

Labour lives no.4

Miriam Daly

Miriam Annette Daly (1928-80), historian, university lecturer, and republican socialist was born at the Curragh camp, Co. Kildare, on 16 May 1928 to Daniel McDonnell, a colonel in the army, and Anne Cummins, who was from a local farming family. Her only sibling, Kathleen, was born two years before and died in 1995. McDonnell, who had Dublin working-class origins and labour sympathies, saw action with the IRA in the war of independence and later took the pro-Treaty side in the civil war. His father worked on the Great Northern Railway and was interned for his political views in Ballykinlar camp near Downpatrick during the war of independence.¹



Miriam was brought up in Hatch Street, Dublin, and educated at the local Loretto convent. She graduated with a BA in economics and history from UCD in 1948, completed an MA under the supervision of Professor George O'Brien on Irish labour in early 19th century England, and lectured from 1950 to 1953 in the Department of History at UCD. In 1953 she married Dr Joseph Lee, a psychiatrist, and from then until they emigrated to England five years later she worked as an extra-mural history lecturer. Lee, still only in his late thirties, died as a result of a heart attack in 1963. A year later, Miriam, who had been teaching history in Haberdashers' Aske's School, London, took up a lecturing post in economic history at the University of Southampton. In London in 1965 she married fellow-academic James Daly, whose family was from Ulster, and they returned to Ireland in 1968 where she took up a post in the Department of Social and Economic History at Queen's University, Belfast while he secured a lecturing position in scholastic philosophy at the same university. In 1970 they adopted their twins, Donal and Marie.

In 1968 Miriam became involved in the civil rights movement and served on the committee of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association. A popular public speaker, she was prominent in the campaign against internment. She joined Sinn Féin in 1974, but in her professional capacity had no difficulty with teaching Ulster Volunteer Force prisoners in Long Kesh or co-operating with them on welfare issues. In 1977 she joined the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) after working closely with its leader, Seamus Costello, on the Murray Defence Committee.² Daly's political outlook was informed by the writings of James Connolly and by an antipathy to capitalism which, she declared, 'rewards the strong and the powerful and the immoral, and exploits and grinds into intolerable oppression, the weak, the unarmed, the defenceless', and this she argued is 'not only the case between classes, but also between communities and nations'.³ Her position on Ireland, as articulated at the Dublin History Workshop in March 1978, was that 'the national liberation struggle' held 'the key to the achievement of socialism,' and in that context she believed strongly in the validity of armed struggle as a political tactic.⁴

Following the assassination of Costello on 5 October 1977, Daly took over as national chairperson of the IRSP; fluent in French, she appeared on French television on several occasions advocating the republican socialist perspective. She continued to contribute to academic life and was a founder member of the Economic and Social History Society of Ireland and an early member of the ILHS in

which she was very active.⁵ She was joint-editor of *Saothar* 2 and 3 published in 1976 and 1977 respectively and remained supportive, though from 1977 her activities as leader of the IRSP meant that she had less time to devote to the society. She also contributed to the Thomas Davis lectures on RTÉ and to *Philosophical Studies*, *History*, *Christus Rex*, *The Newman Review*, *Business History*, *Irish Economic and Social History*, and *Ulster Folk Life*. At the time of her death she was working on a textbook on Irish economic history and still lecturing at Queen's.

Daly stood down as IRSP chairperson in March 1979, though she remained a member of the árd comhairle.⁶ In the same month she helped to organise an International Women's Day picket at Armagh Women's Gaol in support of protesting republican prisoners, an indication of her growing involvement in the campaign for political status within the prisons.⁷ She was later elected to the leadership of the National H-Blocks Committee and immersed herself in this campaign despite threats from loyalist paramilitaries who were targeting leading figures on the committee. However, on 26 June 1980 loyalists forced their way into her home on Andersontown Road in west Belfast, tied her up, and shot her five times in the head.⁸ Her body was discovered by her ten-year old daughter when she returned from school.

The assassination of Miriam Daly provoked anger and sympathy within republican and socialist circles but seems to have had less impact in the academic community, almost certainly because of her pronounced revolutionary views. Indeed, she was one of the few academics to involve themselves on the republican side during the northern 'troubles'. In Belfast an Irish National Liberation Army colour party flanked her coffin when it halted outside her house and a volley of shots was fired in tribute. Hundreds later attended her funeral in Swords, Co. Dublin, where she was buried alongside her first husband in the graveyard of St Colmcille's Catholic church.

Fintan Lane

Notes

1. I am indebted to James Daly for his assistance in compiling this profile of his late wife.
2. The committee campaigned against the execution of Noel and Marie Murray who were convicted of the capital murder of an off-duty garda in Dublin.
3. Miriam Daly, 'Reflections by Miriam Daly on Seamus Costello's life', in Seamus Costello Memorial Committee (eds), *Seamus Costello, 1939-77: Irish Republican Socialist* (Dublin, nd), p.74.
4. *Starry Plough*, April, July 1978, February 1979. In recent years the IRSP has claimed that Miriam Daly was a member of the INLA; see press statement issued by the IRSP on 26 June 2001 entitled 'Fallen comrades of the IRSM: Miriam Daly' (copy in author's possession).
5. John Swift, 'Miriam Daly', *Saothar* 6 (1981), p.6. For additional information on her academic career see obituaries by Harry Gribbon and Joseph Leckey in *Irish Economic and Social History*, vii (1980), pp.5-6.
6. *Starry Plough*, April 1979.
7. See letter by Margaretta D'Arcy in *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 2 December 1999.
8. Gerry Adams and many others have alleged police or British intelligence involvement in Daly's death; see Gerry Adams, *Before the Dawn: An Autobiography* (London, 1996), p.277.