

# CYM Biography of James Connolly

## Early Life and Development

It is to Desmond Greeves that we owe thanks for establishing the birthplace and early childhood of Connolly. Greeves uncovered Edinburgh, Scotland and not Monaghan, as was thought, to be the origins of Ireland's labour leader. He also uncovered Liverpool as the birthplace of Ireland's other great socialist Jim Larkin, and as Manus O'Riordain pointed out, both of these caused considerable displeasure to relatives and followers prompting one Spanish civil war veteran to say of Greaves, "Sure all he bloody-well achieved was to prove that Connolly wasn't even an Irishman!"<sup>1</sup>

Some biographers have attempted to downplay the significance of this discovery. Mac an Bheatha writes:

In a way it did not matter so very much in which place he first saw the light of day; poverty would have been the lot of the family in post-Famine Ireland as it was in the slums of Edinburgh.<sup>2</sup>

He redeems himself later by adding, "Nevertheless, Scotland was not Ireland, and the life of an Irish worker ... in Edinburgh was not that of an Irish peasant at home."<sup>3</sup>

It is the contention of some biographers that Connolly's early life laid the foundation blocks of the man who would take up arms against imperialism in 1916. Friend and comrade of Connolly, Murtagh Lyng, once commented:

Connolly was 'dragged up' like most proletarian boys. Connolly, nevertheless, is well educated. His education is of that sort that comes from conflict with circumstances ... His whole character has been coloured by these circumstances, which have been bitter, and he has a deep hatred of those institutions, which have weighed so heavily on the working class.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> O'Riordain, M. 'Researching Connolly.' [www.iol.ie/~sob/jcet/06riordan.html](http://www.iol.ie/~sob/jcet/06riordan.html) 20-06-05

<sup>2</sup> Mac an Bheatha, P. (1978). 'James Connolly and the Workers Republic.' Mayo. Pg.9.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> quoted in Ryan, D. (1924). 'James Connolly, His Life and Writings.' Dublin. Pg.12.

Anderson also subscribes to this. He believes that the social conditions of Connolly's upbringing had profound impact on the young man. "While having little taste for violence himself, Connolly was a product of violent social conditions."<sup>5</sup> Connolly at a young age, Anderson maintains, developed an intense class hatred of capitalism. "The aggressive class consciousness and sense of solidarity with his fellow workmen ... are characteristics that remained with Connolly throughout his career..."<sup>6</sup>

A number of influences can be found to have impacted this young impressionable man, not least of all the occupation of his father who worked as a manure carter, a job no man would have envied.<sup>7</sup> In Edinburgh, at that time, the Irish community stuck together. This resulted in a Nationalist and even Fenian upbringing for Connolly in which his uncle was important. Ryan remarks:

Already the evils of industrialism, the grim housing conditions of the great city, moved him to vague reflection and revolt. The company of his uncle, an old Fenian, kept vivid in his memory the glamour and the agony of the national struggle.<sup>8</sup>

However it was labour battles, strikes, and socialism that first got Connolly active. After spending seven years in the British army serving in Ireland he returned to Scotland and joined the Social Democratic Federation. Connolly regularly attended their meetings, often addressed by John Leslie, and no doubt read his articles that championed Irish Nationalism through a socialist perspective. Leslie, leader of the Scottish Democratic Federation, also organised unskilled workers, and called for an independent working class party in Ireland. The influence of John Leslie on a young Connolly cannot be underestimated.<sup>9</sup> Connolly eventually ended up in the Scottish Socialist Federation where he led strikes, became secretary of his branch, and stood for election. However in 1896 an offer came along that he could not refuse. Greeves describes it as if an angel had visited him.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Anderson, W.K. (1994). 'James Connolly and the Irish Left.' Wiltshire. Pg.66.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Pg.32.

<sup>7</sup> Mac an Bheatha, P. (1978). 'James Connolly and the Workers Republic.' Mayo. Pg.10.

<sup>8</sup> Ryan, D. (1924). 'James Connolly, His Life and Writings.' Dublin. Pg.13.

<sup>9</sup> Greeves, D. (1986). 'The Life and Times of James Connolly.' London. Pg.53.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Pg.70.

