

# Donal Nevin, 1924-2012: A Century of Achievement

## NERI Lecture, 13 February 2024

### An Architect of Progress: Donal Nevin & the Advance of Organised Labour

It is an honour and a privilege to be invited to deliver the lecture 'Donal Nevin, 1924-2024: A Century of Progress', an occasion to mark the centenary of Nevin's birth. I have titled the lecture 'An Architect of Progress' as many I have spoken to who worked closely with Nevin in the trade union movement, identify him as a key influence of the development of wage bargaining into what became Social Partnership.<sup>1</sup> They acknowledged that Nevin's interest and influence extended far beyond wages and incomes policy and that his thinking influenced equality, social welfare and trade union training among many other concerns. This paper will examine Nevin's early life and political formation; his involvement in Labour Party politics; his role in Congress; and his contribution as labour historian.

#### Early Life in Limerick

Donal Nevin was born on 20 January 1924 at 8 Cornmarket Row, Limerick, one of Thomas and Alice Higginson's Nevin's eight children, three girls and five boys.<sup>2</sup> The couple had met when Thomas moved to work in Bristol, a city where a brother was training as a chemist. Thomas met Alice, who worked on the domestic staff of a hotel in Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire, and they married there in 1906. In 1911 Census, Thomas, aged 30, was described as a cabinetmaker born in Tipperary, and Alice, aged 30, born in England. They lived at 3 Downshire Row, Edenderry, King's County (Offaly). Married for five years, the couple then had two children.<sup>3</sup> Nevin remained close to his siblings throughout his life, particularly to his eldest sister Stasia, and all had lives of achievement.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Nevin was self-employed and, although family income was uncertain, Nevin remembered his childhood as being 'without affluence' but 'sufficient and happy'. He was intensely proud of his Limerick origins, rejecting some of the more negative representations of the city.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, he was an avid reader and supporter of Jim Kemmy's *Old Limerick Journal* from its publication in 1979 and the *Limerick Socialist*, 1971-1981.<sup>6</sup> He won a local authority scholarship to Sexton Street Christian Brothers School and was a dedicated reader in the local Carnegie Library.<sup>7</sup> Hurling was the 'family game' but though the young Nevin occasionally attended matches with his father, he did not play himself. In 1941, after he won first prize in an Oireachtas essay competition and achieved six Honours in his Leaving Certificate, he entered the Statistical Branch of the Department of Industry & Commerce as a Clerical Officer and joined the Civil Service Clerical Association (CSCA).<sup>8</sup>

#### Labour Party

Before dealing with Nevin's role as Irish Trade Union Congress Research Officer, a position he took up in 1949, his involvement in the Labour Party had already commenced. On arriving in Dublin, the young Nevin was impacted by the street oratory of Big Jim Larkin then enjoyed an Indian Summer as a street orator in opposition to the Wages Standstill Orders and Trade Union Act, 1941.<sup>9</sup> As he came to know him, he became particularly impressed by Larkin's son, 'Young Jim', the appeal less an emotive one and much more one of the 'meeting of minds'. Nevin joined the WUI No 15 (Clerical Branch) and quickly became a key advisor to Young Jim, the Labour Party and WUI.

By 1955, Nevin was Chairman of Dublin Regional Council and served as Labour Party Honorary Parliamentary Officer to all Labour TDs, a voluntary, unpaid position, before this role was formally filled by Catherine McGuinness from 1961.<sup>10</sup> In February 1958, Nevin wrote a major speech delivered by Labour Party Leader William Norton that was published as the pamphlet *Labour's Way*. It embodied

much of Larkin and Nevin's thinking in advocating economic planning and urging major capital investment to spur public enterprise and create employment. Nevin was Director of Elections for Frank Cluskey in Dublin South-Central in June 1958 Dublin South Central by-election that followed the resignation of the Unemployed Workers' TD Jack Murphy. Seán MacBride ran for Clann na Poblachta and Noel Hartnett for the National Progressive Democrats. The seat was won by Fianna Fáil but there were informal talks with MacBride exploring a possible merger with Clann na Poblachta.<sup>11</sup> Nevin had been active in the unemployed campaign that resulted in Murphy's election in 1957.<sup>12</sup>

Nevin always supported left unity and, in 1957, was 'instrumental' in persuading the WUI to advertise in the Labour paper and to grant the Party a loan of £500 (interest free for the first four years, thereafter repayable at 4%).<sup>13</sup> The WUI finally affiliated to the Labour Party in 1965, Nevin again a hand on the union's political tiller.<sup>14</sup> Nevin was never completely content with the Labour Party's structure and ambition, stressing the need – as did Young Jim Larkin – for the party to become something more than 'an umbrella under which individuals who eschew the two main parties can shelter in their pursuit of a political career for themselves'.<sup>15</sup> In the 1960s, he became active in the Seán Connolly Branch of the Labour Party, a 'hive of intellectuals and bohemians which met in Eustace Street'. Nevin was described as being one of Dublin's 'tiny Bloomsbury intelligentsia' associating, in the 1950s, with Christy Ferguson of the WUI, Sheila Greene, Peggy Rushton and Brian Inglis of the *Irish Times*, and in the 1960s with *Irish Times* journalist Liam de Paor, Jack and Betty Dowling, Liam Hamilton, – later Chief Justice, Catherine McGuinness and Proinsias Mac Aonghusa and John O'Connell.<sup>16</sup> By the mid-1960s, the Seán Connolly Branch was the 'energetic hub' of the Party in Dublin.<sup>17</sup>

Nevin frequently addressed Labour Party conferences, proving equally popular with both trade union and constituency representatives. This led to suggestions that, had he 'been willing to court public approval and engage in partisan debate, he probably could have successfully pursued political office'.<sup>18</sup> He shared Young Jim Larkin's vision of the 'centrality of a worker's trade union to shaping not just their industrial life but their social and cultural lives. Larkin and Nevin shared a perspective that recognised the need for the movement – a movement united in purpose and organisation – to look beyond endless – and, they thought, ultimately unrewarding Wage Rounds, a perspective summed up by Larkin's article in a 1960 edition of the WUI magazine, *Bulletin*, a publication in which Nevin was centrally involved.

'But what do we do about our backward national economy? – Get more wages! What do we do about the insecurity of jobs and about unemployment and the under-employed? – Get more wages! What do we do about the boys and girls leaving school and no jobs to go to? – Get more wages! What do we do about educating our children to meet the demands of our world of electronics, bionics, sputniks, nuclear power? – Get more wages! What do we do about ill-health and old age, widowhood and parentless children? – Get more wages!'<sup>19</sup>

Larkin – and Nevin – felt the movement could 'go on' with endless Wage Rounds but it will still be confronted 'by all these problems. There had to be

'a realisation that these problems are our problems and not anyone else's and we are the people who have to do something about them. And if we are going to do something then we have to think beyond Wage Rounds and we have to begin to make full and complete use of the great power and resources that we have in our trade union movement ...'

Herein lay the genesis of policy ideas that would underpin the National Understandings and subsequently Social Partnership. From 1957, Nevin became increasingly influential in the WUI No 15, Clerical, Branch, and -despite the limitations imposed by his Congress position – he was, to all intents and purposes, the WUI Research Department, drafting documents, briefing officials, addressing seminars and contributing much to the union journals *Report* and *Bulletin*.<sup>20</sup> Frank Cluskey exemplified the fusion of union and Labour Party that typified Nevin's own view. The 1973-1977 Fine Gael-Labour

Coalition Government, Cluskey as Parliamentary Secretary to his Leader Tánaiste and Minister for Social Welfare Brendan Corish, introduced important reforms and created the now defunct Combat Poverty Agency. Any forensic examination of these reforms would identify Nevin's fingerprints. Nevin later observed that

'In 1973, the rates of benefits for pensioners, the unemployed or whatever were very much below the poverty level. They certainly were not sufficient to keep body and soul together. And over those four years there were enormous increases, certainly above the increases in the cost of living, achieved by Frank Cluskey ... When we realise the starkness of poverty among pensioners in 1973 and the improvement that was brought about ... I think Frank will be remembered, certainly by that generation of the old and the unemployed. He also achieved a reduction in the pension age from seventy to sixty-six which was symptomatic of his attitude towards the weaker sections of the population and those least able to help themselves.'

Whether Cluskey's efforts remained in popular memory is unclear but Nevin's contribution – his concern for poverty drawn from his early experience of witnessing it first hand in Limerick – was never publicly recognised.<sup>21</sup> Nevin had been involved with the pioneering work of Sister Stanislaus Kenndy and the Bishop of Ossory Peter Birch in establishing the Kilkenny Social Service Centre that transmogrified into the Combat Poverty Agency.

