



“She Came as a Stranger and Made Herself One of Us”: Two Irish Women and Anti-colonial Agitation in Trinidad, 1938-1945

Bridget Brereton

Emerita Professor of History
The University of the West Indies
St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago

Abstract: In 1938, two young Irish women, Catherine (Kay) Donnellan and Eleanor Francis (Frank) Cahill, arrived in Trinidad to teach at a Catholic girls' school. They soon got involved in working with the new trade unions and with young anti-colonial intellectuals who put out a monthly magazine. For these activities, they were first dismissed from their teaching posts, and then interned without trial in early 1941 under wartime regulations. Donnellan committed suicide a few months later while Cahill remained a detainee until early 1945. This article will examine how their gender intersected with their ethnicity, nationality, class, religion, age and sexual conduct to ensure that their admittedly brief involvement in radical politics in Trinidad just before and during World War II transgressed all the norms of colonial Caribbean society.

Keywords: Catherine (Kay) Donnellan, Eleanor Frances (Frank) Cahill, Trinidad, labour movement, World War II

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Bridget Brereton: “She Came as a Stranger and Made Herself One of Us”: Two Irish Women and Anti-colonial Agitation in Trinidad, 1938-1945

In 1938, two young Irish women, Catherine (Kay) Donnellan and Eleanor Frances (Frank) Cahill, arrived in Trinidad to teach at the girls' secondary school run by Catholic nuns, St. Joseph's Convent. They soon got involved in working with the new trade unions which had emerged after the “Butler Riots” in June 1937, writing for their publications and occasionally speaking on their platforms. As a result, they were dismissed from their teaching posts in May 1940. Yet they decided to stay in Trinidad, and up to March 1941, continued their anti-colonial, pro-labour public activities. Both Donnellan and Cahill helped to edit and wrote for *New Dawn*, a socialist monthly founded by several young intellectuals, and Donnellan briefly edited the *Vanguard*, the weekly organ of the Oilfield Workers' Trade Union (OWTU).

In March 1941, in an extraordinary abuse of power, Donnellan and Cahill were arrested and interned without trial under the emergency wartime powers granted to all British colonial governors. In June of that year, Donnellan committed suicide. Cahill remained in internment until the war was nearly over (she was freed in February 1945 and left the island).

This remarkable story was first briefly told by the pioneering historian of women in Trinidad & Tobago, Rhoda Reddock (1994, 283-287). In 2010, Susan Campbell published a well-researched article about them (2010, 75-104). This article will expand and extend Reddock's and Campbell's work. I will consider how Donnellan and Cahill's gender intersected with their ethnicity, their nationality, their class, their religion and their age to ensure that their admittedly brief involvement in radical politics in Trinidad transgressed all the norms of colonial Caribbean society.¹

The article is based mainly on the Trinidad newspapers and journals of the 1938-45 period, especially the left-wing, pro-labour press. These papers are a rich source for investigating Trinidad's history during this period, and are virtually the only primary sources for the activities of Donnellan and Cahill, but there are clear limitations in using them. The establishment dailies (the *Trinidad Guardian* and the *Port of Spain Gazette*) rarely reported in any detail on the meetings or

other activities by union or left-wing leaders; the pro-labour press of course did better in this regard, which is why I have used them so heavily. Even these papers, however, often noted that meetings were held but failed to report on the speeches, or did so very briefly, and no other sources are extant for them. For instance, Donnellan and Cahill both spoke at an “indoor meeting” of the Negro Welfare, Cultural and Social Association (NWCSA) held in September 1940, but the weekly which reported this gave no details on the content of their speeches. I have failed to locate the one publication that I know was authored by Donnellan, a pamphlet titled ‘War, Food and Health’ which apparently appeared late in 1940. The official archives, whether in the National Archives in Port of Spain, or the British National Archives in London, are frustratingly silent on the reasons for Donnellan’s and Cahill’s internment, and on Cahill’s situation during her four years of detention.

These two women aligned themselves in Trinidad with the new trade unions and with young anti-colonial intellectuals; nearly all the leaders of both groupings were men, mostly of African or of mixed (African/European) ancestry. There was a fledgling ‘women’s movement’ in the colony when they arrived in 1938, as Reddock has amply documented in her pioneering research. The middle-class wing was dominated by the African-Trinidadian Audrey Jeffers and her Coterie of Social Workers; her election to the Port of Spain City Council marked the entry of women into formal politics in the colony. I have not found any evidence that Donnellan and Cahill worked with Jeffers or the Coterie, whose political positions were feminist but not left-wing (Reddock 1994, 164-181, 238-239).

Though the unions formed in the aftermath of the Butler Riots of June 1937 were heavily male-dominated, women certainly did participate in their activities in the years just before and during World War 2. Donnellan and Cahill were close to the OWTU and other unions based in the south of the island under the influence of A. C. Rienzi, John Rojas and Ralph Mentor, and Reddock again has documented how a few women were important in the early years of the OWTU (1994, 259-63). Though I have no direct evidence that Donnellan and Cahill

specifically worked with these (and other) women, I think it very likely that they did forge links with them.

