

Connolly, James

by Fergus A. D'Arcy

Connolly, James (1868–1916), socialist and revolutionary leader, was born in Cowgate, Edinburgh, on 5 June 1868, the youngest in a family of three boys. His father, John Connolly, and his mother, Mary McGinn, were both born in Ireland in 1833, possibly in Co. Monaghan, and emigrated to Scotland. From their marriage in St Patrick's parish, Cowgate, in 1856, they lived among the Irish immigrant community in that slum quarter of Edinburgh where John worked as a manure carter for the city council. Mary was a domestic servant who died at the age of fifty-eight in 1891; her husband survived her by nine years before he died of a cerebral haemorrhage in 1900.

Early life and socialist beginnings Of the three Connolly children, the eldest, John, born in 1862, worked as a labourer until he joined the army in 1877, and served in India before returning to work in Edinburgh as a temporary carter in the late 1880s. He became active in the growing labour and socialist movements in the city until his political activity caused his council employers to dismiss him. Of the second son, Thomas, born in 1866, almost nothing is known apart from his having worked as a compositor's hand before emigrating, after which no trace of him remains. An early beneficiary of the introduction of universal primary education, James attended St Patrick's catholic primary school in Cowgate until 1878. Thereafter he went to work successively as a printer's devil, a bakery hand, and a factory labourer in a mosaic works. Although his formal education was brief and minimal, he became and remained an avid and reflective reader. In 1882 he followed in his brother John's footsteps by enlisting in the first battalion the King's Liverpool Regiment, and though almost nothing is known of his seven years or so in the army, he may have served in India and almost certainly served in Ireland, probably at Cork, Castlebar, the Curragh, and Dublin. It was in Dublin that he met Lillie Reynolds, a domestic servant from a Wicklow protestant family. They married in Perth, Scotland, in April 1890.

Very soon after his marriage he found work in Dundee, but later in 1890 they settled in Edinburgh, where Connolly worked, like his father, as a manure carter. Connolly was still a practising catholic and the couple undertook to rear the children of the marriage as catholics, which they duly did – all six daughters and one son receiving a catholic education. While he abandoned religious practice and religious belief in the early 1890s, Connolly returned to the catholic fold in the last days before his execution.

The time of his marriage and return to Edinburgh coincided with the upsurge of the 'new unionism' in Britain and Ireland – that is, the development, for the first time in the history of urban labour, of militant, mass-membership trade unions of general workers. It also coincided with a significant growth of socialism, both Marxist and

Christian, and in industrial Scotland these developments were especially marked. James followed his brother John in active involvement in both developments, joining the Socialist League in Dundee in 1889 and helping to organise trade unionism among the carters of Edinburgh in 1890. It is evident that his love of reading took him deeply into the socialist literature of the time, and he began associating with leading figures of the Scottish labour movement. One of the most important of these, who became his mentor and lifelong friend, was John Leslie, who, like the Connollys, came from the working-class Irish immigrant community of Edinburgh. A founder of the Scottish Socialist Federation in 1889, Leslie wrote a brilliant pamphlet, *The present position of the Irish question* (1894), which was undoubtedly the most decisive influence on the young Connolly apart from Marx and Engels.

It was Leslie who brought Connolly actively into the socialist movement, to which he remained passionately committed for the rest of his life. Another influence was James Keir Hardie, the Ayrshire miners' leader, the first independent, working-class socialist to be elected to the house of commons, and the founder in 1893 of the political mass movement the Independent Labour Party (ILP). James succeeded his brother John as secretary of the Scottish Socialist Federation in 1892 and in the following year he joined Hardie's party. It was in this context that Connolly began to develop his direct, trenchant, and critical writing style, contributing reports to the Marxist Social Democratic Federation's journal, *Justice*, and articles to local Scottish papers and labour journals.

