

TERRY STEWART

(1934 - 2011)



a tribute by Brendan Halligan

Terry Stewart: a Tribute

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Delivered at the SDLP Annual Conference, Belfast

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by

Brendan Halligan

Terry Stewart was a life long member of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) of Northern Ireland despite spending most of his working life elsewhere. In his closing years he was active in the Dublin Branch of the party, as well as pursuing many other interests, including his involvement in the Institute of European Affairs of which he was a founding member and later its Director General and Vice-Chairman. He died in April 2011 at the age of 77.

The Dublin Branch of the SDLP decided to commemorate Terry Stewart's contribution to the betterment of Northern Ireland and the advancement of the European ideal by instituting a lecture series in his name to be given at the Annual Conferences of the party. Brendan Halligan was invited to give the inaugural lecture at the Annual Conference the following November. He is a former General Secretary of the Irish Labour Party and is Chairman of the Institute of International and European Affairs. The following is the text,

The lecture was attended by John Hume and Austin Curry, two of the founder members of the SDLP and other leading members of the party. Erskine Holmes and Douglas McAteer, the former Chairman and General Secretary of the Northern Ireland Labour Party, also attended.

Introduction

It is a great honour to give this inaugural lecture in commemoration of Terry Stewart, founding member of the SDLP Group in Brussels and a member of its Dublin Branch. I want to thank the Dublin Branch for initiating this lecture series which will bear his name and I hope that it will become a standard feature of SDLP Annual Conferences for years to come.

It had been my privilege to know Terry Stewart for forty years and to count him among my friends and as a dear comrade-in-arms. This lecture is the least I could do to pay tribute to a great man and to do honour to the ideals that inspired him throughout a rich and diverse life.

The diversity of his experiences and interests posed a problem when I was asked to come up with a title for the lecture. I couldn't decide between one describing his extraordinary journey through life or another reflecting the rich personality of the man.

A title which immediately sprang to mind was “**From Belfast to Brussels and Beyond**”, but so too did the concept of “**The Militant Pacifist**”. Failing to choose between them, because they both seemed so apt, I left the organisers without a title but I hope this attempt at marrying the two themes will compensate somewhat for leaving them in the lurch.

The Belfastman

I am going to use a career which took him from Belfast to Brussels and beyond as the framework for reflecting on the great changes which occurred in Ireland these past sixty years, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland and engagement with Europe.

The first point of note about Terry Stewart was that he was a man of a particular place. His accent, his demeanour, his way of speaking or arguing, his thought processes and approach to life, marked him out immediately as a Belfast man. His identity was unmistakable.

He carried the core of this identity with him throughout a long life and yet it never prevented him from developing new identities based on where he had settled and whatever new life he was living. The quintessential Belfast man became a cosmopolitan and the result was an astonishingly complex multi-layered personality far removed from those mono-chromed dullards who manage to go through life oblivious to the world around them and unaffected by their experiences. In contrast, he always had the capacity to absorb new experiences and culture and to grow intellectually and psychologically, but without ever discarding or denying the background from which he came.

His origins did not suggest there was to be anything unusual ahead for they were only too typical of a community which had closed in on itself for self protection, as all peoples living in a ghetto invariably do; nationalist, Belfast working class, school in St. Malachy's, entry

into the civil service for what could have been a restricted and uneventful career as a minor bureaucrat. I say ‘minor’ because in the 1950s anybody from a nationalist background could only go so far in the service and faced unspoken but impenetrable barriers to advancement. By the time that was partially corrected it would have been too late for him to have matched achievement with ambition.

The first sign that an unconventional future lay ahead was his decision to study at night for an economics degree in Queens University. The post-war educational reforms in the UK, which benefitted Belfast no less than Bristol, meant that those who had been prevented by economic circumstances from going to university now had the opportunity to get a degree, provided they were brave enough and determined enough to sacrifice free time and make the effort to study after work. He was one of the very first - a pioneer - to seize this opportunity and opted for economics, succeeding to the extent that he later lectured part time in the subject in Queens and became part of that cohort of educated young people who were unloosed on a static, or fossilised, society - with predictable effect in terms of reform, such as the emergence of the Civil Rights movement.