There is clearer evidence of their links with women involved in the Public Works and Public Services Workers Trade Union (PW&PSWTU), a union based in Port of Spain, the colonial capital located in the north of the island. This union had female members and a Women Workers branch. It ran a school for workers which taught domestic science among other subjects, obviously targeted at women, and Donnellan and Cahill were among the teachers in 1939-40, as *New Dawn* recalled after the former's death. The only other person detained with them in 1941, Dudley Mahon, was the 'Organiser' of the PW&PSWTU.²

The most important socialist, working-class organization active in Trinidad just before the war was the NWCSA, formed in 1935. Its main leader was Elma Francois, and other women were also front-line speakers and activists; its base was the capital and the north of the island. It is almost certain that Donnellan and Cahill knew Francois and her comrades of the NWCSA, and we know they occasionally spoke at its meetings. While they shared with Francois a strongly anti-colonial and anti-fascist political position, they differed on the question of support for the war. The NWCSA refused to support the Allied war effort and condemned the whole business as an imperialist conflict in which colonial subjects should not participate (Reddock 1994, 290-291; Reddock 1988, *passim*). While Donnellan and Cahill probably privately agreed with this position—and we will see that they passionately defended the neutrality of the Irish Free State (IFS)—in public they followed the line taken by most of the union leaders, including Rieni and Mentor: critical support for the Allies to ensure the defeat of Hitlerism and Fascism was a must. This was also the position taken by the pro-labour press throughout the war (Brereton 2015 & 2016). It is interesting that while they were interned, along with Mahon (who was a member of the NWCSA as well as Organiser of the PW&PSWTU), neither Francois nor any of her NWCSA comrades were.

Of course, many hundreds of Trinidadian women took an active part in various war-related activities, and some joined the uniformed services, as Karen Eccles has fully documented (2013, *passim*). Donnellan and Cahill were not part of these efforts by women to support Britain and her allies in their struggle, but they made their bitter hostility to Hitlerism and all it stood for abundantly clear in their writings and speeches.

Teachers and Activists

Kay Donnellan and Frank Cahill arrived in Trinidad in February 1938, with contracts to teach at St. Joseph's Convent, an elite Catholic girls' secondary school in Port of Spain, the colonial capital. Donnellan held an MA and Cahill a BA—unusual for Catholic Irish women in the 1930s (Campbell 2010, 75)—and the former also taught part-time at the Catholic Women's Teacher Training College. Like so many young, well-educated Europeans in the 1930s, they were socialists, and they had been deeply influenced by the Irish struggle against Britain and the ensuing civil war in the years between 1916 and 1922, when they were teenagers and young adults in what was (in 1938) the IFS. They came to Trinidad, therefore, with left-wing views and a distinct lack of deference for Britain as a colonial power.

That their nationality, as citizens of the IFS, was a key element in their anti-colonial activism is made clear by several articles which Donnellan wrote on Irish history and politics, and especially, about her country's neutrality during World War 2. In an article published in the *Vanguard* in January 1940, she passionately defended the IFS's decision to remain neutral, as a sovereign nation free to control its destiny even though George VI was nominally still its king. Donnellan outlined the history which led to the partition of the island, and expressed guarded sympathy for the Irish Republican Army, which was illegal in the IFS as well as in Northern Ireland and England and was fighting for re-unification. Above all, she looked towards a socialist future for both the IFS and Britain: "When the world grows sane—as we must hope it will—and national

sovereignties cease to capture men's reason and imagination, the workers of the world will unite...no one will starve in the midst of plenty and men's brains will be used to build and not to destroy... But the day will not come as rain from heaven, we must work for it, study for it and prepare in love and not hate for it".³

An unsigned article in *New Dawn* at the end of 1940 was clearly by either Donnellan or Cahill. Again, the defence of Irish neutrality was a key theme, for this steadfast policy infuriated the British government at a time when Britain stood virtually alone against the Axis powers. The article noted that the IFS leader, Éamon de Valera, had refused to allow Irish ports to be used by the Royal Navy, but had offered to provide a refuge for British women and children menaced by German bombing. It was untrue that German U-boats were being refueled off the west coast of Ireland, it continued, but if de Valera had allowed British warships access to the ports, it would have meant entry into the war and a civil war as well. Much as he, and all the Irish, hated Hitler, his first duty was to defend his country's interests.⁴

The most deeply personal piece on Ireland, by Donnellan, was published by *New Dawn* just before she was detained. She wrote that only knowledge of her country's history over hundreds of years could explain why the Irish, famous for being "foremost among the freedom-loving nations of the world", refused to enter the war. That history ensured that any idea of Irish loyalty to the English crown or government was "simply nonsense". Despite the terrible danger facing England (this was February 1941), the Irish could never forget the Famine of the 1840s, the millions of deaths from starvation and the massive emigration of the hopeless survivors, the political oppression, the Black and Tans period of recent memory. Nor could they forget the denial of democracy in India and the Empire. During World War 1, many Irish people were jailed and some were executed; in 1941, Jawaharlal Nehru was in jail in India, Alexander Bustamante in Jamaica, and Uriah Butler in Trinidad. Ireland sympathised with the English suffering from German bombs, but could never join England in the war—at least not as long as partition still existed. This piece, published when Britain faced invasion and defeat, may well have struck the government as 'seditious'.⁵

From articles and reviews which they wrote about education, it seems clear that Donnellan and Cahill were knowledgeable and progressive teachers genuinely interested in their salaried jobs, especially Cahill. In the first issue of *New Dawn*, Cahill wrote a long piece on primary education in Trinidad. It was an indictment of the ugly, overcrowded buildings housing these schools, the “bedlam” caused by several classes in the same room, and the lack of books and equipment. There was no point in training teachers in progressive methods, said Cahill, if they had to teach in such conditions. All this was responsible “for the two-fold crime of intensifying the strain upon the teacher and wasting his powers, and retarding the development of the child mentally and physically”. The recommendations of a commission on education in 1933—decent modern buildings, with a garden and a play space, proper equipment, and classes of 25 not 60—must be implemented “before the teacher, however ardent, can teach, and the child, however intelligent, can learn”.⁶