As to Nevin in the political sphere, on his retirement the *Irish Times* Industrial Correspondent recorded that, in his earlier career, some felt that he was 'destined for a 'distinguished political career':

'It was easy to visualise him as an effective, diligent Minister ... totally briefed about his specialist field. Had he opted for full-time politics he might have become Leader of the Labour Party. His dedication, vitality and vision seemed to mark him for leadership.'

Nevin, however, had little personal ambition and was arguably unsuited in character for a public life in politics. Had he not resigned the Civil Service, however, many of those that worked with and met senior Ministerial advisers felt that they could 'easily see him as the Secretary of Finance'.<sup>22</sup>

Nevin's respect for Cluskey – who had begun his working life as a butcher and WUI activist – was cemented when he resigned his position as Minister for Trade, Commerce & Tourism in 1983 over Government privatisation policy for Dublin Gas Company. It is rare for Ministers to resign on matters of principle and Nevin thought it 'symptomatic of him that he should have effectively killed off his political future by resigning'.<sup>23</sup> From 1964, Nevin receded from Party Leader Brendan Corish's 'kitchen cabinet' to focus on his Congress activities.<sup>24</sup> That said, Nevin's was one of the voices heard in the thinking and policies behind Corish's famous cry that 'The Seventies Would Be Socialist'. With Catherine McGuinness, he was credited with drafting the 1961, 1963 and 1965 Party manifestos. The first being, for Labour, 'more modern and more reformist' than previous ones with an emphasis on economic planning, public enterprise and an equal distribution of national wealth.<sup>25</sup>

Peter Cassells recalls regular meetings in the ICTU offices in Parnell Square of the Labour Party Merchant's Quay Branch, a regular gathering of progressive intellectual members.<sup>26</sup> It was one of the many for a in which Nevin's ideas influenced Cassells, culminating in his commitment to the trade union role in and contribution to Social Partnership.

### **Irish Trade Union Congress**

Already a Labour Party activist, in February 1949 Nevin joined the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC) as Research Officer, a newly-created post to contribute data to support union submissions to the Labour Court which had been established in 1946. Its first Chairman, R.J.P. Mortished, demanded rigorous evidence to substantiate or reject union claims and most unions were under-prepared.<sup>27</sup> John Swift, General Secretary of the Irish Bakers', Confectioners' & Allied Workers' Amalgamated Union

and ITUC Executive member, pushed for the appointment of a Research Officer that not all saw as relevant and, after Nevin's 'outstanding interview', knew they had found the right man. Some could not comprehend someone leaving a sound, secure, pensionable position in the Civil Service for what was not, necessarily, a permanent appointment. Nevin's mother was 'worried' that he opted for insecurity. It was precisely that commitment to cause rather than career that persuaded Swift of Nevin's absolute suitability for the job.<sup>28</sup>

In 1950 Nevin began publishing *Trade Union Information*, a regular bulletin collecting industrial statistics, economic data and relevant legislation, which was widely relied upon across the trade union movement. The information, published in the 'simplest and clearest form' about anything of interest to the labour movement in Northern Ireland and the Republic, was a ground-breaking publication at a time when social statistics were difficult to access.<sup>29</sup> He produced it for the next three decades until 1982, latterly with the assistance of his wife Maura and daughter Anne. To assemble the material, Nevin read widely, his sources national and international, his capacity to comprehend and absorb them remarkable.

Congress protocol was that the Research Officer did not speak at Conference though his prepared briefings and speeches were central to Presidents' addresses. He did speak, however, in 1950, addressing preferred trade union responses to devaluation, wage and prices policy and taxation of profits. He advised an audience of industrial officials who were still probably a little sceptical about the new Research Officer about the timing and formulation of wages claims. His colours were pinned to the mast when he said that the most important factor in any claim was securing the 'mass pressure of the organised workers'.<sup>30</sup> After this, his contributions were infrequent although his voice can be heard in the annual analyses of economic and social events and the ITUC policy responses.<sup>31</sup>

### **Irish Congress of Trade Unions**

When the ITUC and the Congress of Irish Unions merged to form the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) in 1959, Nevin was appointed Research Officer before becoming Assistant General Secretary in 1966 and General Secretary in 1982 in succession to Ruaidhrí Roberts.<sup>32</sup> For both ITUC and ICTU, Nevin wrote countless policy and press statements; attended hundreds of delegations to Government and international bodies; attended Boards, Commissions of Inquiry and Public Tribunals; and appeared on television and radio debates. He was characterised as 'Mister Facts & Figures', which recognised his insistence on and talent for rigorous, factually-grounded research but seriously under-stated his input to the achievement of progressive policies that improved the lives – literally – of millions.

A constant and recurring feature of Nevin's trade unionism was his commitment to gender equality. He played a 'significant and, indeed, passionate role in the final push' for equal pay when the Government attempted to renege on its commitments in the public service under European law and the Anti-Discrimination (Pay) Act, 1974. Peter Cassells remembers that Nevin 'effectively took the case' to Europe, then ICTU General Secretary Ruaidhrí Roberts having opposed entry to Europe being less enthusiastic. For Cassells, the excitement within Congress at Nevin flying off the Brussels was immense as 'few of us had ever been on a plane and none of us to Brussels'.<sup>33</sup> His opposition to discrimination on any grounds throughout society was total.<sup>34</sup> Once ICTU Assistant General Secretary in July 1966, Nevin campaigned for full implementation of equal pay, and personally composed the ICTU submission to the Commission on the Status of Women, 'characterising the State's treatment of women as backward and unjustifiable'. He secured an Equal Pay Committee within Congress to focus attention, though its report was tardy reflecting the absence of interest by some unions.<sup>35</sup> In 1973, he publicly supported the 1973 Irish Widow's Association campaign for equitable treatment regarding sickness and unemployment benefits. He 'frequently highlighted the variable detrimental impact of economic deprivation upon women and in 1977 observed how two thirds of adult women aged under

twenty-four were unemployed'. He sought improved pay and conditions for part-time workers, most of whom were women, an 'issue previously of little interest to male union leaders'.<sup>36</sup>

Nevin spoke more regularly at ICTU Conferences, if not every year. In the early 1960s – in parallel to policies he was urging the Labour Party to adopt – he advised Northern Ireland delegates how they might combat a proposed wage freeze; attempted to introduce a balance to the then hostile attitude towards the prospect of Ireland joining the EEC and cited some of his positive experiences of his Congress involvement in the Committee on Industrial Organisation where they argued for more generous redundancy payments, retraining and re-settlement grants if industrial restructuring occurred with the impact of a Common Market; and outlined the Congress attitude to taking cases to the Labour Court and strike recognition.<sup>37</sup> In 1965, he moved an Executive motion on 'Social Welfare, Health & Education', his comments by now very familiar. It was

'obvious we must increase our spending on the social services and this must be done very considerably. The cost will be heavy but we must insist that the cost of the better benefits that we feel are necessary will be shared equitably.'<sup>38</sup>

Herein lies the genesis of Cluskey's 1973-1977 social welfare reforms and the tax reform campaigns of the early 1980s. Nevin's involvement and influence within the National Industrial & Economic Council (NIEC) was a seedbed for ideas that permeated Congress and, eventually, broad trade union thinking which he brought to affiliates and delegates' attention.<sup>39</sup>

In 1972, when explaining an Executive policy document on full employment and social and economic development', Nevin betrayed a certain frustration at the process of policy making and the slowness of its application by the movement. For all he was a policy maker, he wanted meaningful action.

