

# Ian Andrew Gasse, 1948-2024: An Appreciation

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*Stewart MacLennan*

In 2012, Ian Gasse came to live in Dumfries and Galloway, settling in the Kirkcudbrightshire village of Kirkpatrick Durham. Then aged 64, Ian was guided by several impulses, but retirement as we know it was surely not among them. In one sense, Ian was returning to his ancestral heartland: his grandfather, George Gass, was born in nearby Troqueer; his father, Joseph Gasse (the beneficiary of an additional 'e' bestowed by George to the family name), was from Moffat; there was, too, the eponymous Gasstown on the outskirts of Dumfries. Another spur was Ian's attraction to the growing movement towards Scottish independence: his political instincts were always those of the active participant, rather than the detached bystander.

In his new location, Ian found the local bus service facilitated his genius for connection. It was at a bus stop that he first met his neighbour, the poet and MacDiarmid scholar John Manson. Both shared an abiding interest in the work of Victor Serge, and the two formed an enduring friendship. On John's death in 2020, it was Ian who oversaw the distribution of John's library and papers, many of which are now held in the National Library of Scotland (see Ian's obituary for John Manson in *Scottish Labour History*, Vol. 55, 2020). And, while travelling locally by bus, Ian met Anne Lindsay and, with her, a harmony of interests which led to their setting up home together in Dumfries in 2013.

Following further education in Nottingham and Loughborough, Ian, born in Halifax, West Yorkshire, qualified as a teacher and worked initially in the profession before following a varied career in local government, in arts administration and management, and as a researcher and editor in the arts sector. He held posts with Yorkshire Arts and the North West Arts Board, and was previously tour organiser and administrator for Red Ladder Theatre. He took a Masters Degree in Cultural Studies in 1998 and from 2001 was a fundraiser, tour organiser and development coordinator for Banner Theatre, working also with Solent People's Theatre and in a freelance capacity with Chrysalis Arts Development.

Joining the Committee of the Scottish Labour History Society in 2013, Ian brought to its work a deep commitment to the theory and practice of labour history, inspired in particular by his admiration of the work of

'exemplary' historians Raymond Williams, E P Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, together with a seemingly limitless repertoire of skills and talents developed in his forty-year career: once drawn from his self-effacing personality, these never failed to deliver.

A highlight of the SLHS's Easter Rising centenary conference in Edinburgh in 2016 was Ian's performance of settings of songs by James Connolly, accompanied by partner Anne. The following year saw him curate in Dumfries a festival of films marking the centenary of the Russian Revolution. 2017 also saw him publish in Scottish Labour History the first of five studies drawing upon the hitherto hidden labour history of Dumfries, presaging his three books which would appear in 2021, 2022 and 2024 respectively.

Turning to the running of the Society itself, Ian rationalised and maintained its hitherto somewhat kenspeckle membership system. As its website administrator, he developed [scottishlabourhistorysociety.scot](http://scottishlabourhistorysociety.scot) into the main public promoter of the Society and an active forum for its members, a much appreciated monthly newsletter being added to its services. For Scottish Labour History, he provided, too, the meticulous design, typesetting and proof-reading work brought to his books. Throughout the Covid-19 lockdowns and after, Ian Gasse was the indispensable and unflagging mainstay of the Society.

Ian's home in Lovers Walk, Dumfries was strategically located: from its back door, he need only pass through a lane, a gate and a close to reach the Ewart Library in Catherine Street, repository of Dumfries and Galloway Archives. A pattern was soon set of a day's shift at the archive coalface, interrupted by a brief lunch break at home, where, if necessary, he could have recourse to a huge personal library of some five thousand volumes - his 'friends', as Ian saw his books. Ian being Ian, he also resuscitated a dormant Friends of Dumfries and Galloway Archives, and became its Secretary!

The three books resulting from Ian's research and writing represent a most remarkable achievement through which Dumfries is furnished with a history of its popular and labour movements spanning one and a half centuries. 'Something to Build On' charted the rise and development of the Co-operative movement to 1914; 'Mobbings, Struggles and Strikes' recorded 'episodes in the history of the organised working class' from 1771; and "A Hard Nut to Crack" documented the rise of Labour as a political force, again to 1914, the latter published in the last months of the author's life, and reviewed elsewhere in this

journal. His books as artefacts reflected their author's craftmanship, and it is a source of pride that all were published in association with the Scottish Labour History Society and under its rubric.

It was wholly characteristic of Ian to seek to bring history to the people by the broadest means, so his cycle of publication was prefaced by the illustrated booklet, 'Uncovering Working Lives: A Dumfries Labour History Trail' published jointly by SLHS with Dumfries Trades Union Council and serving as a guide to walks led by Ian himself. His last book was launched at the opening of 'Fighting for Justice' an exhibition at Dumfries Museum of materials unearthed by Ian during his research, which ended its six-month run only two days before his untimely death.

Like the adherents of Cromwell's New Model Army, Ian 'knew what he loved and loved what he knew', and he was, in the words of a close friend, 'a very knowledgeable comrade indeed'. Among some two dozen active affiliations, he greatly valued his involvement in Dumfries Trade Union Council through his membership of the National Union of Journalists. Together, there were few, if any, aspects of local civic life they did not touch. To the end, Ian was a stalwart campaigner on the weekly vigil to raise awareness of the ongoing Palestinian genocide and, when nearby Thornhill was subject to a far-right racist leafletting raid, he led the counter-offensive.

Death struck Ian down without warning on 4 September 2024 at the age of 76, an appalling shock to his innumerable friends, the more so to partner Anne and daughter of an earlier marriage, Eleanor. Following a natural burial, eighty friends, family and comrades from all over Britain gathered in Dumfries on 2 October to commemorate his life and work given to the cause of labour. In recalling his dedication, erudition and wise and amiable companionship, we can best echo Ian Gasse's own words on the passing of his friend John Manson:

"His knowledge was formidable, his scholarship painstaking, and his generosity prodigious."

*Stewart Maclellan  
Chair, Scottish Labour History Society*