In the second issue of *New Dawn*, Cahill returned to the attack in an article which would be relevant if published in 2017 instead of 1940. She taught at a Catholic girls-only “grammar school”, but she wanted “modern secondary schools” on the UK model, which should be free (no fees), co-educational and relevant (no Latin!). Cahill wrote that she knew from her recent experience at St. Joseph’s Convent that little attention was given to critical thinking: children learned by rote in order to pass their exams. As a result, even the “certificated” were easy prey for propaganda from the radio, cinema and newspapers; they became “if not the slaves of a Hitler, the slaves of a system like Capitalism”. Instead, the schools must create “questioning and free intelligence for a free, a democratic world”.⁷

Cahill made many of the same points in a later article in the same journal. Her critique of secondary education as it was practiced at St. Joseph’s Convent—the narrow curriculum, the irrelevance of Latin, the cramming, the rote learning, the poor English writing skills—and her advocacy of the modern secondary model show her to be fully informed on progressive views of the time. In addition, she argued the case for a West Indian university for those secondary

school graduates who wanted a tertiary education—which should not be “the privilege of the few scholarship winners and others whose families can afford to send them abroad”. And shortly before her detention, Cahill reviewed *The Caribbean Readers* by A. J. Newman and P. M. Sherlock, a series of primary school readers plus a teacher’s manual. Her long review shows that she was well versed in up-to-date ideas about teaching the very young, especially reading.⁸

But Donnellan and Cahill did not confine themselves to teaching, or even to writing about education and Ireland. They soon linked up with trade union leaders and young left-wing intellectuals, worked with them, and occasionally spoke on their platforms. The result was their abrupt dismissal from their teaching posts, at St. Joseph’s Convent and the Teacher Training College, in May 1940, just over two years after their arrival.

Their allies in the labour movement formally protested their dismissal, evidence of their importance to the union leaders. First, the Executive Committee of the Trinidad & Tobago Trade Unions Council (TTTUC)—the umbrella organisation of the leading unions under Rienzi’s presidency—passed a resolution in June 1940 condemning the dismissals. It stated that Donnellan and Cahill had “won the sympathy and support of the rank and file of our movement; their sincerity in the educational advancement of the peoples of the Colony have already made them a symbol of that white section of the Colony that is genuinely interested in the education of the people”. Wondering if the governor could have known “such Hitlerite actions are taking place in Trinidad” when Britain was fighting for democracy, it called on him to enquire into the dismissals.⁹

At this point, the PW&PSWTU, whose leaders like Rupert Gittens and Dudley Mahon were close to Donnellan and Cahill, asked that the resolution should not be sent to the governor until it had approached the authorities of St. Joseph’s Convent. The Union asked the Mother Superior to see a delegation which would include Gittens, George McClean who was a founder of *New Dawn*, and Rienzi. She replied declining any interview “as I am not accountable to either your Unions or to the Oilfield Workers’ Union”. So the TTTUC resolution was sent to the

colonial secretary, who predictably responded that the government had no say in the matter as the Mother Superior was solely responsible. He failed to respond when the TTTUC pointed out that both St. Joseph's Convent and the Training College were public institutions aided by the state, except to say that teachers in denominational secondary schools were not paid by the government. So the matter rested towards the end of 1940.¹⁰

In July 1940, *The People*, a pro-labour weekly, interviewed the two dismissed teachers. They said they had excellent relations with the Convent authorities, had been kindly treated, and had been asked to renew their contracts after the initial three years would end early in 1941. The abrupt dismissal therefore came as a great shock. The only explanation offered by the Mother Superior was that "their political associations were frowned on by some important outside authority". Donnellan and Cahill were sure that she had acted "on instructions", but from whom? They had no idea that there could be any objection to their speaking about education and related issues on the platforms of "responsible" unions. "We very much regret that we were forced to give up our work in which we were both keenly interested, especially in a term when some of our pupils were preparing for their final exams". The reporter commented that they both seemed "bewildered and upset" at the inconvenience to their pupils and to the school caused by a clearly "high-handed action". In an editorial, *The People* commented that it knew too little to pronounce on the issue, but felt sure that there should be an enquiry. The Mother Superior's reply was "open to criticism" and the TTTUC was right to insist that anything related to education was a public matter.¹¹ Whoever "instructed" the Mother Superior, whether a government official, or the Catholic archbishop, or powerful members of the planter and business elite, the expectation clearly was that, out of a job, Donnellan and Cahill would leave the island. However, they did not. They continued their work with the unions, helped to found *New Dawn*, and spoke and wrote on behalf of progressive causes.

Donnellan, it seems, wrote a pamphlet 'War, Food and Health', which was published by the TTTUC and argued for subsidies on food. This was an important

theme in the major speech she made at a public meeting in Port of Spain in February 1941—it may have been the immediate trigger for her detention early in the following month. “Comrade Donnellan’s” speech was reported over several columns in the *Vanguard*. She moved a resolution calling on the government to subsidise essential food and clothing in view of the rising wartime prices and chronic shortages. Donnellan stressed the issue of malnutrition, which had been significant before the war and had become far worse: “We have always been paid a starvation wage”, but now, with few getting a war bonus or a cost of living allowance, even relatively well-paid workers could barely manage to feed their families. The estate workers, with four or five months work and wages of between 40 and 50 cents a day, were in a miserable state. No wonder infant mortality was so high, she said, no wonder a doctor told the Forster Commission that he’d never seen malnutrition as bad as among Trinidad’s Indian population.

