

JAMES CONNOLLY

# The street fighter

Born and raised in Edinburgh, this leader of men was a critical figure in the GPO, writes **Darragh Gannon**

**A**DDRESSING his field court martial in Dublin Castle on 9 May 1916, James Connolly characterised the Easter rebellion as “a hurried uprising against long established authority”. Captured within this pithy assessment, it could be argued, was Connolly’s revolutionary self-epithet. For, despite commemorative expectations to the contrary, James Connolly’s place in the 1916 Rising was not predestined. Profiling Connolly’s ‘full life’, however, offers us an insight into the revolution against established authority which long occupied his mind and which, ultimately, hurried him into the General Post Office. Revolutionaries are not born, they are made.

Of James Connolly’s 47 years, 28 were spent outside Ireland. Born to Irish parents in Edinburgh, he was raised in the Scottish capital. In later life he would tour British cities recurrently and reside for lengthy periods in the United States. International socialism was the sustaining influence. Connolly found socialism during his poverty-stricken upbringing, identifying the grim realities of Edinburgh with the writings of left-wing commentators elsewhere in Europe. Despite leaving school at the age of 11, he taught himself enough French and German to read Marx and Engels.

His formative statement on socialist revolution, written from Dublin as leader of the Irish Socialist Republican Party (1896-1903), was to define his activism against ‘established authority’ in both Irish and international terms: “If you remove the English army tomorrow...unless

you set about the organisation of the Socialist Republic... She would [still] rule you through her capitalists, through her landlords, through her financiers”.

Connolly was a relentless advocate of workers’ rights through political and industrial organisation. During his initial American tour on behalf of the Socialist Labour Party (1902-03) he addressed crowds in New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles. Standing at a mere 5’4” and of short-sight and stocky build, Connolly did not have the towering

**SNAPSHOT**

**JAMES CONNOLLY**

**Born:** 5 January 1868, Edinburgh, Scotland

**Educated:** Primary school, Edinburgh, left age 11

**Affiliation:** Irish Citizen Army/ Labour Party

**Career:** Soldier, shoe-mender, trade unionist, activist

**Died:** 12 May 1916, Kilmainham Jail

stature of James Larkin. However, his speeches, delivered in an indomitable Scottish accent, were clear and resonant. One contemporary observed: “Larkin knew how to draw a crowd but Connolly knew how to hold one”.

His later term in the United States (1903-10) included a period as organiser for the Industrial Workers of the World but he was only intermittently paid. Connolly’s dedication to the socialist movement frequently conflicted with his ability to hold down regular employment.



