

Thornley, David Andrew Taylor

by Lawrence William White

Thornley, David Andrew Taylor (1935–78), academic, broadcaster, and politician, was born 31 July 1935 in Sutton, Surrey, youngest child among two sons and one daughter of Frederick Edward Thornley (d. 1953) and Maud Helen Thornley (née Browne). His parents, both civil servants, met while working in Inland Revenue in Dublin in the 1910s. His father, a Welsh agnostic and socialist, sympathised with the Irish republican cause during the 1919–21 troubles, and in later years deplored the rise of fascism in Europe. Frustrated in his efforts to work in independent Ireland, he was posted to several locations in England and Northern Ireland before remaining in London. From his Dublin-born mother, a devout catholic and fervent republican, Thornley imbibed a strongly-felt Irish-catholic identity, fortified by summer holidays with a maternal aunt in Sandymount, Co. Dublin.

Thornley received his primary education at the local preparatory school in Surrey. After his parents' separation his mother moved the family to Dublin where he continued his education through correspondence courses and entered TCD in 1951 at the age of sixteen. A spectacular performance in the final year was rewarded with a first class moderatorship in modern history and political science in 1955 and Thornley went on to complete a Ph.D. under the supervision of T. W. Moody (qv) in 1959. His doctoral thesis, published as *Isaac Butt and home rule* (1964), addressed a theretofore neglected subject in the historiography of nineteenth-century constitutional nationalism, and treated Isaac Butt (qv) on his own terms, not simply as a conservative, cautious precursor to Charles Stewart Parnell (qv). Appointed a junior lecturer in political science (1959), Thornley was elected a TCD fellow (1964), and became associate professor of political science (1968–78). His main areas of interest were modern Irish history, Marxism-Leninism, and Irish working-class movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Involved in leftist politics from his youth, at age fifteen he campaigned for Noel Browne (qv) in the 1951 general election. Finding in Browne a surrogate, principled, radically-inclined father-figure, he revered the mercurial former government minister to the point of idolatry. He followed Browne into Fianna Fáil briefly, to assist in his unsuccessful bid for re-election in 1954, and rejoined him as his director of elections in his successful campaign to regain his seat as an Independent in 1957. Thornley was a principal founder and president of the 1913 Club, launched in the autumn of that year as a leftist think-tank, but the initiative was temporarily overshadowed when Browne and his fellow Independent TD, Jack McQuillan (qv), founded a new political party, the National Progressive Democrats (NPD) in February 1958. After an unsuccessful by-election campaign in June, Thornley denounced the party's constitutional arrangements, and the primacy allotted to Browne in particular, as an undemocratic continuation of the cult of the 'chief' in Irish politics and withdrew to

concentrate on the 1913 Club. This was the first of many bitter quarrels that were to mark Thornley's subsequent relationship with Browne.

In the early 1960s Thornley published several pamphlets under the imprint of the ginger group Tuairim. In an influential paper, 'Ireland, the end of an era?', published in *Studies* (1964), he argued that recent economic change had brought Ireland to the threshold of a sweeping social, intellectual, and cultural revolution. He wrote prolifically for newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals on topical political and social issues, and on subjects of historical and political analysis. He first appeared on RTÉ television as a panellist on a discussion programme 'The professors'. In 1966 he joined the newly launched current affairs programme 'Division', which soon metamorphosed into the punchy and exceedingly popular 'Seven days'. He developed a national reputation as a probing, incisive interviewer, and an intelligent, informed, and witty commentator.

Thornley was among a coterie of prominent left-leaning intellectuals (who included Conor Cruise O'Brien and Justin Keating) recruited by the Labour party in the latter 1960s (and derided by opponents as 'smoked salmon socialists'). Buoyed by his media profile, he was elected TD for Dublin North West (1969–77); returned on the first count with 8,446 first preferences, some 2,300 votes over quota, he thus became the first Labour candidate ever to top the poll in a Dublin constituency. Throughout the early 1970s, as Labour's numerous internal divisions were painfully and publicly exposed, Thornley – who served as party spokesman on education – was a particularly outspoken and controversial TD, embroiled in frequent and febrile rows with party colleagues, attended by considerable personal acrimony. Seeking to maintain the independence of an academic or media commentator, he bridled against party discipline, and employed rhetoric more characteristic of a university debater than a parliamentarian. Chafing under the diurnal drudgery of practical politics, he disliked (and often delegated) constituency work, and railed against the 'parish pump' mentality.

Casting himself in the mould of James Connolly (qv), as a practising catholic, Marxist socialist, and republican nationalist, he professed each of these convictions equally, with a passion that belied scholarly detachment, and baffled orthodox practitioners of each creed. Though alienating many fellow leftists with ostentatious exhibitions of his religious zeal, he was liberal in his social views, regarding access to divorce, contraception, and abortion as fundamental civil rights, and identifying with the anguished anti-heroes of Graham Greene. He stoutly defended the role of catholic clergy in Irish political and social life in disputation with party colleagues O'Brien and Browne (a Labour TD since 1963).

