***25th Desmond Greaves Weekend School, Dublin…Friday 13 September 2013***

***C.Desmond Greaves’s Life and Work: a political evaluation***

 by Anthony Coughlan, Desmond Greaves’s literary executor

As this year, 2013, is the centenary of C. Desmond Greaves’s birth, it is fitting that there should be a political evaluation of his life and work at this 25th Greaves Weekend School in Dublin, an annual event which was established by some of h is friends and admirers to continue and transmit to new generations the values which he stood for.

Desmond Greaves was important for three things: He was (1) a significant theorist of nationality and the national question, (2) a distinguished labour historian, and (3) a lifelong political activist in progressive causes. I shall seek briefly to evaluate his contribution under each of these headings.

**THEORIST OF THE NATIONAL QUESTION**

The French leftwing writer Regis Debray wrote a book in the 1990s: *Charles De Gaulle: Futurist of the Nation* (Verso 1994, translated by John Howe; ISBN 0-86091-622-7). If De Gaulle was a “futurist of the nation” on the political right, one might regard C.Desmond Greaves(1913-1988) as a “futurist of the nation” on the left. It is likely that in time this will come to be regarded as his most important historical contribution.

Both Charles De Gaulle and Desmond Greaves have in common that they avoided abstract theorizing about the nation and nationality. They applied themselves to practical issues of national independence: in De Gaulle’s case France, in Greaves’s case Ireland.

Like De Gaulle Greaves did not begin with a definition of a nation, which is the usual academic approach, and apply it to concrete instances. He took concrete instances and dealt with their developing dynamics. He regarded the approach that starts with definitions as a form of philosophical idealism, likely to lead to wrong conclusions.

Thus in his article “National sovereignty and the Defence of the Nation State”(republished in 2013 by the Connolly Association and Democrat Press under the title *The National Question*, ISBN 978-1-904260-12-7) he writes: *“The academic mind is addicted to abstractions which, like fire, are useful instruments but dangerous when out of control. For example what is a nation? Clearly it is a species of human community characterised by objective features. But there is also a subjective element, frequently the product of a very long history. No two nations are alike. We are therefore dealing with a variable category with uncertain boundaries. If mathematicians can achieve their admired intellectual triumphs through the manipulation of ‘imaginary quantities’ one would think by definition could not be proved to exist, then humble politicians can be excused for not having a pigeon hole for everything.”*

Desmond Greaves’s concern for national democracy and independence made him a strong opponent of European integration from its inception. The monthly *Irish Democrat* which he edited must have been one of the first political organs to oppose British and Irish membership of the EEC (European Economic Community) when that was first proposed in 1961. Greaves regarded the European Community, later the European Union, as essentially a reorganisation of West European capitalism, and the Treaty of Rome as the Constitution of an embryonic European superstate under Franco-German hegemony, drawn up in the interests of EU-based transnational Big Business, without the slightest democratic element.

The contemporary relevance of Greaves’s political thought, like that of the Irish socialist James Connolly whose definitive biography he wrote, stems precisely from the fact that the European Union and the crisis of its supranational currency, the euro, have made the national question, the right of nations to self-determination and independence, the central issue of European politics in our time. This is true not just for Ireland and Europe’s smaller peripheral States, but for States such as Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Italy etc., which were all imperial powers in their day and deniers of national independence to various subordinate nations, but whose citizens are now discovering for themselves the drawbacks of being ruled by others, people they do not elect, through the medium of the Commission, Council, Court and Parliament of the European Union.

In l985 Desmond Greaves organised a Connolly Association conference on the theme, *“The Defence of the Nation State"*. He regarded the Nation State as the locus of democracy, because only within national communities were political minorities willing freely to accept majority rule. He used say that he looked at politics from the standpoint of "socialist internationalism". Internationalism, not nationalism, was the primary category: one could only claim to be an internationalist if one stood for the independence and right to self-determination of the different nations into which humanity is divided. He believed that the weakness of the political Left, in Ireland and across Europe, was due mainly to its failure to be internationalist in this sense.