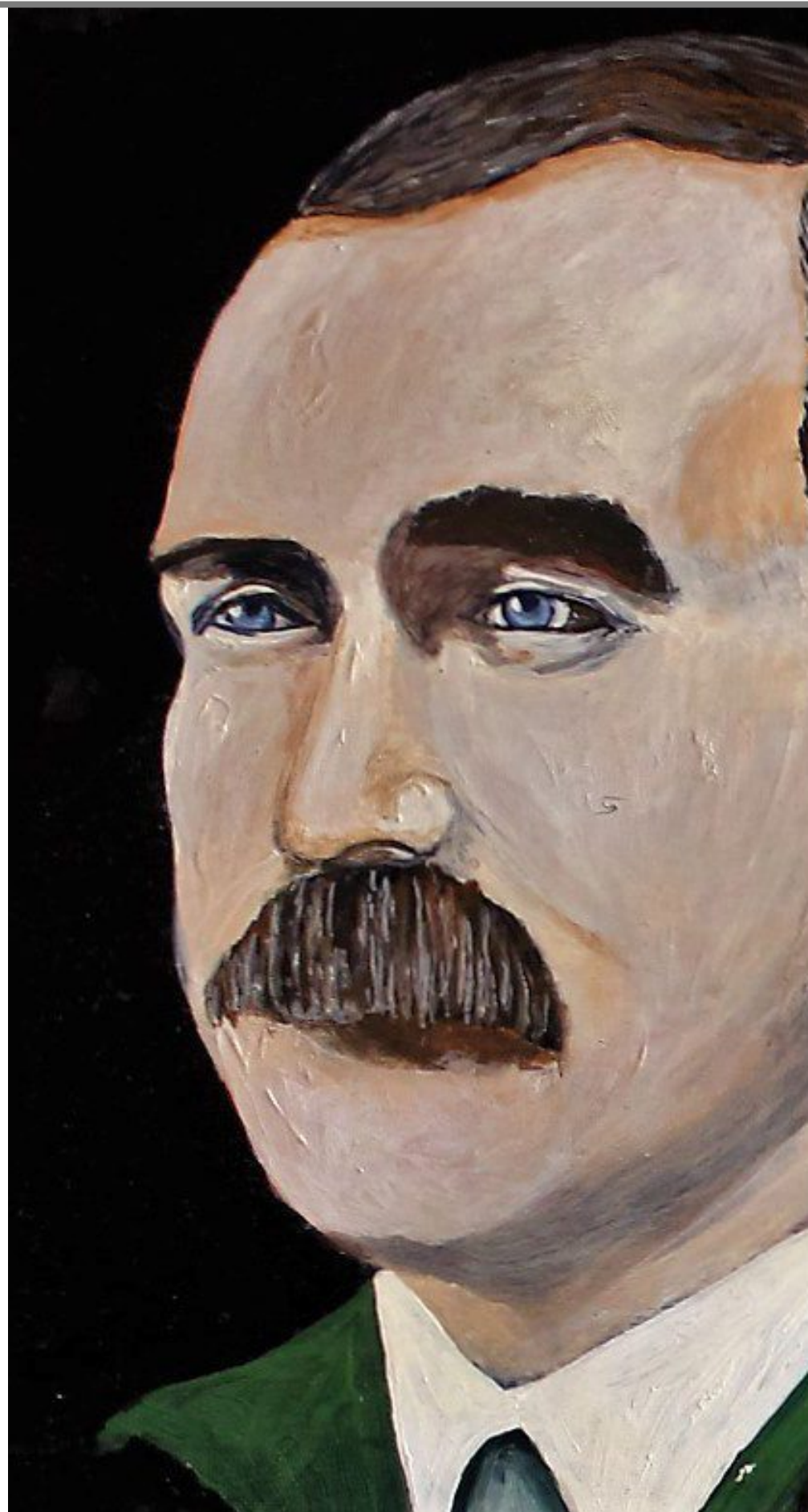
*Connolly did not have the towering stature of James Larkin. However, his speeches, delivered in an indomitable Scottish accent, were clear and resonant. One contemporary observed: ‘Larkin knew how to draw a crowd but Connolly knew how to hold one’*

On at least one Christmas, the Connolly family went without dinner or gifts.

“The history of all hitherto existing societies”, Marx and Engels had famously opened in *The Communist Manifesto*, “is the history of class struggles”. Connolly applied this thesis to Ireland in two seminal volumes, *Labour, Nationality and Religion* and *Labour in Irish History*, both published on his return to Ireland in 1910. In the *Irish Worker* he emphasised labour’s imminent ‘re-conquest’

of Ireland. Despite the suffering endured during the Lockout and the formation of an Irish Citizen Army, however, Connolly continued to write social revolution in terms of political mobilisation, not military insurrection.

