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An influential historian of Irish labour

Peter Berresford Ellis points out that astonishingly little has been recorded about the life of R M Fox, journalist and historian, who helped shape the tumultuous times in which he lived.

AMONG THE first books that I ever read in my teenage quest to educate myself on the history of the Irish left were the works of R M Fox. Books like *The History of the Irish Citizen Army*, *Green Banners: the story of the Irish struggle*, Jim Larkin: the rise of the underman were important milestones in Irish socialist literature.

It was not for a long time that I realised that R M Fox was the husband of Ireland's most renowned and fondly regarded children's author Patricia Lynch, who was born in Cork in 1898 and became the author of some 48 novels and 200 short stories, many of them adapted and broadcast on Radio Éireann. Patricia had been a suffragette who wrote eyewitness reports on the 1916 rising for Sylvia Pankhurst's journal the *Workers' Dreadnought*. Her closely observed and sympathetic account was published as *Rebel Ireland* and circulated widely in the USA and Europe.

Earlier this year, I wanted to look up some information on R M Fox but was astonished that so little seemed to be known about him in spite of his autobiographical volume and the fact that he was the author of more than a dozen books, prolific journalism and one of Dublin's best known theatre critics. Fox's own autobiography *Smoky Crusade* (1937) is heavy on opinions but amazingly lacking on precise dates. What makes matters confusing is that all references, the *Biographical Dictionary of Irish Writers*, and the Princess Grace Irish Library give his date of birth incorrectly as 1899. Even his obituary in *The Times* (London) records a wrong date of birth. We can now correct this.

Richard Michael Fox was born in Leeds, England, in 1891. According to his brief *Times* obituary of 30 December 1969, he was born 'of Anglo-Irish parents'. However, Fox mentions that it was his mother's father, Michael Rathmell, who left Ireland for England. His mother, Elizabeth, was a school teacher and his father, Richard, was a 'skilled engineering workman'. Richard Michael was the second of their four sons. Albert, Richard and Eric were all born in Leeds while George, the youngest, was born in Tottenham, London. Certainly, by the 1901 Census, the Fox family was living in Bruce Castle Road, Tottenham, London.

Richard went to an elementary school in London and left a few days before his 14th birthday. This was in the autumn of 1905. During the following years he worked in a metal factory and an armaments factory. A keen reader and with his parents also active in the Co-operative Movement, he joined the Socialist Party and started attending night school. He eventually sat for the National Co-operative Scholarship for Ruskin College, Oxford, and won it in 1914.

He had become politically active, speaking on platforms in support of socialism and women's suffrage at Wood Green and Highbury Corner. He also began writing for the radical press. He became interested in Ireland at the time of the 1913 Dublin lock out and attended meetings in London addressed by Jim

Larkin, Bernard Shaw, George Russell, Con Lehane, Jack White and James Connolly.

In his biography he says: "Listening to Connolly in 1913 speaking about the struggle in Dublin, I felt that here was a man of quiet implacability, a quality that somehow discounted mere platform eloquence." Connolly's revolutionary approach appealed to him. Fox recalls meetings in Charlie Lehr's bookshop in Holborn, which was a rendezvous for radicals. Charlie Lehr took in lodgers and they were all members of the 'Wobblies', the Industrial Workers of the World. He decided to join the IWW and was elected onto the editorial board of their journal the *Industrial Worker*. This was printed by a German exile in a basement in Tottenham Court Road, London.

Richard Fox seemed to be gathering a reputation as a speaker. When the 1914-18 war started, like Lenin and Connolly he denounced it as an imperialist war. No worker should volunteer to fight against his or her fellow workers of other countries. This was not the position taken by leading members of the Labour Party. At a mass meeting at Finsbury Park Fox was chosen as the speaker to argue on behalf of the anti-war movement.

In 1916 he met Patricia Lynch, whose brother Henry was one of the active members of the IWW. He says that Patricia was then just 18, but had left school and was helping Sylvia Pankhurst. She was, he says, an enthusiastic Sinn Féin member and belonged to various Irish societies. Fox was impressed when Patricia went to Dublin and returned with her report on the 1916 uprising. Fox wrote: "We in north London hailed the Irish rising as the first crack in the as yet undisputed rule of the imperialists."

Eva Gore Booth (1870-1928) poet, trade unionist, feminist and sister of Connie Markiewicz, Miles Malleeson (1888-1969), the actor and writer, and Lady Clare Annesley, feminist, attended the Irish support meetings. Fox also visited Miles Malleeson's apartment in Russell Square to discuss events. The work of Miles Malleeson both as an actor and writer read like a potted history of British cinema. With conscription, objectors began to be rounded up.

In November, 1916, Fox himself was brought before a military court martial for refusing to serve in the British army. He was remanded for 112 days. Then, having been released, he was again brought before the military authorities but again refused to serve. He was then sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labour. Released at the beginning of 1919, even with the war over, he again refused to serve in the army and was sentenced to a second term of two years. He began a hunger strike along with many other political prisoners. In all, some 5,596 war objectors had been court martialled after the armistice in November, 1918. Of these, 240 had been given long terms of imprisonment and 63 objectors had 'died' since their arrest, nine of them while in prison.

