

Lehane, Con

by Terry Clavin

Lehane, Con (1912–83), republican, politician, solicitor and actor, was born in Belfast on 7 May 1912, the only surviving child of Denis Lehane (Donncadh Ó Liatháinn), an excise officer originally from Co. Cork, and his wife Mary (née Connolly), a native of the Falls Road in Belfast. He grew up in an Irish-speaking household, as both parents were prominent in the Irish-language movement, particularly his father who was a longstanding member of the Gaelic League's executive and had published extensively in Irish, both original poetry and translations. One uncle, Michael Lehane, was a leading trade unionist in Dublin; another, Joseph Connolly (qv), was a Fianna Fáil senator and government minister. His father's work led the family to move to Hartlepool in England in 1912 and then in 1920 to Dublin, where Con attended Synge Street CBS. For the final year and a half of school, he boarded at Clongowes Wood College, Co. Kildare, describing this as a detestable but formative experience.

While attending law lectures in UCD from 1929, he befriended future president of Ireland Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh (qv) and was active in the Gaelic League and in the republican club. Lehane joined the IRA in 1929 and formed an important early association with Seán MacBride (qv), supporting the latter's short-lived attempt in 1931 to establish Saor Éire as the IRA's left-wing political auxiliary. He also struck up a firm friendship with Frank Ryan (qv), going on the run with him in 1931. When Ryan and other like-minded left-wingers formed the Republican Congress in 1934, resulting in their expulsion from the IRA, Lehane sympathised but stayed loyal to the army council. His friendship with Ryan endured, as the personable Lehane had a capacity for remaining on good terms with all sides throughout the splits regularly besetting the republican movement. (In 1979 he delivered the graveside oration when Ryan's remains were reinterred in Glasnevin.)

Along with the rest of the Dublin IRA, Lehane canvassed on behalf of Fianna Fáil in the 1932 general election and participated in the widespread fraudulent voting, having responsibility for seven polling booths. During the IRA's ensuing honeymoon with the new Fianna Fáil government, he emerged as one of its most prominent and fiery orators, regularly speaking at public meetings and graveside commemorations. In autumn 1932 he became secretary of the IRA-controlled Boycott British League, which pressured retailers not to stock British sweets, ales and newspapers. He led and spoke at anti-imperialist rallies directed against first world war commemorations and public display of the union jack, and participated enthusiastically in brawls with the Blueshirts and later with the police. In 1934 he was elected to the Gaelic League's executive as part of the IRA's successful takeover of that organisation, but later admitted that politicising the Irish language was misguided.

Having either co-opted or pacified much of the IRA's membership with jobs, pensions and assertions of Irish sovereignty, the Fianna Fáil government struck decisively against the irreconcilable remnants in 1935. Then on the IRA army council, Lehane was caught in a mass roundup in March and received a relatively harsh sentence of eighteen months for a seditious speech. As prisoner OC at Arbour Hill, from June he led the republican prisoners' resistance to the authorities' imposition of criminal status. There were altercations with the prison guards, and Lehane was twice denied food for extended periods before benefiting from a general amnesty (23 December 1935).

Lehane was re-arrested in May 1936, but soon released upon assuring the authorities in a notably abject letter that he had left the IRA and wanted to concentrate on his legal career. He had established his own practice with G. Hogan in 1934 after serving an apprenticeship in O'Connor Solicitors, whose head was a former member of the IRB supreme council. Based in Ormond Quay, Lehane and Hogan Solicitors received briefs from republican barristers and defended trade unionists, republicans and radicals. Upon marrying Marie O'Neill, of Eglinton Road, Dublin, in 1937, Lehane could afford to honeymoon in Italy and regularly enjoyed sun holidays. The couple lived in his family home on the Lower Kimmage Road, and had a son and two daughters. A well-known Dublin raconteur and socialite, Lehane defied popular stereotypes of the fanatical, down-at-heel republican by exuding glamour and good cheer.

He continued for a time in the much-diminished IRA, albeit far more covertly, as the Dublin Brigade's intelligence officer. Opposed to the takeover by Seán Russell (qv) of the army council (April 1938) and the subsequent instigation of a bombing campaign against civilian targets in Britain, he was increasingly inactive. This did not save him from being interned in Arbour Hill upon the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939. He conducted an unsuccessful nine-day hunger strike before being released on 2 December. Later that month he went into hiding following the IRA's raid on an Irish army fort, but soon realised that the authorities had no interest in him. His IRA membership effectively lapsed thereafter, as he settled into a life of bourgeois bohemianism.