The move to Dublin In these years, between 1890 and 1896, his and Lillie's first three children, Mona, Nora (qv), and Aideen, were born; having lost his job as a carter in 1894 and failed as a cobbler, Connolly became dependent on his developing abilities and energies as propagandist for socialism and the labour movement precariously to support his growing family. His desperate straits led him to consider emigration to Chile, but in 1896 an appeal by John Leslie in the pages of *Justice* led to the offer of employment in Dublin as organiser for the Dublin Socialist Club, at £1 per week. However small the socialist movement may have been in Britain in the nineteenth century, in Ireland it barely existed. Robert Owen in the 1820s, the chartists in the 1840s, the First International in the 1860s and 1870s, and William Morris's Socialist League and Henry Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation in the 1880s had all failed to make an imprint on Irish soil. In the 1890s there were very small groups of Fabian socialists and branches of the ILP in Belfast and Dublin, the latter forming the Dublin Socialist Club, which included the brothers Thomas, Daniel, and William O'Brien (qv) (d. 1968), the last of whom was destined to be one of Connolly's closest associates in Dublin and who came to dominate the Irish labour movement for four decades after Connolly's death.

Given the minuscule membership of the socialist organisations and the hostile climate for socialism and socialists in Ireland, Connolly's livelihood as a professional propagandist continued to be precarious and had to be supplemented by various labouring jobs. Still he brought to his new role in Dublin all the passion and

commitment to the cause of working people and socialism that he had developed in Scotland. His arrival in Dublin in May 1896 constituted a decisive break in his career, entailing as it did for any socialist the need to confront the challenge of nationalism. His earliest Scottish years as an activist showed no especial concern for or, interest in, Ireland or in the politics of Irish identity, though the very Irish names he gave his children clearly testify to a strong ethnic consciousness, and the interest that his mentor Leslie took in the Irish question should be taken into account. However, from the moment of his arrival in Ireland Connolly had no choice but to take a position on the ideology that dominated Irish political life.

He rapidly arrived at a view that the future for socialism and the working class in Ireland lay in an independent republic rather than in continued union with Britain or in a federal arrangement involving home rule. This was quickly reflected in his and his colleagues' decision to disband the Dublin Socialist Club and to establish in its place the Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP). His manifesto for the new party was radical indeed, calling for free education and child health care, nationalisation of transport and banking, and a commitment to the further extension of public ownership. He expounded his developing views on the interrelationship of Irish socialism and republicanism in articles he sent to Keir Hardie's newspaper, *Labour Leader*, and to the Belfast nationalist journal, the *Shan Van Vocht*. In 1897 these were brought together and published by the ISRP as the booklet *Erin's hope*. Here, as in his propaganda in public meetings at Dublin's Custom House and Phoenix Park, he drew on the ideas of the Irish nationalist revolutionary of 1848, James Fintan Lalor (qv), whose writings called for the creation of an agrarian cooperative republic. While his fellow British socialists were sympathetic to Irish nationalist aims, they stopped at the point where home rule might begin and were not prepared to envisage a separate republic across the Irish Sea.

Connolly persisted and developed his views on socialism, nationalism, and the workers' cause extensively in the pages of his own weekly journal, the *Workers' Republic* which he began in 1898 with the aid of a £50 loan from Keir Hardie. It brought him to prominence in Dublin radical circles as he joined with Irish advanced nationalists in verbal attacks on the monarchy, the empire and British rule in Ireland. Indeed, his agitation in 1898 led to a police raid on the ISRP's premises and the temporary destruction of his printing press. The paper folded after twelve issues but he managed to relaunch it briefly in 1899.

The development of Connolly's socialism Connolly's growing reputation in Dublin was due in equal measure to his work for trade union organisation in the capital and his journalism. His was a strong voice for the new trade unionism of general labour as distinct from the traditional and conservative craft unions. In 1901 he was elected a delegate to the Dublin trades council where he represented the United Labourers' Union. From the outset of his public career Connolly combined his commitment to trade unionism and socialism in a way that made his version of Marxism distinctive. His approach differed from the state socialist Marxism of the

Second International, the Leninist orthodoxies of the Third International, and the Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation. He developed a Marxist syndicalist position, distinguished by his own perspective, understanding, and strategy, which was to make a major contribution to that tradition in international socialism in his later years, and especially from 1910 to 1913. Yet his syndicalism also differed profoundly from its continental European counterpart in that the latter had an aversion to politics and relied exclusively on the revolutionary potential of the general strike.