In May 1896 Connolly was offered a paid job as organiser of a new Socialist party in Dublin. This must have delighted Connolly and his family, his wife being from Wicklow. The Irish Socialist Republican Party was founded on the 29<sup>th</sup> May 1896.<sup>11</sup> Connolly described this momentous occasion many years later, writing:

It is no exaggeration to say that this organisation and its policy completely revolutionised advanced politics in Ireland. When it was first initiated the word 'republic' was looked upon as a word only to be whispered among intimates ... the thought of revolution was the exclusive possession of a few remnants of secret societies ... the Socialists broke through this ridiculous secrecy, and in hundreds of speeches in the most public places ... announced their purpose to muster all the forces of labour for a revolutionary reconstruction of society and the incidental destruction of the British Empire.<sup>12</sup>

This very early political movement embodied what Connolly would hold till his last breath, the unity of cause of labour and nationalism in Ireland, hence the name Socialist Republican. The ISRP lasted until 1903 and personal attacks, financial corruption and other misfortunes rocked its end. However Lynch argues,

... the ISRP did contribute a radical leftist viewpoint during a period of Irish history when nationalist sentiment was on the increase. The ISRP put the cause of labour and the political needs of the Irish working class to the forefront of its politics, and as such should hold a special place in the history of the Irish labour movement. Its emphasis on social justice for the working class, its opposition to what it saw as the pernicious effects of capitalism on those who work under it and its strong internationalism, combined with a principled stance against imperialism, both in Ireland and abroad make the ISRP still very relevant to the radical political tradition in modern Ireland.<sup>13</sup>

### **The United States Years and Maturing**

The reasons Connolly left Ireland for the United States are threefold - economic, political, and personal. The ISRP had been unable to keep its promise of payments to Connolly. Poverty for the Connolly family was a re-occurring problem and dictated much of their movements. The collapse

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Pg.74.

<sup>12</sup> quoted in Lynch, D. (2005). 'Radical Politics in Modern Ireland.' Dublin. Pg.6,7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Pg.9.

of the ISRP had left political and personal scars leaving its leading figure in a state of minor depression.<sup>14</sup> America seemed the answer.

On arrival, Connolly joined the Socialist Labour Party led by Daniel De Leon. These two men were to have a fractious relationship and many heated debates, eventually leading to Connolly's resignation from the party in 1907 after five years. As Allen points out the root of the quarrel was political. "... the roots of his difficulties were entirely political. Closer contact with the SLP revealed a deep seated sectarianism that stemmed from the flawed theories of its leading figure, Daniel De Leon."<sup>15</sup>

The three main political debates were over the question of wages, religion, and women. The wages debate is the very same one held years earlier between Marx and Lassalle over the latter's 'iron law of wages'. The pamphlet *'Value, Price and Profit'* deals in detail with this argument and ends by stating "A general rise in the rate of wages would result in a fall of the general rate of profit, but, broadly speaking, not affect the prices of commodities."<sup>16</sup> De Leon attempted to justify the 'iron law of wages' on Marxist grounds. This view calculated that any rise in wages would be matched almost automatically by a rise in prices thereby making union campaigns for better wages pointless. Connolly attacked this over-simplification and cited the correct Marxist argument in favour of union agitation.

Connolly's own religious beliefs and his stance on religion is a matter of some controversy. Connolly understood the important and significant role Catholicism had and could play in the struggle for Irish freedom. He also recognised its Irish nature being very different from elsewhere due to Ireland's material conditions. He wrote:

I believe that it is true to say that, politically speaking, the Protestantism of the North of Ireland has no parallel outside of this country, and that the Catholicism of the Irish Catholics is, likewise, peculiar in its political trend. To explain – I mean that, whereas, Protestantism has in general made for political freedom and political Radicalism, it has been opposed to slavish worship of Kings and aristocrats. Here, in Ireland, the word

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<sup>14</sup> Greeves, D. (1986). 'The Life and Times of James Connolly.' London. Pg.166,167.

<sup>15</sup> Allen, K. (1990). 'The Politics of James Connolly.' London. Pg.59.

<sup>16</sup> Marx, K. (2001). 'Value, Price and Profit.' New York. Pg. 62.

Protestant is almost a convertible term with Toryism, lickspittle loyalty, servile worship of aristocracy and hatred of all that savours of genuine political independence on the part of the 'lower classes'. And in the same manner, Catholicism which in most parts of Europe is synonymous with Toryism, lickspittle loyalty, servile worship of aristocracy and hatred of all that savours of genuine political independence on the part of the lower classes, in Ireland is almost synonymous with rebellious tendencies, zeal for democracy, and intense feeling of solidarity with all strivings upward of those who toil.<sup>17</sup>

This of course is a generalisation. It is helpful to recall the protestant democratic spirit of Tone, Emmet, Davis, and Betty Sinclair.

The above view of religion is materialistic in essence, seeing religions not as homogenous or monolithic but as reflections of real conditions and is entirely consistent with Marx or Lenin on the subject.<sup>18</sup>

The debate with De Leon was sparked by what Connolly described as their papers, *Peoples*, 'distinctly anti-religious'<sup>19</sup> positions. Connolly's position was, if attacked by clergy, to reply with corrections with regarding socialism, however, Connolly maintained De Leon would attach the clergyman's theology rather than his 'economic absurdities'<sup>20</sup>.

