded by McPartlin. Until then Macken had not appeared in the affairs of the DLP and was in fact a member of the resident committee of Sinn Féin that year.
He also appears to have been a member of the SPI as that party appealed to its members to support ‘a member of this branch’. Macken must have rejoined the SPI or maybe he joined it when it was relaunched as the Independent Labour Party, Ireland. A specially convened meeting of the DMHPTU was addressed by Thomas Farren of the DLP: the members enthusiastically supported Macken and voted £10 to the campaign.

The election was held in late June and was described by the newspapers as quiet. It was ignored by the newspapers except the Irish Worker. The Worker supported Macken, however, it used more space condemning Farrelly in its own inimitable style than promoting Macken. Larkin presented Macken as ‘one of our own, a man who taught himself Irish, a life-long abstainer, prominent in the Gaelic League, etc.

Although Macken did not participate in the campaign, as he was working outside Dublin at the time, he won the seat with a margin of 20 votes. The jubilant DLP supporters marched from the count centre to Liberty Hall where they were addressed by Larkin, Macken and others.

Obviously concerned at how well Farrelly had done Larkin stated that it was because the nationalists had stated they were opposed to Home Rule and, ‘that was not so, the Labour Party were the best Home Rulers, and they wanted when Home Rule came to manage their own affairs’. Returning to the subject, the fall in the DLP vote, in the Worker Larkin wrote:

“In fact we only canvassed twelve streets and if we had our way the Dublin Labour Party would not canvass. If the electors cannot see the difference between a Macken and a Farrelly than they ought to be disfranchised. Our candidate and now our member was working out of town and could not give us his services in the evenings. Macken never canvassed one solitary vote.”

Macken wrote to the Worker claiming, ‘we have learned the folly of over-confidence’. He thanked the electorate for ‘electing an unknown man’ in view of the fact that he had been denounced as ‘an atheist and an opponent of Home Rule’.

Immediately after the election Macken found himself out of a job. At the time he worked for the Great Northern Railway Company and had resigned rather than work with a non-union painter. The man who replaced him was immediately expelled from the DMHPTU. Within a month of his election the union decided to pay him eight shillings for attending Corporation and committee meetings at which trade issues were discussed. Macken’s membership of the City Council does not reflect itself in the minutes of the DMHPTU, the DLP or the SPI.

The SPI did invite him to speak at a meeting in the Phoenix Park. The last reference to Macken in the SPI or more correctly the ILPI was in July 1912. The SPI became the ILPI in June 1912 when the SPI amalgamated with the branches of the British ILP in Ireland. In the following election Macken did not stand for re-election; the seat was lost to a nationalist and Larkin was replaced as the DLP councillor by M. Brohoon, Larkin having been unseated for legal reasons.

In addition to all his other activities in 1912 Macken wrote, in Irish for Pearse’s short lived magazine An Barr Buadh (The Trumpet of Victory). These four articles were concerned with the Irish language, the ‘League of Freedom’, his introduction to the nationalist/republican tradition, an account of a boy coming to terms with the language of his parents and on the attitude of the Roman Catholic church to secret societies. Written in good Irish, the articles display a passionate belief in everything Irish and the need for an ‘Irish-Ireland’.

Some belong firmly in the style of the period, ‘Shooting strong guns is the most noble work of all’; ‘If the freedom of Ireland is won by the sharp edge of the sword . . .’. It is notable that none of them are concerned with social or labour issues. Macken almost certainly wrote in English in the journals of the time under a pseudonym; yet to be identified positively.

In 1912 he was also a member of the resident committee of Sinn Féin. He was also a member of the secret IRB and when the provisional committee of the Irish Volunteers was established he, along with The O’Rahilly, Eamonn Ceannt and a man called Fitzgibbon, were nominated as the Sinn Féin representatives on it. When the Volunteers split after the First World War started Macken was prominent in organising the minority that kept the original name.

When the Irish Volunteers reverted to the control of the original founding members a manifesto was issued restating the objectives of the organisation. Macken signed the manifesto along with twenty others. Besides serving on the executive he was also a member of the six-member ‘country sub committee’, four of the six were IRB members: Macken, Bulmer Hobson, Sean MacDermott and a Patrick Ryan. Although the DMHPTU was involved in the 1913 lock-out, Macken was not on the committee that year: he continued his position on the trades council.

One of the first activities of the Volun-
teers was an anti-recruitment campaign. Early in 1915, as part of this campaign, Macken proposed a resolution adopted by the union ‘condemning the action of employers, asking men to drill in their (the employers’) yards after working hours’. The employers’ action seems to have been successful as the decision had to be rescinded when the support of the amalgamated union was not forthcoming. Macken brought the issue before the trades’ council and successfully moved the resolution:

“That the Dublin Trades Council, while not disposed to obstruct in any way those persons who, through zeal for the British Empire, might be inclined to volunteer for active service abroad, at the same time calls upon workers to join either the Citizen Army or the Irish Volunteers, as being the best means to avert conscription.”