Cork and Kerryman

But for Terry's generation, change had hardly begun and his reaction was to go into exile, leaving Belfast, even though he had just recently embarked on married life and had undertaken family responsibilities. He succeeded in winning the position of a Tourist Manager in Ivernia Tourism, that part of Bórd Fáilte responsible for promoting Cork and Kerry as tourist destinations.

I say ‘exile’ because the world he was leaving was the polar opposite of the one he was about to enter. It says something about the Ireland of the early nineteen sixties that

his wife Ann could describe Cork and Kerry as “alien”. The culture shock could not have been greater. Psychologically and culturally, the distance from Belfast to Bantry or Bandon was as great as that from Belfast to Birmingham or Boston and explains why the sectarian state of Northern Ireland had been able to survive for so long without political interference from Dublin or London and without scrutiny from the international community as to discrimination and injustice. The isolation of the North from the outside world was almost total and the result was a sectarian and parochial society that seemed impervious to change.

He left this stunted society with a strong feeling of injustice which lasted through his life for he suffered from that sense of separation from family and community that is the lot of the exile. Yet at this very moment in 1964 when Terry emigrated south to Cork and Kerry the newly elected MP for Falls, Gerry Fitt, the first Leader of this party, was challenging the Speaker’s Convention that prevented the affairs of Northern Ireland from being debated on the floor of the House of Commons in London, a constitutional absurdity that disgraced the “Mother of Parliaments”. The process of change had begun.

The Galwayman

Terry’s career in the far South West was a spectacular success but it was his next career move which truly disposed of another absurdity based on the myth that Ulster was as British as Yorkshire; this son of Belfast joined Gaeltarra Éireann as Development Director and he became responsible for economic progress in the Gaeltacht, notably the Galway Gaeltacht.

The instincts that impelled this move were personal advancement but they led to a love of the Irish language and culture, a love which was to be a conspicuous part of his later life and which was a living rebuttal of the cultural fiction that Northern nationalists were Yorkshireman with a different accent.

It is the universal fate of a colonised people to be denied the dignity of a separate cultural identity and to be forced to assume the cultural traits of the coloniser but it is also a universal reaction to resist and for the culture to assert itself when ever possible, and when least expected, as now happened with Terry Stewart.

If Cork and Kerry had been alien then Galway, with its Irish speaking community, might have been expected to be even more foreign, but the Stewarts settled in to such effect that Galway became their second home, and thereafter remained central to their lives. Terry became a Galwayman.

The Bruxellois

His success in the area of regional development resulted in a temporary secondment to the European Commission in 1975 shortly after Ireland’s accession to the then European Economic Community, and thus began his fourth career, this time in Brussels, and thus began too a new love affair that was to endure till his death: love of Europe and the ideals which inspired Jean Monnet.

Garret FitzGerald had predicted in the late 1960s that Ireland’s engagement with Europe would be a psychological liberation, a liberation from the dead hand of colonialism and a re-awakening of our European vocation. Nobody better exemplified this prediction better than Terry.

He took to Brussels like a true cosmopolitan and, with all the gusto of a bon viveur, he began to sample the delights of Brussels and was intoxicated by that great sense of mission that characterized the European Commission to which he had been loaned.

The next step was inevitable. He decided to make his career in the Commission and won entry into the Commission services the following year in 1976, serving as a functionaire until his retirement in 1996.

Terry Stewart became a Bruxellois.

Just as he had been a pioneer in becoming a night student in Queens he was now a pioneer in establishing the Irish presence within the Community institutions in Brussels. He specialised in Social Policy, rising eventually to the rank of Director, no mean achievement for one who might otherwise have been condemned to the life of a minor bureaucrat in a provincial administration.

He was well fitted to social policy in view of his past and it was a policy area to which the Irish made a singular contribution under the influence of Patrick Hillery, Ireland's first European Commissioner, Frank Cluskey, later Leader of the Labour Party, and Terry himself.