'not a beginning, certainly it is not the end. It is a continuation of the process of re-thinking of the policy of the trade union movement necessary if we are to achieve our objectives in changing times. Particularly perhaps it affords us an opportunity to decide what really are our priorities, not the ones that we pay lip service to but the ones we are prepared to act on and fight to bring about.'<sup>40</sup>

Nevin did not speak again until 1979 when, on behalf of the Executive, he asked for rejection of motions calling for a statutory national minimum wage. Such a concept had been rejected by the British movement and a Congress report in 1974 had recommended against. Defending the voluntarist nature of industrial relations and collective bargaining, Nevin argued that direct intervention by the State in collective bargaining had always been 'resolutely opposed' by Congress. A national minimum wage would have negative repercussions on wage levels and differentials. They were not neglecting the lower paid but the solution was more and better organisation of such workers and the extended use of Joint Labour Committees and Wages Councils to improve low pay. He urged that 'in place of State intervention, we substitute trade union intervention'. The Executive achieved rejection of the motion.<sup>41</sup>

In 1980, rejecting motions criticising the Budget – and Congress's lobbying – and calling for tax reductions, Nevin reminded delegates

'The Budget was not concerned exclusively with taxation. It had a crucial bearing on what will happen with employment and, particularly, jobs of those who are dependent on public expenditure. It would have been foolish, unrealistic and dishonest to pretend that you could demand – as we did – action on employment and social welfare, involving massive increases in public expenditure and, at the same time, expect to have a significant reduction on taxation. Taxation and public expenditure, including social welfare payments, are two sides of the one coin.'<sup>42</sup>

He emphasised that the Commission on Taxation, of which he was a member representing Congress, was examining 'all aspects of taxation'. He returned to the theme of taxation in 1981 as hundreds of thousands took to the streets demanding reform, explaining the work of the ICTU Tax Reform Committee.<sup>43</sup>

In 1982, as General Secretary Designate, Nevin's time at the Congress rostrum was mainly taken up by dealing with procedural matters such as explaining why the Executive favoured or opposed proposed constitutional amendments.<sup>44</sup> Among these technical issues that Nevin addressed was the Executive's objection to trades council delegates voting for the Executive. How were trades council choices arrived at? Trades councils were local not national bodies. He insisted that 'In no way' could the Executive Council rejection of the motion 'be construed as opposition to trades councils'. The Executive will prevailed. A happier task for Nevin was conveying fraternal greetings from the South African Congress of Trade Unions. Their message stated that they thanked the ICTU

'for the unwavering support and solidarity you are giving. Your convictions and belief in human equality have made us stronger and more determined because we know that we are not alone in our struggle.'<sup>45</sup>

The statement concluded by expressing 'deep gratitude' for ICTU support of the Michael Mullen Trust (MMT)

'which will provide assistance to South African workers of all races in education, training, welfare and humanitarian aid and to encourage the Irish trade unionists to play an active part in the struggle in South Africa.'

Mullen, a former ITGWU General Secretary had unexpectedly died in Frankfurt on 1 November 1982 while attending a union conference. He was prominent in the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement.<sup>46</sup> Nevin was a MMT Trustee.

In 1984, Nevin moved a motion to 'make clear a position that may have been unclear to some' that motion from the Northern Ireland and Women's Conferences were for the Executive to decide whether they were in order. He looked for remission of a motion suggesting an 'Unemployed movement under the auspices of Congress' but suggested that, through discussions with trades councils, they could decide 'how best ' they could

'go about mobilising this army [of unemployed], bridging the communication gap, and ensuring that by our actions, as with our words, we regard our unemployed brethren as our brothers and sisters and that we fight for their rights, fight for jobs for them, as we would to protect our own interests and our own rights.'

Congress was soon supporting Unemployed Centres organised and managed through local trades council. He later rose to express Executive reservations about childcare expenses being allowed or income tax relief. Congress opposed the use of the tax system to subsidise the provision of essential services, it would ease the tax burden for some at the expense of increasing it for others.<sup>47</sup>

In 1985, Nevin seconded an Executive motion calling for trade union rationalisation and restructuring. The impact of discussion and suggestions on the issue over sixty years had been 'marginal'. Leaving aside half the workforce who were not even unionised, many were in small, under-resourced unions. Such unions had once played a significant role but structural and technological changes in work meant he could see 'no long-term future for the small unions'. The situation had to change as failure to do so bred stagnation and decay: 'unless we rid ourselves of complacency, shibboleths and wishful thinking, we will be doomed to go the way of all dinosaur organisations which fail to adapt'. He drew delegates' attention to the Cardiff Working Group on Trade Union Organisation contained in the *Annual Report*

and hoped the motion would be 'the starting point for fresh initiatives and renewed progress in the restructuring' of the movement.<sup>48</sup>

In 1986, Nevin led Executive opposition to changes proposed by Derry Trades Council as it suggested Congress get directly involved in the political process by contesting elections. This would present some unions with an impossible dilemma and would prove divisive. Congress had a political role to lobby Government for economic, social and legal changes but not to become a political part. He later expressed Congress concerns about radioactive waste being dumped in the Irish Sea. The matter was returned to with the same outcome in 1988.<sup>49</sup>

In 1987, Nevin had to deal with an embarrassing matter involving an affiliate, IDATU (Irish Distributive & Allied Trades Union) and its General Secretary John Mitchell. The spat was fully reported in the ICTU Annual Report for 1987 (pp. 39-43) and revolved around comments made by Mitchell in the *Andersonstown News* on 17 January in which another affiliate was described as 'useless' and 'an Uncle Tom reactionary union'. It decried the 'trade union mafia' in Northern Ireland which 'leads a comfortable sort of existence'. Congress sought a repudiation but were told that the comments were Mitchell's 'personal views'. Further letters – including from a solicitor – followed by IDATU maintained that they could not concede the principle that Mitchell was entitled to express a personal view. IDATU then secured an injunction to prevent their expulsion from Congress. It was overturned in the High Court with costs awarded to Congress. Legal constraints limited Conference's ability to discuss matters but Nevin pointed out that it was the first occasion on which an affiliate had taken a legal action against Congress. When legally entitled to do so, Congress suspended IDATU.

A lengthy and at times heated debate followed before Nevin rose to sum up the debate. To IDATU Treasurer Angela Morgan's charge that Congress had not responded to a solicitor's letter, Nevin pointed out that this was correct as the Executive did 'not correspond' with affiliates through solicitors. The position was clear:

'It is difficult, frankly, to comprehend the mentality of a person who will say that the making of these false, inaccurate, untrue statements by the General Secretary of a major trade union could not be damaging, certainly in the minds of people who read those remarks and might have given some credence to them ... What then, in heaven's name, prevents the union from publicly dissociating itself from and repudiating those statements?'<sup>50</sup>

The Executive position was endorsed. In 1988, Nevin addressed his last Congress, largely on procedural matters, his retirement – and Peter Cassells appointment as General Secretary Designate simply being reported matter-of-factly in the accompanying *Annual Report*.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Gerry Quigley in his 1989 Presidential address thanked, on the delegates' behalf, Donal Nevin for his 'enormous contribution'.<sup>52</sup> Nevin was credited with maintaining the ICTU unity of policy and resistance to divisive, workplace sectarianism when it was confronted by crises in Northern Ireland.

Within the movement, Nevin recognised the need for rationalisation and encouraged the merger of unions, chairing the ultimately unsuccessful merger talks between teaching unions in 1975-1976 and 1990-1991. When Nevin joined the ITUC, it had six staff members. When he retired from the ICTU when it employed fifty people. On his retirement from the ICTU after forty years' service on 20 January 1989, Nevin presented five decades of ICTU and other union records to the National Archives of Ireland, the first such major deposit by a non-governmental organisation.<sup>53</sup> His daughter Anne has been depositing some of his personal papers in the Irish Labour History Society Archives.

### **Negotiator**

Nevin's capacity as a trade union negotiator was doubted by some in the movement as he never been an industrial official. This, for Billy Attley, 'undervalued him and he demonstrated toughness, ingenuity

and imagination once General Secretary holding Congress together during very difficult times'.<sup>54</sup> His contribution to dispute settlement was also often unrecognised, particularly his significant contribution to the nineteen-week Post Office Workers' Union (POWU) strike of 1979. After sixteen weeks, the behind-the-scenes intervention by Nevin and WUI General Secretary Paddy Cardiff on behalf of Congress resulted in settlement terms being drafted, the two stressing Government insistence on 'flexibility' from the workers' side to the POWU Executive. Government success in European and local elections fortified their stance and the POWU Executive acknowledged that 'all the political factors favoured Government ... all the pressures were off'. On 25 June, Congress President Cardiff issued a statement of settlement terms. Cardiff and Nevin had, for two weeks, mediated between the POWU and Fianna Fáil Minister for Posts & Telegraphs Pádraig Faulkner. They had 'painstakingly constructed an acceptable formula for the resumption of work', a formula that was 'fairly complex', its complexity a function of Nevin's practicality and capacity for ingenuity.<sup>55</sup> Cardiff recalled that he was not the POWU's 'first choice' as intermediary and that they had 'turned down some of the best negotiators in the movement'. The end result was that

'Donal Nevin and I were asked to help conduct the negotiations and we worked very well as a team. He supplied all the figures and everything else, the ammunition and I fired it ... it was very intractable, nineteen weeks or something, and they showed no great inclination to go back. It was a good piece of work I thought.'<sup>56</sup>

Cardiff's 'reputation as an uncompromising but honest negotiator was made – albeit with the able research work and preparation of Nevin'. Both men were undoubtedly pleased as to how events reflected positively on the WUI.