Fox was released without any warning or reason in April,

1919. He began working at a War Victims charity in Chancery Lane, London. C W Daniel published Fox's first book *Factory Echoes*, in 1919, on social conditions at the factory workplace. In the autumn of 1919 he finally took up the scholarship he had won in 1914 to Ruskin College, Oxford. His main area of study was in economics and political science, as well as extra-curricula studies in literature and psychology. He joined the Oxford Labour Club and became editor of *New Oxford*.

Known for his labour journalism, he was invited to the new Soviet Russia in 1921 to see the results of the revolution and travelled there with the famous American dancer Isadora Duncan (1878-1927) She had been visiting Russia since 1904 and married the Russian poet Sergei Esenin. Among the people whom Fox met was Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya.

After returning to Oxford, during the Easter vacation of 1922, Fox decided to visit Dublin. The Treaty had just been agreed and there was an uneasy peace between parties. It seems that Fox had continued to keep in touch with Patricia Lynch, then in Dublin, with whom a romance had flourished and they planned to marry when Fox graduated. In Dublin he enthusiastically made contact with the leading socialist figures, attending gatherings at Delia Larkin's flat in Gardiner Street, meeting Peadar O'Donnell, Sean O'Casey and Liam O'Flaherty and AE (George Russell).

He went to see Erskine Childers, who was editing the weekly journal, *The Republic of Ireland*. Childers told the young Fox: "I took the oath of allegiance to the Republic. I meant it then, I am keeping it now. Whether others meant it or not is for them to say. "England has won a moral victory by the Treaty. For the first time Ireland has been induced to abandon her claim to complete independence. Ireland can only remain united on the basis of this demand for independence, anything short of this is bound to create internal strife. "It is the old story, some have wavered and given up the struggle. The rest of us are going on." He urged Fox to "make it clear" (to English readers) "that I am Irish -- I had an Irish mother, I spent my childhood in Ireland, and I have chosen Irish citizenship."

Childers also gave Fox an introduction to Alice Stopford Green (1847-1929), the pioneering Irish historian and feminist but who had decided to support the Treaty. She told Fox: "My husband" (John Richard Green) "had planned to write a history of Ireland similar to his *Short History of the English People* but when he came to undertake the task he found the record was so appalling that he could not bear to write it."

Fox also went to meetings in Maud Gonne MacBride's apartment, which she shared with Dorothy Macardle in Stephen's Green, where he also met Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, and Mrs Darrell Figgis, the wife of the poet, novelist, playwright who was then acting as chairman of the committee framing the Free State Constitution. Mrs Figgis had become politically estranged from the former secretary of Sinn Féin and killed herself in 1924 having found he had a mistress. A year later Figgis himself committed suicide. Fox returned to Oxford to continue his studies and watched with horror as the civil war erupted in Ireland on 28 June.

When he graduated from Ruskin he and Patricia Lynch were married in Dublin on 31 October 1922. Although they planned to settle in Ireland, he was offered a temporary job with the Labour Press Service in London and they spent some time on the continent travelling to Paris, Brussels and to Germany. They returned to Ireland. As Fox and his wife stepped off the boat at Dun Laoghaire he was immediately frisked for weapons by Free State troops. "I had no gun but I had an antique typewriter which I carried off to Rathfarnham at the foot of the mountains beyond Dublin. This, I hoped, would be my visible means of subsistence." He and Patricia had a total of £10. Fox's articles were accepted by AE editing the *Irish Statesman* and he

contributed to newspapers in England and the USA. Patricia was now making her reputation as a children's writer.

Fox began to publish with Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press in the late 1920s. But his best known works were

- *Rebel Irishwomen* (1935),
- *Green Banners: the story of the Irish struggle* (1938),
- *The History of the Irish Citizen Army* (1943),
- *James Connolly -- The Forerunner* (1943),
- *Years of Freedom: the story of Ireland 1921-48* (1948),
- *Jim Larkin: the rise of the underman* (1957)
- *Louie Bennett: her life and times* (1958).

His trip to Red China was described in *China Diary*, published in 1959. In 1937 Fox had written a memoir of his early years entitled *Smokey Crusade*. And in 1947 Patricia had written a semi-autobiographical account *with A Story-Teller's Childhood*. Her stories had brought her the Tailteann Festival Silver Medal in that year.

Richard and Patricia had settled at Glasnevin in Dublin and it was there in December, 1969, that he died. He was not 70 years old, as *The Times* reported, but 78. Following Richard's death Patricia moved to the home of her close friends, Eugene and Mai Lambert in Monkstown, Dublin where she died on September 1, 1972. They are both buried in Glasnevin. Patricia's work is well remembered and praised today. But Richard Fox tends to be overlooked. For my own teenage search, his books were an essential first step in studies of the Irish left.