 In Ireland organised Labour had left the solution of the Irish national question - the reunification of the country and the defence of its State sovereignty - to the parties of the bourgeoisie and small-bourgeoisie, Fianna Fail and the Republicans, and was politically marginalised as a consequence. He regarded the Labour movement in Britain and the different continental countries as rotten with chauvinism as a result of sharing the imperialistic assumptions of their traditional ruling classes. It was therefore slow to appreciate the loss of democracy entailed by membership of the European Union/Community.

Today most of our laws and public policies come from Brussels and Frankfurt and the Irish and other peoples in the EU have quite a marginal say in making them. The EU Court of Justice imposes fines on Member States if they do not obey EU laws. The EU Treaties are a supranational Constitution which has primacy over the Irish and other national Constitutions. With their erection of classical *laissez-faire,* free movement of goods, services, capital and labour, into constitutional principles enforceable by supranational law, the European Treaties amount in effect to a contract *not* to have socialism or anything like it. They are the antithesis of the political and social values Greaves stood for, as did Connolly before him.

The greatest mistake ever made by the Irish State was when its rulers agreed in 1999 to abolish the national currency and with it the possibility of controlling either the rate of interest or the exchange rate for the sake of the Irish people’s economic welfare*. “The two pillars of the Nation State are the sword and the currency,”* said EU Commission President Romano Prodi at that time, *“and we have changed that.”* At present the Irish State is being pushed towards closer integration in a German-dominated Eurozone, supposedly to “save” the euro, while the North of Ireland stays with a United Kingdom which seeks a looser relation with the EU – thus adding a new dimension to the North-South partition of the country. In 2008-10 the EU Central Bank insisted that the debts of reckless and insolvent Irish banks should be imposed on Irish taxpayers who were in no way responsible for them. The resulting social dereliction is all around us.

Whatever this is, it is not *“the unfettered control of Irish destinies”* that was aspired to in the 1916 Easter Proclamation and for which the socialist Connolly allied himself with the radical democrats Pearse, Clarke, McDermott and the others to establish an Irish Republic, united in independence, which would be *“a beacon-light to the oppressed of every land”*.

*“Socialist thought has always tended to neglect the factors making for State boundaries,”* Desmond Greaves once remarked. The number of States which constitute the international community has gone from some 60 in round figures in 1945 when the United Nations was established to some 200 today. We live in a world in which half of mankind is still at the clan-tribal stage of society and where relations based on kinship are still politically significant. There are some 6,000 different languages in the world. At their present rate of disappearance there are likely to be some 600 or so left in a century’s time - in each case spoken by at least a million people, which seems a reasonable rule of thumb that they will survive. There are clearly many embryonic nations. Many of these will develop Nation States. The international community eventually is likely to be constituted of several hundred States.

The central lesson of James Connolly’s life, as Greaves demonstrates in his biography, is that the Labour and trade union movement, socialists and the Left, need to champion democratic issues as well as conventional leftwing ones. Thus the Labour movement needs to be the foremost advocate of national democracy and independence in any country which has not established these. Labour needs to form alliances and work together or in parallel with all other democratic elements for that end. If the political Left fails to do this and to uphold the broad character of the national independence movement, it cedes the field to the political Right to become the champion of national democracy.

In the modern European context this means that the labour movement, socialists and the Left, need to put opposition to the European Union and defence of the democratic Nation State, which the EU seeks to erode, at the heart of their political practice and campaigning. They need to be part of an international movement in defence of national democracy. This is the only way in which they can attain political hegemony over the nation as a whole and establish governments which would implement measures making for the humane and rational society which Greaves and Connolly called “socialism” and which in their respective ways they spent their lives working to achieve.