Arising from this decision attempts were made to co-ordinate the anti-conscription measures between the council, the Citizen Army and the Volunteers. Macken acted as the contact between the three bodies, but the talks involving Pearse, McNeill, MacDermott and Connolly came to nothing. The anti-recruitment campaign had some success however, as one of the main employers in the painting trade gave evidence after the rising to that effect.

In the same year Macken became vice-president of the trades council: he was active within the union and also served on the committee that organised the O’Donovan Rossa funeral. Connolly addressed the trades council on the subject and the Citizen Army provided a guard of honour.

All accounts of Macken’s activities during the 1916 Rising and the circumstances of his death appear to be based on one written in 1926 in An Íoglaich by George A Lyons. Macken was with ‘B’ Company, 3rd Battalion of the Volunteers. Eighty of them mustered, the largest turnout, at 144 Pearses Street on Easter Monday morning. They occupied Bolands Mills and established outposts around the Mills.

The pre-set plans were not scaled down to take account of the less than expected turnout. From the beginning of the week the garrison was set well-nigh impossible tasks. The obvious commitment and enthusiasm of the insurgents did not compensate for the lack of manpower, planning or experience. The battalion was commanded by Eamon de Valera.

From the beginning of the week until Thursday the pressure on and within the insurgents’ ranks built up. By then the centre of the city was burning, rumours were rife, contact had been lost with other units (incredibly the insurgents did not seize the telephone exchange), shell fire from the
gunboat ‘Helga’, continuous rifle and machine gun fire, combined with lack of sleep and food were having disastrous effects on morale and discipline.

Macken was with a small detachment guarding a gate to the Mills. The gate was not fortified and an attack was expected. Lyons was in charge of the unit and although the situation was tense, silence was regarded as essential. Macken obtained an order for Lyons to rest leaving him in command.

Before leaving Lyons relates how one of the volunteers was in a truculent mood and attempts to silence him only aggravated him further. After Lyons left the scene, Macken was, “shot through the heart by one of his own men, that same man who had refused sleep and who had run amok and ultimately got himself shot by a sentry whom he attacked”.

Lyons did not record the time or any other details. However, he also recorded in relation to that day that, “the sentries all too scrupulously obey the instructions of the Commandant and inflicted a few casualties amongst our own officers . . . amongst whom were Lieut Sean O’Keeffe, who was badly wounded and ultimately conveyed to an outside hospital”.

What happened to Macken, whether or not he was taken to hospital or buried on the spot was not recorded by Lyons. The exact circumstances of Macken’s death may never be known, that is if they differ from the account given. Lyons in his account went on to add:

“I will not dwell on the death of Macken here. I have given the details because there had been so many misconceptions as to how Peadar Macken met his death, because one of our men who was not near the spot, but who lost his wits that night, has carried the delusion for many a day that he had shot poor Macken and accused himself before so many that the story gained some ground.”

The available evidence raises some questions. On the death certificate Macken is recorded as having died in May and the place of death is given as ‘18 Nassau Place’ a stable near Macken’s home. A man ‘shot through the heart’ would have died instantly and on the spot. The death certificate states that he died from ‘gunshot wounds not certified’.

It may be the case that Macken’s father, who signed the death certificate, may have been trying to conceal the circumstances of the death to protect himself and the family. He signed the death certificate with an ‘X’ thereby indicating he was illiterate. It is unlikely, however, that a man who had been treasurer and president of his union was illiterate.

On Lyons’ own evidence, he was not present when Macken was shot, so his account, the only one we have, was itself second-hand. By an extraordinary coincidence seven years earlier Lyons accidentally shot dead a fellow member of the IRB. He gave himself up to the police and was charged with murder but ‘got off scot free’.

William O’Brien noted in his diary in 1912 that Macken was an atheist. Desmond Ryan records that Macken told him he had been to confession before the Rising. At the time of his death Macken was 37 years old, he was unmarried, he still lived in the house he was born in and still earned his living as a house painter. He apparently amassed no material possessions as he left no will that has been recorded. His father, George died within months of his son’s death.

At the May meeting of the trades council it expressed its condolences to the families of Macken, O’Carroll and Connolly in that order. The ITUC conference in August paid tribute to the labour leaders who had died in the Rising.

The secretary of the DMHPTU was interned immediately after the Rising but was released in August. The union struck a levy of 6d per member to support ‘all deportees’. Of those brought before courts martial for their part in the Rising; five were painters although not necessarily part of the DMHPTU.

It is tempting to speculate on the many aspects of Macken’s life especially where his activities appear contradictory. With such little information surviving more questions remain than answers. He had a keen and developed awareness of cultural, social and economic issues: yet like so many reformers and revolutionaries then and since, these were placed in a secondary position to the national independence issue.

What can be said about Peadar Macken is that he worked without stint for the achievement of a future Ireland in which the aspirations he valued would be given concrete effect.

Charles Callan

Left Bank Books

Left Bank Books are the largest stockists of left wing books, radical books and feminist literature in Ireland.

Come in and see for yourself

Labour History News 9