These matters were to become evident in later years, but from the turn of the century Connolly engaged in electoral politics as much as in trade union organisation and socialist evangelism. He sought election to Dublin city council in the municipal elections of 1902 and 1903, with a marked lack of success but he made sufficient impact to be attacked in press and pulpit as an atheist, which he certainly was not: he was to develop a distinctive position also on the relationship of socialism and religion.

In the meantime his circumstances went from bad to worse. His propaganda appeared to be making few converts and his ISRP colleagues did little to inspire or support him: his wages were often unpaid even as his family expanded with the birth of a fourth child, Ina, in November 1896, a fifth child, Maire, and then a sixth, a son, Roddy (qv), in 1901. Money he managed to raise for the *Workers' Republic* was diverted by his colleagues into subsidising a drinking club for ISRP members – the last straw for Connolly, who was a strict teetotaler. He managed to supplement his uncertain income by speaking tours in England and Scotland, and in 1902 secured an invitation from Daniel DeLeon's Socialist Labour Party of America to undertake a lecture tour in the United States from September 1902 to January 1903. On his return, a row over the use and abuse of ISRP funds, which he had raised, led to bitter recriminations, his resignation, and the collapse of the party. The success of his American tour, however, made it possible for him to return to the USA in September 1903, where he would work as socialist agitator and union organiser for the next seven years. It was the hope of the Marxist revolutionary Socialist Labour Party (SLP) that Connolly would win many Irish American workers to their cause.

The American years, 1903–10 Connolly's seven years in America saw him working initially as an insurance salesman and collector in Troy, New York, which enabled him to bring his family to join him in the autumn of 1904; tragically, his eldest daughter, Mona, died in an accident on the very eve of their departure. Having lost his insurance employment, he worked for the Singer Sewing Machine Company in Newark for a year. During this time he was active in the SLP and was later elected to its national executive, despite a bruising doctrinal quarrel with its leader, DeLeon. This dispute centred on three items in the credo of the SLP, namely, the 'iron law of wages', the question of marriage, and the position of socialism in regard to religion. Connolly's debate with DeLeon on these matters was presented initially in his article, 'Wages, marriage and the church', published in the SLP's *Weekly People*,

in April 1904. Connolly dissented from the official party line concerning the 'iron law of wages', originally laid down by the German socialist Ferdinand Lassalle, which stated that every nominal wage increase gained by workers would be quickly and exactly offset by a corresponding increase in prices. Connolly argued that Marx himself had rejected this proposition. Although a technical point, it had implications for Connolly as a syndicalist, who saw in mass trade unionism an instrument for effecting economic and social change.

Of greater significance was their disagreement over the issue of conventional morality respecting monogamous marriage and the relationship of socialism to religion and morality. Against the prevailing Marxist orthodoxy on historical materialism and atheism, Connolly tried to argue that socialism was concerned exclusively with economics and politics, and that the holding of certain religious beliefs was entirely consistent with being a socialist; furthermore, to the extent that a given set of religious beliefs might involve an egalitarian and humanitarian commitment, they could assist the cause of socialism. In addition, at a practical or strategic level, it made no sense to antagonise potential socialist support by irrelevant attacks on religious beliefs or those who held them. Connolly had abandoned the practice of his catholicism from around 1893, but he never launched attacks on it in America, Britain, or Ireland. Further disputes with DeLeon arose in 1907, leading DeLeon to denounce Connolly and Connolly to sever his links with the sectarian SLP and join the much larger reformist Socialist Party of America, led by Eugene Debs. Having lost his job with Singer, Connolly was eventually able to secure a regular, if modest, income as speaker and organiser for Debs's party in 1909.