The final debate of the three was over De Leon's 'free love'<sup>21</sup> attitude to women and marriage, as Connolly saw it. Connolly understood the economic causes of the oppression of women and correctly estimated that socialism could destroy this. However, Metscher is right to point out that:

He did not see that gender relations are basically social relationships, which, in turn, are tied up with the traditional patriarchal concepts of the family and women's role in the family. Thus he failed to understand divorce as a fundamental democratic right. He saw the emancipation of women basically as economic emancipation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> quoted in Mac Aonghusa, P. (1995). 'What Connolly Said.' Dublin. Pg. 55.

<sup>18</sup> See Marx 'Thesis on Feurbach' or Engel's 'Anti-Duhring' or Lenin's 'Socialism and Religion.'

<sup>19</sup> quoted in Greeves, D. (1986). 'The Life and Times of James Connolly.' London. Pg. 175.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> quoted in O'Riordain, M. [www.iol.ie/~sob/jcet/06riordain.html](http://www.iol.ie/~sob/jcet/06riordain.html) 20-06-05

<sup>22</sup> Metscher, P. 'James Connolly and the Reconquest of Ireland.' *Nature, Society, and Thought*. Vol. 14, Nos. 1 and 2. Pg. 158.

O’Riordain further criticises Connolly for misrepresenting De Leon’s position on marriage and ‘over-shooting the mark’ on his attack upon the *People’s* anti-religion. O’Riordain claimed this is indeed why Connolly lost this round of arguments. Greeves also comes under attack for failing to accurately describe this period of Connolly’s life although this is ascribed to William O’Brien’s suppression of information.<sup>23</sup>

After a time in the Socialist Party of America Connolly became an organiser for the new syndicalist union the IWW. It was here that Connolly’s syndicalism matured, his organising abilities developed and he grew into the labour leader we would see in 1913.<sup>24</sup> Migrant workers were disenfranchised so the anti-political syndicalism of the IWW flourished.<sup>25</sup> As Greeves put it:

Enthusiasm abounded. At last it seemed that the unskilled and the disenfranchised were finding their own ... Everywhere branches of the I.W.W. were set up as the message of industrial unionism caught the imagination, stimulated to vigorous action and generated intense class-consciousness.<sup>26</sup>

Syndicalism globally was dominating as a Marxist theory of action where unskilled and aggressively class conscious workers organised. Connolly too was caught up in this whirl-wind, although he never dropped his understanding of the class nature of the state and politics.

It was in the IWW that Connolly would once again encounter and take on De Leon, only this time he would come out on top. O’Riordain attributes this victory to Connolly’s concentration on essentials and less personal diatribes.<sup>27</sup>

One final note must be made on the activities of Connolly in America and that is of the creation of the Irish Socialist Federation in 1907. Impressed by a similar Italian venture, Connolly sought to organise and win over the Irish community to the cause of socialism. The ISF described itself as an organisation composing:

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<sup>23</sup> O’Riordain, M. [www.iol.ie/~sob/jcet/06oriordain.html](http://www.iol.ie/~sob/jcet/06oriordain.html) 20-06-05

<sup>24</sup> Metscher, P. ‘James Connolly and the Reconquest of Ireland.’ *Nature, Society, and Thought*. Vol.14. Nos. 1 and 2. Pg.63.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Pg. 68.

<sup>26</sup> Greeves, D. (1986). ‘The Life and Times of James Connolly.’ London. Pg. 191.

<sup>27</sup> O’Riordain, M. [www.iol.ie/~sob/jcet/06oriordain.html](http://www.iol.ie/~sob/jcet/06oriordain.html) 20-06-05

... members of the Irish race organised to assist the revolutionary working class movement in Ireland by a dissemination of its literature; to educate the working class of this country into a knowledge of socialist principles ... It affirms its belief that political and social freedom are not two separate and unrelated ideas, but are two sides of the one great principle, each being incomplete without the other.<sup>28</sup>

Most biographers are in agreement that Connolly's years in the US matured him politically and as an organiser. On his return he lent himself quickly and successfully to the revolutionary current sweeping Ireland, Larkinism.

### **Ireland on his Return**

The Ireland Connolly returned to was very different politically from the Ireland he left. A Gaelic revival was in a full flow. Arthur Griffith and his unique brand of nationalism was taking over from the old and stale Irish Parliamentary Party. But most importantly James Larkin had arrived and had begun organising the unskilled labourers into the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, a broad syndicalist union based on the One Big Union theory.<sup>29</sup> Metscher writes:

There were undoubtedly three main aspects of the situation in Ireland that convinced Connolly he 'could do good work' there: the progress of the socialist movement; the consolidation of left-wing forces on the nationalist side (the awakening of the democratic elements in the Sinn Fein and republican movements); and the development of 'new unionism' under Jim Larkin.<sup>30</sup>

Connolly pointed to the precedent and tradition established by the Irish Land League of 'Boycotting' during the time of the famine as the peasant weapon, the sympathetic strike being the modern industrial form.<sup>31</sup> He describes the sympathetic strike as:

... the manifestation of our daily industrial relations that our brothers fight is our fight, that our sisters troubles are our troubles and the we are all members one of another.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> quoted in Ryan, D. (1924). 'James Connolly His life and Writings.' Dublin. Pg. 32.