Donnellan, the only woman speaking at the meeting, said she was pleased to see a few women there, “but not nearly enough”. There was not a single female on the Legislative Council’s 1935 Wages Advisory Committee, she noted, yet it was women who had to struggle to feed their families. If working-class women sat on such committees, she said, the reports would be more sensible than the one from the 1935 Committee. In these brief remarks, Donnellan signalled her awareness of the special difficulties experienced by housewives and mothers during the war, and her recognition that even the unions, far more the colonial legislature and government, had failed to bring women fully into their activities.

Turning to the war, Donnellan said that “one man” did not start it; Hitler was responsible for a great deal, but Germans backed him because they had been badly treated after World War 1. The causes of the war were uncertain, but the people of Trinidad were surely not responsible; they suffered from it but had no control over events. It is possible that this last part of her speech may have struck the government as ‘seditious’, especially coming from one who had publicly and robustly defended the neutral IFS.¹²

Editors and Writers

Donnellan and Cahill were co-founders of the monthly *New Dawn*, which first appeared in November 1940, and sat on its four-person editorial board; the others were Rupert Gittens and George McLean, with Leo Gittens listed as its publisher. No one was named as chair of the board. They both wrote many signed articles and reviews, and no doubt several unsigned editorial pieces, up until the April 1941 issue (they were detained in March 1941).

We have already noted pieces by Donnellan and Cahill on Ireland and on education, but they wrote on other issues too, including local politics. In *New Dawn's* first issue, Donnellan attacked the war censorship which discriminated against people involved in the unions. In her own case, all her overseas mail, and all of Cahill's, was opened, a practice that began the same week of their dismissals. Despite the recommendations of the Royal Commission, all those who worked with the unions were under suspicion. "What a tragedy if Britain's fight for democracy should be nullified in the eyes of millions by anti-labour and semi-Fascist methods in the Colonies". Cahill's article 'Might is Right' attacked the local daily papers, both pro-establishment as a rule, for "championing the cause of minorities and might as against majorities and rights". They never failed to shout about the war effort and the defence of the rights of man yet ignored the scandalous wages and conditions of Trinidad's agricultural labourers, and the suppression of democracy at home. They championed the planters' cause but ignored the workers' demand for a war bonus or a cost of living subsidy.¹³

Shortly before her detention, Cahill wrote a long article about London's tactic of sending out commissions to delay reforms and buy time, a piece revealing that she was well informed on West Indian history. Both the Norman Commission (1897-98) and the Olivier Commission (1929-30) had recommended peasant settlement and improvements in the housing and wages of plantation workers. Yet, no serious changes were made: "The vile barracks and hovels of the rapidly increasing masses still steamed in the hot sweat of closely huddled humanity..." The Marriott-Mayhew Commission (1931-32) made excellent recommendations

on education, but now, ten years on, nothing had been implemented—it was more important to punish praedial larceny with floggings. The Forster Commission (1937-38) repeated many of the recommendations made by the Norman and Olivier Commissions; between Olivier and Forster, the oil and sugar companies had modernised their machinery and methods but had done nothing for their workers. Now the Moyne Commission had visited in 1938-39 and its report, not yet published, would no doubt join all the others “on the file”. Would the next one, Cahill asked provocatively, come from Washington not London?¹⁴

Cahill managed to turn a piece on a recent agricultural exhibition into an indictment of colonial policy. At the Irish agricultural shows she had attended, local farmers were deeply involved and interested in all the activities, but it was different in Trinidad. For in that “outpost of empire and home of vested interests, where the land that might house and feed and clothe a sturdy farming community is held fast in the grip of a few big men”, there were no real “farmers”, only big planters and labourers. People were being told to grow more food—on what land, with so much under “diseased cocoa” or sugar or swamp? They were being told to ensure their children get nutritious food—on starvation wages and no garden plots? Interestingly, this article by Cahill was re-purposed into an unsigned editorial piece published in the *Vanguard* during Donnellan’s brief stint as its editor.¹⁵

In addition to their signed articles, and almost certainly unsigned pieces too, Donnellan and Cahill both contributed book and film reviews to *New Dawn*. Among the books Donnellan reviewed were Malcolm Muggeridge’s *The Thirties*, memoirs by British leftists Harry Pollitt and William Gallacher, a biography of Nehru, and a collection of essays by Harold Laski. She also wrote on films. In a review of *Pastor Hall*, about a Christian pastor executed in Nazi Germany, she recalled the tyranny of the Black and Tans in the Ireland of her youth. She once visited a British concentration camp where her friend’s brother had died in his hospital. “No one cried, no one did in those days till one had escaped from the eyes of the sentries and assassins”. She often left school to the sound of gunfire

from the British soldiers, “war-maddened wretches sent to keep law and order in Ireland!” In Ireland the people resisted, but not in Germany, so the Nazis triumphed. The film’s lesson, Donnellan concluded, was that it was “the duty of every honest man and woman to do his utmost against injustice, victimisation or discrimination wherever they occur, in Germany, Ireland or the West Indies”. Donnellan reviewed local plays, and a recital by a local pianist, Kathleen Davis (later to be famous as a radio and TV host, ‘Aunty Kay’).¹⁶ Indeed, she seems to have been the principal book and film reviewer for *New Dawn* up to her detention.

