Review

Helena Sheehan, *Navigating the Zeitgeist: A Story of the Cold War, the New Left, Irish Republicanism, and International Communism*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019, (pb) 308pp., ISBN 978-1-58367-727-8.

This book reflects an extraordinary life, but it also illuminates a whole series of political causes that animated the author from the late 1950s until the late 1980s. Much of the interest in Sheehan's life-story has concentrated upon her journey from being a young nun in Philadelphia in the early 1960s to her joining the 'Official' IRA and subsequently the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI) in the 1970s. Her own text, *Portrait of a Marxist as a Young Nun* (published in the mid-1990s), has helped to focus readers' attention upon this unusual trajectory. However, this book contains a wealth of material that goes well beyond this specific dimension, fascinating though it undoubtedly is.

Readers of *Twentieth Century Communism* will certainly be especially keen to dissect Sheehan's reconstruction of the milieu of the CPI in the late 1970s, and its relations with the broader international communist movement, and more specifically her insights into the political and philosophical debates that were enlivening the communist world at this critical juncture. It is a measure of how wide-ranging the book is (itself a reflection of Sheehan's immersion in several very diverse political contexts), that her chapter on the New Left in the United States from 1966-1972, and that dealing with the internecine feuds between competing wings of Irish Republicanism, are equally compelling. Historical and political lessons abound, and the author pulls no punches in her retrospective political judgments, nor in her willingness to criticise some of the prominent personalities that she has interacted with over these tumultuous decades.

Sheehan begins with some methodological reflections, arguing that

the book is 'striving for something more than memoir – for a work of intellectual, social and political history within the narrative frame of autobiography' (p7) . She is acutely aware of the hazards of first-person writing, and is determined to resist the temptation to present her life as lived under a single spotlight, and equally to resist the vice of many memoirists, namely retrospectively to impose continuity and order on lived experiences that were often chaotic and open to multiple interpretations. This is an account which strives, generally with success, to be both self-reflective and to recognise the socio-historical consciousness of the times being recounted. Her self-appointed task is to place her own experience and narrative within the perspective of the 'grand narratives' of these times; 'I am seeking to tell the story of my times in world-historical terms' (p8). Sheehan is conscious of the fact that several of the 'worlds' she reconstructs are 'lost', and she deliberately tries to bear witness to the experience of living in a pre-Vatican II American convent, or spending several months at the Lenin School in the Soviet Union: 'these were strong and seemingly stable worlds that vanished stunningly and suddenly' (p9). The book is by no means an egotistical endeavour, but an authentic effort to place the author in the flowing tide of her times. For readers under the age of fifty, the reconstruction of these 'lost worlds' will be particularly eye-opening.

Born into a conventional, conservative Irish-American family in 1944, Sheehan's early years gave little indication of the remarkable life to come. The world of the family was characterised by the pervasive presence of the Catholic Church, with its apparently unchanging codes and rituals. In an early example of the kind of perspicacious reflection peppered throughout the book, she looks back on her girlhood in wonder at the restrictions placed upon her. The rigidities of gender roles in the 1950s appear incredible from a twenty-first century perspective, but 'there was no trace of feminism in my life-world at that time' (p.29). Feeling increasingly alienated from home and school, Sheehan 'yearned to have a comprehensive worldview and to live in harmony with it' (p44). Entering the convent of the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1962, she persevered through the novitiate, despite wrestling with an 'irresistible urge to rebel' (p56). Sheehan worked as a primary teacher in North Philadelphia, and found it increasingly difficult to reconcile her

life bound by the constraints of the order, and the changing social and political context around her. The ingrained racism of much of the white working class in the inner city during this era was hard to stomach. She turned 21 in 1965, and took the drastic decision to leave the order; this was the first of several occasions when Sheehan turned her back on what had been an entire social/political world, and set off in a new direction. 1965 was 'the most difficult year of my life' (p66), as she experienced a profound crisis of faith. Over the next few years, she threw herself into studying philosophy, searching for a new worldview to replace her waning faith in the Church.

It so happened that Sheehan's 'crisis of worldview' coincided with the wider crises that seemed to form the agenda of the times. She joined the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1967, although she argues that its best years were already behind it. During the next four years or so, Sheehan became essentially a full-time political activist, particularly motivated by the anti-Vietnam war movement, but engaged also by a panoply of diverse causes associated with the 'New Left'. The sheer exhilaration of these times in the radical milieu of the student left is well-captured in the memoir, although both the younger and older woman were critical of some of the wilder self-indulgences of the Yippies and the counter-culture. Some of these 1960s debates regarding the relationship between 'psychological and cultural liberation' on one hand, and socio-economic emancipation on the other, remain pertinent in contemporary left-wing circles. Sheehan also points out how much of this flowering of 'history from below' has informed the evolution of academic disciplines and discourses: the growth of Black studies, gender studies, women's history, labour history and subaltern studies can all be traced to this fruitful period of experimentation.