**GREAVES AS HISTORIAN**

Desmond Greaves was unusual among historians in having a natural science training in addition to a deep humanistic culture. As a Marxist he did not believe that there could be such a thing as non-partisan history - at least not when the historian is dealing with issues touching his own life and times. The important thing, he held, was that the good historian should be conscious of and declare his partisanship. He had a low opinion of academic historians generally for failing to do this and for pretending to an objectivity they in no way possessed. He was concerned that Labour history should not become another academic industry, fearing that this would tend to rob the working class of its tradition. He was no enthusiast either for the academicising of "Irish studies". In the late l940s he began working on a history of the modern Irish Labour movement, but when this became too long he decided to present it in two parts, weaving the story around the lives of the socialist James Connolly and the radical republican Liam Mellows.

In writing *The Life and Times of James Connolly*, which Greaves undertook in the l950s, he had the great advantage, he used say, of having the assistance of the Connolly family and of meeting many people who knew Connolly personally. It was such a meeting that enabled him to scotch the widely held belief that Connolly was from Co. Monaghan and to show instead that he had been born in Edinburgh. He also established that Connolly as a young man served a period in the British Army. For Greaves the theoretical importance of his biography lay in showing how the Marxist socialist Connolly came to ally himself in l9l6 with the radical democrats of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in a revolt for national political independence, which Connolly referred to as “the first days of freedom”.

Connolly's participation in l9l6 did not, in Greaves's view, represent an abandonment of his socialism for nationalism, but was rather an attempt to establish an independent democratic State as the essential prerequisite of socialist advance in Ireland, through providing the freest field of operation for the Labour movement. That socialists should seek to give the lead in solving democratic questions - of which national self-determination is one - was always Greaves's view. He regarded Connolly's final position on this as similar to his own and as indeed in line with the general views of Marx, Engels and Lenin when they dealt with the National Question.

 Connolly was the socialist who came to realise that the establishment of an independent sovereign State was a necessary prerequisite of obtaining a government which would implement socialist measures, however one might define these. Liam Mellows was the Republican who came to realise that it was not enough for an elitist military movement to desire an independent Irish Republic, but that if that were to be attained the mass of Irish working people had to identify with it as a goal, work for it and make sacrifices to obtain it.

Greaves’s Connolly biography was widely and favourably reviewed when it first appeared – by English politician Roy Jenkins amongst others. His biography of Mellows a decade later, entitled *Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution*, got much less notice, although Greaves regarded it as a more mature and complex work, dealing as it did with the social dynamics of Ireland’s War of Independence and Civil War. *“The Connolly book is socialism”,* he once suggested as explanation, *“and socialism has little prospect of being implemented in our part of the world for the foreseeable future. The Mellows book is nationalism, something which is much more dangerous to the powers-that-be in the era of transnational capital and the European Common Market.”*

He made a related point on another occasion: *“We are in no position nowadays to advance the core value of the Russian Revolution, socialism, when people across Europe are seeking to defend the values of the French Revolution, national democracy and independence, as these are threatened as never before by European integration; so that most of our battles are defensive rather than offensive, to prevent things getting worse.”* And defensive battles, he used say, require quite different tactics from offensive ones.

The dialectics of socialism and national independence were transmuted into art in the plays of Sean O'Casey. Greaves's book, *Sean O'Casey: Politics and Art*, is an interpretation of the work of the dramatist through whose eyes much of the Left in Britain and Eastern Europe had tended to view Ireland during his lifetime. O'Casey too had accused Connolly of abandoning socialism for nationalism. In Greaves's view it was about as sensible to extol O'Casey as a political theorist as it was to judge Connolly by his verses. National independence and socialism, he wrote, were two stages of one democratic transformation of society, each of which required economic changes which it was the function of political change to bring about.

Greaves also wrote *Wolfe Tone and the Irish Nation*, a study of the late-18th century founder of Irish Republicanism, whose United Irishmen movement, under the influence of the French Revolution, was the first national political movement to have as objective the setting up of an Irish State. The Executive of Ireland’s biggest trade union also commissioned Greaves to write its history and he completed the first volume of that, which was published in 1982 as *The Irish Transport and General Workers Union: The Formative Years*.