Early in 1941, Donnellan became editor of the OWTU’s weekly, the *Vanguard*. It speaks to her standing in the labour movement that a young, white, foreign woman was entrusted with this task by Trinidad’s most powerful trade union. The weekly had not appeared for the second half of 1940, but reappeared in late February 1941. She was responsible for two issues as editor; the second was published on March 1, 1941. She presumably wrote, or perhaps helped to write, the editorial articles in that issue, which dealt with the conditions for the US bases being built in Trinidad, with immigration of workers which the planters were demanding, and with racist actions by American sailors. But after just two issues edited by Donnellan, she was arrested before the appearance of the next issue (8 March 1941).¹⁷

Detentions and Death

This issue of the *Vanguard* was signed by Ralph Mentor, a top official of the OWTU and the TTUC. A brief note on the front page, headed ‘An Unusual Call’, stated that Donnellan, its editor, was told by a senior police officer on March 7 that she was “wanted” by the police in Port of Spain (the paper was based in San Fernando in the south of the island). No reason was given. She left immediately with the officer. At this stage, the paper seemed either uncertain about what was happening or was unwilling to say. But the pro-establishment daily, the *Guardian*, in its issue of the same day, stated it had been “officially

informed" that Donnellan, Cahill and Mahon had been detained under the Defence Regulations. Of course, this paper had good connections with police and government sources in the capital.¹⁸

By the next issue of the *Vanguard*, on March 15, the situation was clear: the three had indeed been detained under the wartime emergency powers. No charges had been announced—and under the Regulations, there was no obligation to do so. Appeals might be heard by a special tribunal, and appeals for the three had been filed. The weekly outlined the activities of Donnellan and Cahill since they came to Trinidad "from a country that has carried out a ceaseless struggle for the last 700 years for the right of freedom, independence and social justice". They became active in the "Educational work of the Trade Union Movement", leading to their dismissal from their teaching posts. Since then, "they have toured the Colony" helping in educational and propaganda work "for the removal of the slums, the filth and the poverty in the midst of plenty"; they tried to understand the people and encouraged them to seek their rights. Ralph Mentor, the weekly's new editor, felt sure that the three detainees were "loyal and patriotic to HM the King Emperor, his throne and person", far more so than the bosses and war profiteers of Trinidad—though in fact Donnellan and Cahill had made it clear that they were anti-Nazi and anti-Fascist but hardly loyal to George VI and his government.¹⁹

In a signed column, Mentor noted that the whole trade union movement was united to protest the detentions. A public meeting held in Port of Spain on March 14, representing "every shade of Trade Union opinion", had demanded that they be released and that the Defence Regulations making such detentions without trial possible be revoked. It passed a resolution stating the meeting's conviction that the three were "loyal and patriotic, but sympathetic to the workers, and their arrest can only indicate that educated, cultured and fair minded people who take up the workers' cause may be liable to be detained". Mentor pointed out that the three had been "outspoken critics of the Young-Huggins administration" and frequent speakers on union platforms, but at no point had they sought to undermine the war effort.²⁰

The three detainees appealed; the *Vanguard* announced that Rienzi, a lawyer and the leading trade unionist of Trinidad, was to appear for Donnellan and Cahill, and E. P. Bruyning for Mahon. It also informed its readers that Mahon was being held on Nelson Island, along with Butler, while Donnellan and Cahill were at the detention camp in St. James, a suburb of Port of Spain, with interned enemy aliens.²¹

Because the appeals tribunal met in secret, and the local government was under no legal obligation to reveal the charges against the three, it was only when the matter was taken up in the British Parliament that an official statement was made. On April 10, 1941, the Labour MP D. N. Pritt asked a question in the Commons about the detentions. The Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office, G. H. Hall, replied that they had been “engaged in anti-British and anti-war propaganda calculated to diminish the war effort in Trinidad and to encourage the use of violence”. The *Vanguard* commented that this would be news to “the thousands who had the privilege of hearing their speeches or reading the writings of Misses Donnellan and Cahill”. They had never encouraged violence and they were bitterly anti-Nazi; there could be no evidence to support this official declaration by Hall. The editor conceded that some restrictions were necessary in wartime, but at the very least, the appeals tribunal should be held in public. In June, the *Vanguard* returned to the issue, noting that three months after their detention, no information had come from the local government on their cases. The appeals were held, in camera, and the only word was that “judgement was reserved”. Public feeling was strong against “this hush-hush business”.²²

For *New Dawn*, the loss of Donnellan and Cahill, founding editors and prolific writers, was a huge blow—indeed, shutting down this strongly anti-colonial monthly may have been one of the objectives behind their internment. *The Teachers Herald*, another progressive monthly, commented that they were the best writers appearing in *New Dawn*, well informed, up to date, practical and sympathetic. Obviously the local authorities found their writings too well informed, educational and advanced, it said, and sought to protect the

population from their views. Their writings were missed by many, the monthly concluded, looking forward to their release "when the world is less mad".²³