<sup>29</sup> Mac an Bheatha, P. (1978). 'James Connolly and the Workers Republic.' Dublin. Pg. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Metscher, P. 'James Connolly and the Reconquest of Ireland.' *Nature, Society, and Thought*. Vol. 14. Nos. 1 and 2. 2001. Pg. 89.

<sup>31</sup> Connolly, J. (1983). 'The Re-Conquest of Ireland.' Dublin. Pg. 38.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Pg. 37.

The ITGWU was established in 1909 and immediately became involved in an industrial dispute in Cork. This resulted in a huge loss for the Union but important financial lessons were quickly learned. Metscher argues, the employers "... were determined to smash the union for all time."<sup>33</sup> The ITGWU above all else would be the vehicle by which Connolly would spread his militant socialist republicanism and fight the battles of the working class right up to the rising in 1916.

Metscher correctly argues that the ITGWU was very much a product of Larkin. "The union was dominated by the spirit of Larkinism, by Larkin's personality." Larkin was a fighting man not overly concerned with the finer points of theory. This must have appealed to Connolly as he wrote, "I believe that the development of a fighting spirit is of more importance than the creation of the theoretically perfect organisation..."<sup>34</sup>. However, this often got Larkin in trouble and sometimes cost the union badly, as in 1913, when he went over the heads of the British leaders and appealed to the rank and file for support, thus alienating the British union leadership at a crucial time.

Although Connolly must have been attracted to the man's militancy, organisational skills, and syndicalism, relations between the two giants were not always great. Greeves writes of this relationship:

Towards Larkin, Connolly had mixed feelings. He respected his ability to personify the Labour movement. Not since O'Connell had any man possessed such a gift of moving the masses. He had a vivid turn of speech with just that touch of the gutter that makes the small man not merely hate, but despise the great. But his self-centredness, increased by the denunciations heaped upon him, was irritating to Connolly. Larkin could be hurt. It was as if he had to stifle his self-critical ability. Connolly once described him to O'Brien as an 'undisciplined overgrown schoolboy'.<sup>35</sup>

### **1913 Lockout**

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<sup>33</sup> Metscher, P. 'James Connolly and the Reconquest of Ireland.' *Nature, Society, and Thought*. Vol. 14. Nos. 1 and 2. 2001. Pg.135.

<sup>34</sup> quoted in Ibid. Pg.136.

<sup>35</sup> Greeves, D. (1982). 'The Irish Transport and General Workers Union, The Formative Years.' Dublin. Pg.56.



Dublin in 1913 was witness to an immense class battle that would affect over 400,000 people. The pinnacle of class struggle in Europe was to grip Ireland's capital. Pdraig Yeates, in his contribution to Labour history, sets the scene upon which this fitting event took place. He points to the growing militarism of Ireland and indeed Europe, particularly of the reactionary force of Carsonism in Ulster.<sup>36</sup> He argues that the ITGWU had tipped the balance of forces from employers to the employed. Labour was on the offensive.<sup>37</sup> William Martin Murphy planned to change all this. After founding the Dublin Employers Federation as a response to the growth of the ITGWU, he swore to destroy working class unity and make them once again dependent on his Catholic benevolence. To this effect "William Martin Murphy provoked a strike epoch making and lasting in its results."<sup>38</sup>

The strike started over the issuing of a circular within the Dublin Tramways company condemning the ITGWU and its members to be signed by all workers, of which many were union men. In the spirit of Larkinism the sympathetic strike was called, but Murphy reacted with capitalist unity forcing a lockout of 20,000 Dublin workers.<sup>39</sup> The importation of scab labour from England began.

Connolly throughout his life maintained that the position of the capitalist class and the state with regard to violence would determine that of the people. This is best summed up in his dictum, 'peaceful means if possible, violent means if necessary.' He would neither glorify nor shirk violence. True to his word, and on the advice of a Captain Jack White, the Irish Citizen Army was established in response to state and scab violence that had killed and maimed workers and their families in many street battles. The ICA that began in this defensive light was, over the next few years, to be transformed into an active workers militia prepared to fight and die for the labour and Irish cause. Captain Jack White wrote, "...the Citizen Army under Jim Connolly made common cause with the Sinn Fein section of the volunteers..."<sup>40</sup>. In many ways the ICA can be,

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<sup>36</sup> Yeates, P. (2000). 'Lockout Dublin 1913.' Dublin. Pg. Xix.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. Pg. xxiii.

<sup>38</sup> Ryan, D. (1924). 'James Connolly His Life and Writings.' Dublin. Pg. 62.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Pg. 63.