Nevin's capacity to supply 'all the figures and everything else' for Congress in the shaping of national wages and incomes policy is impossible to quantify but a crucial element of their development. From 1963, Nevin was a member of the National Industrial Economic Council (NIEC) established in 1963 by Lemass to consult with unions and employers on economic policy and, from 1973 he served on its successor, the National Economic & Social Council (NESC). They can be seen as seed trays for the development of collective trade union policy. Nevin was a 'key promoter of the PAYE protests', supported a property tax and, through detailed briefings, demonstrated that PAYE workers shouldered too much of the tax burden. He 'highlighted the prevalence of widespread and unpunished tax evasion'. He called for farmers with significant income or assets to be assessed for tax, and the Working Group on the Integration of the Tax & Social Welfare system (1993-1996), which he chaired, urged simplification of taxation systems to incentivise work.

In the mid-1980s Nevin blamed private sector managerial incompetence for Ireland's economic woes. They had failed 'to avail of low Irish labour costs' and had squandered of generous State and EEC subsidies' He called for job creation through expanded State enterprise and was 'a vocal critic of the auction politics and inflationary budgets that characterised Irish electoral politics in the 1980s. He deplored the 'deception of the electorate by both main parties'.<sup>57</sup> Despite his Labourist views, Nevin was pragmatic and worked with Fine Gael Ministers in the coalitions of 1981-1982 and 1982-1987 and supported the Fianna Fáil Government's 1987 *Programme for National Recovery*, the first Social Partnership agreement. He arguably ensured that Congress made a substantial contribution to wage-restraint in the late 1980s, and thus arguably to the impressive economic growth achieved in the next decade which underpinned major improvements in living standards.<sup>58</sup>

In the period after the collapse of the National Understandings and the so-called 'Free For All', Bill Attley said Nevin 'urged affiliates to be ready, arguing that the pendulum will turn and when it does we must be prepared, united and strong. Attley held Nevin in the highest regard'.<sup>59</sup>

## **Commissions**



Nevin was a 'very active member' of the two Commissions on Taxation. The first, from 1959-1963, produced the PAYE system and the second, 1980-1985, led to various reforms though neither 'satisfied his desire for a comprehensive, progressive fiscal regime'.<sup>60</sup> Nevin constantly promoted Congress economic, social and industrial policy within the National Industrial Economic Council and, later, the National Economic & Social Council, as well as drafting pre-Budget submissions to Government. In 1960, he was one of eighteen founder members of the Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI), a body founded under the auspices of the Statistical & Social Inquiry Society of Ireland following a grant from the Ford Foundation negotiated by T.K. Whitaker, then Secretary, Department of Finance. It was valued recognition of the trade union movement that allowed its perspective be heard at the highest levels but also personal recognition of Nevin's scholarship. He mixed comfortably as equal among academic circles. Nevin served on the ESRI Council until 2004, acting as President from 2002.<sup>61</sup> He used his ESRI Presidency to impress on Government – and beyond it Europe – the value of much increased, independent funding for social and economic research.<sup>62</sup>

Prior to Ireland's entry to Europe in 1973, Nevin served on the Committee of Industrial Organisation that prepared industry for the imminent free trade competition. Over five decades, his engagement in public policy saw him serve – always diligently and constructively – on a bewildering range of boards, review groups, committees, associations and trusts has been described as Stakhanovite. He was involved with the Abbey Theatre, Bewley Trust, Broadcasting Review Commission, board of the Central Statistics Office, Combat Poverty Agency, Commission on Remuneration & Conditions of Service in the Defence Forces (1993 and 1996), European Social Fund Advisory Committee, Expert Working Party on the Integration of the Tax & Social Welfare System, Focus Ireland, Glencree Reconciliation Centre, Health Research Board, Higher Education Authority, Irish Hospice Foundation, Irish National Productivity Committee, National Roads Authority, People's College Adult Education Organisation, Steering Group of the Irish Council for People with Disabilities, and Working Party on the Occupational Training of the Handicapped. He was a Governor of the Irish Times Trust since its formation in 1974 and a director of the newspaper, positions he cherished. While all these engagements were diverse, Nevin brought a common denominator of progressive thinking and ideas, all carefully researched and, where necessary, costed. He was a valued contributor to all he engaged in.

In 1989, the University of Limerick awarded Nevin an Honorary Doctorate in Laws, recognising his 'scholarly work as an extension of [his] practice as socialist and trade unionist'. He also received an Honorary Doctorates in Laws from the National University of Ireland in 1989 and the National Council of Educational Awards in May 2000. This led to a family nickname of 'Dr³' ('Doctor Cubed'). He was also honoured by the Royal Dublin Society. These were unique tributes to his academic achievements as well as his significant contribution to society. He always maintained the highest standards of scholarship but everything was driven by the 1959 ICTU declaration that served to inspire him.

'Our movement can now take its proper place in the nation's life, concentrating its undivided endeavours towards the achievement of working-class ideals and aspirations .... Trade unionism has been ... the most potent instrument for winning dignity, self-respect and freedom for the workers.'<sup>63</sup>

Nevin was interested in the application of these ideals. The creation by Congress in March 2012 of the Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI) honours and continues that commitment. With offices in Dublin and Belfast, NERI aimed to generate trade union policies to challenge the New Right and its annual Donal Nevin Lecture has been addressed by leading socialist intellectuals, beginning with the inaugural lecture by President Michael D. Higgins. For all lectures see Appendix 2 below, video recordings of which are available on the NERI website or Youtube.

Nevin published widely. His work appeared in the *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland* and he became a prominent member of that society.<sup>64</sup> In the mid-1950s Nevin's submissions

on behalf of various trade unions to the Prices Advisory Board demonstrated a mastery of relevant statistics and economic models and he was often a member of trade union delegations to the government. During the 1950s he appeared regularly on Radio Éireann panel shows which addressed topical political and socio-economic issues and on similar television programmes in the following decade. In addition, Nevin regularly addressed regional and sectoral trade union groups, professional bodies, and the People's College (set up in 1948 to provide education for workers).

### **Internationalist**

Nevin had an 'absolute horror of war and violence'. He supported Irish entry to the European Economic Community, accepting its original ambition for the construction of a peaceful Europe. He thought EEC membership would enhance Ireland's economic performance, raise living standards and introduce progressive social legislation. There were tensions within the ICTU with most unions, like the ITGWU, vigorously campaigning against entry. Undoubtedly under Nevin's influence, the WUI was in favour, albeit after a rousing all-day debate at a Special Conference.<sup>65</sup>

In the late 1960s, Nevin had 'presciently warned of both a precipitous decline in agricultural employment' and an 'ensuing rapid, large-scale urban expansion as inevitable (which would significantly inflate urban land values)'. He called for wealth redistribution through progressive taxation. After accession to the EEC in 1973, he served on the European Trade Union Conference Executive and on the Advisory Committee of the European Social Fund. He argued for enhanced trade union rights and increased funding for vocational training.<sup>66</sup> Nevin was influenced by European social democratic parties and ideas and was admirer of Antonio Gramsci. He had attended the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL, Italian Confederation of Labour) conferences and expressed admiration for their attempts to influence Government policy.<sup>67</sup>

Nevin was a founder and active member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in November 1957.<sup>68</sup> He abhorred war and was energetic in his opposition to nuclear weapons and calls for peace. From 1964, he served on the Executive of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement (IAAM) from the late 1950s, and was a key figure in gaining labour movement support for the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement and opposed worker repression wherever it occurred.<sup>69</sup> As ICTU General Secretary in 1982, he established a Liaison Committee with the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement, called for tighter restrictions on trade with South Africa, opposed the Springboks tour in support of the international sporting blockade of the Apartheid regime. IAAM meetings were held in Congress. He was a prominent figure in Anti-Apartheid demonstrations working closely with Kader and Louise Asmal, Terence McCaughey etc.<sup>70</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, Nevin was active – sometimes conspicuously so – in protests against the Vietnam War taking part in demonstrations, giving speeches and urging trade union support. While supporting the Vietnam struggle – and incurring the wrath of those who thought this was supporting communism – the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 brought savage criticism from Nevin. At a meeting of the Irish-Czechoslovakia Society in Dublin on 25 August, the Lord Mayor Frank Cluskey, TD, said the gathering of two hundred people 'offered whatever moral support, assistance or encouragement it could to Czechs in Ireland'. Nevin said that 'a criminal blunder had been perpetrated on' Czechoslovakia and that 'it was important that the voices of trade unionists and socialists be heard on this occasion'.<sup>71</sup> Nevin's support of human rights was universal.

