

Liam McNulty – *James Connolly: Socialist, Nationalist and Internationalist*  
(London: Merlin Press, 2022; pp. 403; £25 (p/b); ISBN 978-0-85036-783-6)

Connolly scholar Helga Woggon observed that: ‘The last word on Connolly will never be written.’. Certainly, of the foundation figures of modern Ireland, James Connolly has received the most attention and scrutiny. Apart from multiple biographies and analyses, his legacy also has multiple claimants seeing him as: ‘a vital part of their political credo’ (Woggon again), from an airbrushed Irish state martyr pushing his Marxism into the shadows to a variety of revolutionary factions within those shadows, and amongst today’s Republicans, including Sinn Fein, claiming Connolly as an inspiration. It is into this increasingly cluttered field that Liam McNulty’s book enters. Not surprisingly, he argues that it contributes something new, essentially a more internationalist perspective.

While McNulty’s book has all the hallmarks of conventional biography it is shaped, he says by a ‘transnational account of the international socialist movement in which Connolly operated’, and his dialogue with it (p. 17). This includes Connolly’s opposition to the Boer War and antisemitism, as well as his support for ‘women’s liberation’. Thus, McNulty seeks to explore Connolly the internationalist rather than just the Irish revolutionary Marxist who spent just thirteen of his forty-seven years in Ireland. Readers of this journal will likely be familiar with Connolly’s general life story. While the headline moments are the 1913 Dublin lockout, the 1916 Easter Rising and his execution, two other periods – in Scotland and America – were vital to his development as socialist, organiser and propagandist. McNulty gives due weight to both, although his socialist apprenticeship in Scotland has been generously covered elsewhere e.g. by Chloe Ross Alexander (*Scottish Labour History Journal*, 49, 2014).

Connolly’s socialism can be traced to his impoverished upbringing in the slums of Edinburgh’s Cowgate (‘Little Ireland’), where he was born in 1868 to Irish migrant parents. Poverty characterised his peripatetic life until his death. He was working by the age of eleven, spent six years in the British army, mostly in Ireland, before absconding back to Scotland and marrying Lillie Reynolds, from County Wicklow, in 1890. Following his older brother John, he immersed himself in the burgeoning labour movement with its ‘new unionism’ and upsurge in strike activity. He joined the Marxist-inclined Social-Democratic Federation (SDF) and was involved in other groups, including Keir Hardie’s Independent Labour Party.

Financial woes drove him to Dublin in 1896 where he helped form the Irish Republican Socialist Party, Ireland’s first revolutionary Marxist organisation, with a radical programme. Central to its activities was its newspaper, *Workers Republic*, launched with a crucial loan from Keir Hardie. But low membership

and income persisted, forcing a brief return to Scotland, where Connolly helped found the Socialist Labour Party in a split from the SDF, then back to Ireland. From there, Connolly moved to America and the company of such radical figures of the day as Daniel De Leon and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, then to the militant industrial unionism of the Industrial Workers of the World ('The Wobblies'), which preached working class and international solidarity.

A restless Connolly, feeling that he had achieved as much as he could in America, returned to Ireland in 1911 following publication of his highly influential 'Labour in Irish History'. He teamed up with Jim Larkin in the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, becoming its Ulster organiser in Belfast.

Ireland was also entering a febrile period of industrial and political conflict, and Connolly was at the heart of it, firstly on his return to Dublin supporting Larkin during the 1913 lockout, then helping to form the Irish Citizen Army, leading a contingent into the 1916 Rising and his own death. While ultimately a largely free, independent Ireland emerged it arguably put an end to any likelihood of the workers republic for which Connolly had fought for so long, fulfilling his fears of a 'carnival of reaction' as a strongly conservative Catholic state emerged alongside a reactionary six-county autocracy in Northern Ireland.

In terms of McNulty's central perspective – Connolly's internationalism – the core chapters are those covering the Second International and the years 1903-1911 in America. McNulty rightly describes the latter as 'decisive in his development as a socialist and trade union organiser' (p. 137). Both chapters are detailed, absorbing but the least superfluous. Some of the narrative on international links is circumstantial and contextual but McNulty does endeavour to pinpoint direct Connolly connections. In some cases, he suggests, 'elective affinity' might exist, whereby two unconnected socialist thinkers have come to similar conclusions. McNulty cites a 'familial resemblance' to Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution (p. 230).

Two later sections, on Connolly's support for women's liberation and his seemingly ambivalent relationship with Catholicism, are to be welcomed. Each is given a thorough interrogation, though perhaps inconclusively on the latter. A troublesome aspect of the Connolly story which has exercised many, invariably partisan, scholars is that for which he is best known, the 1916 Easter Rising. It turns on reconciling the socialist revolutionary with a group of bourgeois Catholic Nationalists with whom he collaborated. It has sometimes led to some malleable analysis justifying the alliance, although McNulty largely avoids this. Was it caused by disillusion with xenophobic working class enthusiasm across Europe with the outbreak of the First World War, leading to the disintegration of the Second International?

McNulty clearly believes that to be part of the answer, citing: “his incorrigible revolutionism in the face of the seeming collapse of the international socialist movement’ (p. 20). While that chimes with the overall narrative of the book, it is a disputed position seriously dividing scholars and McNulty’s position remains debatable. The answer might be simpler. Both to Catholicism and the 1916 Rising there could just as well have been the response of a realist, recognising the negative consequences of unnecessarily antagonising the Church’s inherent antisocialism, then taking a unique opportunity for revolution in the hope that a free Ireland would lead to a workers republic.

What alternative was there? And does it matter now?

Who might benefit from this book? The general reader would probably turn to less detailed, shorter biographies, while it might not offer enough for the seasoned Connolly scholar. But there could be a solid readership in between, including this reviewer. While the book is well produced by Merlin Press, a bibliography would have been helpful in negotiating the unbroken run of endnotes. There is no biographical note on the author. The publishers have advised that he is a London-based historian and writer from County Derry whose work on Irish, socialist and labour history and politics has appeared in the *New Statesman*, *Twentieth Century Communism* and elsewhere. This is his first book and hopefully not his last.

***Reviewed by Dr Mike Meham***

*Honorary Research Fellow at St Mary’s University, London*

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