From the late 1930s he worked increasingly with MacBride, who had by then qualified as a barrister, in defending republicans. The duo frequently refused payment for such cases. The government's ruthless repression of the IRA during the Emergency kept them busy, usually in lost causes, although in 1943 Lehane helped save Mick Quill from execution by carefully schooling three women in providing a false alibi. (In 1947 he similarly saved the IRA's most notorious activist, Harry White (qv), by casting enough doubt on the medical evidence to have his conviction changed on appeal from murder to manslaughter.) He dabbled in politics, being a founding member in 1940 of a new constitutional republican party, Córás na Poblachta, which lapsed after faring dismally in the 1942 local and 1943 general elections.

In the early 1940s he performed in the Peacock Theatre with the Irish-language acting troupe An Comhar Drámaíochta. After it merged with the Abbey Theatre, he was among those An Comhar actors who founded Compántas, which staged bilingual variety shows in various venues until 1958, the sporadic use of extremely basic Irish complementing the unsubtle, largely physical humour. In 1944 Compántas enjoyed success with a Christmas pantomime in which Lehané's sketch 'Huntin', shootin', fishin'" was especially popular. Around this time he also starred in a Radio Éireann comedy, 'Micka and Mickser', alongside his fellow Compántas member Seamus Kavanagh. In partnership with Kavanagh, he emerged as a leading comedy actor on stage and on radio, specialising in Colonel Blimp-type roles while also occasionally turning out as a grand dame.

Following the end of the Emergency and the lifting of press censorship, Lehané's and MacBride's legal and political campaigning aroused sympathy for the republican prisoners. Appearing at the inquest in 1946 into the death in Portlaoise prison of Sean McCaughey, they embarrassed the government by publicising McCaughey's privations. Soon after, Clann na Poblachta was founded as a constitutional left-republican party with MacBride as leader and Lehané as his deputy. Benefiting from widespread disillusionment with Fianna Fáil and from a weak and divided opposition, the new party seemed set to carry all before it, but the government's scaremongering restricted it to ten seats in the 1948 general election with Lehané elected for Dublin South Central.

Lehané argued that to avoid alienating republican voters Clann na Poblachta should support, but not directly participate in, the mooted Fine Gael-led, anti-Fianna Fáil coalition. Instead, MacBride persuaded the party to join the new government and surprised everyone by choosing Noel Browne (qv) rather than Lehané to accompany him into the cabinet. Lehané was widely respected as an experienced and tough political operator with impeccable republican credentials, but MacBride wanted someone without an IRA past and considered Browne less likely to cause trouble.

The old IRA element in Clann na Poblachta distrusted MacBride and looked to an aggrieved Lehané to keep him honest. A frequent speaker in dáil debates, Lehané sharply questioned government ministers in a bid to placate those republicans, Irish-language enthusiasts and left-wingers in his party dissatisfied with the compromises of coalition. He was particularly critical of the Garda Síochána, calling for the abolition of its special branch. While he tended towards a theatrical focus on symbolic issues, his stances were not entirely contrived and reflected genuine differences with MacBride, who believed that Lehané's more bellicose utterances alarmed potential supporters. Yet Lehané always stopped short of outright rebellion and cajoled wavering deputies – even once a Labour deputy – into supporting the coalition line.

As the fateful rift between MacBride and Browne developed from early 1951, Lehané and his republican cohorts initially sympathised with Browne's desire for Clann na

Poblachta to withdraw from the government over its failure to support his ambitious health scheme for mothers and children. The politically inept Browne, however, kept his distance from Lehane, who changed tack in late March by rallying behind MacBride with a view to becoming a minister. When Browne resigned from the cabinet and Clann na Poblachta in April, he published correspondence revealing MacBride as embarrassingly deferential towards the catholic church's objections to the mother and child scheme. Disastrously misjudging public sentiment, Lehane intemperately condemned Browne and suffered a resounding defeat in his constituency amid the near annihilation of Clann na Poblachta in the May general election.