In its April 1941 issue, *New Dawn* announced the detention of two of its editors, along with Mahon. It thought that the "last straw...for the reactionary groups and others more powerful" was their involvement with the monthly, and Donnellan's recent acceptance of the *Vanguard* editorship. Neither they, nor the "old militant" Mahon, deserved to be detained, and thousands agreed. Reacting in the next issue to the statement in the Commons, the remaining *New Dawn* editors insisted that there was not a shred of evidence that the three had ever encouraged violence or tried to undermine the war effort. A Parliamentary enquiry was necessary; as it was, it seemed "that to believe at all strongly in democracy, to be eager to see it applied here, to have been anti-Fascist long before most people, is to be suspect". The monthly noted that *Public Opinion*, a progressive Jamaican journal, had expressed its amazement at the detentions which could never be justified, it thought, by anything published in *New Dawn*.²⁴

The tragic death of Donnellan on June 24, 1941, three months after her detention, came as a shock to all her colleagues and friends. It was first announced by the *Guardian*. Her body had been found in the sea near the Cocorite airport (for Pan-American sea planes), about a mile from the St. James internment camp. The report, obviously based on a police source, noted that there was a gash on the right side of her neck which bled when the body was brought ashore. It also stated that Donnellan was a native of Galway in the IFS and was about 40 years old. And it added: "After her identity had been made known yesterday [June 24] morning, the Government revealed that both she and Miss Cahill had been offered their release from internment on May 26, on condition that they both return to Ireland at once but they both refused". The post mortem was to be held that day (June 25) and an inquest later on.²⁵

The *Vanguard* expressed its shock and sorrow in a long article published soon after her death. It noted that it was only the day after Donnellan's death that it learned, from the *Guardian*, of the offer to release her and Cahill if they left

Trinidad at once. Whatever her mental state at the time of her escape and death, “her name will be indelibly impressed upon the suffering masses of this country...for whom she suffered martyrdom”. The same sentiment was expressed in a letter from an OWTU official, Lucas Nunez, who wrote that she dedicated her life to Trinidad's people and died for them. She was, he thought, “the first woman who died here for love of Trinidad working class emancipation” despite her Irish birth. And the Fyzabad branches of the OWTU and the sugar workers' union held a joint memorial service for her in September, describing her as a dear friend and comrade, a great soul and martyr, and offering prayers for Cahill and Mahon.²⁶

In a moving tribute in its August 1941 issue, *New Dawn* called Donnellan's death a “grievous loss” to Trinidad's working-class movement. “She came as a stranger to these shores and made herself one of us...confident in the righteousness of the cause she never flinched nor faltered”. None of her comrades and colleagues ever imagined, when she was arrested, that they would not see her again alive. “She too probably never thought that her last resting place would be so far away from her beloved Eire and her own stout-hearted people”. But “her name will be enshrined in the annals of the West Indian working-class movement...She has died but her spirit lives. Working men and women of Trinidad who read her writings and listened to her addresses, those who sat at her feet in the Workers' School, will inspire their sons and daughters with the fervour of this late friend of ours, this valiant daughter of the Irish countryside”. The monthly reported that workers, some former St. Joseph's Convent pupils, some Irish nuns and two priests took part in her funeral procession to the Mucurapo cemetery near the camp; she was “always a dutiful child” of the Catholic Church.²⁷

In its October 1941 issue, *New Dawn* revealed that the National Council for Civil Liberties, a British watchdog group, had considered Donnellan's case in August. It had pronounced her death especially tragic because the grounds for her detention were very questionable. The secret appeals tribunal asked her about every article in *New Dawn*, not just her own, and all her public speeches, but the

Council's case worker had studied the monthly and had found nothing which was “anti-war” or even anti-British, quite the reverse. Moreover, Donnellan's speech in June 1940, at a ‘Win The War’ campaign meeting, was proof of her support for the war effort. The Council intended to have questions asked in the Commons about Donnellan's detention and death, and Cahill's continuing internment. (In November 1941, the Labour MP Dr. Morgan, who had been born in Grenada, asked about Donnellan in the Commons; the written reply merely said that the Secretary of State had received from the governor a copy of the inquest record and it was available at the Colonial Office).²⁸

The full tragedy of Donnellan's death was revealed during the inquest, which was extensively reported in the *Guardian*. It was typical of this daily that it headlined its first report ‘Irish Ex-Teacher Was Expectant Mother’—neither the *Vanguard* nor *New Dawn* mentioned this distressing fact. The inquest revealed that Donnellan had made two earlier attempts at suicide while in the camp, but had been stopped by Cahill's intervention. On the night of her death, she had cut her wrists with a razor, then escaped from the camp and walked down to the sea at Cocorite. (Cahill was unable to intervene on this occasion because she was in solitary confinement for a breach of the camp rules). On the shore, she had gashed the side of her neck, and entered the water. Death was by drowning, but the medical witness thought she may have been unconscious from loss of blood before she drowned. The post-mortem revealed a fully formed male foetus of 5 to 6 months.²⁹

After this tragedy, and the loss of her friend and companion, it seems especially brutal that Cahill was not released. But she was not, and she was refused visits. In its last issue, *New Dawn* noted that Nehru and other Congress leaders in India had just been released, and so had Bustamante in Jamaica (this was early in 1942) and called for Cahill, Butler and Mahon to be freed “in the name of justice”. They had been interned when everyone was “panicky” but there had never been any evidence that they planned violent actions, they had never been formally charged or tried in the courts.³⁰ The end of *New Dawn* about a

year after the detentions was certainly due in part to the loss of Donnellan and Cahill.