By that time Connolly was already involved in a major new development, launched in 1905 when Big Bill Haywood established the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), or 'Wobblies' as they came to be known. A militant new labour organisation, the IWW promoted the ideology of revolutionary syndicalism or industrial unionism, recruiting among the huge mass of unskilled and general labour in the USA. The IWW aimed to pursue social and economic revolution through the agency of 'one big union', using mass action and sympathetic strikes. Joining it soon after its launch, Connolly became one of its most active and prominent propagandists, gaining widespread recognition in the movement for his tract *Socialism made easy*, published in Chicago in 1909. In industrial unionism he saw the potential for a socialist movement that, while remaining democratic, would be capable of developing the structures for a socialist republic. He himself successfully recruited Irish and Italian workers in New York for the IWW.

Return to Ireland His commitment to promoting socialism among the Irish was evident in his foundation of the Irish Socialist Federation in 1907, and it was through its agency that he began to re-establish links with socialists in Ireland, notably with his former ISRP colleague, William O'Brien. By 1908 both he and O'Brien's Dublin socialists were considering the possibility of his coming back to be organiser for

the newly emerging Socialist Party of Ireland (SPI). In January 1908 he established a radical journal, *The Harp*, as the organ of the Irish Socialist Federation and in 1909 he transferred its production to Dublin. In the next year he accepted an offer of speaking engagements in Ireland, Scotland, and England, and arrived back in Ireland on 26 July 1910. The Dublin to which he now temporarily returned was much changed in its radical politics, with the arrival on the scene three years before of the syndicalist agitator and union organiser Jim Larkin (qv). His establishment of the Irish Transport Union as 'one big union' in 1909 was to transform labour relations in Ireland and the politics of the labour movement. It was mainly Larkin who persuaded the SPI to try to raise the finances that would enable Connolly as its national organiser to resettle permanently in Ireland. At the end of 1910 Connolly brought his family back to Dublin.

The period after his return saw much of the most significant theoretical and practical work of his life. In 1910 he published the important tract *Labour, nationality and religion*, written to rebut the attacks of the Jesuit Father Kane on socialism and to contest the contemporary orthodoxy that catholicism and socialism were irreconcilable. In the same year he also brought to publication his most famous work, *Labour in Irish history*. This was the first substantial exposition of a Marxist interpretation of Irish history. Highly original in some of its findings, it argued for the continuity of a radical tradition in Ireland, and sought to debunk nationalist myths about Ireland's past and to expose the inadequacies of middle-class Irish nationalism in providing a solution for Ireland's ills.

Trade unionism in Belfast From being national organiser for the SPI in 1910 he went on in 1911 to become Ulster organiser for the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU). In Belfast he encountered the stranglehold of sectarianism and although he managed a limited success in recruiting catholic workers into the union he never really came to terms with the nature and strength of working-class political unionism. In May 1911 he issued 'A plea for socialist unity in Ireland' in the pages of the Scottish labour journal *Forward*, attacking the Belfast Independent Labour Party for its opposition to home rule. He thereby precipitated a famous controversy with the Belfast socialist William Walker (qv), who argued that the future of socialism depended on the continuing union with Britain. For Connolly, Walker's position was one of false internationalism, and the only true socialist internationalism lay in a free federation of free peoples.

While he continued his promotion of industrial unionism he also continued to promote the political dimension of the labour movement in Ireland. With Larkin, O'Brien, and other radical elements in the Dublin trades council he managed to get the Irish Trade Union Congress at its meeting at Clonmel in 1912 to commit to the formation of the Irish Labour Party. That special combination of syndicalism and politics was reflected nominally in the new title, the Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party. In the midst of his hectic political and union organising activities Connolly continued to write, notably on the theme of socialism and nationalism at

a time (1911–14) when the constitutional future of Ireland went into political crisis. Much of his writing at this time appeared in book form in 1915 as *The reconquest of Ireland*, where he argued that Irish freedom meant securing the common ownership of all Ireland by the Irish. Yet his experience in Belfast made it clear that a significant proportion of its working class had no time for Irish freedom, and that some of the north's socialist leaders sought the triumph of socialism within the continued political union of Britain and Ireland.