She also engages with the historiography of the 'New Left', arguing that the history of the movement has tended to be dominated by the narrative of the rise and fall of SDS. Sheehan is convincing in her claim that the 'New Left' continued to be significant into the 1970s, and she poses the question: 'Why, then, should Chicago 1968 be so much more widely chronicled than May Day 1971?' (p140). The latter events constituted the most sustained campaign of civil disobedience and challenge to mainstream authority in the post-war USA, but they have

not been well-remembered. Sheehan's considered judgment concerning these years is that the broad movement did not accomplish the revolution it was seeking, albeit in an inchoate fashion: 'we were not even able to translate massive social upheaval into a sustained political force. We were deserted by the opportunistic, the cowardly, and the faint-hearted, the flotsam that flow with every tide. We had our casualties and tragedies. We had our traitors too' (p.141). But, on the other hand, 'most of us who were really committed then remained so, and found ways to advance the ideas and ideals formed in the sixties into subsequent decades. Sadder but wiser, we carried on.' Sheehan had married a fellow anti-war activist in 1967, although in keeping with the times, they did not set up a conventional home life.

In retrospect, it is perhaps not so surprising that Sheehan should embrace the 'liberation' movement in Ireland in the early 1970s, given both her familial background, and the temper of the times. 'Unmoored' from her sense of American identity, the 'highly romanticised vision' of the 'struggle' in Northern Ireland was a beguiling vista (p145). Sheehan gravitated towards the Official wing of the Republican movement, attracted by the Marxist direction of its leadership, and she became active in the James Larkin Republican Club in Philadelphia. In April 1972, on foot of arranging a speaking tour for Billy (Liam) McMillen (a Belfast based IRA Army Council member), Sheehan took the bold decision to buy a one-way ticket to Ireland, leaving behind her husband, parents and siblings, as well as her political life. She immediately immersed herself in the conspiratorial world of republican politics, initially in Dublin. She became engaged in the leadership circle very quickly. Characteristically, she threw herself into this new political commitment, but also a new culture and a new country. She shared a house belonging to Mick Ryan (Quartermaster of the IRA) with the foremost Marxist ideologue of the Officials, Sean Garland. The book provides thumbnail sketches of some of the key figures of this movement, including the Chief of Staff of the IRA, Cathal Goulding, the President of Sinn Féin, Tomás MacGiolla, as well as 'colourful' characters such as Dominic Behan and Des O'Hagan. It is instructive that Sheehan found the 'structural clarity' of the Irish republican movement refreshing after the 'chaotic structurelessness' of the US New Left (p155), although in hindsight she recognises the poten-

tial problems associated with such a hierarchical (and, one might add, militarised) mode of organisation. The Official IRA called an open-ended ceasefire in May 1972, precipitating tension and ultimately a split within the movement, with those committed to continuing violence forming the Irish National Liberation Army (and its political wing, the Irish Republican Socialist Party), based around the charismatic figure of Seamus Costello.

Sheehan helped to develop the movement's political education courses, and began a new relationship with Eoin Ó Murchú, the editor of the SF newspaper, *United Irishman*. In 1973, Sheehan gave birth to the couple's son, Cathal, and after her divorce came through, they married (although it is plain that Sheehan saw this as primarily necessary to cement her status in Ireland). The trappings of family life did not dissuade Sheehan from maintaining her commitment to political activism, but these were dangerous years, with several friends (including McMillen) being killed or injured in tit-for-tat feuding with the INLA. The Officials were also attempting to usurp the privileged position in relation to the USSR enjoyed by the CPI, and the two movements, which had previously worked co-operatively, increasingly became competitive or even hostile. At this time, Sheehan recognises that the Officials embraced Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy with the zeal of the convert, and there was an atmosphere of 'heresy-hunting mistrust' (p174) in the movement. Looking back, she is regretful about this element of the movement's politics, but still maintains that the overall experience was rich and positive: 'In this movement, I became a Marxist. I had already moved far in the direction of Marxism without conscious or direct influence from it. When I did finally come to it, the effect was electric' (p175).

