

Boyle, (Christopher) Kevin

by Linde Lunney

Boyle, (Christopher) Kevin (1943–2010), lawyer, academic and human rights activist, was born on 23 May 1943 in Newry, Co. Down, the fourth of nine children of Louis Boyle, a taxi driver, and his wife Elizabeth (or Alice) (née McArdle). The family was catholic. Kevin was educated locally by the Christian Brothers in St Colman's Abbey Primary School and the Abbey Grammar School, and was an altar boy in Newry cathedral. From 1961 he studied law in QUB, graduating in 1965. The following year he was awarded a diploma in criminology from Cambridge University and returned to Queen's to teach in the law faculty. Boyle was one of the small number of academic staff in the university who supported the civil rights movement from its beginning in the late 1960s, campaigning for equality of rights for catholics. Civil rights marches were sometimes blocked by the RUC and attacked by supporters of Ian Paisley (1926–2014); after one march, in October 1968, Boyle joined increasingly radicalised students and others, including Bernadette Devlin, Michael Farrell and Eamonn McCann, to found People's Democracy (PD). Boyle was an influential member of the new group, and often their spokesman, articulating the frustration and anger of catholics as state and paramilitary violence increased and internment without trial was introduced.

Boyle's statements and opinion articles very seldom expressed any extreme or sectarian views. His comment – made in a speech at an anti-internment rally in Belfast in August 1971 – that the 'Orange card' could no longer be played because 'we have burned the pack' was out of character (perhaps even misattributed), but undoubtedly reflected the extreme volatility of the situation (*Kerryman*, 28 August 1971). His understanding of the role of law in society and his commitment to equality and fairness gave him a more nuanced understanding of the political situation than most of his colleagues in PD and other organisations. Boyle eventually turned his back on direct action, and eschewed the violence and confrontation with which some other activists, among them former colleagues, very quickly got involved. With hindsight, in evidence given in June 2001 to the Saville inquiry into the 'Bloody Sunday' shootings of 30 January 1972, he described some of the events of those times as 'foolhardy', but strongly defended the right of people to protest against the legal and moral iniquity of internment and against the disproportionate violence of the security forces.

In February 1971 his move to establish a committee to coordinate the various protest groups and to take civil disobedience in new directions was rejected by the NI Civil Rights Association, which then replaced him as its press officer. He was called to the Northern Ireland bar in September 1971, and on occasion represented people accused of terrorist offences. Still busy with university work and teaching, he was

increasingly involved in activism in international human rights, though Irish issues continued to engage his attention, and his research activity, throughout his career.

Boyle had a sabbatical year (1972–3) in the USA as a visiting fellow in Yale Law School. He recognised the influence that the American civil rights movement of the 1960s had exerted in Northern Ireland, spurring people to combat long-standing grievances and inequalities, and saw west Belfast's catholic enclaves as analogous to the ghettos of Detroit. Called to the Irish bar in 1978, in that year Boyle also became professor of law in UCG, and ultimately was dean of the law faculty there. During a very productive period of his career, he worked to develop the teaching and resources of the faculty in Galway, expanded the law library, and in 1980 helped to establish the pioneering Irish Centre for Human Rights in the college. He was one of the campaigners for decriminalisation of homosexuality in Ireland, and in 1979 acted as a trustee of the Hirschfeld Centre in Dublin, which housed the National Gay Federation. In 1981 he was a member of the legal team representing the Northern Irish gay activist Jeffrey Dudgeon before the European Court of Human Rights, which resulted in the eventual reform of laws on homosexuality in Northern Ireland.

Over the course of a long career in academic law, Boyle published a number of influential books and many articles (some along with a former colleague from Queen's, Tom Hadden), analysing such topics as Northern Ireland's emergency powers, religious freedom, civil liberties and policing, and examining the legitimacy of non-jury Diplock courts. In 1984 the two academics worked as law and rights advisors to the New Ireland Forum, set up by the Irish government to examine ways to help end the conflict in Northern Ireland. Boyle also brought some of the early cases involving people from Northern Ireland before the European Commission of Human Rights.