With *New Dawn* out of action from March 1942, it was left to a rather similar progressive monthly, the *Teachers Herald*, to remember Cahill's plight. It attacked Governor Hubert Young who had detained her and Donnellan; the governor had deemed "noble and liberal spirits" like them "dangerous to Empire peace and security" for no just cause. In May 1944, a columnist in the monthly noted that Cahill remained in the internment camp "for what it has not pleased Government to say in open trial by her peers". She enjoyed "the respect of the West Indian Community", except the reactionaries who had influenced Young; had the new governor (Bede Clifford) outgrown such influences and did he now subscribe to the "Four Freedoms" endorsed by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill in the Atlantic Charter? If so, he was obligated to review Cahill's case. There was never any evidence that she had sought to retard the war effort. The columnist said that Cahill had done a year's course in medicine but had failed an exam because she was not allowed to practice as an intern in a hospital. He (or she) nevertheless hoped that she would "persist in her noble work for humanity, as Patriot, Teacher and Healer", and ended in an appeal for her immediate release.³¹

It was not until February 1945, when the end of the war in Europe was only three months away, that Cahill was released, following a review of her case by the Advisory Committee. (Butler and Mahon were released a few weeks later). She went to London, where she was visited in the late 1940s by Lloyd Braithwaite, one of the *New Dawn* founders and writers. He told Susan Campbell decades later that she had not really recovered from her wartime experiences in Trinidad (Campbell 2010, 90).³²

Transgressions

Kay Donnellan and Frank Cahill transgressed the norms of colonial West Indian society of the period on several grounds, or in several ways, all of which intersected. Most obviously, perhaps, they undermined the racial premises of British colonialism when, as 'white', European persons, they took such an active and public part in trade union and left-wing movements. This was clear to their allies and comrades in Trinidad. As the *Vanguard* put it, "they have fraternised with Negroes and Indians as few 'Whites' have done in this Colony"; and, "unlike other white teachers who have come to this Colony", they had agreed to lecture for the unions on education and related issues. Only people like them, thought the *Teachers Herald*, could "bind the Empire of Black and White together" and give meaning to the new concept of a 'Commonwealth'. And *New Dawn* summed it up: "In Trinidad, it is not considered proper for Europeans to identify with the people's cause, and they do not; our colleagues, true Irishwomen moved by the plight of the underprivileged workers, transgressed".³³

Trinidad had a small but visible community of Irish descent; the Creoles among them, nearly all Catholics, had intermarried into the larger 'French Creole' group. With few exceptions, by the 1930s they were part of the colony's business, professional and planter elite (De Verteuil 1986). Irish nuns, priests and teachers also served in Trinidad, but, again with few exceptions, their brand of religion and their kind of politics were conservative if not reactionary in this period. (Of course, this was broadly true of the higher echelons of the Church in the IFS itself). As white Irish women, and apparently devout Catholics, Donnellan and Cahill took an entirely different line. Their public defence of IFS neutrality during the war, such a grievance to Britain during the terrible months after the Fall of France, and their anti-British attitudes honed in the Irish struggle that they had lived through, must have further distanced them both from the local Irish-descended community and from the colonial authorities.

It's clear, too, that their gender only magnified their "transgression". White women, whether Creole or European, took little part in public life in the colonial

Caribbean at this time, outside church and charitable activities. A rare exception in Trinidad was Beatrice Greig, a married Scottish/Canadian woman who was involved in several public causes in the early 1900s and was, along with Audrey Jeffers, a candidate for the Port of Spain City Council in 1936 (Reddock 1994, 167-168.) Those few women who did try to enter public and political life in Trinidad, like Jeffers, did not get involved in the trade unions or left-wing groups, preferring to create middle-class social workers' groups as their vehicles (Reddock 1994). Again, the two Irish women transgressed. The fact that they were fairly young, in the mid to late thirties, magnified their offence. To the best of my knowledge, they were the only women interned in the British Caribbean colonies for anti-government activities during World War 2 (as opposed to women interned as enemy aliens, simply because of their nationality).

They were young, unmarried, Catholic women, and the revelation that Donnellan had been sexually active before her internment was, perhaps, a final transgression. It was not by chance that the *Guardian* trumpeted the fact of her pregnancy in its report of her death. While white men, including Europeans, were generally free to conduct extra-marital affairs and father children outside marriage with little public disapproval, the double standard as applied against white and upper-class women was quite rigid in the colonial Caribbean in this period. The inquest as reported in the *Guardian* revealed that the father of her child, George Fereira, had recently come to Trinidad from Madeira. Assuming he was in fact Portuguese, this was not an inter-racial union, which would have been a further transgression, but people of Portuguese descent or nationality were considered to be only marginally 'white' in Trinidad at this time, certainly not generally a part of the island elite. For class, too, played a part: Donnellan and Cahill were not only white and European, they were university-educated women holding teaching posts at a posh girls' secondary school where most of the pupils were from upper or upper-middle class backgrounds. By education, occupation, place of birth and ethnicity they should have joined the colony's upper class; but they defied all this in their public identification with the unions, the workers and the young leftist intellectuals.

Bridget Brereton: “She Came as a Stranger and Made Herself One of Us”: Two Irish Women and Anti-colonial Agitation in Trinidad, 1938-1945

These two Irish women, one of whom died in Trinidad, defied the norms of colonial society, norms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual conduct, class and religion, in their brief career in the island’s radical politics between 1938 and 1941. Though largely forgotten today, their story is well worth remembering.

