

## Labour Lives

Cathal O Shannon (1893-1969), republican, labour journalist, and Labour Court judge was born on 9 June 1893 at Drumsough, near Randalstown, Co. Antrim, the third of four children of Charles Shannon (c.1851-1908), a locomotive engine driver, and his wife Alice (c.1850-1925), née McLarnon, of Draperstown, Co. Derry. His parents were both Catholic. O Shannon's upbringing inspired an interest in trade unionism, republicanism, and the Irish language:

My father collecting a few shilling to keep railwaymen on strike, the centenary of the insurrection of 1798, and a few old men talking Irish to a Gaelic League organiser are among my earliest memories. These are the three threads that have run together in one piece in me all through my life.<sup>1</sup>



When he was six months old the family moved to Draperstown, where he was educated at the national school, later going to St Columb's College, Derry, on a scholarship.

In 1908, his father's death caused him to be sent to Belfast for grinding for the Civil Service, which he hated. By 1909 he was prominent in Sinn Féin, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), Fianna Éireann, and Conradh na Gaeilge, as well as the Ulster Literary Theatre. Having started to write for the *Irish Packet* and the *Mid-Ulster Mail* as a schoolboy, using his St Columb's nickname 'Sean Athair', he became a correspondent for the *Peasant* and the *Irish Nation* from 1908 to 1910. In 1910, he abandoned his studies for a junior clerkship with Heysham Steamers. A founder member of the Belfast branch of the Railway Clerks' Association in 1910, he joined the ITGWU in 1912, and became a full-time official of the union in Belfast in 1913. Impressed by James Connolly's writings since 1908, O Shannon joined the Socialist Party of Ireland and, after the outbreak of World War I, acted as a conduit between Connolly and the IRB. Between 1912 and 1916, he also extended his journalism, corresponding for *An Claidheamh Soluis*, *An Barr Buadh*, *Nationality*, *Sinn Féin*, *Les Annales de Nationalités* (Paris), the *Irish Worker*, the *Workers' Republic*, the *Daily Herald* (London), and *Labour Leader* (Manchester). On Easter Saturday 1916, O Shannon mobilized with some 100 Volunteers at Coalisland, Co. Tyrone. Without definite orders from Dublin, the body dispersed and O Shannon tried unsuccessfully to reach Dublin. The following week he was arrested in Belfast, interned in Frongoch, Wales, and then in Reading gaol.

After his release in the general amnesty of Christmas 1916, O Shannon worked as an ITGWU official in Cork from July 1917 to March 1918. As labour enjoyed phenomenal growth, he acquired national influence, as intermittent editor of the ITGWU's *Voice of Labour* (March 1918 to September 1919), and its successors, the *Watchword of Labour* (1919-21), and the *Voice of Labour* (1921-27); as a member of the executive of the Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (1918-20 and 1922-23); and as an ITGWU and Congress political advisor. He was prominent in Labour's anti-conscription campaign in 1918, and helped draft the 'Democratic Programme'; but failed to persuade Labour to contest the 1918 general election, and or to resist backing the 'Belfast boycott' in 1920. Now calling

himself an 'Irish Bolshevik', O Shannon rejoined the revived Socialist Party of Ireland in 1917, representing it at the international socialist conference at Berne, Switzerland in 1919, on which he published two pamphlets *Ireland at Berne* (Dublin, 1919), and *Memoire sur Irlande* (Berne, 1919), asserting Ireland's claim to independence and labour's sympathy with Soviet Russia. He also gave a revolutionary flavour to the ITGWU press and propaganda. Central to Labour's covert liaison with Sinn Féin during the War of Independence, O Shannon was compelled to go 'on the run' in Britain in 1920. Under the pseudonym 'Conor Hayes', he organized the bye-election campaign of imprisoned ITGWU chief William O'Brien in Stockport, Cheshire, and met his future wife, Margaret Doris Finn, of Stockport, in Manchester's Free Trade Hall. Arrested in March 1920, he was eventually released from Mountjoy gaol on 5 May after an eight day hunger strike. In the general election of 1922, he topped the poll in Louth-Meath, and became deputy leader of the parliamentary Labour Party, but lost his seat in the 1923 general election. His backroom role during these years has confined him to passing historical treatment, and he remains enigmatic as the 'Irish Bolshevik' who combined revolutionary propaganda with defence of Labour as it drifted to the right after 1921, and as a republican who endorsed Labour's neutrality on the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

By 1923, the glory days were over. Recalled to an ITGWU reeling from economic recession and the split with James Larkin, O Shannon served as ITGWU Political Secretary (1924-26), and Head of [wage] Movements (1926-41). During these divisive years he produced a number of ITGWU pamphlets attacking Larkin and other enemies, and edited the Labour Party newspapers the *Irishman*, *Watchword*, and *Torch*. He married in 1924, and, small in frame, became familiar around Dublin as a 'slight, bent figure with the black broad-brimmed hat', the hallmark of the Dublin literary man.<sup>2</sup> Secretary of the Irish Trade Union Congress (1941-45), and the Congress of Irish Unions (1945-46), O Shannon was influential in the establishment of the Labour Court in September 1946. He served as a workers' representative on the Court from its foundation, acquiring a reputation for being 'peppery' with ill-prepared appellants, until his retirement in 1969. He continued to write, contributing a column to the *Evening Press* in the 1950s and 1960s, recollections and scripts for Radio Éireann, Teilifís Éireann, and the BBC on the independence struggle, and editing *Fifty Years of Liberty Hall* (ITGWU, 1959). He died in Dublin on 4 October 1969, and was buried in Dean's Grange cemetery, leaving a son, Cathal, and two daughters, Gráinne and Fionnuala.

**Emmet O Connor**

### Bibliography

*Private papers*: Irish Labour History Archive.

*Secondary sources*: *Liberty: Jubilee Issue* (ITGWU, 1959).

Nic Silvester, 'The Cathal O Shannon papers in the ILHS archive', *Saothar* 19 (1994), pp.107-9.

### Notes

1. Irish Labour History Archive, O Shannon MSS, COS 93/12/12B.
2. *Irish Times*, 6 October 1969.