Gerald Griffin

Gerald Griffin, a New Zealand socialist and fighter for peace who earned fame in Australia in 1934 is interviewed by Malcolm Salmon.

An Irish-born New Zealander who has recorded his name indelibly in Australian history books is Gerald Griffin, member of the famous anti-war duo of Kisch and Griffin whose successful fight against Lyons Government efforts to keep them out of Australia was making headlines throughout the country just 34 years ago. I had the opportunity to interview Griffin for Tribune and Australian Left Review when he passed through Sydney late last year.

A man of the Left in the best sense of the words, Griffin, now in his 'sixties, has spent his days not only as anti-war agitator, but as white collar union leader — he was secretary of the large and influential New Zealand Public Service Association from 1945 to 1967 — and as an active protagonist of Irish freedom —he has been part of countless movements for the political rights of his homeland from 1916 to the present day. The son of a bookseller, he has also been a bookman all his life, with a grasp of marxist and progressive literature which has never faltered throughout his long years of activity.

It is doubtful whether any episode in the history of the Australian peace movement has seen such a massive rallying of public support as the Kisch-Griffin affair in 1934-35. Certainly, none has been so salted with dramatic incident. Certainly, none has resulted in such a clear-cut defeat for a federal government (in particular for the Attorney-General of the day, Robert Gordon Menzies).

It was the year after Hitler's rise to power in Germany. The Left everywhere was seized with the menace of this event to the people of Germany and of the whole world. Australia was no exception. Egon Erwin Kisch, an outstanding Czech journalist, who had been imprisoned and tortured by the nazis, was invited to attend a Congress Against War and Fascism to be held in Melbourne in November, 1934.

The New Zealand anti-war movement decided to send its secretary, Gerald Griffin, to represent it and to speak at the Congress.
On November 6 Kisch (who afterwards published a fascinating account of his experiences, entitled *Australian Landfall*, long out of print but soon to be re-issued by an enlightened Sydney publisher) was forbidden to land at Fremantle. Menzies had said (Melbourne Argus, November 8) that Kisch "had not been allowed to enter Great Britain because of his subversive views and his association and affiliations with communist organisations. 'The Commonwealth feels under no obligation to receive persons of this type'.” But “obligation” or not, receive Kisch it did. When his ship, the *Strathaird*, tied up at Melbourne, Kisch jumped on to the dock, broke his leg, went to hospital, failed to pass a dictation test in Highland Gaelic and went into court to be declared a prohibited immigrant.

As for Griffin, he was given a dictation test in Dutch when he arrived in Sydney on November 2, declared a prohibited immigrant and marched across the wharf to be put on another ship headed back to New Zealand. But Griffin was back within the week — living in Scarlet Pimpernel fashion, popping up and speaking on the war danger at widely separated places, to the accompaniment of official denials that he was in the country at all.

It was almost three weeks before Griffin, on the advice of his friends in the Australian anti-war movement, allowed himself to be arrested when he appeared at a huge anti-war rally in the Sydney Domain on November 26.

In the meantime, he had appeared at a rally of 8000 people in West Melbourne Stadium on November 19, had addressed miners in Newcastle, and had actually called a "levee" of Melbourne pressmen who took photographs of his hands (signing a picture of Egon Kisch) in order to prove that he was in Australia after all.

For both Griffin and Kisch (slowly recovering from his broken leg, but still speaking to meetings to warn of the new German barbarism), a protracted legal battle followed, which was only to end after three months when the High Court threw out the prosecution cases, declaring in Kisch's case that Highland Gaelic "was not a European language in the meaning of the Immigration Act," and in Griffin's case that the Crown in its zeal had charged him under two sections of the Immigration Act at once. The government was ordered to pay costs of fifteen hundred pounds.

For some days in the process of the legal wrangling, Griffin came to know the inside of Parramatta Jail. He told me: "The irony of it all from the government's point of view was that they
would not let me land and then, due to the legal delays, they would not let me leave. I stayed in Australia for almost seven months and addressed far more people than I would have if I had been allowed in in the ordinary way. Altogether I spoke to about 100,000 people.

"It all represented a major defeat for the Lyons Government. But behind it all was Menzies, who came out of the affair with a badly battered reputation."

Piquancy was added to the whole Kisch-Griffin affair by the presence in Australia at the time of the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester and the British poet laureate, John Masefield, come for the Melbourne centenary celebrations. Kisch and Griffin, in the circumstances, carried off one of the most outstanding headline-stealing operations in Australian press history.

