

Photographer and 'firebrand' who fought for poor in society

EAMON MELAUGH

IN his home city of Derry, Eamon Melaugh was probably best known for the part he played in trying to improve the living conditions of the poorest in society.

He blamed Stormont and the Londonderry Corporation for the discrimination in public housing and jobs. He was determined to shake his community from the political lethargy he felt it had drifted into.

A key driver in both the Derry Housing Action Committee and Derry Unemployed Action Committee, he also played a pivotal role, along with Eamonn McCann, in the civil rights march of October 5 1968.

He anticipated the RUC would respond with violence but told co-organisers: "When our blood flows, Stormont goes!"

Born in 1933, during the "Hungry Thirties", Eamon's own early years were marked by poverty. His tenement home in Bridge Street housed eight families, each with one room, a shared outdoor toilet and a yard tub to wash in that froze in winter.

He often said he was one of the last people to regularly walk the streets of Derry barefoot.

At 13, he discovered photography when his father, Tommy, a tailor with an interest in technology, showed him how to develop a print from a negative. He was captivated.

His first camera was a 'Box Brownie' bought from a pawn shop on Bishop Street for ten shillings, and photography would remain a passion throughout his life, including during the Troubles. His photographs from the late 1960s and early 70s, including Bloody Sunday, have been widely published and were compiled in a book in 2005.

Eamon had to leave school at 14 to help support his family. He regretted this but was a constant reader, and our home was filled with books. He believed strongly in education and wanted his children to take every opportunity available.

He worked at various jobs, including as a tea blender in Bridgend and driving trams in Glasgow, where he occasionally relied on his amateur boxing skills to protect passengers.

He returned to Derry, met Mary (May) McLaughlin, and they married in 1956. They raised 11 children in a house in Creggan, and later fostered 15 children who needed short or medium-term care.

In the run-up to the October 5 march, Eamon helped organise several protests in the city.

This included picketing housing and unemployment offices, disrupting meetings of the Londonderry Corporation, and a sit-down at the re-opening of the lower deck of the Craigavon Bridge – which he had just finished working on.

This activity resulted in arrests, fines, and court appearances. During

this time Eamon thought he was the most arrested man in the city.

However, he never supported the later violence of the Troubles and regretted the suffering it caused.

Over the years many people came to his door for help with welfare and employment issues. He stood for the Workers' Party in several elections, although without success.

Later in life he travelled, walked and cycled in Britain, Europe, the USA and India, always with a camera.

After witnessing severe poverty among children in India, he founded the charity Action With Effect in 2005. With the help of family and friends, it raised more than £900,000 before closing in 2024 due to his health.

In recent years Eamon lived with dementia, though he always knew his family.

Although he could appear stern, he had a sense of humour and a quick wit, even on his death bed.

Described as 'a free-wheeling radical' and a 'firebrand', he hated injustice and unfair treatment, particularly as it resulted in wasting the lives and talents of people. Given the circumstances he was born into, he lived a full and meaningful life. He will be deeply missed.

Eamon Melaugh died peacefully at home on December 8 aged 92.

He is survived and sadly missed by his wife Mary, his sister Irene, 11 children, 26 grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren.

Martin Melaugh