Whatever Connolly hoped to achieve in Belfast in terms of union growth and socialist progress was quickly overtaken by the events of the lockout and general strike in Dublin from August 1913. He was summoned to Dublin to assist Larkin in the leadership of this conflict, and, when the struggle was lost and Larkin left for America in 1914, Connolly took over as acting general secretary of the defeated Transport Union. At the same time he took over the editorship of Larkin's *Irish Worker* paper, as well as being commander of the Irish Citizen Army, which had been set up in November 1913 as a workers' defence force.

Revolutionary activities and the Easter rising To the disastrous defeat of the locked out and striking workers was now added the calamitous outbreak of world war. This drove him into an advanced nationalist position and, though he never abandoned his socialist commitment, the social revolution took a back seat. The growing militancy of Ulster unionist opposition to home rule, the British government's postponement of plans for home rule in the face of unionist opposition, the growing prospect of the partition of Ireland, the outbreak of world war, and the consequent collapse of international socialism, all contributed to his adopting an extreme nationalist stance. As he wrote in *Forward* in March 1914: 'the proposal of the Government to consent to the partition of Ireland . . . should be resisted with armed force if necessary'. Added to this, the 'carnival of slaughter' that was the world war drove him to incite 'war against war', and to make tentative overtures to the revolutionary IRB. By late 1915 his increasing militancy at a time when the IRB had decided on insurrection caused them in turn to approach him; by late January they and he had agreed on a joint uprising. The Transport Union headquarters at Liberty Hall became the headquarters of the Irish Citizen Army as he prepared it for revolt. It was ironic that Connolly, who had in the distant past denounced 'Blanquism' or 'insurrectionism' and who had ever argued that political freedom without socialism was useless, now joined forces with militant nationalists in an insurrection that had nothing to do directly with socialism. It appears that he had become convinced that national freedom for Ireland in the prevailing circumstances was a necessity before socialism could advance.

In the event he led his small band of about two hundred Citizen Army comrades into the Easter rising of 1916. His Citizen Army joined forces with the Volunteers, as the only army he acknowledged in 1916 was that of 'the Irish Republic'. As commandant general of the republic's forces in Dublin he fought side by side with Patrick Pearse (qv) in the General Post Office, until surrendering on 29 April. Badly

injured in the foot, he was court-martialled along with 170 others, was one of ninety to be sentenced to death, and was the last one of the fifteen to be executed by firing squad. He was shot dead, seated on a wooden box, in Kilmainham jail on 12 May 1916. He was buried in the cemetery within Arbour Hill military barracks. His wife and six of his children survived him.

Reputation and legacy Along with his executed comrades, Connolly entered the pantheon of Irish national heroes. However, for one whose public life until almost its end had been committed to the working classes of Britain, America, and Ireland, and to the cause of international socialism, the impact of this commitment is problematic. It can be argued that the great achievement of his final years, as a revolutionary socialist, was to bring the most militant elements of the Irish labour movement to the forefront of the anti-imperial fight against the British empire, giving Irish labour a central place in the national struggle. Thereby he gave national and international significance to a body of labour militants far in excess of what was warranted by their numbers. He was, however, to prove irreplaceable, and those who followed him in the leadership of socialism and the labour movement in Ireland, whatever their strengths and abilities, lacked that unique combination of personal passion, vision, insight, experience, and charisma, and the movement under his successors failed to capitalise on the position he had secured for it. The syndicalist ideal of 'one big union' as the vehicle for the realisation of the workers' republic, though it looked promising with the revival of ITGWU fortunes from 1917, failed to materialise, and in the end fell victim to the disruptive power of Jim Larkin's mercurial personality and to the entrenchment of a socially conservative ruling class.