In a very real sense, his years in Brussels closed the circle of moving from Belfast to Cork and Kerry and then onto Galway for it brought him into contact with the Irish College in Leuven, once the centre, **the** centre may it be emphasised, of Gaelic culture and learning in the dark centuries of oppression, the place from which Brother Mícheál Ó Clerigh set forth with his companions to compile the "Annals of Ireland".

This was a sort of spiritual homecoming for him and he helped develop the vigorous communal life enjoyed by the Irish exiles in the new capital of Europe. It was punctuated, of course, by numerous rounds of his beloved golf and not infrequent visitations to good restaurants.

The Dubliner

His talent for working with people, combined with his economic expertise and an innate flair for politics, led to his appointment as head of the European Commission office in Dublin. In reality, this was, and is, the equivalent of an embassy and he rightly became part of the diplomatic corps, de facto if not de jure. Here he adapted, without effort, to the role of a national figure, adding yet another persona to his repertoire.

There can be little doubt that it was here he made his greatest contribution to public life by propagating the European ideal with an unmatched zeal and with endless enthusiasm. From 1987 to 1993 he swept through the country spreading the gospel of peaceful co-existence in Europe as a whole and on the island of Ireland in particular. It was fortunate that he held office in Dublin during two referenda which were crucial to the future of Europe itself but especially so for the future of Ireland in Europe.

The first was on the Single European Act in 1987 when he was one of the very few who realised the danger of the referendum being defeated. It was our first time to campaign together. The second referendum was that on the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 where together we set up an ad hoc national campaign organisation, a campaign which, mercifully, proved successful.

This was largely due to him for he had great organisational skills and boundless energy but, above all, infectious optimism and that rare ability to simply get things done. The politicians here will recognise these qualities as indispensable to campaign success. I knew how fortunate I was to have him as comrade in arms when they were few and far between.

The Cosmopolitan

In between the referenda we had worked together, from 1989 to 1991, in establishing the Institute of European Affairs based in Dublin. He was a founding member of its organising committee and on his retirement from the Commission became its Director General.

He was an outstanding success, yet again. He brought the European dimension to the Institute and exploited his vast network of contacts to create vibrant working relations with all the institutions in Brussels, especially the Commission.

He repeated the feat of establishing a branch of the SDLP in Brussels by doing the same for the

Institute. The Brussels Branch is still in existence after nearly two decades and is the only one of its type in the European capital, a great tribute to him and the other pioneers who set it up.

For three years he and I worked together happily as Chairman and Director General and he laid the foundations for the Institute to become a world class think-tank in European Affairs. But his attention now went beyond Europe for during this last phase of his many-sided career Terry expanded his intellectual horizon and enlarged his field of activity to the global level, seeing Europe not just as an unparalleled experiment in nation states sharing their sovereignty in common institutions but as a global player in which the great regional powers of the world would have to learn how to co-exist, in peace and in goodwill.

For that reason, I was tempted to title this lecture "From Belfast to Brussels and to Beijing" for he was one of the first to foresee the rise of China and wanted the Institute to establish a major project on "Europe, America and China", the 'triangular project' he called it, instinctively understanding that in the world ahead we would have to go beyond conventional bi-lateral relations between the regional superpowers and establish a complex network of relationships which balanced their interests in a new global framework.

The Historian

This odyssey from Belfast to Brussels and Beijing, which I have only briefly outlined, is, of course, fascinating in its own right but it is more important as proof that imagination, energy and intelligence can transcend the constraints of social, physical and political boundaries. In the process of continuous personal transformation he was aided by an innate sense of history for, like all good economists, he was essentially a historian at heart. So great was his love of history that having retired, and having become a pensioner, he went back to university and

graduated with a Masters Degree in history from UCD, to his own delight, be it said, and to the applause of his friends and admirers.

Perhaps it was his upbringing in a divided city that heightened his historical sense. He was intrigued, for example, by the concept of sovereignty itself, how it had evolved and what it meant in practice, particularly the real meaning of economic sovereignty. He read deeply on the issue and the insights he developed helped him explain, with unusual clarity, what was being attempted through the voluntary integration of sovereign states into a European Union.

