

FROM IRA CHIEF TO NOBEL PEACE PRIZE WINNER

"Several recipients of the prize have fought for their country — there's nothing dishonourable in that", says former I.R.A. Chief Sean MacBride, who, on Tuesday, receives the Nobel Peace Prize

The strange paradox of Sean MacBride

by **VINCENT BROWNE**

ON TUESDAY, Sean McBride, the Irish revolutionary, lawyer, politician, Minister and international statesman, will be awarded one of the most prestigious honours the world can accord—the Nobel Peace Prize. It will mark the culmination of one of the most remarkable careers Ireland has witnessed—one only partly appreciated because of its bewildering variety of achievement.

MacBride himself would quarrel with the designation "culmination" and with reason, for at present he occupies the most senior position in international affairs ever held by an Irishman. United Nations Commissioner for Namibia, with the rank of UN Assistant Secretary General. And it is in this role that he foresees his greatest accomplishment — the liberation of South West Africa from Southern African rule.

The Nobel Peace Prize Award has been controversial for the second year in succession, not because of MacBride's nomination but because of his opponent, Mr. Sato, the former Japanese Premier.

Sato is accused of having bought the prize through enormous public relations exercise and certainly the official explanation for the award — that he kept Japan out of the nuclear club — sounds less than convincing.

CONTROVERSIES

Last year's award to Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho also provoked some cynicism because of their all-too-apparent failure to end the Vietnam war and Kissinger's complicity in the genocidal bombing of North Vietnam and the invasion of Cambodia.

As far as MacBride is concerned these controversies are irrelevant and he professes to know little about the issues involved — they don't detract at all from the significance of the honour.

Nevertheless it is with some hesitation that he concedes that he is glad to have been nominated — for the additional volume of work generated by the award — replies to correspondence and preparation of acceptance speech — is daunting for someone already stretched to over 100 hours a week.

The congratulatory messages streamed in from all over the world and included telegrams from President Ford, Henry Kissinger, Jim Callaghan and Liam Cosgrave — but none from Fianna Fail.

A handsome £26,000 accompanies the prize and all of this will go to favourite causes, notably the International Peace



Bureau in Geneva of which he is President. Incidentally, the Peace Bureau won the Nobel Peace Prize itself in 1910.

MacBride was born 70 years ago to the enchanting Maude Gonne, to whom W. B. Yeats had given his heart, and to John MacBride, a veteran of the Boer war and once described by jealous Yeats as "a fool, vain-glorious lout." He didn't know his father very well but was very close to his fiery-spirited mother.

Because his father was on the run after the South African adventure, the family lived for a while in France, where Sean went to school for four years — he acquired there a characteristic which has remained with him throughout his life and has created an eccentricity about him in several of the roles he was later to play — a very pronounced French accent.

The father was one of the 1916 leaders to be executed and thereby transformed in the eyes

of a recondite Yeats — he was one of those named out in verse by the poet — one of those who "changed, changed everything" and bore "the terrible beauty."

Inevitably the young MacBride quickly became involved in the revolutionary struggle and at the age of 14 he was first imprisoned, when he was interned for six weeks. On his release he joined the Fianna and then later the IRA in which he graduated up the ranks to

become Chief of Staff in the mid 'thirties.

During the War of Independence he worked as an aide to Collins and accompanied him on the Irish delegation to London to negotiate the treaty. MacBride of course wasn't one of the negotiators — he was a mere 18-years-old at the time — he ferried messages back and forth from Dublin and thereby had an intimate knowledge of what was happening.

On their return home to a stormy Dail session, MacBride briefly discussed the issues of the Treaty with Collins, who presumed correctly, that MacBride was opposed to acceptance.

COLLINS SHOCK

Though they took opposite sides on the Treaty, MacBride remembers Collins with affection and admiration. He was in jail when Collins was killed and felt deeply personally bereaved.

MacBride remained on in the IRA in the 'twenties and 'thirties. Shortly after his 20th birthday he was put on GHQ staff and he later graduated into the army council. He was identified with the more political element within the IRA in the mid-thirties and as a consequence encountered a lot of hostility from the more militant sections.

Nevertheless he became Chief of Staff in June, 1936 — his brief reign was marked by a bitter struggle with the mythological IRA figure, Sean Russell. MacBride had the latter court martialled and suspended — the animosities thereby generated led to the replacement of MacBride as Chief of Staff but he remained on in the IRA.