**THE POLITICAL ACTIVIST**

Desmond Greaves was, like James Connolly before him, a Marxian socialist. I once asked him how he would define socialism. The answer he gave was: a society run in the interest of the working class - that is, people who have to work and sell their labour-power in order to earn a living.

This was essentially a political definition. It did not entail a commitment to any particular mix of public and private provision or to any particular proportion of State ownership of the means of production, local and cooperative ownership and private ownership. That clearly would depend on changing politics and technology.

Greaves joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1934 at the age of 21 during his student days at the University of Liverpool. At that time, with fascism advancing on the continent, many of the best of Britain's young intelligentsia moved to the Left. He remained in the CPGB all his life and served for some years on its International Affairs Committee, which was essentially an advisory body, being interested primarily in the situation of Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

He took to politics like a duck to water, he used say. In the l930s, he recalled, he had three regular set speeches: on the horrors of war, the crimes of the British Empire and the evils of Partition! An interesting biographical point is that, so far as I know, he never set foot on the European continent, although he knew most parts of Britain and Ireland well. He used quote the Latin proverb: *“Caelum not animam mutant qui trans mare currunt”;* one changes the sky but not one’s soul, when one crosses the seas. He was critical of those in the Leftwing movement who went on frequent delegations to Russia or Eastern Europe during the days of the Cold War, regarding such trips as a mild form of political bribery.

From the time of his political awakening, perhaps because of his Irish and Welsh family background, he was much more interested in the National Question and issues of colonialism and imperialism than in issues of socialism. Internationalism was not the opposite of nationalism, but its complement. This was to understand nationalism as the aspiration to self-determination and political independence of the different national communities into which humanity was divided. Internationalism implies the existence of nations, not their supersession. He often quoted Frederick Engels’s remark to Kugelman that there were two nations in Europe which were never more internationalist than when they were most national: Poland and Ireland.

Greaves regarded the CPGB as the most progressive force in British politics so far as Ireland was concerned because it was the only British political party which was opposed to the Partition of Ireland and had total British disengagement from the country and the establishment of its political unity and independence as part of its programme. This did not mean that every member of that party had a good attitude on Ireland or felt inclined to do anything about the Irish problem. Some did, but others did not. In the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s the CPGB was influential in organising mass movements in Britain against the Vietnam war and against the Apartheid regime in South Africa, but Greaves was often privately critical of the party’s failure to give the Irish situation the place in its campaigning which he believed that it deserved. He could be scathing about the subtle prejudice and unconscious chauvinism towards Ireland which existed in sections of the British Left.

He knew well the leading figures of the British communist movement. One of these was Thomas Alfred Jackson, the English Marxist historian of Ireland, to whose general history of the country, *Ireland Her Own,* Greaves later added a modern epilogue. Jackson had known James Connolly personally and in later life Greaves, who had a strong sense of the importance of the personal transmission of tradition, used say that he regarded himself as having passed on to a new generation the socialist republicanism of Connolly which he had originally got from Jackson.

**CONNOLLY ASSOCIATION**

In l94l he joined the Connolly Club, as it was then known, later the Connolly Association, and when its monthly newspaper, the *Irish Democrat*, was about to fold due to declining sales in 1948, he took on the job of editor. In 1951 he went full-time on a tiny wage, giving up a well-paid job as chief research chemist in a leading private firm to do this.

Greaves's decision to devote himself full-time to politics constituted the mature second choice which, he used say, all revolutionaries had to make if they were to sustain throughout their lives the commitment first entered on in the idealism of youth. For Greaves that commitment was to the cause of a united independent Ireland, to be achieved by making the ending of Partition the policy of the British Labour movement. He held that the then near million-strong Irish community in Britain could, if organized, be a powerful influence on British politics, for their own benefit and that of the country they had come from.

