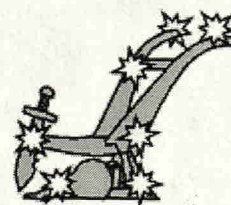


[Content](#) · [Home](#) · [Sitemap](#) · Search

IRISH DEMOCRAT

Campaigning for a united and independent Ireland, established 1939



[Irish Democrat](#) > [About us](#) > History of the Irish Democrat

History of the Irish Democrat

Serving Irish freedom and democracy

Irish Democrat editor David Granville looks back at the proud history of the Connolly Association's flagship newspaper

One grey January day in 1935 a small group of London members of the Republican Congress turned into a basement flat in Kilburn, north-west London, for the first editorial meeting of *Irish Front*, an occasional bulletin 'to give Irish exiles significant news of the situation at home'.

From that meeting stems the growth of the Connolly Association and its paper, *Irish Democrat*, which celebrated its 60th anniversary in 1999.

Following the demise of the Republican Congress in Ireland, and the formation in London on 4 September 1938 of the Connolly Club — comprising the former London branches of the Republican Congress and the Irish section of League Against Imperialism, along with some former members of the Irish Self-Determination League, an editorial board met in December in Unity Theatre, Britannia Street, to plan the first issue of *Irish Freedom*.

The paper was edited by Michael McInerney, who later became a well-known journalist as the political correspondent of *The Irish Times* during the 1950s and 1960s, with production costs financed by a £25 loan from Eamon Martin, a friend of Liam Mellows, who was living in London.

The banner headline on the front page of this first edition called for readers to 'Fight for Irish Unity' while an unsigned article on the same page, presumably written by McInerney, urged the Irish in Britain to join their appropriate trade union.

Inside, the paper included articles on Liam Mellows, the portrayal of the Irish in contemporary films, Dublin housing conditions, the recently formed

Anti-Partition League and the contribution of the Irish to the British labour movement.

During the first two years the paper had a number of *ad hoc* 'editors', including MacInerney, Belfastman Malachy Gray, Jim Prendergast, and P.J. Musgrove. In practice many, if not all, of the issues produced during this period were put together collectively by an editorial board.

Early campaigns

Among issues to be given prominence in these early years was the 'Release Frank Ryan's campaign, which was attempting to highlight the plight of the Irish leader in Franco's prisons after the Spanish Civil War. The campaign attracted broad labour movement and progressive support.

The paper also defended Irish neutrality and opposed the conscription of Irish citizens, although it supported the allies' war effort following the invasion of Russia in 1941.

Various improvements to the paper, including the introduction of layout and illustrations, were brought to the paper by Pat Dooley, a professional journalist, who took over as editor in January 1942.

It was towards the end of Dooley's stint as editor that it was agreed to change the name from *Irish Freedom* to *Irish Democrat*.

Flann Campbell edited the paper for most of the period between June 1945 – December 1947, although his return to teaching meant that Sid Maitland was responsible for a number of editions towards the latter part of this period.

Greaves takes the helm

However, for many, it will be the name of Desmond Greaves, who took over as editor in January 1948 – a position which he maintained until his death in August 1988, which remains indelibly linked to the development of the modern day Connolly Association and the *Irish Democrat*.

Throughout the late 1950s and 1960s Desmond Greaves turned the *Irish Democrat* into a powerful campaigning paper which advanced the view that the only way to achieve a peaceful solution of the Irish problem was to discredit Ulster unionism in Britain, so depriving it of political support there.

Greaves saw that this could be done by exposing the discrimination experienced by the Northern Ireland nationalist community under the Stormont regime. He thereby pioneered the idea of a broad-based civil rights campaign as the practical means of undermining unionism.

Never afraid of controversy, it was Greaves who warned against the abolition of Stormont at a time when much of the Labour left and the republican movement heralded its demise as a political victory.

As events subsequently proved, Greaves rightly saw the abolition of Stormont as a weakening of the Irish dimension and a strengthening of the grip of the Westminster parliament, a move which would take many years to reverse.

Beyond the Greaves era

The sudden death of Greaves in August 1988 was a great blow for the Association coming as it did at a time of growing crisis for the left in Britain and internationally. Fortunately there were those around in the CA who recognised the importance of continuing its work of the political solidarity with the cause of Irish democracy.

The late Paddy Bond, who had given unstinting voluntary work to marketing and selling the paper since the 1950s, remained a tower of strength during this time of transition. Gerard Curran, who had been the literary editor of the *Irish Democrat*, who stepped into the breach, producing a number of issues in 1988 and 1989, assisted by a re-established editorial board.

John Boyd, Martin Moriarty and Gerard Curran were among those who served on the editorial board at this time and played a key role in ensuring that the paper was produced.

Martin Moriarty, the Association's new general secretary, formally took over responsibility for producing the paper in January 1990. A talented journalist and sharp political analyst, he contributed much over the next three and a half years, undertaking a major redesign and introducing new technology into the production process.