On 28 July 1914, the First World War erupted. All changed, changed utterly. Across Europe millions of working class men, abandoned the Red Flag, and ‘rushed’ to their respective colours. In Ireland alone, 44,000 enlisted in the British Army in 1914. It is impossible to underestimate

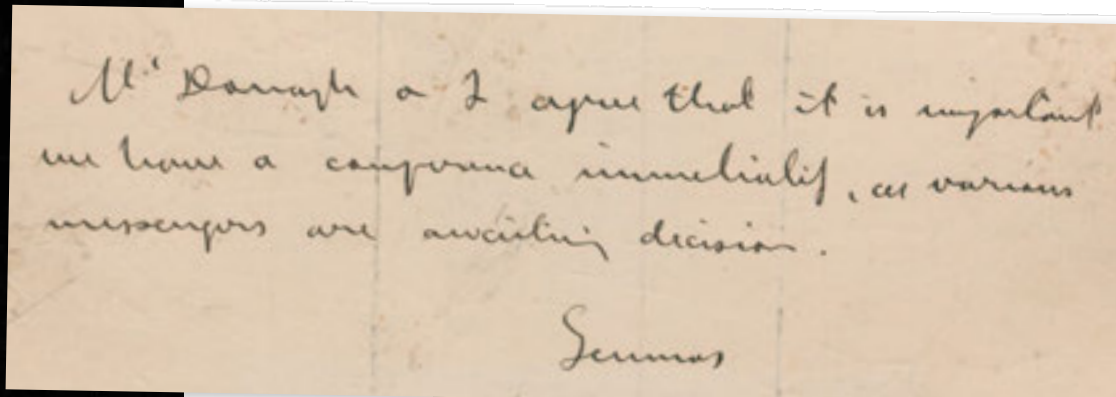


the psychological impact of these events on Connolly. Decades of exhaustive campaigning, speaking and writing on the socialist revolution had been shattered: “We are helpless!!! What then becomes of all our resolutions, all our protests of fraternisation... all our carefully-built machinery of internationalism, all our hopes for the future? Were they all as sound and fury, signifying nothing?” This was his Macbethian moment.

Connolly’s biographer, Ruth Dudley Edwards, has chaptered his final 20 months ‘desperation’. It is a laconic title. Throughout this period Connolly betrayed a restlessness with the world around him, a restlessness which hurried

him to violent insurrection. At a public meeting in September 1914 he declared: “Revolutions do not start with rifles; start first and get your rifles after. Make up your mind to strike before your opportunity goes.”

He made a similar call to rebellion at a meeting of separatists which included many subsequent military council members. One month later Connolly took on the role of Commandant of the Irish Citizens Army (ICA), leading recruitment; intensifying training and carrying out reconnaissance of capital buildings. By December 1915 the ICA, numbering just over 300, was primed for insurrection, independent of IRB initiative.



**James Connolly, by Dublin artist Brian O'Neill. Above: A letter sent by Connolly to Éamonn Ceannt on Easter Sunday morning, summoning him to a meeting at which it was decided to go ahead with the Rising the following day, despite Eoin MacNeill's countermanding order.**

MILITARY ARCHIVES/  
BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY

**Right: Dr Darragh Gannon, Curatorial Researcher to the National Museum of Ireland's Exhibition, 'Proclaiming a Republic: The 1916 Rising'.**

STEVE HUMPHREYS



burn out until the last throne and the last capitalist bone and debenture will be shrivelled on the funeral pyre of the last warlord". Europe's difficulty was Ireland's opportunity.

The military plans for the 1916 Rising have not survived. However, during 1915 James Connolly provided a tactical blueprint for what was attempted during Easter Week. In a series of articles, entitled 'Insurrection and Warfare', Connolly presented historical case studies on street fighting. Using the Belgian Revolution (1830), the June Days uprising in Paris (1848) and the Moscow Insurrection (1905), as examples, he emphasised the tactical superiority of defensive warfare if reinforced by cleverly positioned barricades, thereby exposing state forces to lateral lines of fire from 'civilian soldiers'. Subsequently 'kidnapped' by the military council on 19 January 1916, he remained locked in political and strategic discussion with Mac Diarmada, Pearse and Plunkett for three days, agreeing to join their Easter Rising. In Joseph Plunkett, who had predominantly mapped-out a Dublin-based Rising, Connolly had found a kindred spirit.