Recognition of the significance of his social and economic writings came quickly, if critically, from unlikely quarters – notably in 1920, when another Jesuit, Fr Lambert McKenna (qv), published *The social teachings of James Connolly*. However, despite biographical studies by Desmond Ryan (qv), Nora Connolly-O'Brien, R. M. Fox and others, the writings themselves remained unpublished until the 1960s. From late in that decade a new generation began to revisit his life and make his work available in the context of a new phase of political and social conflict in Ireland. There is no James Connolly archive as such. There is a valuable discussion of his letters and writings in Donal Nevin's *James Connolly, 'A full life'* (2005). Manuscript sources relating to his career and its aftermath are in the NLI (William O'Brien papers, Thomas Johnson papers, Cathal O'Shannon papers, Dublin trades council minutes, Adolphus Shiels papers) and UCD Archives (Thomas McPartlin papers, Desmond Ryan papers). An extensive bibliography is to be found in W. K. Anderson, *James Connolly and the Irish left* (1994), and T. Horikoshi (ed.), *The political writings of James Connolly* (1980) has a comprehensive list of his journalistic work.

Connolly's memory is preserved in many different forms in Ireland and elsewhere. One of Dublin's three main railway stations, that in Amiens Street, was named Connolly Station in his memory in 1966. On the eightieth anniversary of his execution (12 May 1996) a memorial by Eamonn O'Doherty, located near the

Custom House in Dublin and facing Liberty Hall, was unveiled by the Irish president Mary Robinson. His name is borne by several trade union and Labour Party halls and buildings, including those of SIPTU (The Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union) in Cork, Shannon, Thurles, Tipperary, Tralee, and Waterford, and by streets in places including Ballina, Clonakilty, Midleton, and Sligo. There are well-known drawings and portraits of him by Seán O'Sullivan (qv) and Robert Ballagh (first exhibited in 1971; latterly in the NGI). A famous set of labour murals in what was originally the headquarters of the Dublin bakers' trade union, Four Provinces House, Harcourt Street, was destroyed when the building was demolished for development. A photographic record (in private hands) was made of the murals, which included a fine representation of Connolly speaking at Belfast's docks. His Belfast years are also marked by a plaque on the Falls Road, where he and his family lived during 1911–13. A plaque in his honour was erected in June 1968 on George IV Bridge, near his birthplace in Cowgate, Edinburgh, through the efforts of the Edinburgh and District Trades Council. There is a fine bust of Connolly with a commemorative plaque in Troy, New York, where he spent the years 1903–5.

L. McKenna, *The social teachings of James Connolly* (1920); D. Ryan, *James Connolly: his life, work and writings* (1924); H. W. Lee and E. Archbold, *Social democracy in Britain* (1935); N. C. O'Brien, *James Connolly: portrait of a rebel father* (1935); R. M. Fox, *James Connolly: the forerunner* (1946); C. D. Greaves, *The life and times of James Connolly* (1961); O. D. Edwards and B. Ransom, *James Connolly: selected political writings* (1968); O. D. Edwards, *The mind of an activist: James Connolly* (1971); *James Connolly: selected writings*, ed. P. Berresford Ellis (1973); S. Levenson, *James Connolly: socialist, patriot and martyr* (1973); C. Reeve and A. B. Reeve, *James Connolly and the United States: the road to the 1916 rebellion* (1978); *The political writings of James Connolly*, ed. T. Horikoshi (1980) (incl. list of journalistic writings); H. Patterson, *Class conflict and sectarianism: the protestant working class and the Belfast labour movement, 1868–1920* (1980); B. Ransom, *Connolly's Marxism* (1980); R. D. Edwards, *James Connolly* (1981); James Connolly, *Collected works* (2 vols, 1987–8); A. Morgan, *James Connolly: a political biography* (1988); E. O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland* (1988); K. Allen, *The politics of James Connolly* (1990); W. K. Anderson, *James Connolly and the Irish left* (1994) (incl. bibliography); J. L. Hyland, *James Connolly* (1997); Donal Nevin, *James Connolly, 'a full life'* (2005)