Concerning the big meeting in Melbourne, at which Griffin made his electrifying appearance to speak from a seat in the audience in a darkened West Melbourne Stadium, he wants it clearly understood for the record that he was in no way disguised.

Griffin's devotion to the cause of peace is as strong today as ever it was. He told me with some pride that in February 1965, when President Johnson announced the policy of systematic bombing of North Vietnam, he had been the first to arrive at the protest demonstration called at the war memorial in Wellington, and had stayed right to the end.

Asked to compare today's anti-war movement with the movement of the 'thirties, Griffin had this to say:

"I don't think there's any doubt that today's movement involves a very much larger section of society and that it is much more mature in its approach. This, of course, is a world-wide trend but is specially evident in the U.S. But in N.Z., too, the participation of intellectuals, students and the churches is on an unprecedented scale. Apart from actual participation, opinion against the Vietnam war is more forcibly expressed by these various groups than ever before.

"At least in N.Z., however, the trade union participation, as such, lags behind, and official trade union participation is less evident than in the 'thirties. The government here can no longer ignore the movement against the Vietnam war and the right to demonstrate against it is conceded. The numbers participating have reached dimensions far greater than in the 'thirties. Generally, it is a protest against the particular war, rather than the idea of imperialist or colonial war."
But the anti-war cause is far from exhausting the scope of Griffin's life of activity. He told me:

"I suppose the struggle for Irish freedom has been the dominant influence in my life. Here, my father influenced me very greatly. I think when I was very young he was no more than a very ardent Irish nationalist. But he moved very much Left of that position as time went on.

"I can remember, towards the middle of 1914, the Scottish Borderers shot down women and children in Batchelors Walk, Dublin, after the Irish Volunteers — precursors of the Irish Republican Army — had landed a consignment of arms in Ireland. The family had just then arrived in New Zealand from Ireland. My father came home with the news and was violently agitated. He explained to us what it meant.

"From then on, my father constantly talked about Ireland to us. He told us of the past struggles for Irish freedom, of Wolfe Tone, of Robert Emmet, John Mitchel and the 'Sixty-seven Men, as well as of the Young Irelanders of '48.

Griffin remembers vividly the outbreak of the Easter Week Insurrection in 1916.

"I was on holiday in Christchurch with a family friend," he recalls. "I was wildly excited and full of enthusiasm at the news. When we arrived home at the end of Easter Week I can remember my disappointment when I discovered that my parents did not share my enthusiasm. Like most Irish overseas they were bewildered and shocked. Then, in the following weeks, when the executions of the leaders were announced, there was a marked change. I felt proud to have been for the rebels before the rest of the family.

"From then on we were all for Sinn Fein, as the new movement became known, although when in Ireland my father had not sympathised with the original Sinn Fein movement founded in 1909 by Arthur Griffith."

There then began for Griffin a life-long association with Irish organisations in New Zealand. He told me: "In 1917 a monthly magazine, The Green Ray, was founded in Dunedin to propagate the ideas of Easter Week. It was suppressed in 1918, and the editor and manager were sent to prison.

"We were greatly influenced by the Russian Revolutions in 1917 and from 1918 onwards my father and brother were very pro-Bolshevik. I was still attending school but read all the pamphlets my father brought home. I remember especially
Frank Anstey's *Red Europe*. At about this time, my father and brother began to attend meetings of the Social Democratic Party on Sunday nights.

"The Wellington Group of the recently formed Communist Party declared their sympathy with the Irish Republican Association which I had founded in 1924, and gave us a lot of support. Through this contact I got to know John Loughran very well. I had known him slightly from 1921 when I enrolled him in the Irish Self-Determination League after a strong argument with him about 'bourgeois nationalism'. I was able to answer him by quoting Connolly, whose close friend and colleague he had been. I came to know Loughran intimately and he exercised a deep and lasting influence on me. Without any doubt he was the most outstanding Marxist to come to New Zealand from the U.K."

Griffin has maintained an unbroken association with the movement for Irish freedom. Only last June he attended the Dublin celebrations of the centenary of the birth of James Connolly. He travelled to his homeland as official representative at the celebrations of the NZ Federation of Labor (NZ ACTU), the Wellington Peace Council, and the Wellington Representation Committee of the NZ Labor Party (main local organisation of the party).