 In the l950s, as the guiding political brain of the Connolly Association, Desmond Greaves advanced the view that the way to a peaceful solution of the Irish problem was to discredit Ulster Unionism in Britain through exposing the discriminatory practices which prevailed under the Stormont regime in Belfast, in the process winning sympathetic allies for the cause of Irish reunification in the country that legislated Partition into existence. This perspective was embodied in a new constitution he drafted for the Connolly Association, which it adopted at its December l955 annual conference in Birmingham.

There followed a fifteen-year-long campaign of education and propaganda in the British Labour and trade union movement which did much to ensure that when, in l968, the Civil Rights movement got going in the North itself, British Labour opinion was substantially behind the Nationalist rather than Unionist side. This was a transformation from l949, when the Attlee-led Labour Government had passed the Ireland Act, which purported to give the Stormont Parliament a veto on constitutional change in Northern Ireland.

In l958 Greaves proposed that the Connolly Association send the English lawyer, John Hostettler, to cover the trial of the Republican activists Mallon and Talbot in Belfast. Subsequently, in a series of meetings throughout England, Hostettler spoke on the abuses of the RUC that were exposed during this trial and the iniquities of the Special Powers Act. Following the formal cessation in 1961 of the IRA's Border campaign of the late 50s, Greaves and the Connolly Association took up the issue of the release of the Republican internees in Crumlin Road prison, Belfast. Numbers of these were trade unionists, some of them members of British unions whose branches and members found it hard to believe that people could be interned without charge or trial, sometimes for years on end, in part of the United Kingdom, even though the matter could not be raised at Westminster under the "convention" whereby British MPs were forbidden to raise subjects devolved to Stormont under the Government of Ireland Act. This was a happy way of ensuring that various sleeping political dogs, which might otherwise inconvenience the British Government, were left undisturbed. Through a succession of lobbies at Westminster, Greaves and the Association succeeded in getting over half the Parliamentary Labour Party, together with various British notabilities, to send telegrams to Northern Unionist Prime Minister Brookeborough demanding the release of the internees, which gradually occurred.

This campaign enabled Greaves and the Connolly Association to build good relations with the old Nationalist Party and in particular with Cahir Healy, Member for Fermanagh in the Stormont Parliament, with whom he stayed in l962 while on an investigative visit to study anti-Catholic discrimination in the Six Counties. The Association organised other visits to the North by British notabilities, among them Col. Marcus Lipton, Labour MP for Brixton, Miss Betty Harrison of the Tobacco Workers Union and John Eber, secretary of the Movement for Colonial Freedom - later Liberation - which championed the anti-colonialist cause in the latter decades of the British Empire's existence. There followed a series of civil rights marches across England - the longest being one from Liverpool to London in l962 - which Greaves both organised and participated in, with a couple of dozen Irish people holding meetings in the towns along the way and describing the injustices suffered by the Northern Catholics. Strictly speaking, these were the first Irish civil rights marches, although they took place in England and were greeted with derision and indifference rather than brickbats. The anti-Unionist campaign was taken up by the National Council for Civil Liberties and the Movement for Colonial Freedom, to which the Connolly Association was affiliated and, from l965, by the Labour-Party-based Campaign for Democracy in Ulster, with Connolly Association encouragement. In l966 Brookeborough's successor as Northern Ireland Prime Minister, Captain Terence O'Neill, was sufficiently alarmed at the growth of anti-Unionist sentiment at Westminster to write a letter to the Connolly Association attempting to defend the convention of British non-intervention in Stormont's affairs. Details of this anti-Unionist campaign in Britain can be traced in the files of the *Irish Democrat*. It is an aspect of the background to the Northern civil rights movement and the events it gave rise to which has generally been neglected by historians of the period.