<sup>40</sup> White, J. (2005). 'Misfit, A Revolutionary Life.' Dublin. Pg. 160.

symbolically, seen as the link between 1913 and 1916. “Connolly’s road to the 1916 rebellion was firmly established during the 1913 Dublin Lockout.”<sup>41</sup>

The failure of 1913 drew many lessons for labour and syndicalism in general. Questions of the revolutionary potential of trade unions have to be asked. Union’s inherent link to the capitalist system renders their break from it difficult. Also unions are often seen by their members as merely wage increasing vehicles and so are forced to act as this. Connolly and Larkin may have been naïve to think otherwise, however, syndicalism developed out of a particular time and space through which these two great men lived.

The most important lesson learned from the defeat of 1913 reinforced what Connolly already understood. The British, whether ruling class or socialists, couldn’t be relied upon to deliver Irish freedom. This was the job of the Irish people themselves and more specifically those whose interests clashed with Britain.

Connolly described the defeat in 1913 as a great betrayal by the union leaders in Britain. In spite of their financial support they refused to go the full way and strike to prevent the importation of scab labour to Dublin. This was what was needed. Some blame must be placed on Larkin whose temper and arrogance angered the union leaders across the sea. However, it is unlikely that they would have acted differently.<sup>42</sup> They failed to see the 1913 Lockout as what it was, a great class conflict, instead, they saw it as a mere industrial dispute. Connolly wrote at the time:

And so we Irish workers must go down into Hell, bow our backs to the lash of the slave driver, let our hearts be seared by the iron of his hatred, and instead of the sacramental wafer of brotherhood and common sacrifice, eat the dust of defeat and betrayal.<sup>43</sup>

This pessimistic view of the events is understandable in light of the great hope that was dashed. In greater hindsight it wasn’t a total defeat, for Murphy did not succeed in his aim of smashing the union. In fact the records will show how the union grew over the next few years.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Anderson, W.K. (1994). ‘James Connolly and the Irish Left.’ Wiltshire. Pg. 61.

<sup>42</sup> Marreco, A. (2002). ‘The Rebel Countess.’ London. Pg. 165.

<sup>43</sup> quoted in Mac Aonghusa, P. (1995). ‘What Connolly Said.’ Dublin. Pg. 85.

<sup>44</sup> Yeates, P. (2000). ‘Lockout Dublin 1913.’ Dublin. Pg. 586.

Connolly also notes the reaction of Ireland's literary, artistic, and nationalistic circles in support of the Dublin workers.<sup>45</sup> Names like Shaw, Yeats, Maude Gonne, George Russell, O'Casey, Pearse, and Ceannt spring to mind. This again served to link the cause of labour with that of Ireland. However it is also important to note that the reaction of some nationalists was not so good. The Ancient Order of Hibernian's acted against the workers siding with Murphy. Griffith and MacDiarmada criticised the ITGWU for splitting the Irish in face of the greater evil, English rule.<sup>46</sup> On the whole radical nationalism, i.e. separatists, sided with the 'men of no property'.

### **The Great War**

World War One changed Ireland and the Irish situation. The nationalist movement had to decide between separatism and loyalty and was divided. 1914 also saw the arming of Ulster, and the first murmurs of partition. The war developed Connolly's thinking and presented an opportunity for action and alliance.

Morgan argues that Connolly saw the war on simple nationalistic terms, with some reference to workers. He writes, "Connolly ... proffered a nationalist conception of the crisis..."<sup>47</sup>. This is untrue Connolly constantly reminds us that workers were going out to slaughter each other in the interests of bankers, land owners, etc. Connolly very definitely had a class understanding of the imperialist nature of the war.

Yes, friends, governments in capitalist society are but committees of the rich to manage the affairs of the capitalist class. The British capitalist class have planned this colossal crime in order to ensure its uninterrupted domination of the commerce of the world.<sup>48</sup>

If these men must die, would it not be better to die in their own country fighting for their class, and for the abolition of war, than to go forth to strange countries and die slaughtering and slaughtered by their brothers that tyrants and profiteers might live.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. Pg. 83.

<sup>46</sup> MacAtasney, G. (2004). 'Sean MacDiarmada. The Mind of the Revolution.' Leitrim. Pg. 153.

<sup>47</sup> Morgan, A. (1988). 'James Connolly, A Political Biography.' Manchester. Pg. 131.

<sup>48</sup> quoted in Mac Aonghusa, P. (1995). 'What Connolly Said.' Dublin. Pg. 63.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Pg. 68.

It is in the above context that Easter 1916 and Connolly's role in it can be seen and understood.

