

Harkin, Nora

by Turlough O'Riordan

Harkin, Nora (1910–2012), republican socialist, was born on 15 September 1910 at her parents' farm in Breenagh, near Glenswilly, in the Co. Donegal Gaeltacht. Her father, Michael McGinley (1852–1940), a Fenian, wrote the ballad 'Glenswilly' as he sailed to New Zealand in 1878. Returning in 1880, he married (1901) Bridget McDevitt, eighteen years his junior. They farmed a small holding at Breenagh, later leasing a pub in Strabane, Co. Tyrone, before settling in Ballybofey, Co. Donegal. Michael McGinley maintained strong Fenian principles throughout his life, and memorialised the summary execution of four anti-treaty republicans in Drumboe on 14 March 1923 in the ballad 'The woods of Drumboe' (aka 'The Drumboe martyrs'). Nora's upbringing was steeped in nationalist history: her maternal grandfather, Antoin Ned McDevitt (1825–1917), recounted to her his memories of the great famine, and her republican family disdained the constitutional and geographical compromises of the Irish Free State. Such influences combined with the emigration of both her brothers to America (though one later returned) and the stark poverty of post-independence Donegal to form her lifelong republican socialism.

A talented performer, she sang and danced at concerts and ceilidhs in the Ballybofey area. She moved to Dublin in spring 1932 to fill a temporary, six-week post in the Irish Hospital Sweepstake, where she remained for some years. That October, at a ceilidh in the Mansion House to raise funds for the Republican Prisoners' Dependants' Fund, she was introduced to Charlie Harkin. Hailing from Newtownstewart, Co. Tyrone, though recently returned from America where he had been active in Clan na Gael, Harkin introduced her to republican socialist circles in Dublin, centred around George Gilmore (qv), his fiancée Cora Hughes, and Bobbie Walsh (d. 1988). Nora and Bobbie shared a flat together and worked in the sweepstake, forming an enduring personal friendship and political partnership; Bobbie later married the left-wing republican Frank Edwards (1907–83). Charlie Harkin, more socialist than mainstream republicans, left the IRA with Peadar O'Donnell (qv), was a founder in 1934 of Republican Congress, and was close to Frank Ryan (qv). Nora and Charlie married (18 April 1938) in the catholic church at Stranorlar, Co. Donegal. Working in the Department of Justice for a time, Charlie suffered ongoing ill health before his death in 1979; Nora was the family's sole earner for long periods as they raised their two boys (a daughter died in infancy).

Rejecting both the IRA's militarism and the chauvinistic nationalism associated with the Ireland of Éamon de Valera (qv) – aggravated for her by the subjugation of women implicit in the Irish constitution of 1937 – Nora Harkin strongly embraced left republicanism. A member of the Republican Congress executive, she experienced the fraught political atmosphere of Dublin in the 1930s, and was batoned off the streets on several occasions. She was a member of the women's aid committee of

the Irish Friends of the Spanish Republic, which was chaired by Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington (qv). The group initially appealed for medical aid and funds for republican forces in Spain, and later assisted Irish veterans of the international brigades in Spain, who were socially ostracised and had difficulties gaining employment (Frank Edwards lost his teaching job due to ecclesiastical pressure from the local catholic bishop). The Soviet Union's defence of the Spanish republic was a key totem for Harkin and her colleagues, but, though sympathetic to communism, she (like Sheehy-Skeffington and Rosamond Jacob (qv)) did not join the Communist Party, believing she could accomplish more outside than in it.

Harkin also had strong cultural interests, and in 1937 was a founding member of the overtly anti-fascist and proletarian New Theatre Group centred around Thomas O'Brien (qv) (1914–74), which performed contemporary American and European leftist drama. She also sang on Radio Éireann and appeared on stage at the Peacock Theatre and other Dublin venues.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Harkin spent much of her time working for Electrolux, the home-appliance manufacturer. In October 1966 she co-founded the Ireland–USSR Society, with John Swift (qv) and Bobbie and Frank Edwards, amongst others. She was assistant secretary of the society, and made the first of almost twenty visits to the Soviet Union in 1968, becoming widely travelled across central Asia and the Baltic states. She described viewing the memorial to the 500,000 citizens of Leningrad who died defending their city from German onslaught (1941–4) as the most moving experience of her life. When Minister for Foreign Affairs Garret FitzGerald (qv) established diplomatic relations with the USSR in 1973, he paid tribute to the society's efforts in improving relations between the two countries. Harkin and the society's treasurer, Angela McQuillan (wife of Jack McQuillan (qv)), were its driving forces, and in 1987 Harkin was elected the society's chair. On 2 April 1989 she was among the guests invited by the Department of Foreign Affairs to welcome Chairman Mikhail Gorbachev to Shannon Airport. The Soviet ambassador to Ireland, Gennadi Uranov, made a presentation to her on her 80th birthday (1990). Over the years, the society brought her into contact with new generations of left-leaning activists, artists and writers; its twenty-first anniversary commemorative publication included articles by Michael D. Higgins and Theo Dorgan (whose poem 'Nora Harkin remembers Peadar O'Donnell' was published in his collection *The ordinary house of love* (1990)). After the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the society, after much internal debate, decided to establish contacts with the fifteen newly independent, post-Soviet republics, renaming itself the Irish International Friendship Society. Harkin and McQuillan formed an Ireland–Russia Society, but both endeavours soon petered out.