### **History and Culture**

In the Larkinite tradition of placing a rose on the table alongside a loaf, Nevin valued culture and had lifelong interests in literature, theatre and art. In his homage to Big Jim Larkin, *Lion of the Fold*, he reproduced an impressive range of poetry, prose, drama and songs about Larkin. Where others averred to Larkin's impact on artists, Nevin brought their works to life again, much of it performed by actors in stage shows in Belfast and Dublin in 1997 to celebrate Big Jim's fiftieth anniversary.<sup>72</sup> This was complemented by an impressive exhibition on Larkin in the National Library of Ireland which he had

assembled. Nevin's personal contacts encouraged various Larkin family members and the author James Plunkett Kelly to loan material for the event. Nevin knew Kelly from his days as a WUI Official in the Gas Company and they shared a mutual respect.<sup>73</sup> Earlier, Nevin had been a driving force behind Óisín Kelly's Larkin Monument – and Nevin was always insistent that it was 'a Monument not a statue' – erected in O'Connell Street in 1976, a year then erroneously thought to be Larkin's centenary. Much can be learned from Nevin's thoughtfully selected inscriptions – the front stating 'The great appear great because we are on our knees: let us arise!' in French, Irish and English.<sup>74</sup> Quotations from Patrick Kavanagh and Seán O'Casey grace the other sides.<sup>75</sup> His engagement with Larkin meant that Nevin had personal involvement with almost everyone who researched the man. They regarded Nevin as a generous and willing source of information, notably Emmet Larkin who was a willing contributor to occasional Larkin-related celebrations organised by the WUI.<sup>76</sup>

He was a founding member of what became the Dublin Civic Action group, established in 1966 to protect Dublin's Georgian heritage, and a frequent protestor against Dublin Corporation's decision to build their new civic offices on a former Viking settlement at Wood Quay. Nevin served as a Trustee, Abbey Theatre, and of the People's College Adult Education Association.<sup>77</sup> Nevin never used the fada on his name and, indeed, was occasionally published as Donald Nevin. He spoke Irish and was marginally active in Scéim na gCeardchumann, an organisation of trade unionists designed to promote the language and culture, and, in his early days, occasionally wrote as Dónal Mac Cnáimhín.<sup>78</sup>

After his formal retirement from Congress on 20 January 1989, Nevin compiled substantial biographies of Larkin and James Connolly and brought the latter's writing and correspondence together in three volumes. While reviewers have identified items that Nevin missed, the three volumes were important contributions to labour historiography. He engaged many willing hands in the process – a reflection of the esteem and fondness in which he was regarded by many – and secured ready sponsorship from SIPTU. While the Larkin material had been assembled over a lifetime – he came to Connolly later and, if not from scratch, began to discover aspects of Connolly's politics, intellect and personality. Having always describing himself as 'a Larkinite' – a term with a tinge of the divisive rancour between WUI and ITGWU – he began to acknowledge that he was 'becoming more of a Connollyite' as he recovered his works.<sup>79</sup> In fact, Nevin had long held an admiration for Connolly's socialism. In 1966, as Connolly again came to the fore of public imagination, Nevin remarked

'On the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising, which Connolly did so much to bring about, one must echo the words of Desmond Ryan, 'There is no need for any maudlin apologies for the most vital and consistent thing about him: his socialism!'"<sup>80</sup>

Nevin's works while generally admired and regarded as significant personal achievements and important contributions to labour historiography, received criticism. Historian John Cunningham, in reviewing *James Connolly: 'A Full Life'*, observed that 'it is a matter of regret to the reviewer that so many shortcomings had to be identified, but it was frustrating to find that what promised to be a great book was merely a moderately good book'. He argued that better editing 'might have been saved if repetitive passages had been excised and quotations abridged' and that 'an expert reader might have coaxed the author into making occasional judgements'.<sup>81</sup> This criticism – Nevin's reluctance to offer a personal view or assessment – was a common denominator in reviews all of which, nevertheless, demonstrated enormous respect and no little affection for Nevin as historian and author.

Nevin was a father figure of Irish labour history and, from 1989, *the* most fitting Irish Labour History Society (ILHS) Honorary President, 1989-2012. Initially ambivalent about the ILHS and expressing misgivings about the ILHS Museum & Archives project in Beggar's Bush opened in 1990, he warmed to its work and made an important contribution. He was ever an encouraging source, a prompter of work, and honest and critical eye, a generous tutor.

At the first symposium on labour history, held in Queen's University on 16-18 May 1974 – an event coinciding with the Ulster Workers' Council stoppage and held in a 'bizarre environment' – Donal Nevin addressed 'the state of labour history', highlighting the 'relative neglect' by historians 'partly due to the failure of intellectuals to come to terms with the integration of the history of trade unions with the history of the working class'. The 'neglect of the labour archives and ignorance of those which had survived' added to the problem. Nevin reminded labour historians of their obligation

'to do justice to their subject matter and avoid perversion of the truth. They must adhere to the best professional standards and be scrupulous in the pursuit and examination of documentary evidence. If the highest standard of objectivity was met then first rate labour history would force itself into the accepted corpus of Irish history.'<sup>82</sup>

### **Personal Life & Character**

For a national figure, some observers found Nevin to be 'unusually self-effacing' and his 'unexpected modesty' may have 'enhanced his influence'. Certainly, an apparently mild, unthreatening character probably earned him – and the cause he represented – a sympathetic hearing where deaf ears might otherwise have applied. He tended to speak 'only when strictly necessary' and therefore, when he did speak, his contributions carried persuasive weight. His statements were 'well-researched, well-considered and delivered with clear conviction. He could, however, be witty and engaging company even if not someone 'over-given to socialising'.<sup>83</sup> He frequently lightened tense meetings with well-chosen humour and would readily regale friends with anecdote or reminiscence, though few such tales revealed much about Nevin the person. His knowledge of history, politics and many other subjects made utterly engaging conversations with him enlightening. You left Nevin with more than brought with you. More than one senior trade unionist who travelled with him on delegations found him a 'magnificently compelling and appealing companion'.<sup>84</sup>

In a contemporary world when trade union recognition is disputed or ignored, in Nevin's time he was a central figure not only in the mechanisms of the trade unions formal recognition by the State and employers through national agreements and consultations, but in an important, informal recognition. In this regard, Nevin came to be the personal embodiment of this informal process of contacts and exchanges. He could lift the phone to Taoisigh, Ministers, Labour Leaders, Departmental Heads or employers' leaders and his call would be answered and his message listened to if not always positively responded too. In this regard, Nevin came to understand how Government actually worked. As Otto von Bismarck observed that 'politics was the art of the possible, the attainable – the art of the next best', Nevin recognised that achieving the achievable, inevitably often incremental progress, contributed more to workers' futures than failing to achieve the impossible. In that regard, not having to face an angry membership – as leaders of many individual unions had to do when their demands were thwarted – was an advantage.

Nevin was privately 'informed by Catholicism but not overawed by it' and it had informed the development of his commitment to social justice. As a young man, he was briefly involved in St Vincent De Paul and the Legion of Mary and, in later life, he engaged in parish activities and advised on diocesan financial programmes. His fundamental faith notwithstanding, in 1983 Nevin and the ICTU opposed the Constitutional Amendment banning abortion and in 1986 they campaigned for a Constitutional Referendum on divorce. Nevin had been a founder member of what became the Divorce Action Group. Nevin regarded both positions as supporting individual civil rights, a position reflecting his membership of the Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL) from 1976. The ICCL had been founded by Kader Asmal, Mary Robinson and union official Seán Redmond.<sup>85</sup>

In 1952, Nevin met Kerrywoman Maura Murphy in the CSCA premises where she was involved in a social committee.<sup>86</sup> Originally from Ballinskelligs, her family moved to Mullagh, Kilcock, from where

she came to Dublin to join the Civil Service as a Clerical Officer in the General Post Office. The Marriage Bar ended her career. On 22 September 1960, the couple married in St Kevin's Oratory in the Pro-Cathedral, Dublin. Nevin was essentially a private person. The most important and valued aspect of his life was his family. Maura Murphy and his daughter Anne, a Secondary School Teacher born in 1962, were integral to his life and central to much of its activities, not least as his unofficial administration. Their loving support sustained and inspired him through various serious illnesses, accepting that – once the Nevin batteries were re-charged – he would disappear into frenetic activity again. His sense of social justice was informed by deeply-held religious beliefs, another private aspect of his character.

### Death & Assessment

Donal Nevin died on 16 December 2012 in St Vincent's Hospital, Dublin, sadly being denied witnessing the 1913 Lockout Centenary. After a funeral mass at the church of the Holy Cross, Dundrum, Nevin was buried at Shanganagh Cemetery, Shankhill. When choosing a title for his monumental compendium on James Connolly, he echoed Connolly's last words to his wife and daughter Nora in Dulin Castle in the early hours of 12 May 1916: 'Hasn't it been a full life, Lillie, and isn't this a good end?' Nevin's own life could bear the same description: 'A Full Life'. President Michael D. Higgins, delivering the inaugural NERI Donal Nevin Lecture, observed that Nevin dedicated his life to the achievement of a better, fairer society'. Pádraig Ó hUiginn, former Secretary-General, recalled that Nevin made the toughest and most demanding Congress positions seem eminently reasonable.<sup>87</sup> Barry Desmond reflected that his contributions to industrial and political labour were 'unique'.<sup>88</sup>

SIPTU General President Jack O'Connor said that Nevin was 'a man of great intellect and absolute integrity' who

'always called it as he saw it and never shirked the responsibility of delivering the message, however unpopular. Despite his meek temperament and pleasant demeanour, he stood full square in the tradition of Jim Larkin. He particularly espoused the post-war European trade union tradition championed in this country by Young Jim Larkin and John Conroy.'