MacBride now insists that he left the movement when the 1937 constitution was enacted. He explains: "I opposed the 1922 settlement because it meant the continued subjugation of Ireland to British sovereignty, it brought us into the Commonwealth and it inflicted partition on us."

QUITS I.R.A.

"However, the 1937 constitution changed the entire constitutional position. It meant that for the first time the people of Ireland had control over their own destinies — internally."

But there is probably an element of rationalisation in this for MacBride was virtually hounded out of the IRA by the Russell faction which won control in the late 'thirties and which started the disastrous bombing campaign in Britain at that time.

In retrospect, MacBride

doesn't see any incongruity in being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and his past involvement with the IRA. "Several recipients of the prize have fought for their country — there's nothing dishonourable in that," he maintains.

MacBride's first "regular" job was with the London Morning Post, now the Daily Telegraph. He joined as a sub-editor under an assumed name as he was still on the run in Britain at the time. On his return to Dublin he joined the Irish Press and worked for a while with the Evening Telegraph, which was later replaced by the Evening Press.

Meanwhile he had been studying law at UCD and the Kings Inns and he was called to the Bar in 1937. He became a Senior Counsel in 1942.

Solely as a lawyer, MacBride would have achieved considerable distinction. While he practised actively at the Dublin Bar he was widely regarded as being among the most knowledgeable and brilliant. His forte was constitutional law — he has been involved in virtually every constitutional case since considerable distinction. While he is still peer in this class.

He rates the electoral law case of the late 'sixties as his greatest legal achievement — he has also been involved in the constitutional challenges to the Offences Against the State Act in the early 'forties, the Trade Union Act, the Lawless case which went to the European Court and, more recently, the contraception laws (the McGee case).

LEGAL SUCCESS

Incidentally, MacBride believes that a constitutional challenge to the laws prohibiting the sale of contraceptives would be successful.

He cites two cases among the gravest miscarriages of justice he has witnessed as a lawyer. The first was the unsuccessful challenge to the Offences Against the State Act in 1940 — he describes the judicial decision upholding the constitutionality of that Act as scandalous and he is convinced that the decision would be reversed today.

The other case involved a murder trial in which he is convinced an innocent man was convicted and executed.

MacBride says that the judge conducted a very unfair trial and that he was out for a conviction from the beginning. "I was quite convinced that Gleeson not alone didn't commit the crime but couldn't have committed it as it showed that he

was elsewhere at the time," says MacBride.

They lost the appeal and he did everything possible to have the execution stopped but failed. On the night before the execution took place, Gleeson asked to see MacBride in his cell and in the presence of the prison chaplain and a number of others said: "I know you worked hard for me and did everything possible to stop the execution because you believed in my innocence."

THE EXECUTION

"I asked what was the latest time I could set you and this is it — I now want to tell you again, now that I know that there is nothing that can be done to save me, that I am innocent, I did not kill that woman."

Gleeson went on to say: "I am ready to die now and I know that I would never again have the opportunity to die so well prepared, so I'm going to my death in peace." MacBride says that everyone in the cell

wealth but would be willing to attend for the purposes of discussing Irish unity. Atlee refused. These two developments precipitated the issue within the cabinet.

The Tanaiste William Norton announced shortly afterwards in the Dail that the External Relations Act would be repealed. MacBride himself repeated this in the Dail a few days later. And then Mr. Costello, the Taoiseach made his famous announcement in Canada, which attracted such world-wide attention, but which was no different from what had already been announced by two Government ministers in the Dail.

MacBride recalls that Costello's Canadian speech was gone over again and again by the Cabinet prior to his departure. No other speech had been subjected to such scrutiny or was so well prepared.

Under his aegis the Department of External Affairs became involved in the late 'forties on a huge propaganda war on the partition issue. Conor Cruise

Dev alarmed by new party

was convinced of the man's innocence.

MacBride is now somewhat a forgotten political figure in Ireland, but for a few years he threatened, as no one else has done in the last 50 years in Ireland, to break the political dominance of the two Treaty parties, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael.

In 1946 he convened a meeting of old republicans and other political allies — including even people who supported the treaty, such as Peadar Cowan, in Barry's Hotel, Dublin. It was an unpropitious start to Clan na Poblachta, which within two years had terrified the souls of the two major parties.

NEW PARTY

MacBride was prompted to start a new party, largely because of his disenchantment with De Valera. His concern centred on the conservative economic policies then being pursued by Fianna Fail, the failure of afforestation and the ill-treatment of political prisoners.

