

Mac Aonghusa, Proinsias

by Patrick Maume

Mac Aonghusa, Proinsias (1933–2003), journalist and Irish language activist, was born in Salthill Nursing Home, Co. Galway, on 23 June 1933, eldest of four children (two sons and two daughters) of Criostóir Mac Aonghusa (qv), writer and language activist, and his wife Mairéad Ní Lupain (De Lappe), nurse and native Irish speaker.

Mac Aonghusa's parents were Fianna Fáil supporters with left-republican views; their circle included Máirtín Ó Cadhain (qv). Mac Aonghusa was strongly influenced by the Marxist-leaning views of Ó Cadhain and Peadar O'Donnell (qv), which linked republicanism, socialism, cultural autonomy, and the economic well-being of the small-farm West, and saw the clericalism and economic failure of the post-independence state as betraying the independence struggle. Mac Aonghusa spent his early years in Rosmuc, Co. Galway, but moved to Dublin aged 10 after his parents separated; he allegedly only learned to speak English aged eleven. He was educated at St Ignatius College, Galway, and later recalled how the life of Galway at the time seemed utterly dominated by Bishop Michael Browne (qv). In later life he joined the Church of Ireland, of which his wife Catherine McGuinness (née Ellis), later to be the first female judge of the Irish supreme court, was a member. They had two sons and a daughter.

After leaving school Mac Aonghusa became an actor with the Abbey Theatre (which then emphasised knowledge of the Irish language). From 1952 he moved to Radio Éireann, at first as actor and reader of short stories, then current affairs presenter and interviewer on the Sunday programme 'Aeriris'. He later worked as a freelance broadcaster, maintaining his own recording studio and working through his own company, An Comhlacht Taifeachta Teo.

In 1966 Mac Aonghusa was involved with other prominent Gaeilgeoirí, including Ó Cadhain, in disrupting public meetings of the Language Freedom Movement, which advocated abolition of compulsory Irish in the education system. This disruption was widely criticised as illiberal. Mac Aonghusa's behaviour reflected his intense nationalism and commitment to the Irish language, coupled with the view that those holding views he regarded as un-national were 'slaves' and 'hiredlings' unworthy of toleration.

In 1962 and again in 1964 Mac Aonghusa presented 'An fear agus a scéal', a weekly television series in which he interviewed a distinguished person about his or her life, with a summary appearing the weekend before the broadcast in the *Sunday Review* (a short-lived tabloid owned by the *Irish Times*); the series won a Jacob's Award in 1962. Two interviews (with Ó Cadhain and Con Lehane), which criticised anti-IRA measures by the de Valera government during the Second World War, were

not broadcast due to the intervention of the Fianna Fáil government. A programme which Mac Aonghusa presented calling into question the utility of civil defence measures as a response to nuclear war was later suppressed at the insistence of Kevin Boland (qv), then minister for defence, and Mac Aonghusa's bilingual (anonymous) political gossip column 'Who fears to speak', sharply critical of Fianna Fáil, was dropped by the *Sunday Independent* under pressure from the minister for agriculture, Neil Blaney (qv). Mac Aonghusa subsequently published a political column in the *Sunday Press* as 'Gulliver' and a gossip column on the back page of *Hibernia* magazine. Nollaig Ó Gadhra (1943–2008) noted that throughout his life Mac Aonghusa 'suffered from a passion to write gossip under various names and indeed no name at all ... that will make it difficult to evaluate his own journalistic legacy in the future' (*Connacht Tribune*, 3 Sept. 2003).

His broadcasting career is particularly associated with the lively and popular Irish# language television current affairs programme 'Féach' on which he was both presenter and editor. Mac Aonghusa resigned from 'Féach' in 1972 after a dispute with the broadcaster and commentator Eoghan Harris.

In 1975–6 Mac Aonghusa worked as a special consultant to Seán MacBride (qv), who as UN special representative for South#West Africa (Namibia) was trying to negotiate the independence of that territory, then controlled by apartheid South Africa. Mac Aonghusa published a diary of his African experiences, which involved developing the national broadcasting system, in *Gaillimh: agus aistí eile* (1983). On returning to Ireland in 1976 he applied for the directorship of Raidió na Gaeltachta, but although the interview board unanimously favoured him the RTÉ Authority chose another candidate. (Mac Aonghusa, a master of the leak, conveyed a record of these proceedings to the Irish# language newspaper *Inniu*.) He subsequently returned to 'Féach' and remained its editor until his final retirement from RTÉ in 1985.