He added that Nevin's 'intellectual rigour cut to the core of every issue analysing it from the perspective of its potential impact on working people and the marginalised'.<sup>89</sup> Reflecting on Nevin's legacy today, O'Connor considered Nevin 'one of the last trade union leaders who understood his role in terms of the broad labour movement'.<sup>90</sup> David Begg, then ICTU General Secretary, recognised Nevin's 'huge integrity ... who was possessed of a sharp and rigorous intellect and a keen strategic vision'.<sup>91</sup> Recently retired ICTU General Secretary Patricia King felt Nevin's 'legacy' even though a number of others had served in the position since Nevin's retirement. She recalled that he 'always demonstrated his empathy for those in poverty and the dispossessed' in whatever he did and she was conscious of his commitment to equality of treatment throughout society.<sup>92</sup> When awarding him an Honorary Doctorate, the University of Limerick said that Nevin had 'frequently volunteered his time to assist the State in its development of policy on a wide range of issues'. His 'multitudinous activities' provided 'some idea of the comprehensiveness' of his 'vision of what social partnership might mean'. They cited Edmund Burke's 1790 perception of a social contract – although whether Nevin would have approved an association with Burke is doubtful – 'it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born'. This succinctly encapsulates Nevin's commitment to workers' futures.<sup>93</sup>

Noël Browne was among left-wing critics who considered Nevin an 'insider', unwilling to mount any radical challenge to the status quo'. Many respected Nevin

'for his statistical rigour, economic nous and expert marshalling of data and evidence, which he employed judiciously to champion the welfare of workers. Taciturn and focused, he contributed to meetings only when strictly necessary. Admirers attributed his reticence to an innate lack of

personal ambition and a selfless focus on improving workers' rights and their standard of living, as well as addressing the needs of the marginalised and the unemployed.'<sup>94</sup>

Nevin's unfailing courteousness, reputation for honour and fastidiously researched detail, made him a formidable advocate on workers' behalf. In Michael D. Higgins' words, his wonderful contributions mark him out as a great twentieth-century Irishman, as the 'intellectual giant of the Irish trade union movement', as a committed socialist and prodigious historian, a true and quietly effective servant of Irish working people.<sup>95</sup>

### **Appendix 1: Select Bibliography of Nevin's Works**

#### **Books**

*1913: Jim Larkin & the Dublin Lockout*, (WUI, Dublin, 1964), pp. 124  
*Trade Unions & Change in Irish Society*, (RTÉ Thomas Davis Lectures, Mercier Press, Cork, 1980), pp. 174  
*Trade Union Century*, (RTÉ Thomas Davis Lectures, Mercier Press, Cork, 1994), pp. 208  
*James Larkin: Lion of the Fold*, (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1997; paperback edition 2006), pp. 624  
*James Connolly: 'A Full Life'*, (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 2006), pp. 864  
*Between Comrades: James Connolly, Letters & Correspondence*, (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 2007), pp. 688  
*Writings of James Connolly: Collected Works*, (SIPTU, Dublin, 2011), pp. 319  
*James Connolly: Political Writings, 1893-1916*, (SIPTU, Dublin, 2011), pp. 680

#### **Articles/Chapters**

'Labour and the political revolution' in Francis MacManus (ed), *T Years of the Great Test*, (Mercier Press, Cork, 1967)  
'The Irish Citizen Army' in Owen Dudley Edwards & Fergus Pyle (eds), *The Easter Rising*, (MacGibbon & Kee, London, 1968)  
'Industry and labour' in Kevin B. Nowlan & T. Desmond Williams (eds), *Ireland in the War Years & After. 1939-1951*, (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1969)  
'Radical movements in the twenties and thirties' in T. Desmond Williams (ed), *Secret Societies in Ireland*, (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1973)  
'Marx, Connolly and the Irish labour movement' in Kevin B. Nowlan (ed), *Karl Marx: The Materialist Messiah*, (Mercier Press, Cork, 1984)

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### **Appendix 2: NERI Donal Nevin Lectures**

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#### **2013, Inaugural Lecture**

President Michael D. Higgins, CWU Premises, Dublin

#### **2014, 2nd Lecture**

Professor Stephany Griffith-Jones, Financial Markets Director at the Initiative for Policy Dialogue, Columbia University, 'The future of Banking in Ireland & Europe',

#### **2015, 3rd Lecture**

Professor Mariana Mazzucato, Professor in the Economics of Innovation & Public Value, University College London, 'The Entrepreneurial State', Royal Irish Academy, Dublin

#### **2016, 4TH Lecture**

Professor Diane Coyle, University of Manchester, 'Does GDP Measure What Matters?', Queen's University Belfast

#### **2017, 5th Lecture**

Professor Jeremias Prassl, Fellow of Magdalen College, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Law at the University of Oxford, 'Humans as a Service - the Promise and Perils of Work in the Gig Economy',

2018, 6th Lecture

Professor Kevin Hjortshøj O'Rourke, All Souls College, Oxford, 'Putting Brexit in Historical Perspective', Queen's University Belfast

2019, 7th Lecture

Dr Lorna Gold, Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University, 'Is Ireland ready for a Green New Deal?', Royal Irish Academy, Dublin

2021, 8th Lecture

Professor Emeritus Cormac Ó Gráda, UCD, 'The Irish Economy After A Century', Webinar

2022, 9th Annual Lecture

Paul Johnson, Independent Fiscal Commission for Northern Ireland, 'Options for Fiscal Devolution in Northern Ireland', Queens Management School, Queen's University Belfast.

2022, 10th Lecture

Sharon Donnery, Deputy Governor (Financial Regulation), Central Bank of Ireland, '*Inflation and Labour Market Dynamics After The Pandemic*', CWU Premises, Dublin

2023, 11th Lecture

Torsten Bell, Chief Executive of the Resolution Foundation, 'Good Work Across the United Kingdom's Nations, Regions & Industries', Queen's University Belfast

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### Notes

*In constructing this profile, I am grateful for the encouragement and assistance of Anne Nevin, Bill Attley, Patricia King, Jack McGinley, Dan Murphy, Jack O'Connor and Conal Parr. All internet sources were retrieved in January 2024*

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<sup>1</sup> Conversations with Bill Attley, 21 January; Peter Cassells, 1 February; Patricia King and Jack O'Connor, 31 January 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Nevin's brothers were Thomas, Jack, Frank and Dermot and sisters Stasia (Bowman), Maureen (Flanagan) and Eileen (Smyth). All predeceased him. Details are drawn from Francis Devine's oration at Nevin's funeral in Holy Cross Church, Dundrum, 18 December 1912.

<sup>3</sup> The Nevins then had two children, Edwin, 4, born in England, and Anastasia, 2, born in King's County. They had a visitor on Census night, Agnes Higginson, 25, born in Longford and Church of Ireland, [www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai002655521/](http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai002655521/) The couple had also lived in Kilkenny.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas became Professor of Experimental Physics and Dean of the Faculty of Science in UCD, 1963-1979; Stasia was a National School Teacher; Jack an engineer with General Electric in New York; Dermot worked for Manpower in Galway; Frank helped run a family furniture and repair business in Limerick; Maureen was a Civil Servant; and Eileen a Secondary Teacher in Holyhead, Gwynedd. Information from Anne Nevin, 31 January 2024.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, he enjoyed Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* though it did not represent the Limerick he knew.

<sup>6</sup> All issues of both publications can be accessed at [www.limerickcity.ie/Library/LocalStudies/BooksJournals/TheOldLimerickJournal/](http://www.limerickcity.ie/Library/LocalStudies/BooksJournals/TheOldLimerickJournal/) [www.limerickcity.ie/Library/LocalStudies/BooksJournals/LimerickSocialist1972-1981/](http://www.limerickcity.ie/Library/LocalStudies/BooksJournals/LimerickSocialist1972-1981/)

<sup>7</sup> Turlough O'Riordan, 'Nevin, Donal (1924-2012), trade unionist and historian, *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, [www.dib.ie/biography/nevin-donal-a10208](http://www.dib.ie/biography/nevin-donal-a10208)

<sup>8</sup> Francis Devine, 'Donal Nevin (1924-2012)', *Saothar* 39, 2014, pp. 119-122. Nevin's mother was concerned that her son had gone to Dublin and that he would not be able to look after himself properly. He had also declined a clerical position in the railways which would have kept him in Limerick. Information from Anne Nevin.