**CIVIL RIGHTS**

Though his work was in Britain, there is a good case for regarding Desmond Greaves as the intellectual progenitor of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement of the l960s. For it was he who pioneered *the idea* of a civil rights campaign as the way to undermine Ulster Unionism. Moreover the political successes of the Civil Rights movement when it got going in the Six Counties in 1968 could not have been achieved without the changed political climate within Britain itself which Greaves’s and the Connolly Association's work had substantially contributed to. Although Greaves held strongly that movements in Britain should not organise in Ireland, North or South, and that movements in Ireland should not organise or interfere in Britain, he had considerable personal influence on some of those associated with the foundation of the civil rights movement - for example the Belfast journalist Jack Bennett who was involved in the Belfast Wolfe Tone Society and who wrote the influential “Claud Gordon” column in the weekly *Sunday Press* during the 1960s and Gerry Fitt who became MP for West Belfast. It was in response to a suggestion from Greaves that Betty Sinclair, secretary of the Belfast Trades Council, and Billy McCullough its chairman, proposed that the Trades Council hold an important civil rights conference in Belfast on 8 May l965, at which the launching of a campaign for civil rights was discussed, with the Republicans for the first time putting their grievances to the Labour men. This came to nothing because of stalling by the Northern Ireland Labour Party, which was reluctant to take up such a seemingly "nationalist" issue. Greaves later considered that the tragedy of the Northern civil rights movement was that it did not get going in l965, under the auspices of the mainly Protestant workers of the Belfast Trades Council. For over the subsequent three years Paisleyism became stronger, the Republicans grew more impatient and much inflammable sectarian tinder was given time to pile up. When the Northern civil rights marches commenced in l968 Greaves was a strong critic of the tactics of the student-based People's Democracy. As he put it in his *Reminiscences of the Connolly Association*: *"Looking back I would say the Civil Rights movement failed to achieve its object because between l965 and l968 control passed from the Trade Unionists to the Republicans. Whereas the Trade Unionists would have known how to resist the 'ultra-left', the Republicans did not."*

Desmond Greaves always believed that the key to solving the Irish problem was in Britain, where British Government policy was primarily formed, rather than in Ireland. When Ulster Unionism was squeezed and divided between, on the one side, pressure from London for reform and on the other the pressure of the local civil rights movement, Greaves wrote to Prime Minister Wilson on behalf of the Connolly Association in July l968, advancing the conception of a Bill of Rights at Westminster as the progressive way forward. This advocated a legislative straitjacket being imposed by the Westminster Parliament on the subordinate Stormont assembly. That would at once outlaw discriminatory practices - thus guaranteeing civil rights and freedoms for the Northern Nationalist population and removing the rational basis of the unionism of a lot of Unionists - while at the same time permitting, and preferably encouraging, the devolved administration in the North to develop closer relations with Dublin. He saw such a constitutional initiative as the best way of enabling Nationalists to take advantage of the divisions within Unionism, encouraging an alliance in a reformed Stormont between Nationalists and liberal Unionists, isolating the Unionist Right and opening up a way in time to peaceful reunification with the South.

This conception prefigured in significant ways the Good Friday Agreement of nearly 30 years later. The Bill of Rights demand was taken up by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in Belfast. In September l97l, as a result of the Connolly Association's lobbying, it became the policy of the Trades Union Congress and thus of the entire British trade union movement. But the Labour Government was by then out of office and Harold Wilson had thrown away his opportunity to make a constructive contribution to solving the Irish problem. Four months before, in May l97l, following discussions with Arthur Latham MP, Lord Brockway and Geoffrey Bing, Greaves personally drafted a Bill of Rights in suitable parliamentary form, which was published by HM Stationery Office. This was proposed on the same day, 12 May l97l, by Latham in the Commons and by Brockway in the Lords. It seems to have been the first time in modern British parliamentary history that a Bill was simultaneously presented in both Houses. In the House of Commons the Tories imposed a three-line whip to refuse the Bill of Rights a first reading. This was granted in the Lords, but the Bill was thrown out on its second reading there in June.