His career as a broadcaster was paralleled by involvement in left#wing politics. In 1958 he was a founder of the 1913 Club, which called for a reconciliation of nationalism and socialism; members included David Thornley (qv), Noel Browne (qv), Owen Sheehy#Skeffington (qv), and Desmond Ryan (qv). In 1959 MacAonghusa wrote a series of six articles in the *Irish Times* opposing the Fianna Fáil government's proposed constitutional amendment to abolish proportional representation (reprinted as a pamphlet, *PR in Ireland*); he maintained that the first past the post system gave excessive power to party bosses, and that by giving even small groups a chance to influence government formation, PR prevented the formation of 'discontented and sullen minorities' permanently excluded from power like the nationalists of Northern Ireland.

In the early 1960s Mac Aonghusa and Catherine McGuinness joined the Dublin# based Sean Connolly branch of the Labour Party, seen as a haven for 'intellectuals' who found the traditional domination of the organisation by trade unionists uncongenial. The branch combined advocacy of expressly socialist policies with

hard work on the ground, and through their talents and efforts Mac Aonghusa and McGuinness (who as parliamentary officer from 1961 was the dáil party's principal speechwriter and supplier of secretarial support) came to exercise considerable influence over the party leader, Brendan Corish (qv). Mac Aonghusa was the unsuccessful Labour candidate for Louth in the 1965 general election; in 1966 he edited a short selection of Corish's speeches (to a considerable extent written by McGuinness, with some input by Mac Aonghusa), with an introduction proclaiming that Corish, by developing a 'brand of democratic republican socialism ... broadened by experience and built firmly on Irish#Ireland roots' and by replacing 'do#nothing backwoodsmen' (widely seen as a reference to the party's old guard, particularly the deputy leader, James Tully (qv)) with 'vital young politicians', had established himself as the 'first plausible and respected Labour leader in Ireland'.

Mac Aonghusa became vice#chairman of the Labour party and briefly chaired a committee which reorganised its structures and finances. He tried unsuccessfully to persuade Corish to contest the 1966 presidential election, and subsequently endorsed the Fine Gael candidate Thomas F. O'Higgins (qv). Mac Aonghusa was simultaneously active in the left#republican Wolfe Tone Society, linked to the leftist leadership of Sinn Féin, and appealed for republicans of 'progressive' views to join the Labour party.

He made many enemies by his openly expressed contempt for the right#wing of the party and its trade union associates (at one point an unsuccessful attempt was made to have the party's administrative council censure him for endorsing breakaway unions) and his habit of making policy pronouncements without reference to party structures. In late 1966 the Labour Association or Young Labour League, an unofficial body formed with Mac Aonghusa's encouragement by the actor Brian O'Higgins, son of the republican Brian O'Higgins (qv), began publishing an anonymous weekly *Labour Newsletter*, containing violent anonymous criticism of the traditionalists in general and Tully in particular. When the administrative council condemned the publication, Mac Aonghusa admitted he had helped finance it and written some of its contents, but denied he wrote the anti#Tully material. After refusing to co#operate with further inquiries, Mac Aonghusa was expelled from the Labour party on 12 January 1967. Partly through the administrative council's incompetence in explaining its position, he received widespread sympathy when he portrayed himself as an inspirational leftist sacrificed to right#wing dirty tricks by the arbitrary decisions of a 'star chamber', but the expulsion was confirmed by the October 1967 party conference (where he was allowed to argue his case).

For a while Mac Aonghusa expressed sympathy for the social democratic wing of Fine Gael, and in the 1969 general election unsuccessfully contested Dun Laoghaire–Rathdown as an independent. The Northern Ireland troubles and the 1970 arms crisis in Dublin brought a final re#alignment. Although Mac Aonghusa supported the Official Sinn Féin line on Northern Ireland in 1969–70 (he later fell out with the party and was hostile to their influence within RTÉ), his coverage of the

arms crisis for the *New Statesman* and other left-wing journals was favourable to the defendants; he warned editors that his material should not be used in papers circulating in the Republic of Ireland because of the *sub judice* rule, and official attempts were made to block the transmission of his telexed reports.