Another accusation thrown at Connolly is that he was pro-German in the war. If one reads the constant stream of articles during this period one would come to that conclusion. However, the dictum - England's enemy is Ireland's friend is too simplistic. His articles have to be seen as anti-British imperialist propaganda to be taken with a pinch of salt. As Pearse clearly explains:

Connolly is most dishonest in his methods. In public he says that the war is forced on Germany by the Allies. In private he says that the Germans are just as bad as the British, and that we ought to do the job ourselves.<sup>50</sup>

Events throughout Connolly's life shaped him and led him to the man who took up arms in 1916. World War was one such important event. Connolly argued that socialists across Europe could prevent or stop the war. Sadly this did not happen. Socialists buckled under the pressure of national chauvinism, particularly in England and Germany. Connolly couldn't but have been deeply distressed by this. Metscher in her work on Connolly shows how he reflected the 'left wing' of the Second International and the many problems it faced.<sup>51</sup> She argues that at the outbreak of the war the opportunists, who represented the petit-bourgeois and the labour aristocracy, controlled the International "... and their pact with the national bourgeoisie had the effect of influencing and completely disorientating the masses..."<sup>52</sup>. Morgan argues this was a deciding factor in turning Connolly away from socialism and towards nationalism.<sup>53</sup>

Another knock on effect of the war was the split that occurred in the Irish Volunteer movement. In many ways this split was inevitable as the movement attempted to cater for ideologies as diverse as those of Redmond and Pearse. The immediate cause of the break was World War One. Redmond argued for commitment to the defence of the empire and participation in the war in return for a promise of Home Rule, while MacNeil and others opposed loyalty to the crown.

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<sup>50</sup> quoted in Mac an Bheatha, P. (1978). 'James Connolly and the Workers Republic.' Dublin. Pg. 42.

<sup>51</sup> Metscher, P. 'James Connolly and the Reconquest of Ireland.' *Nature, Society, and Thought*. Vol. 14. Nos. 1 and 2. 2001. Pg. 177.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. Pg. 182.

<sup>53</sup> Morgan, A. (1988). 'James Connolly, A Political Biography.' Manchester. Pg. 131.

Jackson notes that of the 200,000 volunteers only 12,000 remained in the organisation, the rest joined Redmond's break away movement, the National Volunteers.<sup>54</sup>

Connolly welcomed the split and more importantly with the pro-imperialist element of the volunteers gone it now opened up the possibility of a socialist and advanced nationalist alliance. Connolly was quick to realise this opportunity and wrote:

The Volunteers must recognise that their fight is a struggle to the death ... The Volunteers must realise that against the shamelessly vile methods of the politician there is but one effective weapon – the daring appeal of the Revolutionist.<sup>55</sup>

An increasingly aggressive militancy can also be noted in his writings.<sup>56</sup>

### **Easter 1916**

In many ways the Easter Rising of 1916 can be seen as the logical conclusion to this man's life. Also the relationship between Connolly and Pearse typifies both the politics of Connolly and the Rising itself. Militant labour allied to militant nationalism to free Ireland for her people, not just the capitalists.

Pearse and Connolly came together in 1914 for the anti-conscription campaign. Pearse had also been an outspoken supporter of the workers in 1913 and, as Ryan notes, was aware of the evils of modern industrialism.<sup>57</sup> Ryan also argues that many of Pearse's writings can be seen as an echo of Connolly's, although more romantic in style. One good example would be 'The Sovereign People' in which he declares all men and women of Ireland to be masters of the soil and none to be exploited.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, Connolly's increasingly militant and '*gaelicised*' propaganda was almost certainly influenced by Pearse.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Jackson, T.A. (1991). 'Ireland Her Own.' London. Pg. 388.

<sup>55</sup> quoted in Metscher, P. 'James Connolly and the Reconquest of Ireland.' *Nature, Society, and Thought*. Vol. 14. Nos. 1 and 2. 2001. Pg. 173.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ryan. D. (1924). 'James Connolly His Life and Writings.' Dublin. Pg. 82.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. Pg. 85.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. Pg. 99.

The Rising eventually took place on Easter Monday 1916, after much confusion, hesitation, and heated discussion. It had suffered several blows in the proceeding weeks - the failure to secure German arms and help, and the counter-command sent out by MacNeil. Connolly played the leading role in the Rising, being described by Pearse as the ‘guiding brain of our resistance.’<sup>60</sup> The details of the rising are not for this thesis, suffice to say it lasted about a week before Pearse sent out a white flag to prevent the slaughter of innocent civilians. The leaders expected and awaited their fate.

The Easter Rising remains a contentious event and opinions remain divided. Was it a putsch, was it an insurrection, was it the beginning of a revolution?

There was no textbook ‘matured revolutionary situation’ in Ireland at the time. The 1913 Lockout, the anti-conscription campaign, and the Redmond split in the Volunteers all showed that the revolutionary potential of Ireland was growing. It is also worth noting the example of Cuba as a revolution occurring through the spark of a handful of brave and dedicated men.