His most vociferous internecine disputes were with O'Brien regarding the political violence in Northern Ireland. In articles of the 1960s, Thornley had argued that the militantly Marxist Labour party founded by Connolly and James Larkin (qv) had lost its revolutionary socialist character largely because of its failure to be sufficiently

nationalist. Amid the troubles of the early 1970s, he resolutely refused to condemn IRA violence unreservedly, asserting that physical force cannot be ruled out in all circumstances. Urging Labour to emulate Connolly by distinguishing between the reactionary and progressive aspects of republicanism, and upholding the latter, he derided O'Brien's repudiation of republican verities as Redmondite. Addressing the killing of NI senator Jack Barnhill (qv) by the Official IRA (December 1971), he contended that the deed was being 'excessively deplored', that Irish soldiers and police should not be required to act as 'felon-setters' for the Stormont government, and that IRA volunteers operating from bases in the republic should not be equated with common criminals (dáil speech; quoted in Gallagher (1982), 141). Nonetheless, he supported Labour's policy statement of January 1972 that rejected physical force in the attainment of a socialist, non-sectarian, united Ireland. When IRA chief-of-staff Seán Mac Stiofáin (qv), arrested and convicted of IRA membership, went on hunger-and-thirst strike, Thornley visited him in the Mater Misericordiae hospital, and joined the demonstration of 7,000 persons calling for his release (November 1972).

Though in the 1960s Thornley had argued the pragmatic efficacy of a Labour–Fine Gael coalition government to halt Fianna Fáil's 'march to dictatorship' (quoted in Gallagher (1982), 177), by 1973 he regarded coalition sceptically because of Fine Gael's anti-republican Northern Ireland policy, its readiness to accept coercive legislation, and the generally conservative leadership of Liam Cosgrave. Prior to the 1973 general election he briefly refused to sign the coalition pact agreed by the two parties, and distanced his campaign from its terms. He was reelected with a dramatically reduced tally of first preferences (5,023), claiming the third seat in the four-seat constituency. Excluded from office in the coalition government, in compensation he was appointed to represent Ireland in the European assembly (1973–7), forerunner of the European parliament, where he affiliated with the socialist group.

In April 1976 he lost the Labour parliamentary whip after attending a banned Easter commemoration rally of Provisional Sinn Féin, claiming that his motive was not to support the Provisional movement, but to uphold free speech and civil liberties. He voted against the coalition government on two pieces of security legislation following the assassination of the British ambassador, Christopher Ewart-Biggs (qv), in July 1976. The party whip was restored to him in February 1977. In the June 1977 general election, he suffered a disastrous defeat; his first-preference vote collapsed and he came sixth of ten candidates in the three-seat Dublin (Cabra) constituency, becoming the first Labour TD since 1923 to lose his deposit. The result was probably due to a general decline in the Labour vote in that election, to dissatisfaction among the electorate with Thornley's maverick record on TV, and to his inattention to constituency work. Resigning from the European assembly, he left the Labour party, and in 1978 joined the newly launched Socialist Labour Party, of Browne and Matt Merrigan (qv).

An enthusiastic boxer, Thornley was a member of Knights of the Campanile, which comprised TCD's elite sportsmen. Possessing a fine tenor voice, he won prizes at the RIAM (Ludwig cup for singing (1974)) and feis ceoil, and sang regularly with the choir of Westland Row church. His other recreations included bridge and golf. He married (1958) Petria Mary Hughes, a UCD student and member of the 1913 Club; they had a son and a daughter. A man of unusually wide-ranging gifts, Thornley was destroyed personally and physically by the stresses and responsibilities peculiar to the life of a practising politician. Analysing his tortured relationship with Browne, John Horgan observes that 'Thornley's own expansive but vulnerable personality clashed fatally with Browne's unforgiving temperament' (182). Overweight, afflicted with undiagnosed diabetes, his judgement increasingly erratic, from the early 1970s he suffered a steady deterioration of health, compounded by his heavy drinking, on which he relied to cope with stress and emotional depression. On one occasion he collapsed in the dáil, and was attended by party colleague Dr John O'Connell. He died 18 June 1978, one week after admission to Jervis Street private nursing home. After a sung Latin requiem mass in St Andrew's church, Westland Row, he was buried in Bohernabreena cemetery, Co. Dublin.

ITWW; *Ir. Times*, 8 May 1976 (interview), 19–22 June 1978; Michael Gallagher, *The Irish Labour party in transition 1957–82* (1982); id., *Political parties in the republic of Ireland* (1985); Noel Browne, *Against the tide* (1986); Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Memoir: my life and themes* (1998); John Horgan, *Noël Browne: passionate outsider* (2000); Niamh Puirseil, *The Irish Labour party 1922–73* (2007); Houses of the oireachtas: members database, www.oireachtas.ie (photo) (accessed 8 June 2007)