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<sup>9</sup> See John P. Swift, 'The last years' in Donal Nevin (ed), *James Larkin: Lion of the Fold*, (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1998), pp. 84-92.

<sup>10</sup> McGuinness was born Catherine Ellis in Belfast on 14 November 1934. Educated in Alexandra College, Trinity and the King's Inns, she was called to the Irish Bar in 1977. She was elected to the Senate as an Independent for Dublin University, 1979-1987, eventually losing her seat to David Norris. She served on the Council of State, 1988-1990 and 2012-2019. She was a judge in the High Court, 1996, and Supreme Court, 2000-2006. She served on the Employment Equality Agency and countless other agencies and commissions. She was married to Proinsias Mac Aonghusa from 1954 until his death in 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Cummins (FF), 6,014; MacBride (CnP), 3,030; John Hegarty (FG), 3,089; Cluskey, 2,762; and Hartnett (NPD), 2,688.

<sup>12</sup> Evanne Kilmurray, *Fight, Starve or Emigrate: A History of the Irish Unemployed Movements in the 1950s*, (Larkin Unemployed Centre, Dublin, 1989); Brian Kenny, *Sam Nolan: A Long March on the Left*, (Kenny/Personal History Publishing, Dublin, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Devine, *Organising History*, *op. cit.*, pp. 494-495.

<sup>14</sup> The ITGWU followed in 1967, *ibid.*, pp. 548-550, 582-584.

<sup>15</sup> *Pictorial*, 22 October 1955, cited in Niamh Puirseil, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-1973*, (UCD Press, Dublin, 2007), pp., p. 184. Nevin's views were shared by the *Irish Times* reporter and veteran socialist Michael McInerney.

<sup>16</sup> Puirseil, *The Irish Labour Party*, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>17</sup> Puirseil, *The Irish Labour Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

<sup>18</sup> O'Riordan, 'Nevin, Donal', *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> *Bulletin*, January 1960 cited in Manus O'Riordan, *The Voice of a Thinking, Intelligent Movement: James Larkin Junior & the Ideological Modernisation of Irish Trade Unionism*, (Studies in Irish Labour History 2, ILHS, Dublin, 2001), p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> Francis Devine (ed), 'A Trade Union Journal, First, Last & Always': *the Workers' Union of Ireland Report, 1952-1954*, (Saothar Studies 2, ILHS, Dublin, 2011), book & CD Rom

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Rodney Rice, 'At arm's length but not worlds apart' in Kieran Jack McGinley (ed), *Cluskey: The Conscience of Labour*, (Umiskin Press, Dublin, 2015), p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Conversation with Bill Attley, 28 January 2024.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>24</sup> Puirseil, *The Irish Labour Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

<sup>25</sup> Barry Desmond, *No Workers' Republic! Reflections on Labour & Ireland, 1913-1967*, (Watchword, Dublin, 2009), pp. 242-243, 257-259.

<sup>26</sup> Conversation with Cassells, 1 February 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Bridget Hourican, 'Mortished, Ronald James Patrick (1891-1957), socialist and first chairman of the Labour Court', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, [www.dib.ie/biography/mortished-ronald-james-patrick-a5999](http://www.dib.ie/biography/mortished-ronald-james-patrick-a5999)

<sup>28</sup> Devine, 'Donal Nevin', *op. cit.*, p. 122, fn. 2. For Swift's memory of things, see John P. Swift, *John Swift: An Irish Dissident*, (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1991), p. 132.

<sup>29</sup> *Trade Union Information* can be consulted in the ILHS Archives.

<sup>30</sup> ITUC, *Fifty-Sixth Annual Report, 1949-1950 & Report of Proceedings of Fifty-Sixth Annual Meeting, Galway, 1950*, p. 26-28.

<sup>31</sup> ITUC, *Sixtieth Annual Report, 1950-1951 & Report of Proceedings of Sixtieth Annual Meeting, Killarney, 1951*, pp. 137-140, 140-142.

<sup>32</sup> Lawrence William White, 'Roberts, Ruaidhrí Butler (1917-86), trade unionist', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, [www.dib.ie/biography/roberts-ruaidhri-butler-a7704](http://www.dib.ie/biography/roberts-ruaidhri-butler-a7704)

<sup>33</sup> Conversation with Devine, 1 February 2024. For general survey, see 'Women and the trade union movement', Donal Nevin, *Trade Union Century*, (ICTU/RTÉ/Mercier, Dublin, 1994), pp. 357-370.

<sup>34</sup> e-mail from Dan Murphy to Francis Devine, 2 November 2014.

<sup>35</sup> ICTU, *Eighth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Eighth Annual Conference, Galway, 1966*, pp. 240-242; ICTU, *Twelfth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Twelfth Annual Conference, Cork, 1970*, p. 355.

<sup>36</sup> O'Riordan, 'Nevin, Donal', *op. cit.*; Margaret Ayers, 'Equal pay for women: words not deeds?', *Saothar* 36, 2011, pp. 89-96.

<sup>37</sup> ICTU, *Third Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Third Annual Conference, Cork, 1961*, pp. 240-244, 256-261; *Fourth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Fourth Annual Conference, Galway, 1962*, pp. 224-228; *Sixth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Sixth Annual Conference, Belfast, 1964*, pp. 365-366; and for criticism of redundancy legislation, *Tenth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Tenth Annual Conference, Killarney, 1968*, pp. 371-373



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- <sup>38</sup> ICTU, *Seventh Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Seventh Annual Conference*, Cork, 1965, pp. 353-355.
- <sup>39</sup> ICTU, *Eighth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Eighth Annual Conference*, Galway, 1966, pp. 306-308; *Ninth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Ninth Annual Conference*, Portrush, 1967, pp. 326-328.
- <sup>40</sup> ICTU, *Fourteenth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Fourteenth Annual Conference*, Galway, 1972, pp. 388-391.
- <sup>41</sup> ICTU, *Twenty-First Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Twenty-First Annual Conference*, Bundoran, 1979, pp. 501-503.
- <sup>42</sup> ICTU, *Twenty-Second Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Twenty-Second Annual Conference*, Belfast, 1980, pp. 430-432.
- <sup>43</sup> ICTU, *Twenty-Third Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Twenty-Third Annual Conference*, Cork 1981, p. 498.
- <sup>44</sup> ICTU, *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Twenty-Fourth Annual Conference*, Belfast, 1982, pp. 180-189.
- <sup>45</sup> ICTU, *Twenty-Fifth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Twenty-Fifth Annual Conference*, Galway, 1983, pp. 78-79, 161-162.
- <sup>46</sup> Mullen, born in Church Street, Dublin, in 1919, was an ITGWU activist in Ever Ready batteries, Portobello, becoming a Branch Secretary, National Group Secretary and finally General Secretary, 1969-1982. A Dublin Corporation Councillor, 1969-1982, he was Labour TD, Dublin North-West, 1961-1969, and Senator, 1973-1977. He died in Frankfurt attending a trade union conference on 1 November 1982. See Marie Coleman, 'Mullen, Michael (1919-82), trade unionist, republican, and politician', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, [www.dib.ie/biography/mullen-michael-a6040](http://www.dib.ie/biography/mullen-michael-a6040); 'Michael (Mickey) Mullen' in Francis Devine, *Organising History: A Centenary of SIPTU, 1909-2009*, (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 2009), pp. 967-969.
- <sup>47</sup> ICTU, *Twenty-Sixth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Twenty-Sixth Annual Conference*, Waterford, 1984, pp. 43-44, 127-128.
- <sup>48</sup> ICTU, *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Twenty-Seventh Annual Conference*, Killarney, 1985, pp. 44-45.
- <sup>49</sup> ICTU, *Twenty-Eighth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Twenty-Eighth Annual Conference*, Belfast, 1988, pp. 56-57, 189; *Thirtieth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Thirtieth Annual Conference*, Dublin,
- <sup>50</sup> ICTU, *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Twenty-Ninth Annual Conference*, Cork, 1987, pp. 52-68.
- <sup>51</sup> ICTU, *Thirtieth Annual Report & Report of Proceedings of Thirtieth Annual Conference*, Dublin, 1988, pp. 48 (AR), 50-51, 203, 248.
- <sup>52</sup> ICTU, *Report of Proceedings of Thirtieth Annual Conference*, Bundoran, 1989, pp. 5-6.
- <sup>53</sup> Surprisingly, no mention of Nevin's retirement was recorded in ICTU reports: *Report of Executive Council, 1988/89*; *Report of Executive Council, 1989/90*. For ICTU records see Catriona Crowe & Ken Hannigan, 'Labour records in the National Archives of Ireland', *Irish Archives, Journal of the Irish Society of Archives*, Winter 2003-2004, vol. 9 ns, pp.11-18.
- <sup>54</sup> Francis Devine, *The Man in the Middle: Bill Attley, Trade Union Leader, 1938-*, (Studies in Irish Labour History, ILHS, Dublin, 2022), p. 35.
- <sup>55</sup> Francis Devine, *Communicating the Union: A History of the Communications Workers' Union*, (CWU, Dublin, 2015), pp. 461-463, part of Chapter 15.2, "An example to the whole trade union movement": the Great Post Office Strike, 1979', pp. 456-476.
- <sup>56</sup> See Francis Devine, *Understanding Social Justice: Paddy Cardiff & the Discipline of Trade Unionism*, (Studies in Irish Labour History 8, ILHS, Dublin, 2002), p. 25.
- <sup>57</sup> *Irish Times*, 3 September 1984.
- <sup>58</sup> O'Riordan, 'Nevin, Donal', *op. cit.*
- <sup>59</sup> Devine, *Man in the Middle*, *op. cit.*, p. 35. For ITGWU and WUI actions from 1979-1987 in relation to national bargaining see Francis Devine, *Organising History: A Centenary of SIPTU, 1909-2009*, (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 2009), pp. 494-495, 660-661, 704-714, 763-765.
- <sup>60</sup> Devine, 'Donal Nevin', *op. cit.*, p. 120.
- <sup>61</sup> ESRI, 'Donal Nevin, RIP', [www.esri.ie/about-us-donal-nevin-rip/](http://www.esri.ie/about-us-donal-nevin-rip/); 'Donal Nevin – Obituary', *ESRI: review of research 2012*, p. 63.
- <sup>62</sup> 'Donal Nevin replaces George Quigley as ESRI President – calls for increased funding for research', [www.esri.ie/news/donal-nevin-replaces-george-quigley-as-esri-president-calls-for-increased-funding-for-0](http://www.esri.ie/news/donal-nevin-replaces-george-quigley-as-esri-president-calls-for-increased-funding-for-0)
- <sup>63</sup> Cited in Devine, 'Donal Nevin', *op. cit.*, p. 120.