He was fascinated above all by the attempt to create an economic and monetary union and was an advocate of the euro, not least because he was a great admirer of its creator, Jacques Delors, under whom he had served in the Commission. The relationship between them explains to a great extent the sympathy which Delors, as President of the Commission, had developed for Northern Ireland, which expressed itself in the generous financial support received under the various Commission programmes.

The Militant Pacifist

Terry's sense of history also helped him reach a deep understanding of the communal and class divisions which afflicted Northern Ireland. He had actually started political life in the Northern Ireland Labour Party, acting as a branch secretary at the age of 14 years and had canvassed for candidates like Billy Bleasdale.

This was highly unusual at the time, to say the least, but he was, in the words of his wife Anne, "a Labour man through and through".

It was only natural, then, that he should have been a founder member of the Brussels branch of the SDLP; He had never ceased to be a citizen of what he ironically called "our wee province" or an adherent to the cause of Labour, and both came together in the SDLP.

The party's philosophy accorded with his own deep-rooted commitment to democracy and to the parliamentary process, as well as to his aversion of physical force. He saw the path laid out by the SDLP as the only one that would eventually reconcile the Unionist and Nationalist communities to living together in peace and which would, in the process, avoid unnecessary loss of life.

He opposed the violence of the paramilitaries with a militancy that was sometimes more brave than it was prudent. He detested the IRA as much as he did the UVF and his opposition to Sinn Féin was legendary. This is what I meant when calling him a militant pacifist.

As a philosopher, he did not believe in determinism and, as a Christian, he did not believe in pre-destination. On the contrary, he believed we had free will and that we had personal choices to make even in the face of violence and injustice.

Some, like John Hume, chose the path of non-violent resistance, of civil disobedience, of dialogue, persuasion and of democratic politics. Others chose the Balaclava and the Armalite, and the way of bloodshed. Those who made this choice had chosen evil, for which there was no existential excuse. That was the creed to which he subscribed as a supporter of the SDLP.

It is no surprise, therefore, that despite the sectarianism surrounding his upbringing, and the victimisation to which he and his community had been subjected, that he rose above sectarian differences and reached across to the Unionist community, especially when he returned to live out his retirement in Dublin.

He was an ardent member of the Irish Association for Cultural, Economic and Social Relations and was its President between 2000 and 2002. As one obituary said "he brought his remarkable personal attributes of intelligence and warm personality" to the building of dialogue within the North and between North and South.

The Dubliner

It was in Dublin he had eventually settled embracing his final persona, that of Dublin 4 (if he will forgive me for saying so). The Belfastman and Bruxellois became a Dubliner.

He spent his final years in full vigorous pursuit of all his interests and in the militant defence of decency, mutual respect and the pursuit of the moral life.

He campaigned one last time, in the Lisbon referendum, to keep Ireland in Europe and set up the Galway branch of a new campaigning organisation, "Ireland for Europe". He acted as Vice-Chairman of the Institute and was a vigorous member of its Finance and Administration Committee. And he acted as a generous host at home and benefactor of many charities.

All the threads of his life had come together in that serenity for which all men of affairs yearn, and which they rightly regard as the most fitting reward for a life in the public service.

He had travelled far from his home in Belfast, but had never really left it. He had remained true to the ideals of Tone and Tom Paine and Jean Monnet. He had personified the decency, devotion and dedication of those who had established the SDLP.

Ireland in his lifetime had changed beyond recognition. Cork and Kerry were no longer alien to a Belfastman and the Unionist hegemony had been smashed. The parity of esteem had been established and the Queen had been received in Dublin.

The Republic had become one of the richest countries in the world and an established member of the European Union. The Irish in Brussels felt at home and were appointed to the highest positions. The Irish people now had multiple personalities, but remained unchanged at the core. They had evolved but remained unchanged at the core.

Odysseus

So too had Terry Stewart. In his long odyssey from Belfast around the island of Ireland and onto Bruxelles and back to Dublin again he had become Irish, European and cosmopolitan but had remained what he was when he had started out: the quintessential Belfastman.

The best tribute that could be paid to him and his generation would be the continuation of the SDLP as a force for good and for hope on this island of ours, North and South, but especially in the North from which Terry Stewart had sprung.

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