The Bill of Rights approach to the Northern problem sought to leave the Stormont Parliament in existence, with its power to do harm from the Nationalist standpoint taken from it and its ability to develop in a progressive direction extended. The alternative course, which Greaves used all his influence to oppose but which eventually prevailed, was to abolish Stormont altogether and impose "direct rule" from London. Greaves saw this step as likely to strengthen the Union rather than weaken it, much as the abolition of the corrupt and discredited College Green Parliament in l800 had strengthened the link with Britain then. The call for "direct rule" from London was first put forward by the young leftist radicals of the People's Democracy - who saw the Unionist regime in Belfast rather than its principals in London as the main enemy. It was taken up by the newly formed Provisionals, followed by the SDLP's John Hume and his colleagues. It swept like wildfire through the British Parliamentary Labour Party, and in due course it was implemented by the Conservative Edward Heath in l972 - as Greaves put it, "like a cat being driven into a dairy". When in February l97l the left-wing weekly *Tribune* advocated "Shut Down Stormont", Greaves wrote in the *Irish Democrat*: *"This is Labour assuming the mantle of imperialism. Imagine the difficulty of getting a united Ireland if the whole administration of the North were fused with England. Does Tribune want a new fifty years of bitterness as anti-partition leagues, labour organisations and the IRA direct their energies to getting the direct rule administration removed? Every issue would be automatically transferred from Belfast to London. And a solution might wait years as successive English governments fooled, vacillated and temporised as they are well able to do."*

At the time of the 1968-9 civil rights marches Greaves influenced the Republican leaders Cathal Goulding, Sean Garland and Tomas MacGiolla in relation to their attitude to “direct rule” and whether they should support the abolition of the Stormont Parliament or advocate its being left in existence though in a reformed fashion**.** Some thirty years later, following several failed attempts to reestablish a devolved Assembly in Belfast, the advantages of "direct rule" appeared more dubious to the interested parties. Following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement maximum devolution of governmental functions to a power-sharing Stormont Assembly and Executive, based on policies that ensure parity of esteem and equality of treatment between the two Northern communities, have been accepted by most Irish Republicans and nationalists as providing the best framework for moving towards eventual national reunification. It is a tribute to Greaves’s political genius that he formulated this Bill of Rights conception at a time when, if it had been adopted, it might have prevented three lost decades of harm in Anglo-Irish relations.

Greaves regarded the military campaign of the Provisional IRA as mistaken, because it could not achieve the end desired, a united Ireland, in view of the imbalance of forces involved, although he respected the good intentions and dedication of the Republicans. He never criticized them publicly so as to keep open an avenue of influence to them. He regarded the IRA campaign as an inevitably doomed attempt to take on NATO at a time when the exigencies of the Cold War required Britain to maintain military bases in Ireland on NATO’s behalf to guard the North Atlantic approaches to the European mainland.

In the l970s and l980s his political work in Britain was concerned with the effects on the Irish community of such measures as the Prevention of Terrorism Act and with lobbying in Labour and Trade Union circles for the adoption by them of a policy of supporting Irish reunification. In those years he sought to bring cultural and educational activity to the fore in the work of the Connolly Association, organising lecture series on Irish history, weekend summer-schools and the like and contributing to the general growth of interest in Irish studies within the Irish community in Britain, as second-generation Irish immigrants began to explore their historical roots. In the latter years of his life he became increasingly concerned with theoretical issues relating to democracy and the Nation State, which he thought were likely to dominate European politics for the coming half-century or longer because of the development of the EC/EU.

One can be certain that in the circumstances of Britain today Desmond Greaves would have seen the main political challenge so far as the Irish community living there is concerned as that of winning the British Government to a policy of working positively towards encouraging Irish reunification. This objective is now intertwined with the need for Britain’s own disengagement from the European Union as a step towards the re-establishment of national independence for all the EU Member States, which is the only basis for stable international cooperation between them.

The above then are the three reasons why Desmond Greaves’s life and work are historically important and are worth remembering and learning from today.

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