Morgan argues that 1916 was a putsch. Connolly “... went to his death accepting responsibility for a putsch...”<sup>61</sup> Nowhere did Connolly ever accept responsibility for a putsch. To consider 1916 a putsch is to see it as an isolated event outside of the past and unconnected to the future, and outside of the wider European context. This author rejects that kind of narrow analysis, and would argue as Lenin did that revolutions rarely occur without insurrections and uprisings. Lenin’s quote, although lengthy, best sums up the Marxist understanding of 1916:

To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petit-bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression etc. – to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution. So one army lines up in one place and says, ‘We are for socialism’, and another, somewhere else and says, ‘We are for imperialism’, and that will be a social

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<sup>60</sup> quoted in Greeves, D. (1986). ‘The Life and Times of James Connolly.’ London. Pg. 415.

<sup>61</sup> Morgan, A. (1988). ‘James Connolly, A Political Biography.’ Manchester. Pg. 197.

revolution! Only those who hold such a ridiculously pedantic view could vilify the Irish rebellion by calling it a ‘putsch’.

Whoever expects a ‘pure’ social revolution will never live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is.<sup>62</sup>

Perhaps the best understanding of the Rising comes from one of its guiding brains Sean MacDiarmada. Before surrender he told the troops, “We, who will be shot, will die happy – knowing that there are still plenty of you around who will finish the job.”<sup>63</sup> MacDiarmada, described by one Volunteer as the ‘mind of the revolution’<sup>64</sup> understood that 1916 was only the beginning of a revolution. In this light it cannot be seen as an isolated event, and therefore, cannot be seen as a putsch, on the contrary it must be viewed as the beginning of the popular and mass Irish War of Independence, the Irish Revolution. George Russell understood this well when he wrote at the time:

If the authorities were wanting to make Dublin a place with the bombs blazing in the streets they were going the right way about it. It was Labour supplied the passionate element of the revolt. It has a real grievance. The cultural element, poets, Gaels, etc., never stir more than one percent of the country. It is only when an immense injustice stirs the workers that they unite their grievances with all other grievances.<sup>65</sup>

### **Connolly a Marxist, a Christian Socialist, or a Nationalist?**

Writers have described him as a Marxist, militant nationalist, a Fenian, and even a Christian Socialist. Most biographers agree that a number of events from 1913/14 profoundly affected Connolly and his thinking. Morgan lists four major influences as: the raised hopes and expectations of 1913 dashed by the bitter defeat, the arming of Ulster and the threat of partition, the outbreak of continental war, and the collapse of the International.<sup>66</sup> No one should deny that these events had enormous impact on Connolly. Morgan, however, jumps to huge conclusion by arguing “...a seed of nationalism was nurtured by a historical crisis until it dominated his

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<sup>62</sup> Lenin, V.I. (2002). ‘National Liberation, Socialism, and Imperialism.’ New York. Pg. 160.

<sup>63</sup> quoted in MacAtasney, G. (2004). ‘Sean MacDiarmada, The Mind of the Revolution.’ Leitrim. Pg. 123.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. Pg. 122.

<sup>65</sup> quoted in Marreco, A. (2002). ‘The Rebel Countess.’ London. Pg. 215.

<sup>66</sup> Morgan, A. (1988). ‘James Connolly, A Political Biography.’ Manchester. Pg. 135.

politics”<sup>67</sup> This incorrect assessment is based on the dubious charge that Connolly doesn’t mention socialism much from 1914 and increasingly speaks the nationalist language.<sup>68</sup>

Socialism and Nationalism for Connolly, as he repeatedly said, were not antagonistic, but in fact were complimentary and two sides of the same coin. This was said in 1896 by his party the ISRP, and repeated in 1916 when he said:

We are out for Ireland for the Irish. But who are the Irish? Not the rack-renting, slum-owning landlord; not the sweating, profit-grinding capitalist; not the sleek and oily lawyer; not the prostitute pressman – the hired liars of the enemy. Not these are the Irish upon whom the future depends. Not these, but the Irish working class, the only secure foundation upon which a free nation can be reared.

The cause of labour is the cause of Ireland, the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour. They cannot be dissevered.<sup>69</sup>

We must note the date of these statements as April 8<sup>th</sup> 1916. These were written on the eve of the Rising and clearly show Connolly, true to his earliest political writings, was out for a ‘Workers Republic’.

Morgan attempts to justify his position that “... Connolly went to his death an unapologetic Fenian.”<sup>70</sup> However Connolly didn’t see any conflict between his militant nationalism and his international socialism. His own works, in particular ‘Labour in Irish History’, clearly explain that feudalism and capitalism were foreign to Ireland, that they were brought in with the conquest, making Ireland’s subordination social and requiring a social revolution to free it, thus making true nationalism socialist in practice.