For the rest of his life Mac Aonghusa was a staunch friend and supporter of Charles Haughey (1925–2006); his ‘Gulliver’ column in the *Sunday Press* was widely criticised for its exaltation of the controversial Fianna Fáil leader and accused of descending to self-parody, as were the similar sentiments of his column in the Irish-language paper *Anois*. He still regarded himself as a socialist; in his 1995 selection of quotations from James Connolly (qv), *What Connolly said*, he declares in the introduction that ‘the abolition of capitalism is essential if the great mass of the people in all parts of the globe are to be emancipated’, argues that the Stalinist regimes of eastern Europe were not truly socialist, sees the social democracies of Scandinavia as the sort of society desired by Connolly and a possible model for future development, and accuses the Irish education system and ‘commercial mass media’ of deliberately suppressing Connolly’s views and engaging in clever propaganda against socialism and nationalism. Although paradoxical, this combination of loyalties was not so strange as it appears; the mid-century Irish cultural Bohemia which provided Mac Aonghusa’s formative experiences had a significant Irish-language element and combined elements of socialism and ultra-republicanism in its general reaction against drab respectability. Haughey and Mac Aonghusa shared a certain cultural flamboyance (Mac Aonghusa was a noted bibliophile and art collector), a love of the grand gesture and of the west of Ireland, and a sense that critics of the republican tradition could automatically be dismissed as mental and moral pygmies. Mac Aonghusa revered Patrick Pearse (qv) as well as Connolly; he published two selections, *The best of Pearse* (1967) and *Quotations from Pearse* (1979; introduction by Seán MacBride), the latter of which proclaims in the foreword: ‘the very fact that sixty years and more after his execution by an English firing squad clever men should spend time and energy devising ways in which to denigrate him speaks for itself’. This reverence extended to Éamon de Valera (qv). Both *Éamon de Valera – na blianta reabhloideacha* (1982), an account of de Valera’s life to 1932 (awarded first prize at the 1982 Oireachtas) and *Quotations from De Valera* (1983) emphasise the radical aspects of their subject’s career. Mac Aonghusa also believed that Haughey simply possessed more ability than his opponents; shortly before his death he told an interviewer that Haughey had been the most remarkable and competent politician of their era.

Haughey twice appointed Mac Aonghusa to the Arts Council (1982–4, 1989–98) and named him president of Bord na Gaeilge (1990–93). This caused some controversy as Mac Aonghusa was at the same time president of Conradh na Gaeilge (1989–94; elected to the executive 1987). Simultaneous leadership of a government body and a lobbying organisation involved certain tensions. In 1992 calls were made for his dismissal from Bord na Gaeilge after he called on ‘every respectable nationalist’ in West Belfast to vote for the Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams rather than the SDLP

candidate Joe Hendron in the Westminster general election on the grounds that Adams's defeat would be 'a victory for British imperialism'. And yet he advised Sinn Féin supporters in South Down to vote for the SDLP.

His last years were marked by ill#health and principally devoted to literary work: *Ar Son na Gaeilge* (1993) is a centenary history of Conradh na Gaeilge commissioned by that organisation. He also produced several essay collections, including *Ón gCrannóg* (1991) and *Súil tharam* (2001) and historical works such as *Ros Muc agus cogadh na saoirse* (1992) and *Oireachtas na Gaeilge 1897–1997* (1997).

Pronsiás Mac Aonghusa died in St. Vincent's Hospital, Dublin, on 28 September 2003.

Michael Gallagher, *The Irish Labour party in transition 1957–1982* (1982); John Horgan, *Labour: the price of power* (1986); *Ir. Times*, 29, 30 Sept., 4 Oct. (obituary) 2003; *Connacht Tribune*, 30 Sept. 2003; *Sunday Tribune*, 5 Oct. 2003; <http://www.rte.ie/news/2003/0928/macaonghusap.html> (accessed 8 Feb. 2010); Niamh Puirseil, *The Irish Labour party 1922–1997* (2007)