In 1975, after the bitter split with Costello, the Sheehan and Ó Murchú household was sometimes literally under siege. Violence and threats were regular occurrences, and the movement was spiralling into chaos. By this point, Sheehan had had a daughter, but at 30 years-old she had still not completed her PhD in philosophy of science, and whilst her political commitment was as strong as ever, she felt the Officials were 'floundering, without proper discipline or clear ideology, and that serious Marxists were being isolated and undermined' (p180). She and Ó Murchú resigned and quickly joined the CPI, thus closing another

political chapter, and beginning afresh. Her rationale was that the CPI was the embodiment in Ireland of the international communist movement, and that given that she now saw herself as a communist, she might as well be in a communist party!

The CPI was a very small party, with what Sheehan characterises as an anti-intellectual culture, combined with male chauvinism (p199); its prevailing political stance was fiercely pro-Soviet, with the 1975 Congress reversing an earlier CPI condemnation of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Initially, Sheehan tried to steer a middle course between the 'tankies' and the 'Euros', but she makes clear that, under the influence of the debates in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), her sympathies lay with what she calls a 'Left Eurocommunist' position (p215). She argued that the movement needed to be open to broad alliances and 'new social movements' (especially feminism), and she was energised by the lectures and the spirit at the annual Communist Universities of London during the late 1970s. Whilst rejecting an uncritical pro-Soviet line ('dogmatic recycling'), she nevertheless also refused to countenance what she saw as the 'unravelling' of Marxist thinking which was the alleged direction of travel for some 'revisionists' in the CPGB (p224). Meanwhile, she enrolled for doctoral study at Trinity College Dublin, and began to contemplate seriously pursuing an academic career.

As with the Official Republicans, the book provides some spicy portrayals of her erstwhile comrades, with leading CPI figures such as Mick O'Riordan, Betty Sinclair and Roy Johnston subject to a no-holds-barred treatment. This section is particularly interesting in terms of the reportage of debates within the international communist movement, and the significance of her extensive travel to the USSR and Eastern Europe from 1977-1980. The portrait of her four-month sojourn in Moscow in 1978 is fascinating; although Sheehan recognised the 'complexities and tragedies' of communist history, she still 'affirmed Soviet society as a monumental striving towards socialism.' (p229). Such an unabashed reconstruction of fidelity and emotional connection to the USSR will come as a shock to younger readers. As she attended philosophy conferences, Sheehan sympathised with those in the GDR and elsewhere in the socialist bloc who were attempting to work with integrity, to push

against the limits of orthodoxy, but without succumbing to disloyalty. She interacted with a range of Marxist thinkers, some of whom were 'dissidents'; for instance Adam Schaff, Wolfgang Harich and others. Like them, she wrestled with the problems of constructing a more democratic form of socialism. As she worked on her doctoral thesis (eventually published in 1985 as *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science: A Critical History*), she attempted to avoid the polarisation of orthodox Marxist and anti-Marxist histories of Marxism. This was, she confesses, a sorrowful experience, as she realised how much of the history of the socialist world was a litany of 'self-inflicted tragedies' (p246). The poignant nature of her reflections on communist history is illustrated in her conversations with Harich, a philosopher at Humboldt university who had been imprisoned for eight years (seven in solitary confinement) after 1956, accused of forming a counter-revolutionary group. Although still a communist, he stated that he understood the reasons for his imprisonment; communists were only a tiny minority of the population, and could only maintain power by coercive means. Sheehan recounts that she was haunted by his matter-of-fact summation: 'The communist movement is like a dragon. It eats enthusiastic young communists and it expels cynics, careerists, broken personalities' (p256).

Her relationship to Marxist thought was becoming more complicated, and in turn her connection to the largely orthodox CPI was more and more problematic. At the party's Congress in 1979, Sheehan was subject to a 'vicious denunciation' by Betty Sinclair (p249), and she felt she had no option but to resign. Once more, she felt cast adrift: 'I was still a communist but it would have to be without the party card.' (p268). 1980 felt like a reprise of 1965, except that Sheehan believed she had a clear foundation for her worldview. The book ends with the collapse of this world in 1989, by which time Sheehan had forged a career in Irish academia, teaching in communication studies at Dublin City University. Politically, she worked within the ranks of the Irish Labour Party, forging close relations with the future President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, but this was politics in a minor key in comparison to her previous depth of commitment. She found it hard to adjust to the shifting ground of the 1980s: 'I often lacked confidence, not so much in myself, but in the world' (p275). There is inevitably a valedictory quality

to this reflection ('We had to learn to live with the pathos of the world moving on in a direction so disdainful of our desires'), but Sheehan has promised a second volume, bringing her story up to the present. If it is even half as compelling as the first volume, it will be a left-wing memoir to treasure.

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