He never stood for the dáil again, but remained active in the ailing Clann na Poblachta and was elected to Dublin Corporation in 1955, overcoming a lack of transfers with a strong first-preference vote. When the Fine Gael-led coalition responded to the IRA's border campaign by introducing relatively mild repressive measures early in 1957, Lehane and MacBride unsuccessfully urged party members against toppling the coalition. Lehane did not seek re-election for Dublin Corporation in 1960 and drifted from Clann na Poblachta, joining the Labour party for a time in the mid 1960s. In 1963 political controversy arose when Telefís Éireann cancelled the broadcast of an interview in which Lehane robustly expressed his republican views.

Having performed in variety shows and pantomimes as a TD, Lehane maintained a regular presence on stage and radio into the late 1950s and thereafter landed small parts in Irish-speaking dramas on radio and television. His legal practice remained profitable, attracting celebrity clients such as his friend Brendan Behan (qv), and the political and social ferment of the late 1960s provided him with plenty of causes and casework. He was involved in the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland and prominent in protests against the Vietnam war, the unsympathetic redevelopment of Dublin's city centre, anti-squatting legislation, and Ireland's entry into the EEC. In 1969 he was founding chairman of Citizens for Civil Liberties, a pressure group formed to oppose objectionable clauses in the criminal justice bill, and vigorously pursued a war of words with the justice minister, Micheál Ó Móráin (qv).

The outbreak of the Northern Ireland troubles in 1969 enabled Lehane to resume his role as the resurgent IRA's main solicitor in the Irish republic. After wardens in Portlaoise prison demanded the right to search a file he was carrying while visiting an incarcerated client in 1977, he established an important precedent in securing a high court ruling that prisoners had the right to be interviewed privately by their legal counsel. In 1982 he counselled a Sinn Féin political candidate engaged in an unsuccessful constitutional challenge to the ministerial directive barring RTÉ from broadcasting anything that could be regarded as helpful to groups engaged in political violence. Accepted as an honest broker by all the republican factions, he mediated between the IRSP, the Provisional IRA and the Official IRA during their feuds.

Latterly, Lehane lived in Warrenhouse Road, Baldoyle, Co. Dublin, and enjoyed holidaying in the Soviet Union. A keen walker in his youth, he later took up swimming and golf, and was a member and captain of Howth Golf Club. He was still practising as a solicitor when he died in Dublin on 18 September 1983.

---

*Ir. Press*, 28 Mar., 11 Nov., 13 Dec. 1932; 16 Mar. 1934; 2 Sept., 5 Oct. 1935; 10 Sept. 1937; 20, 23 Oct., 4 Dec. 1939; 30 Dec. 1944; 29 Jan. 1945; 3 June 1946; 24 Feb. 1947; 14 Jan., 5, 13 July 1948; 26 Feb. 1949; 7 Aug. 1950; 18 Apr., 1 June 1951; 25 June 1955; 21 Feb. 1969; 9 May 1972; 15 June 1977; 20, 21 Sept. 1983; *Ir. Times*, 25 Apr. 1935; 1 July 1948; 22 Oct. 1949; 23, 25 Feb. 1953; 31 Mar. 1965; 16 Feb. 1968; 12 Feb. 1976; 18 Feb. 1982; 27 Sept. 1983; *Leader*, 4 Aug. 1945; *Ir. Independent*, 25 June, 8 Dec. 1948; 14 Oct 1968; Seamus Wilmot, 'The Gaelic theatre', *Eire-Ireland* (summer 1968), 63–71; J. Bowyer Bell, *The secret army* (1972); *ITWW*; *Hibernia*, 12 Apr. 1979 (profile); Uinseann MacEoin, *Survivors* (1980); Sean Cronin, *Frank Ryan: the search for the republic* (1980); Harry White and Uinseann MacEoin, *Harry: the story of Harry White* (1985); Noel Browne, *Against the tide* (1986); Pádraig Ó Siadhail, *Stair dhrámaíocht na Gaeilge 1900–1970* (1993); Kevin Rafter, *The Clann: the story of Clann na Poblachta* (1996); Uinseann MacEoin, *The IRA in the twilight years, 1923–1948* (1997); Eithne MacDermott, *Clann na Poblachta* (1998); David McCullagh, *A makeshift majority: the first inter-party government, 1948–51* (1998); John Horgan, *Noël Browne: passionate outsider* (2000); Máire Ní Mhurchú agus Diarmuid Breathnach, *1983–2002: Beathaisnéis* (2003); Seán MacBride, *That day's struggle: a memoir 1904–1951* (2005); Robert J. Savage, *A loss of innocence?: television and Irish society, 1960–72* (2010)