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- <sup>64</sup> For the S&STSI journal, including Nevin's contributions to economic round table discussions, see [www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/1080](http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/1080).
- <sup>65</sup> See Devine, *Understanding Social Justice*, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-37.
- <sup>66</sup> e-mail from Dan Murphy to Francis Devine, 2 November 2014.
- <sup>67</sup> Conversation with Bill Attley, 23 January 2024. Anne Nevin conformed that Gramsci's works 'are found in my father's library'.
- <sup>68</sup> For brief history of CND's origins see 'Campaigning for nuclear disarmament' in John P. Swift, *Brendan Scott: The Struggle For a Socialist & Secular Ireland*, (Umiskin Press, Dublin, 2020), pp. 22-26.
- <sup>69</sup> Kader Asmal & Adrian Hadland, *Politics In My Blood: A Memoir*, (Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2011), pp. 48ff.
- <sup>70</sup> Louise Asmal, Kadar Asmal & Thomas Alberts, 'The Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement', *South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET)*, January 2008, pp. 1-67, <https://jstor.org/stable/10.2307/al.sff.document.sadet008>; Swift, *Brendan Scott*, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-90.
- <sup>71</sup> Swift, *Brendan Scott*, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
- <sup>72</sup> *Salute to Big Jim* was produced in Liberty Hall and Transport House, Belfast, with professional actors and musicians.
- <sup>73</sup> See Francis Devine, 'James Plunkett Kelly', *Saothar* 28, 2003, pp. 14-16.
- <sup>74</sup> 'Les grands ne sont grands que parce que nous sommes à genoux: Levons-nous' and 'Ní uasal aon uasal ach sinne bheith íseal: Éirimis'.
- <sup>75</sup> The quotation from Kavanagh's poem 'Jim Larkin' is 'And Tyranny trampled them in Dublin's gutter / Until Jim Larkin came along and cried / The call of Freedom and the call of Pride / And Slavery crept to its hands and knees / And Nineteen Thirteen cheered from out the utter / Degradation of their miseries' and from O'Casey's *Drums Under the Windows*: 'He talked to the workers, spoke as only Jim Larkin could speak, not for an assignation with peace, dark obedience, or placid resignation, but trumpet-tongued of resistance to wrong, discontent with leering poverty, and defiance of any power strutting out to stand in the way of their march onward'. The 'great' quotation is usually attributed to Camille Desmoulins (1760-1794) and first appeared in the paper *Révolutions de Paris*. For the statue Paula Murphy, 'Let us rise', *Irish Arts Review*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2013-2014, pp. 114-117.
- <sup>76</sup> Emmet Larkin, *James Larkin, Irish Labour Leader, 1876-1947*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1965; Pluto Press, London, 1989).
- <sup>77</sup> Ruaidhrí Roberts & R. Dardis Clarke, *The Story of the People's College*, (O'Brien Press, Dublin, 1986).
- <sup>78</sup> Swift, *Brendan Scott*, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-33.
- <sup>79</sup> 'Larkin bibliography', *Saothar* 4, 1978, pp. 57-61 an extended version of that which appeared in *Trade Union Information*, Winter 1976-1977.
- <sup>80</sup> *Irish Times*, 7 April 1966 cited in Puirseil, *The Irish Labour Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 238.
- <sup>81</sup> John Cunningham, review of James Connolly: 'A Full Life!', <http://johnfcunningham.weebly.com/donal-nevin.html>
- <sup>82</sup> Miriam Daly, 'Belfast Symposium on Irish Labour History', *Saothar* 2, 1976, pp. 1-2 cited in Francis Devine, 'Caoga bliain ag fás: the Irish Labour History Society, 1973-2023' in John Cunningham, Francis Devine & Sonja Tiernan, *Labour History in Irish History: Essays Celebrating Fifty Years of the Irish Labour History Society*, (Umiskin Press/ILHS, Dublin, 2023), pp. 5-6.
- <sup>83</sup> An observation by his daughter Anne, 28 January 2024.
- <sup>84</sup> e-mail from Dan Murphy to Francis Devine, 2 November 2014.
- <sup>85</sup> O'Riordan, 'Nevin, Donal', *op. cit.*; ICCL, *45 Years Is A Long Time In Human Rights*, [www.iccl.ie/news/celebrating-45-years-of-change](http://www.iccl.ie/news/celebrating-45-years-of-change). See also Tom Redmond, 'Seán Redmond (1936-2012)', *Saothar* 39, 2014, pp. 123-124.
- <sup>86</sup> Some sources have stated that they met in the Adelaide Ballroom but Maura's recollection is clear.
- <sup>87</sup> Bill Attley's recollection of Nevin's impact in talks with Government as told to Devine, 1 November 2014.
- <sup>88</sup> Desmond, *No Workers' Republic*, *op. cit.*, pp. 282-282.
- <sup>89</sup> 'SIPTU pays tribute to late trade unionist Donal Nevin', *The Journal*, 16 December 2012, [www.thejournal.ie/donal-nevin-death-718934-Dec2012](http://www.thejournal.ie/donal-nevin-death-718934-Dec2012); Paul Melia, 'Remarkable' ex-union chief Nevin dies after illness', *Irish Independent*, 17 December 2012.
- <sup>90</sup> O'Connor conversation with Devine, 30 January 2024.
- <sup>91</sup> 'Congress General Secretary pays tribute to Donal Nevin: 'man of huge integrity'', [www.ictu.ie/news/congress-general-secretary-pays-tribute-donal-nevin-man-huge-integrity](http://www.ictu.ie/news/congress-general-secretary-pays-tribute-donal-nevin-man-huge-integrity)
- <sup>92</sup> King conversation with Devine, 30 January 2024.
- <sup>93</sup> [www.ul.ie/ceremonies/dr-donal-nevin](http://www.ul.ie/ceremonies/dr-donal-nevin)
- <sup>94</sup> O'Riordan, 'Nevin, Donal', *op. cit.*

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<sup>95</sup> [www.president.ie/speeches/inuagural-donal-nevin-lecture-president-michael-d-higgins-nevin-economic-research-institutute-thursday-23-may-2013](http://www.president.ie/speeches/inuagural-donal-nevin-lecture-president-michael-d-higgins-nevin-economic-research-institutute-thursday-23-may-2013); 'Intellectual giant of the Irish trade union movement', *Irish Times*, 22 December 2013.