The new party captured a few Dail seats in the following year by-elections — MacBride himself was elected for a Dublin constituency. Alarmed with the threat of the new movement, De Valera called a snap general election in early 1948.

It was widely expected that the Clan would win up to 30 seats but in the event it took just 11 — still a highly creditable performance for a party just two years old.

To the astonishment of most political commentators at the time, to the dismay of many of the new supporters, MacBride decided to join the anti-Fianna Fail coalition along with Fine Gael, two Labour Parties and Clan na Talun. He says now that there really was no alternative. "We had campaigned with the slogan "Put them out," so we couldn't either by default or deliberation, allow the return of Fianna Fail to power.

Clan didn't impose many pre-conditions on joining the Government and surprisingly did not insist on the implementation of its two main election demands — the release of political prisoners and the repeal of the External Relations Act.

MAJOR DEMANDS

MacBride says: "As a minority party in the coalition I didn't feel that we had the right to make these major demands and anyway I felt that the logic of the situation would propel us towards the implementation of those policies without making a political issue of them."

The only conditions that Clan laid down were the provision of adequate health services, the establishment of a TB eradication scheme, an afforestation programme involving the planting of 25,000 acres of trees a year and a commitment to higher rates of Government investment in economic development.

Interestingly, it was another Minister in the Government who insisted on the repeal of the External Relations Act. MacBride says that while, of course, he favoured this course he was not the person to push the matter through the Cabinet as was alleged at the time by Fianna Fail. In fact the issue arose as a matter of course and the Government found that it just had to deal with the issue.

Shortly after coming to office a new Argentinian ambassador was appointed to Ireland. He arrived with his credentials addressed to King George VI. MacBride ordered him to have them altered and addressed to the President of Ireland, Sean B. O'Kelly. This was done and for the first time an ambassador was presented to an Irish President.

ATLEE'S REFUSAL

Shortly afterwards the British Premier Clement Atlee invited Ireland to participate in a Commonwealth conference. MacBride replied that Ireland didn't consider itself part of the Common-

O'Brien was the spearhead of the campaign and he has since reviled the effort in one of his books.

NO APOLOGIES

However MacBride says that he has no apologies to make for the effort. "If more attention had been paid to the North down through the years, then there mightn't be the tragedy there today," he says.

He thinks that there was then a possibility of getting a solution to the problem with the British Government and that it would have been possible to get the Unionists to go along with it.

He thinks they would have been able to use the provisions and mechanisms of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms as the basic law for the protection of the Unionists in a United Ireland. Indeed he believes that this convention could have been utilised in a variety of situations to alleviate the problem of Northern Ireland.

MacBride himself was one of those instrumental in having this convention drafted and accepted in 1949 — he regards this as among the most significant achievements of his career.

The first coalition broke up in 1951 because of the Noel Browne affair and MacBride played a central role. It was he who requested the resignation of Browne from the government — a role usually the prerogative of the Prime Minister.

PROVOKED ROW

MacBride says: "I asked him to resign because I could no longer accept responsibility for him vis-a-vis the Taoiseach" — MacBride was Browne's party leader. "I felt that Noel Browne had deliberately provoked a row with the bishops — one that could easily have been avoided, while preserving the essentials of the scheme."

He was offered a position in the second coalition government but he felt that as his party was then in such a minority position he couldn't accept it. While the position wasn't specified at the time he assumed that it would have been his old job as Minister for External Affairs, the position which was then filled by Liam Cosgrave.

The collapse of the second coalition Government is widely attributed to MacBride who, it is alleged, objected to the measures then being taken by the Government to curb the I.R.A. John Costello maintains to this day that MacBride was ordered by the I.R.A. to scuttle the Government and that he dutifully obliged.

MacBride strenuously rejects this contention. He explains that he had sent the Government a detailed memo on the economic situation some months before the fall of the Government. He was concerned about the reactionary economic policies being pursued by the Department of Finance at the time.

The Government ignored the memo and he was forced to put down a motion of no-confidence in the Government's economic performance — it was this and only this that prompted his action at the time, he maintains.

LOST CREDIBILITY

Reflecting on the decline of Clan na Poblachta, MacBride says that the party lost credibility due to the Noel Browne affair in 1951 and also that Browne very effectively exploited the issue to discredit both him and the Clan. He takes pride in the accomplishments of Clan and he mentions the achievements in the spheres of health, social services, afforestation, the leaving of the Commonwealth and the establishment of a Republican Government. He also points out that during the three years of the first coalition there was peace in Ireland and there were no political prisoners.



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