

Obituary

Rayner O'Connor Lysaght (1941-2021), an Irish lifelong revolutionary Marxist, historian and author

Saturday 10 July 2021, by [MEEHAN John](#), [Socialist Democracy \(Ireland\)](#) (Date first published: 8 July 2021).

We are saddened to learn Rayner Lysaght has passed. Rayner Lysaght was a lifelong revolutionary Marxist, historian and author. He edited and introduced the IIRE Notebook “[October Readings: The development of the concept of Permanent Revolution](#)”. Our thoughts go out to his friends, family and comrades. [IIRE]

We publish contributions from Socialist Democracy and friends and comrades of Rayner's.

Contents

- [Rayner O'Connor Lysaght \(...\)](#)
- [Rayner Lysaght has passed away](#)

Rayner O'Connor Lysaght Presente!

Rayner Lysaght passed away today after a period of illness. His illness went largely unnoticed in the socialist milieu in which he spent his life. Yet he was a central figure in the foundation of the 60s “New Left” reimagining of a socialism in Ireland beyond the Communist Party.

In part this is because the movement that he helped to found, with its full throated commitment to rebellion and revolution, seen by the state as an existential threat, would be foreign to many of today's activists.

In a very short time he, and his comrade Peter Graham, helped build the Irish Workers Group and the British International Marxist Group as sections of the Fourth International, publish the iconic Red Mole journal, and was associated with the Saor Eire group.

That period in Rayner's life ended with the assassination of Peter Graham in 1971. FI leaders from across Europe rallied around his grave to sing the Internationale. No-one was ever charged with his killing.

Rayner went on to establish himself as a leading writer of Irish working class history, rediscovering and reapplying the analysis of James Connolly following a long period of counterrevolution with his 1971 book The Republic of Ireland.

However he had one major fault. He was someone who lived in the mind and was totally unsuited to dealing with the business of publishing and of working with academia. As a result much of his work

was stolen by academics and then refuted by them in a later wave of revisionism without him receiving the recognition that is usually extended in these fields.

How many remember D R O'Connor Lysaght and his early researches and writings on the Irish working class, the Irish Citizen Army and his rediscovery of the history of the Limerick Soviet? These issues live on, stripped of their revolutionary content by an elite that wants to remember the IRA and the Black and Tans as equality deserving of commemoration.

In later years he received some recognition through the Irish Labour History Society and through the trade unions for publications on the development of the trade union movement in Ireland and he republished privately theoretical socialist works from Ireland and Europe. A major achievement in anyone else's life, the publication of Trotsky's transitional programme As Gaeilge (An Tidirchar), was a mere footnote in his.

As noted, much of Rayner's work has fallen out of favour. That's because the whole idea of working class independence, of a Worker's Republic, has fallen out of favour in a world constrained by a pallid reformism.

Yet Rayner was right. His opponents were wrong. The promises of peace, justice and prosperity have come to naught. The reformist current is on the ebb. The tide of revolution will swell again.

Socialist Democracy

Rayner Lysaght has passed away - Limerick Soviet Historian, a parent of modern Irish Trotskyism

Most readers of this site probably know the sad news that Rayner Lysaght passed away on Friday 2 July 2021.

Here is a link to the [death notice](#).

People can add condolences, if they wish.

A wide range of people from the left and the workers' movement have written generous personal tributes. A number of them are [here](#).

People in Dublin may wish to join friends and comrades lining the route holding banners and tributes aloft. I will be bringing a Starry Plough and Fourth International banner. People might like to assist.

Rayner Lysaght was a long-standing supporter of the Fourth International, a founder-member of its Irish Section - the [Revolutionary Marxist Group, in 1971](#).

The cremation ceremony starts at 2.00pm, so try to get to Glasnevin Cemetery at least 15 minutes before that time.

Anne Conway reports on Rayner's life and death.

"I'm very sad to write that my dear friend and comrade Rayner Daniel Lysaght passed away today at Beaumont hospital. Rayner was a lifelong revolutionary Marxist, historian and author, a Trotskyist and member of the Fourth International. He will be sadly missed by friends, family and comrades from around the world. I visited his wife Aine today in hospital and she is coping bravely with the news. Rayner wrote under the name D. R O'Connor Lysaght and leaves behind a large literary legacy, beginning with The Republic of Ireland in 1971 and more recently a trade union history 100 Years of Liberty Hall.

He was always to be seen at political meetings and demonstrations. I first met Rayner in the late seventies and was in regular contact with him assisting him these last few months. Myself and Kate and Grainne will miss him dearly.

Funeral arrangements: leaving Stafford's Funeral Home Maypark @1.30pm Tuesday 6th arriving at Glasnevin crematorium for service at 2pm. It will be on rip and funeral can be viewed on webcam."