A continuing theme of Griffin's life has been a relationship with the Communist Party which has been to say the least of it complex. The connection has a long history.

He told me "Basically, as far back as I can remember, my standpoint has been a marxist one. This was at times complicated because of family associations. My late brother, R. F. Griffin, was for many years a leading member of the CPNZ and served several terms of imprisonment. He represented the CPNZ at the Sixth Congress of the Comintern in 1928, when he formally affiliated the NZ party which previously had been subordinate to the Australian Party.

"There was strong disagreement for a long period between my brother and me over policies and tactics and assessment of the role of particular party personalities, particularly F. E. Freeman and L. Sim.

"This was complicated by the fact of his being in the party and I not, with both living in our parents' home.

"I was reluctant to accept a leading role in the Friends of the Soviet Union in the early 'thirties because of my brother's already prominent—if not leading—role in the CP."
"In the mid-'thirties, when I was to play the main role as national secretary in the Movement Against War and Fascism, the CP, at my brother's instigation, tried to block this. Their own earlier efforts to man the movement with their own nominees had ended in failure, at least in Wellington.

"I was in the faction of the time labelled as 'Trotskyist', quite erroneously. In fact, I was one of the few concerned who not only understood the meaning of this term but had polemicised against the Trotskyist tendency as far back as 1927.

"About this time (1934-5) Freeman had returned to NZ where he took over the leadership of the party, after being in Moscow since 1929 at the Lenin School. In the 'twenties, I had been a consistent opponent of Freeman for his political unreliability. He had been expelled from the party with several others for disruptive activities and personal behavior bringing the CP into discredit. My brother was responsible for Freeman's readmission and nomination for the Moscow studentship.

"Because of his incorrect leadership in the historic 1935 general election, which returned the first Labor Government, Freeman was removed from the leadership and was later expelled."

The feud was carried vigorously across the Tasman to Australia.

Griffin said: "When in October 1934 I was selected as the NZ delegate to the Australian Congress Against War and Fascism, the party accepted this reluctantly. Freeman gave me a letter of introduction to the Australian party. This was in a sealed envelope.

"When I was arrested and placed aboard the Marama for return to NZ I opened the letter and was disgusted to read that I was being introduced as a politically unreliable person and a 'Trotskyist.'

"I have never been able to find out if the letter was written with party approval or not.

"While I was in Australia, I have every reason to believe that the NZ party, or at least Freeman as general secretary, did everything to undermine the confidence of the Australian comrades in me.

"During the latter part of my stay in Australia my relations with the leadership of the Australian party became strained because of maliciously false statements sent from the CPNZ. Until then these relations had been on a very friendly, cordial basis. The CPA leadership frequently commented favorably on this.

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Encouraged from his earliest day by his father to read—"for knowledge or for entertainment, or perhaps I should say for enjoyment"—Griffin has a lifetime association with books.

He said "As I grew up and became more identified with the labor movement, my interests widened. My library extended from just Irish items to books on the history of labor, trade unionism, socialism, the Russian revolution and later the Soviet Union. I must have one of the best libraries of its kind in New Zealand.

"I also have a very large collection of pamphlets and periodicals including many rare items, especially on labor history."

Of his association with Egon Kisch, he said: "I was rather overawed when I first met him and I think he did not pay much attention to me. Later, we were very much in one another's company, travelled together by train and car and often shared the same accommodation. I came to know him very well, in many ways more closely than most.

"He used to talk very frankly to me about the various personalities who were associated with us. He found, very often, that I had formed the same opinion as his. He was very pleased to find I was aware of many details of his revolutionary career.

"After he returned to Europe in May, 1935, Kisch kept in touch with me. One of the prized mementoes I have of him is a postcard photo he sent me from Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War.

"I visited Prague early last August expecting to meet his widow and was grieved to learn that she had died almost two years before. His brother, who had been a well-known surgeon, is now living in retirement in Prague but is not in very good health."

Still spry, slim in figure, precise in speech, and equipped with a prodigious memory, Griffin is a living example of the fact that the chief answer to the ravages of the years is a constant interest in the world around us.

I asked him what he was going to do when he returned to New Zealand.

"Find something to occupy my mind," he said.

"I have no intention of retiring into carpet slippers."

More than fifty years of unabated political commitment is the guarantee he will be as good as his word.