

JANUARY 19, 1985

Saidie Patterson

An appreciation

I remember as a young boy seeing Saidie Patterson addressing hundreds of mill workers at a lunchtime meeting on the Falls Road. She had just borrowed a chair from my grandmother's house outside of which the meeting was held. She told me with pride that the speaker was Saidie Patterson — "she is in the union, isn't she a great wee girl?"

That scene that day stuck in my memory. I can still recall the voice, the quiet smiles that lighted up her eyes and the humour, especially the humour generated by her speech to the workers.

I remember the workers leaving the meeting in armlocked rows dancing like chorus girls and singing songs about the extent of the bosses' excesses in the spinning rooms.

I met her on a regular basis afterwards, at May Day celebrations, elections and working-class demonstrations. She set the pace as well as the tone and temper on these occasions. During the 1940s and 1950s I got to know her on more intimate terms. In the Labour Party I watched with deep interest how, by gently prodding, she moved the dragging foot, by dignified interpretation where policy or philosophy was fudged, or by a flash of naked steel when that was called for to move the party onwards.

She was no radical except in a Northern Ireland context. Her politics stemmed from her religious views. She was a Methodist who, like her mother, felt obliged to throw in her lot with the Labour Party and later with the Moral Rearmament Movement.

In 1974, when I was Minister

for Health and Social Services, she asked me for a meeting to discuss the possibility of shifting more resources towards the personal social services area. She walked in agony, having arthritis in her hip, for a long distance from the public transport to Stormont building, where the meeting was held.

She pointed out to me with her quiet smile how important it was for a socialist to develop voluntary organisations to balance the power of the bureaucracy and as a safeguard to protect the weak and disadvantaged falling through the cash benefit net of the Department.

She was quite prophetic in her references to the peace people whom she believed lost a great opportunity to recruit a peaceful community in the North. She was an inveterate peacemaker who was honoured throughout the world for her work in the cause of peace. She was sensitive to the possibility of creating conditions of community harmony on this occasion.

Some time after the big demonstration on the Shankill Road, to which she gave her blessing, I asked her opinion of the Peace People campaign. She replied, with great sadness, that she thought they were going away from the people instead of towards them. "You can't have peace unless you take the people with you," she said.

Her insight was inspired by the value she placed on the idea that peace was superior to all others, but it could not be introduced successfully without love in one's own heart.

Paddy Devlin