Morgan also fails to grasp what many Socialists then and now fail to see. Socialism cannot exist inside imperialism. Socialism must be built in free, independent, and sovereign nations. Independence is a pre-requisite for socialism. Sean O’Casey made the same mistake back in 1914 when he argued Connolly was betraying socialism for nationalism. He wrote:

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. Pg. 135.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. Pg. 161, 202.

<sup>69</sup> quoted in Mac Aongusa, P. (1995). ‘What Connolly Said.’ Dublin. Pg. 32.

<sup>70</sup> Morgan, A. (1988). ‘James Connolly, A Political Biography.’ Manchester. Pg. 199.



It is difficult to understand the almost revolutionary change that was manifesting itself in Connolly's nature ... Connolly had stepped away from the narrow byway of Irish Socialism on to the broad and crowded highway of Irish Nationalism ... The high creed of Irish Nationalism became his daily rosary, while the higher creed of International humanity that had so long bubbled from his eloquent lips was silent forever and Irish Labour lost a leader.<sup>71</sup>

Both Mac an Bheatha and Mac Aonghusa contend that Connolly, although a socialist, was not a Marxist, and was closer to an idealistic spiritual kind of socialist. This revises one of the earliest biographies, that of Ryan, that openly declares Connolly a Marxist.<sup>72</sup> Their hypothesis comes from the belief that Connolly could never accept one of the philosophical bases of Marxism i.e. materialism, so while Connolly accepted some of the conclusions of Marxism, he was not a philosophical Marxist.

First Connolly's own religious beliefs must be mentioned. In a letter to a friend in 1908 Connolly wrote:

... For myself, though I have usually posed as a Catholic I have not gone to my duty for 15 years, and have not the slightest tincture of faith left. I only assumed the Catholic pose in order to quiz the raw freethinkers whose ridiculous dogmatism did and does annoy me as much as the dogmatism of the Orthodox. In fact I respect the good Catholic more than the average freethinker.<sup>73</sup>

Although Connolly did receive the Last Rights before execution the above quotation seems to confirm the belief held by Anderson and others that Connolly was very much a pragmatist on the religious question, correctly wishing not to alienate a majority of workers from socialism.

Interestingly, Mac an Bheatha uses quotations from a Pope to explain Marxist materialism rather than the original texts.<sup>74</sup> He says: "... we are reminded that whatever Marx may have written it

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<sup>71</sup> quoted in White, J. (2005). 'Misfit, A Revolutionary Life.' Dublin. Pg. 161.

<sup>72</sup> Ryan, D. (1924). 'James Connolly, His Life and Writings.' Dublin. Pg. 8.

<sup>73</sup> quoted in Anderson, W.K. (1994). 'James Connolly and the Irish Left.' Wiltshire. Pg. 26.

<sup>74</sup> Mac an Bheatha, P. (1978). 'James Connolly and the Workers Republic.' Dublin. Pg. 75.

was Christ who brought justice and freedom to the world.”<sup>75</sup> Such a statement is not based either in history or philosophy and is a mere a reflection of his theology and faith.

A closer examination of Connolly’s view on religion shows that it is in fact based in a materialistic conception of the world. As can be seen in his understanding of Catholicism and Protestantism shown earlier, an understanding very much based in the belief that religions reflect real world material conditions.

If Mac an Bheatha had searched through Marxist texts, rather than theological ones, maybe he would have found this quote from Lenin on the subject, “Religion should be declared a private affair...”<sup>76</sup>.

This author believes it is safe to say James Connolly was not a Christian Socialist, and in his own words:

Socialism is neither Protestant nor Catholic, Christian nor Freethinker, Buddhist, Mahometan, nor Jew; it is only Human<sup>77</sup>

James Connolly preached revolutionary socialism, he preached a materialist conception of history and the world, and he believed that class politics was the driving force of progress and humanity. Connolly was a Marxist Socialist.

This author believes it is important to note that Connolly was by no means a dogmatic Marxist. Ryan describes him as a living Marxist,<sup>78</sup> and Metscher describes him as an organic Marxist.<sup>79</sup> Both very much understand that James Connolly was a product of his time and conditions. Connolly’s Marxism was shaped by his own experiences and by events that were happening around him. He wasn’t primarily a philosopher or an intellectual he was a revolutionary. It is only in this way that we can see and understand the life of this great man. And it is only by living the revolution that we can continue the work he set for us.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid. Pg. 88.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. Pg. 245.

<sup>77</sup> Connolly, J. (1983). ‘Labour, Nationality, and Religion.’ Dublin. Pg. 62.

<sup>78</sup> Ryan, D. (1924). ‘James Connolly, His Life and Writings.’ Dublin. Pg. 9.

<sup>79</sup> Metscher, T. [www.iol.ie/~sob/jcet/02metschert.html](http://www.iol.ie/~sob/jcet/02metschert.html) 20-06-05