Increasingly recognised internationally as an authority on human rights, Boyle travelled abroad on fact-finding and advocacy missions, sometimes on behalf of Amnesty International, in The Gambia, Somalia and South Africa, and on cases involving complaints by the Kurdish minority of ill-treatment in Turkey. He was acknowledged as having greatly assisted the Kurdish quest for civil rights, by taking many cases to the European Court of Human Rights.

In 1987 Boyle was a founding member of Article 19, an NGO named in honour of article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which called for freedom of opinion and expression. Boyle moved to London as its first director, and was involved with high-profile campaigns worldwide. He had long criticised the media bans imposed on Sinn Féin and IRA spokesmen in the Republic of Ireland as well as in the United Kingdom. Through Article 19 he also worked on a major initiative to support the author Salman Rushdie, who was under a fatwa issued by Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran calling for his assassination. A 'world statement' supporting Rushdie had over 12,000 signatures, including those of several celebrated authors.

Appointed professor of law in the University of Essex in 1989, Boyle devoted most of his remaining career to the university, developing the Centre for International Human Rights Law (later to become the world-renowned Human Rights Centre), and serving as its director (1990–2001; 2003–07); he spent the intervening period (2001–02) in Geneva as special advisor to Mary Robinson when she was UN high commissioner for human rights. In 1990 the University of Essex established an MA in human rights, attracting many students, who, like others from Queen's and Galway, would acknowledge the influence of Boyle's teaching and example on later careers.

Boyle received numerous honours from the many voluntary organisations, civil rights watchdog groups, and pressure groups of which he was a member, and from various academic institutions. He was visiting scholar in a number of universities worldwide, including Maine, USA, and La Trobe, Australia. He was selected, along with an Essex colleague, as Liberty's UK human rights lawyer of the year in 1998, and he was awarded an honorary MA from Essex and an honorary doctorate of laws from NUIG in 2010. Boyle suffered from cancer, and died on 25 December 2010 in Colchester, Essex. Shortly before his death, colleagues at Essex presented him with an impressive Festschrift, *Strategic visions for human rights*, published in 2011. An international video conference honouring Boyle took place in 2011, and in that year a prize in his memory was instituted by the Irish Association of Law Teachers.

Boyle married (1976) Joan Smyth, a language teacher, with whom he had two sons. A huge archive of papers and other materials, covering the whole of Boyle's important and varied career, was deposited by his family in the Hardiman Library in NUIG, where it was catalogued, and opened to scholars in 2014. The information it contains will be of importance to historians of Northern Ireland's most troubled times, to social and legal historians interested in changes in public attitudes, and to historians of professional education. In all of these fields Kevin Boyle played significant roles, but will probably be remembered most for his contribution to the development of the study of human rights, and to awareness worldwide of the universality of human rights.

Ir. Times, esp.: 17 Oct. 1968; 1 Jan. 2011; *Kerryman*, 28 Aug. 1971; *Ir. Independent*, *passim*, esp.: 12 June 2001; 29 Dec. 2010; 'Irish human rights academic, Kevin Boyle, passes away' (29 December 2010), <http://kurdistancommentary.wordpress.com/2010/12/29/irish-human-rights-academic-kevin-boyle-passes-away/>; *Guardian*, 2 Jan. 2011; *Sunday Independent*, 2 Jan. 2011; Barry Houlihan, 'Introduction: Professor Kevin Boyle papers, 1965–2010' (Nov. 2014), Boyle Archive catalogue, James Hardiman Library, NUIG, www.library.nuigalway.ie/media/jameshardimanlibrary/Catalogue-of-the-Boyle-Archive-FV-PDF.pdf (internet material accessed Aug.–Sept. 2016)

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