When Anne Conway gave me the news on Friday last I was outside Grogan's Pub in South William Street, a favourite haunt of many people from the left - including at that exact moment the Labour historian Donal Fallon sitting with the former political prisoner Nicky Kelly. I passed on the sad news and Donal pointed out, straight away, that in the 1960's Rayner was a pioneer historian of the Irish workers' revolutionary story - especially the Limerick Soviet of 1919.

Joe Harrington adds :

So sorry to hear the sad news. Rayner seems to have been around forever. First met him in Dublin in 1972 when I stayed with him and Aine (and a few other notorious and not so notorious characters) in the place that I think was known as Parnell Road, in Harold's Cross. Much later in Limerick the link to Rayner was persistent. He looked to us in the Treaty City for sorting the practical aspects of producing the six or so editions of his 'The Story of the Limerick Soviet' - aspects such as typing out his handwritten and long revised tracts of the narrative - on the old fashioned typewriter, typex and all. Every edition had to be launched and to succeed in putting a time limit on Rayner speeches, on those occasions, was never easy. As Pat O'Connor could tell and as Mary O'Donnell tells, there was always a story to tell after Rayner returned home. I think Rayner saw the Limerick Soviet as extremely important as a clearcut example, in so many ways, of how workers can change society and the lessons from that particular effort - the strike weapon, the organisation of a society without bosses (if only for a short while), the impinging national question, the international aspect and the bureaucrats and the clerics sellout. Apart from his other work, Rayner Lysaght's labours on the Soviet has ensured that he has made a difference. But sure that's what legends of the socialist movement do.

[A Limerick Soviet Tribute.](#)

From the GPO to the Winter Palace - produced with assistance from the UNITE Trade Union and the Irish Labour History Society

Donal Fallon has written a highly recommended account of a famous Dublin event on 8 March 1966 (International Women's Day). "Notorious characters" from Rayner's milieu decided the city of Dublin housed too many monuments honouring British imperialists. Liam Sutcliffe [blew up Nelson's Pillar.](#)

The life and afterlife of Nelson's Pillar

The Dubliners celebrated with this [mocking ballad](#) - a rebellious spirit is captured beautifully by [Ronnie Drew's deadpan voice.](#)

For a hundred and fifty-seven years it stood up there in state
Toora loora loora loora loo!
To mark old Nelson's victory o'er the French and Spanish fleet,
Toora loora loora loora loo!
But one-thirty in the morning,
Without a bit of warning,
Old Nelson took a powder and he blew!
Now at last the Irish nation
Has Parnell in higher station
Than poor old Admiral Nelson, toora loo!
Oh the Russians and the Yanks, with lunar probes they play,
Toora loora loora loora loo!
And I hear the French are trying hard to make up lost headway,
Toora loora loora loora loo!
But now the Irish join the race,
We have an astronaut in space,
Ireland, boys, is now a world power too!
So let's sing our celebration,
It's a service to the nation.
So poor old Admiral Nelson, toora loo!

Liam Sutcliffe, Rayner, the late Peter Graham and Máirín Keegan, and many others, were among the "notorious characters" who, in 1968-9, established a Defence Committee in the 26 County bit of Ireland. Some were also involved with Saor Éire. The North had erupted, following the famous Derry Civil Rights March of October 1968. Rayner once remarked that events like these were created by the parents of modern Irish Trotskyism - even though its children today might be embarrassed by some of the older generation's antics!

PS This is a good irreverent source [Splintered Sunrise](#).

PPS A good account of [Rayner Lysaght's funeral](#).

John Meehan 5 July 2021

Jim Monaghan wote:

A polymath. (I remember many pleasant conversations on obscure footnotes in history, where he knew really interesting bits and pieces.) Born in South Wales. Was in the Irish Workers Group in the mid to late sixties with Gery Lawless, Paddy Healy, Eamonn McCann and Sean Matgamna. Very erudite. He was in the Irish section of the Fourth International from the earliest days to the end. Made a big contribution to Irish Left history., He explored, the first to do so, the Irish soviets during the War of Independence. He had a broad range of interests. I recall a lecture he gave in the Pearse Institute on James Joyce and Ulysses. he had trawled the daily Freeman's journal to check each and every contemporary reference. He contributed to financially to the defence of Northern ghettos and went bail for people in political charges. He had his weaknesses, a tendency to get lost in footnotes. But always worth bearing with for the insights he had. I remember Paddy Healy telling me that while many of us would fall by the wayside, Rayner would hold to the path, selling a leftwing paper outside meetings. Rayner never lost the faith in a revolution in Ireland and across the world.

Works

D.R. O'Connor Lysaght speaks about his life

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iDStnCDBco>

The Story of the Limerick Soviet, April 1919

Limerick: Peoples Democracy, 1981

The Republic of Ireland

Cork: Mercier Press 1970

Work is underway to make this available on the Marxist Internet Archive.

John Meehan

P.S.

• IVP. Thursday 8 July 2021:

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7210>