"Bill, we are going out to be slaughtered." These were the words uttered by Connolly to William O'Brien on Easter Monday morning. Connolly's performance that week as Commandant-General Dublin Brigade belied such fatalism. On leading a combined Irish Volunteer and Irish Citizen Army force into the GPO, Connolly ordered the men to smash the windows and barricade them, in keeping with street fighting exercise.

He later stood beside Pearse as the latter read the Proclamation, to which

Connolly had almost certainly contributed several articles. Most rebels' recollection of Connolly is of an authoritative military leader despatching orders. One such order saw the raising of the Starry Plough flag over William Martin Murphy's Imperial Hotel.

Connolly was a highly visible presence on Sackville Street preparing and repairing barricades, in keeping with anticipations of a British infantry attack. Instead, from Wednesday, artillery shells from Trinity College rained down on the rebel positions. Connolly was militarily unprepared for this tactical upturn. Sniper fire increasingly raked the streets surrounding the GPO. On one Thursday sortie into Prince's Street, Connolly took a stray bullet to the arm. He quietly had his wound dressed in the GPO before returning to Middle Abbey Street. Within minutes, however, he was injured again, this time seriously, a bullet having shattered his left ankle. Incapacitated and in acute pain, Connolly survived his final days in the GPO on a makeshift mattress, dictating orders. In one latter moment of light relief he was to remark of his unfavourable circumstance: "A morning in bed, a good book to read, and an insurrection, all at the same time. It's revolution de luxe."

James Connolly was executed on 12 May 1916. His had been a hurried uprising against long-established authority.

*Dr Darragh Gannon, UCD, is currently Curatorial Researcher to the National Museum of Ireland's 'Proclaiming a Republic: The 1916 Rising' exhibition*



## 'Connolly'

By Liam MacGabhann

*The man was all shot through that came today  
Into the barrack square;  
A soldier I – I am not proud to say  
We killed him there;  
They brought him from the prison hospital;  
To see him in that chair  
I thought his smile would far more quickly call  
A man to prayer.*

*Maybe we cannot understand this thing  
That makes these rebels die;  
And yet all things love freedom – and the Spring  
Clear in the sky;  
I think I would not do this deed again  
For all that I hold by;  
Gaze down my rifle at his breast – but then  
A soldier I.*

*They say that he was kindly – different too,  
Apart from all the rest;  
A lover of the poor; and all shot through,  
His wounds ill drest,  
He came before us, faced us like a man,  
He knew a deeper pain  
Than blows or bullets – ere the world began;  
Died he in vain?*

*Ready – present; And he just smiling – God!  
I felt my rifle shake  
His wounds were opened out and round that chair  
Was one red lake;  
I swear his lips said 'Fire!' when all was still  
Before my rifle spat  
That cursed lead – and I was picked to kill  
A man like that!*

### AN ASSESSMENT DR LUCY COLLINS



The idealism of James Connolly's life, and the stark facts of his death, are the twin concerns of this poem. It offers a striking perspective on the subject; its speaker is a British soldier who remembers his role in Connolly's execution at Kilmainham Gaol.

The stumbling rhythm expresses the soldier's regret and uncertainty – 'Maybe we cannot understand this thing / That makes these rebels die'. His thoughts are disjointed but he recognises the human need that shaped the rebellion, the universal desire for freedom and justice. Connolly's capacity to inspire loyalty among his followers is given an almost religious significance here, and its powerful effect is clearly felt by the speaker himself.

Yet though he reflects on the moral force of the rebels' actions, he registers his own responsibility as a soldier too. The poem meditates on the obligation of the individual to the group. Connolly is set apart from the rest of the rebels in his commitment to improving the lives of the poor, and his suffering expresses the collective distress of all marginalised people.

*Dr Lucy Collins is a lecturer in English at University College Dublin (UCD). She is the curator of 'Reading 1916', a forthcoming exhibition at UCD Special Collections*

