O'Donnell, Peadar (1893–1986), socialist and writer, was born 22 February 1893 in Meenmore, near Dunglow (Dungloe), Co. Donegal, youngest among six sons and three daughters of Biddy and James (‘Sheáin Mhóir’) O'Donnell. He was greatly influenced by his upbringing in the Rosses, in north-west Donegal, one of the poorest and most remote parts of Ireland. His father, a popular local fiddler, earned a living through his smallholding, seasonal labouring in Scotland, and winter work in a local corn-mill. His mother, who came from a radical labour and nationalist political background, worked in a local cooperative store. O'Donnell attended Rampart national school and Roshine national school, near Burtonport, where he was a monitor (pupil-teacher) for four years. In 1911 he won a scholarship to attend St Patrick's teacher training college in Drumcondra, and returned in 1913 to the Rosses, where he spent two years teaching on Inishfree Island. In 1915 he was appointed head of Derryhenny national school, near Dunglow, and the following year became principal of a national school on Arranmore Island, where he began to write. O'Donnell had long been concerned by the poor conditions of the local ‘tatie-hokers’ (potato-pickers) who migrated annually to Scotland, and in the summer of 1918 he travelled there to help organise the Scottish Farm Servants’ Union. While there he was influenced by left-wing radicals such as Willie Gallacher, later a communist MP, and Emanuel ‘Manny’ Shinwell, later Baron Shinwell. In September 1918, against a background of rising labour militancy, O'Donnell left teaching to become a full-time organiser for the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union (ITGWU) in the west Ulster area. The following year O'Donnell organised one of Ireland's first ‘soviets’ when the attendants and nurses of Monaghan's lunatic asylum occupied the grounds and appointed O'Donnell as governor until their demands were met. In early 1919 he joined the IRA in Monaghan, resigning from the ITGWU for full-time IRA service in late 1920. He led the 2nd Battalion, Donegal IRA, from the summer of 1920. In December 1920 he went ‘on the run’ and led a flying column in west Donegal until May 1921, when he was wounded. Regarded as insubordinate and militarily inexperienced, O'Donnell was unpopular among the other senior officers of 1st Northern Division. O'Donnell, in turn, was disappointed by the lack of social radicalism among the nationalist leadership. He opposed the treaty, was placed in command of the minority anti-treaty 1st Northern Division, and was a member of the IRA executive that occupied the Four Courts in Dublin in defiance of the provisional government. Arrested in June 1922, O'Donnell shared a prison cell with Liam Mellows (qv) and influenced his radical ‘Notes from Mountjoy’, an important document for subsequent left-wing republicans. O'Donnell spent the next two years in various prisons and internment camps; his execution was widely expected to follow those of 8 December 1922. In August 1923 O'Donnell won a seat in Donegal in the general election called after the end of the civil war. He went on hunger-strike for forty-one days in late 1923 and succeeded in escaping from
the Curragh in March 1924. In June 1924, while on the run, O'Donnell married Lile O'Donel, a wealthy Cumann na mBan activist who had smuggled communications for republican prisoners. O'Donel, a radical and member of the Communist Party, was the daughter of Ignatius O'Donel, a prominent landowner from Mayo. They had no children but raised their nephew, Peadar Joe, as their own son after the death in New York of O'Donnell's brother Joe.

O'Donnell began writing seriously in jail and remained a prolific writer, journalist, and editor until the 1960s. His first novel, Storm, set in the war of independence, was published in 1925. One of his most highly regarded books, Islanders, was published in 1928. Adrigoole (like Islanders a story of poverty and starvation in rural Ireland) was published the following year. The knife (1930) and On the edge of the stream (1934) soon followed. The most significant of his later novels was probably The big windows (1954). Foremost among O'Donnell's qualities as a writer was his empathy for the people, life, and landscape of rural Ireland. But his novels have been criticised for their slow pace, excessive detail, and didactic nature. O'Donnell claimed his writing was incidental to his political activism. His trilogy of autobiographical non-fiction, The gates flew open (1932), Salud! An Irishman in Spain (1936), and There will be another day (1963), which respectively concern the Irish civil war, his activism during the Spanish civil war, and his role in the land annuities agitation, remain highly regarded. O'Donnell's other important literary achievement was with The Bell, an innovative literary and political magazine which played a useful dissenting role in an insular and conservative period. He founded The Bell with the writer Sean O'Faolain (qv) in 1940 and edited it from 1946 until it ceased publication in 1954.

O'Donnell exercised an influential role in the interwar IRA, particularly through his editorship of An Phoblacht (1926–9), which he attempted to divert from militarism to socialist agitation. His ultimate aim was for a thirty-two-county socialist republic. His most successful campaign was organising small farmers against the payment of land annuities to the government in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This campaign was later adopted by Fianna Fáil and contributed to their electoral success in 1932. O'Donnell was less successful in radicalising the IRA. After the failure of Saor Éire, a left-wing IRA front which provoked clerical and popular hostility against the IRA, increasing tensions between the IRA's left-wing and the leadership led O'Donnell (along with Frank Ryan (qv) and George Gilmore (qv)) to split from the IRA to establish the short-lived Republican Congress in 1934. Although O'Donnell claimed he was never a Communist Party member, he played a central role in forging links between republicans and the revolutionary left (both in Ireland and internationally) and invariably supported the communist party line at critical junctures. After the failure of Congress, O'Donnell (who had been in Spain when the Spanish civil war broke out) took up the cause of the Spanish republic. His championing of unpopular causes such as communism and Spain entailed a good deal of frustration. He was physically attacked at political meetings and in 1932, despite having never visited the Soviet Union, lost a high-profile libel action against the Dominican Irish
Rosary, which claimed he had studied in Moscow's Lenin College. He was banned from entering the United States for several decades, although he maintained: 'My relations with all the great powers continue to be friendly.'

O'Donnell continued to support radical campaigns until his death. He was an outspoken advocate of Irish emigrants. He was prominent in the Irish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and served as its president in the early 1960s. He was a leading protester against the Vietnam war and a supporter of African anti-colonial movements such as that against apartheid. In later years he was involved in the ‘Save the west’ campaign, highlighting the problems of the west of Ireland. After several months of ill-health following a heart-attack, O'Donnell died in Dublin, aged 93, on 13 May 1986. He was cremated in Glasnevin and his ashes were buried at his wife's home in Swinford, Co. Mayo. Although O'Donnell once remarked that every cause he fought for was a failure, he is now regarded as one of the most influential socialist republican theorists and an important voice of dissent in twentieth-century Ireland.

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Ir. Times, Ir. Press, 14 May 1986; Uinseann MacEoin, The IRA in the twilight years (1997); Peter Hegarty, Peadar O'Donnell (1999); Fearghal McGarry, Irish politics and the Spanish civil war (1999)