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Abbreviations for newspapers/journals (all published in Trinidad):

G: *The Guardian*

ND: *New Dawn*

P: *The People*

TH: *Teachers Herald*

V: *Vanguard*

Bridget Brereton: "She Came as a Stranger and Made Herself One of Us": Two Irish Women and Anti-colonial Agitation in Trinidad, 1938-1945

¹ The best work on Trinidad in the late 1930s/early 1940s is Singh 1994. For Trinidad during World War II, see Singh 1994: 186-222; Neptune 2007; Anthony 2008; Eccles 2013. See also Brereton 2015 & 2016.

² ND Aug 1941, p.2, 'Her Spirit Lives On' and Reddock 1994, 277-279.

³ V 6/1/40, p.7, 'The Future of Irish Politics' by 'Kay Don.'

⁴ ND Dec 1940, p.17, 'Anglo-Irish Relations', unsigned.

⁵ ND Feb 1941, pp. 12-15, 'As the Irish See It' by KD. The 'Black and Tans' refers to the British soldiers in Ireland in the 1919-21 period leading up to partition and the founding of the IFS.

⁶ ND Nov 1940, pp. 5-7, 'Some Needs of Primary Education' by FC. It was the Marriott-Mayhew Commission which reported in 1933.

⁷ ND Dec 1940, pp.10-12, 'Education for Democracy' by FC.

⁸ ND Jan 1941, pp. 15-18, 'By Way of Contrast' by FC; ND March 1941, pp. 18-20, Review by FC of 'The Caribbean Readers'.

⁹ V 28/6/41, pp. 7-8, 'Published Correspondence'.

¹⁰ P 20/7/40, p.3, 'Dismissal of Convent Teachers'; and n.8.

¹¹ P 20/7/40, p.5, 'The People Interview Miss Donellan and Miss Cahill' and pp. 6-7, 'Alleged Wrongful Dismissal' (edit.).

¹² For this and the preceding two paragraphs, V 1/3/41, pp. 2, 7, 'Historic Meeting at Prince's Building'. The Forster Commission (1938) came to Trinidad to investigate the 1937 riots. The pamphlet, which I have not been able to locate, is mentioned in V 28/6/41, p.4, 'Another Martyr'.

¹³ ND Nov 1940, pp.12-13, 'Trade Unions and the Censorship' by KD. The Royal Commission was the Moyne Commission, whose 1939 Report recommended that trade unions in the British West Indies should be encouraged. ND Jan 1941, pp. 7-8, 'Might is Right' by FC.

¹⁴ ND March 1941, pp. 9-12, 'Those Royal Commissions—So What?' by FC. See ns. xii and xiii for the Forster and Moyne Commissions.

¹⁵ ND March 1941, pp. 16-17, 'The Agricultural Exhibition' by FC; V 8/3/41, p.4, 'Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition' (edit.).

¹⁶ These reviews were published in ND Dec 1940, Jan 1941 and Feb 1941. See n.v for 'Black and Tans'.

¹⁷ 1/3/41, pp. 1, 4, edits. The earlier issue of 25/2/41, also edited by KD, is missing in the bound volume of V for 1940-41 in the Trinidad & Tobago National Archives, Port of Spain.

¹⁸ V 8/3/41, p. 1, 'An Unusual Call'; G 8/3/41, p. 1, 'Irish Teachers Detained'.

¹⁹ V 15/3/41, p.4, 'Editors and Trade Union Organiser Detained'.

²⁰ V 15/3/41, p. 5, 'Candid Comments' by R. Mentor. Hubert Young was the governor and John Huggins the colonial secretary of Trinidad at this time.

²¹ V 22/3/41, p. 5, 'Appeals Against Detention'. Nelson Island is a small island off the north-

²² V 19/4/41, p. 4, 'Truth Stranger Than Fiction'; V 21/6/41, p. 4, 'Those Detentions'

²³ V 19/4/41, p. 3, Excerpt from TH, n.d.

²⁴ ND April 1941, p. 3, 'Enforced Absences'; ND May-June 1941, p. 1, 'We Are Amazed'.

²⁵ G 25/6/41, p. 3, 'Irish Ex-Teacher Found Dead'.

²⁶ V 28/6/41, p. 4, 'Another Martyr Passes Away' (edit); V 23/8/41, p. 7, 'Tribute to the Late Kay Donnellan' by L. Nunez, 17/8/41; V 6/9/41, p.7, 'Fyzabad Workers Hold Memorial Service'. Fyzabad is a small town in the oil belt in south Trinidad.

²⁷ ND Aug 1941, p. 2, 'Her Spirit Lives On'.

²⁸ ND Oct 1941, p. 18, 'Those Detentions'; G 21/11/41, p.11, 'Inquest into Miss K. Donnellan'. Campbell quotes Donnellan's speech in June 1940 (Campbell 2010: 79).

²⁹ A verbatim report of the inquest is in G 29/6/41, p. 3, and 4/7/41, pp. 3, 11. Campbell says the father is unknown, but the inquest report makes it clear that George Fereira, a recent immigrant from Madeira, "confessed" that he fathered the child, and Cahill testified that she knew Donnellan was "very fond" of him. (Campbell 2010, 100, n. 125).

³⁰ ND Aug 1941, pp. 2-3, 'Striking Commentary'; ND March 194, p. 1, 'Free Them All'.

³¹ TH April 1942, p. 5, edit; TH May 1944, pp. 21-23, 'Pepper Pot' by 'Note-Taker'.

³² G 1/2/45, p. 3, 'Interned Teacher To Be Released'.

³³ See notes xix and xxvi; TH May 1944, n. 31; and n. xxiv.