Harkin was a founding member of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement, and served on its executive committee in the 1970s. With Louise, wife of Kader Asmal (qv), she organised the dispatch of material support for prisoners and their families in South

Africa. In the 1970s and 1980s, Harkin volunteered with the Irish Family Planning Association, often assisting at reception in their clinics.

Nora first met Peadar O'Donnell when, aged 13, she cycled from Ballybofey to Letterkenny to deliver a note to him from her father during the civil war. After her husband's death, they corresponded and re-established contact. From May 1979, O'Donnell lived with Harkin at her home, The Lodge, Monkstown, Co. Dublin, until his death in 1986. Nora hosted the many visitors making political and literary pilgrimages to O'Donnell, and in the two decades before her own death was often interviewed by scholars, activists and journalists. She contributed a foreword to a reissue of Patrick Byrne's *The Irish Republican Congress revisited* (1994). Harkin died on 7 June 2012 at Ashbury Nursing Home, Kill Avenue, Blackrock, Co. Dublin; her funeral mass was held on 12 June at St Patrick's church, Monkstown, before her burial in Dean's Grange cemetery.

Like many on the Irish left, Harkin was motivated by her disenchantment at the failure of the independent Irish state to live up to the ideals of the 1916 proclamation. This inspired her broad concern for the marginalised in Ireland and elsewhere. She was notable for her praise of female republican socialists, such as Helena Molony (qv), long before their full recognition in Irish historiography.

GRO (birth, marriage certs.); image of Michael and Bridget McGinley (1920s), www.mcginleyclan.org/photographs.htm; *Donegal News*, 7 Sept. 1940; 27 Feb. 2004; 29 June 2012; *Ireland–USSR: 21st anniversary, Ireland–USSR Society 1987*; *Ir. Times*, 3 Apr. 1989; 17 Mar. 1990; 23 Sept. 1993; 1 Sept. 1994; 23 June 2012; *Ir. Press*, 6 June 1989; *Ir. Independent*, 8 Feb. 1990; John P. Swift, *John Swift: an Irish dissident* (1991); *Donegal Democrat*, 18, 25 Feb. 1993; H. Gustav Klaus (ed.), *Strong words, brave deeds: the poetry, life and times of Thomas O'Brien, volunteer in the Spanish civil war* (1994), 32–3; Patrick Byrne, *The Irish Republican Congress revisited* (1994), 5, 24, 37, 44; Irish Family Planning Association, annual report 1997; Margaret Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: a life* (1997), 332; *No Pasarán* [(1997)], interview: 1–2; Peter Hegarty, *Peadar O'Donnell* (1999), 302–4; Fearghal McGarry, *Irish politics and the Spanish civil war* (1999); *Sunday Independent*, 13 Feb. 2000; 7 Aug. 2001; Emmet O'Connor, *Reds and the green: Ireland, Russia and the Communist Internationals 1919–43* (2004); www.rip.ie (9 June 2012); *Socialist Voice*, July 2012, www.comunistpartyofireland.ie; Michael Quinn, 'The Ireland–USSR Society, 1966–92', *Saothar*, xxxviii (2013); id., 'Irish–Soviet diplomatic and friendship relations, 1918–80' (Ph.D. thesis, NUI Maynooth, 2014); 'Glenswilly', Irish Traditional Music Archive, catalogue record, itmacatalogues.ie/Default/en-GB/RecordView/Index/79310#; RTÉ visual archives: 'Nora Harkin', *Old heads*, episode 6 (14 Dec. 1989); 'Between two eternities', *Would you believe* (13 Jan. 1994); 'Irish

women since the 1920s, part 1: 1920s–1940s', *Hoodwinked*, episode 3 (10 Mar. 1997); *Remembering the century*, episode 4 (19 Dec. 1999)

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