Regretably, several years as general secretary and editor of the *Irish Democrat*, running in tandem with demanding full-time employment as a trade union journalist, took its toll and his health suffered, forcing him to standing down from all his responsibilities by January 1994.

Fortunately, another talented and experienced journalist, Helen Bennett, was able to take over in August 1994. She kept up the high standards set by her predecessors for another two years until personal circumstances impelled her to discontinue.

The current editor, David Granville, an experienced freelance journalist with a background in political campaigning and trade-union PR, stepped into the breach in April 1996, taking up the challenge of guiding the paper, now a 12 page bi-monthly, through a further professional redesign.

However, form is has little meaning without content — and neither is worth a penny without readers. Sales have risen significantly in recent years and subscriptions more than doubled since the paper was relaunched in April 1997. But, the paper remains we are a long way off the 15,000 monthly sales recorded in 1945.

Times have changed, indeed. However, the paper proudly continues to reflect the outlook of the Connolly Association, the oldest political campaigning organisation of the Irish in Britain, and politics of the great Irish socialist republican James Connolly, the man who has inspired successive generations of the most progressive Irish political and trade union activists, and whose writings we continue to feature.

Contributors' roll call

Over the years the *Irish Democrat* and its predecessor *Irish Freedom* have been pleased to feature a number of high profile contributors including: Roddy Connolly, T.A. Jackson, Dorothy MacArdle, D.N. Pritt, Krishna Menon, J.D. Bernal, Frank O'Connell, Sean O'Casey, Fenner Brockway, Fr. Michael O'Flanagan, Willie Gallagher, Rajani Palme Dutt, James Larkin Junior, Maire Comerford, Thomas Carnduff, Liam O'Flaherty, Seam MacBride, Charlotte Despard, George Gilmore, Peadar O'Donnell and Betty Sinclair, to name but a few.

The respected historian, journalist and novelist, Peter Berresford Ellis, has contributed a regular column to the paper since 1987, while in recent times the paper has included contributions from some of Ireland's most progressive historians including Thomas Bartlett, Ruan O'Donnell, Kevin Whelan, Mary Cullen and Denis Carroll.

Our Dublin correspondent, Anthony Coughlan, continues to write regularly for the paper and has made a significant contribution over many years, as has veteran columnist Jim Savage in Cork. In recent years Bobbie Heatley has sent regular contributions from the North. Many others make regular contributions.

However, in these days of the internet, information overkill and the widespread availability of Irish newspapers in Britain — to say nothing of the two highly popular Irish papers published here — the challenge ahead for the paper will be to continue to carve out for itself a distinctive role. To use the jargon of the market place, it's USP (unique selling point) — that which sets the paper apart from the rest of the field - is its distinctive analysis.

Where we stand today

A non-sectarian left-republican outlook, which incorporates progressive interpretation of the national question, continues to induce it to campaign without fear or favour for peace, justice and democracy in Ireland, and remains central to the paper's appeal.

Like the Connolly Association whose official organ it is, we adopt this position both in the interest of the Irish people as a whole and of the ordinary people of Britain themselves who have also suffered over the years as a result of Britain's colonial attitude to Ireland and the Irish.

The faltering Irish peace process continues, but there remains much that needs to be done and much that can yet go awry. Democratic and progressive public opinion in Britain is still the principal potential ally of the Irish people in their struggle for a united, independent country. The diffuse goodwill towards Ireland and the Irish that exists widely in Britain needs to be expressed, organised and brought to bear on British government policy in the interest of Irish national democracy.

One day, there will hopefully be no need for a paper such as the *Irish Democrat*. Such a day is for the future.

In the meantime, we continue to stay true to our ideals in the knowledge that the struggle for justice, peace and freedom for Ireland as the basis for friendship and cooperation between the peoples of Ireland and Britain, remains as relevant today as on the day in January 1939 when the members of the newly-formed Connolly Club took their new paper onto the streets of London for the first time.

Sources:

Reminiscences of the Connolly Association - Desmond Greaves (Connolly Association, 1978)

C. Desmond Greaves, 1913-88: an obituary essay - Anthony Coughlan (Irish Labour History Society, Dublin, 1990)

History of the Connolly Association - Anthony Coughlan (unpublished typescript)

Editors of *Irish Freedom* and *Irish Democrat* 1939 -1999:

Michael McInerney: January — May 1939*

Malachy Gray: June — October 1939*

Jim Prendergast: November 1939 — April 1940*

P.J. Musgrove: June 1940 — December 1941*

Pat Dooley: January 1942 — May 1945

Flann Campbell: June 1945 — December 1947**

Desmond Greaves: January 1948 — August 1988

Gerard Curran: September 1988 — February 1990

Martin Moriarty: March 1990 — January 1994***

Helen Bennett: August 1994 — March 1996

David Granville: April 1996 —

* Approximate dates

** Sid Maitland was also responsible for a number of editions during 1947.

*** Although credited as having responsibility for production between March 1990 and December 1993, he was in effect editor throughout this entire period . For a few months in early 1994 the paper was produced by various members of the editorial board, together with John Boyd

[Up](#) · [Editorial board](#) > >

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