**EULOGY FOR PA MagLOCHLAINN**

**ALL SOULS NON-SUBSCRIBING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 14 APRIL 2013**

**by Jeffrey Dudgeon**

We all have our memories of PA, visually etched into our minds, of both the character and the image - which effortlessly matched.

I knew him for very many years. Although I don’t recall the first time we met, he wove his way into my, and so many of our lives, becoming a welcome fixture. He was someone who could always be relied upon to turn up for meetings and to keep them moving along, having a well-honed talent for interventions, which broke awkward silences. Then again he had arranged and set them up, in so many instances.

PA’s earlier school days at St Columb’s College in Derry are not known to many but he was one of a number of great men from that school in the 1950s who would normally have gone on to be priests but instead formed a cadre of politicians, poets, lawyers and academics and In one case a gay activist.

It has to be said he lived amongst mounds of paper like many historically and politically-minded gay men, while being a genealogical zealot - again like so many gay men.

He was loved and appreciated in a way that is difficult to explain, and hard to comprehend. In many ways, it should not have happened, especially in what we are often told is a looks-based community. Everyone, save a few moaners and con artists, fell victim to his character, and his particular charm. He was of course interesting and educational.

His death hurt me more than any other in the last two decades. Indeed I cried for the first time since my parents died when I saw him in the funeral home. And I have continued to think about him, and be surprised, when I realise he won’t be coming round the corner.

PA kept his head above the parapet longer than anyone else. For years, after a surge of bravery in the 1970s, no one other than him would do TV appearances. When he spoke, he provided an example of toleration and moderation, one that disarmed antagonists, particularly those of a fundamentalist variety; proof that image is not more powerful than words. And he paid for his courage by getting abuse, and worse, around the part of the city he inhabited.

He spoke as President of NIGRA, which post he held for decades. Luckily he did not leave office to marry as, quite remarkably, his two immediately previous predecessors did, to a member of the opposite sex.

For those media appearances we give him respect. He came out to tens of thousands and disarmed so many. It is coming out that has given us our recent freedoms and he took it to the outside edge.

And of course he went further into the public eye, by initiating Belfast Gay Pride with Sean McGouran, and by parading with a very few brave souls at the beginning. The current level of Pride celebration in the city is a spectacular reflection of his early work.

I quote here the famed Cork hurler, Donal Og Cusack, who spoke so evocatively at Foyle Pride last year, and whose words apply to PA: “What unites us at the end of the day is pride in being who we are, pride in the totality of who we are as people. Pride in the fact that we refuse to just fit the label hung on us by prejudice. We can't be limited in what we do in life and in law, by our choice of who, if anybody, we sleep with or what God, if any, we worship. This city knows that better than anywhere. If we narrow the definition of a person to one aspect of their life, we create a ghetto and a platform for prejudice.”

For starting Belfast Pride we give PA respect, and thanks.

And respect too for organising the potentially difficult Remembrance event every November at the City Hall War Memorial for those who died in our conflicts, and for those tens of thousands of homosexuals and lesbians who were literally worked to death in the German Concentration camps, like Mauthausen and Buchenwald. Running that took a peculiar kind of bravery.

I was asked in 2011 to speak at the Europa when he received the ‘Contribution to Belfast Pride’ award. I said then, “He was the first the press call, for they know that they will always receive a considered, balanced statement that seeks to move forward with dialogue - and often great humour. Respected and feared by our opponents, PA is never afraid to challenge but is always the first to extend the hand of friendship. He is the activist that keeps on arriving; the gift to our community that goes on giving.” And that was true to the end.

In October last, at the dinner to celebrate the 30th anniversary of decriminalisation, we were hoping to hear him speak but it was not to be. He was in hospital and without the needed kidney transplant - which I feel should have been offered earlier and was something he resented. His days were drawing to a close although he seemed to chose not to consider his passing.

The SDLP which he loved and adhered faithfully to has cause to thank PA for the unstinting, and unpaid, work and effort he put in over the decades. Work I believe he felt was necessary to bring peace and to curb the violence which he hated so ruthlessly.

PA cut across the two communities here and the all the sub-communities. This may have connected to his own background from a mixed marriage but it meant he listened to and understood all the complexities of Protestants, in particular.

The support of his family of which he used to tell me and his Dungiven parish at his burial is an unnoticed aspect of our tolerant and understanding culture, belied by our fearsome reputation for trouble.

Vince Creelan who knew PA far back in the days when he was educating the RUC to new realities, messaged: “I will be out of the country … on Easter Island in fact, just about as far away as one might be … so sadly am unable to attend. I know there will be a great turn out and fond remembrance, celebration and farewell had. Love and regards to all.”

Richard Pierce, the well-known Fermanagh architect wrote to say, “Thanks for the information about PA's memorial service. I would go because, as I said before, he was outspoken on gay civil rights at a time when it took great courage to be so and I'd like to honour him for that. However, I'm in Finland with my beloved Nino until 23rd April so can't be there. I notice that you will sing ‘Be Still my Soul’. It is normally sung to the tune Finlandia, by Sibelius, so there will already be a Finnish link! Tomorrow at 5.30 pm Finnish time, which is 3.30 Belfast time I will join in. A sort of international concelebration of respect for PA's bravery, decency and honesty.”

Peter Tatchell sent a message to those gathered here honouring our comrade: “I am sorry that I cannot attend but please convey my condolences to the Service of Remembrance for PA. He was a feisty fighter for LGBT rights; making an important contribution, over many decades, to the struggle for equality. Bravo!”

In the Irish Times, in an obituary was written, “His work touched the lives of hundreds.” That indeed is his legacy, and our inheritance. His being in this world will go down the generations, and if one could map influences, like genealogy, traces of PA will still be found in hundreds of years.

WE WILL REMEMBER HIM