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James Connolly – A life and a legacy

**Review: James Connolly ‘A full life’ by Donal
Nevin. Published by Gill and Macmillan ISBN
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to postpone action in order not to needlessly harry the revolutionists, nor disarrange their plans — such revolutionists only exist in two places — the comic opera stage, and the stage of Irish national politics”⁵

Connolly is of course most widely remembered as one of the leaders of the 1916 rebellion in Dublin. His memory being all the more poignant as he was the last of the leaders to be executed, incapable of standing because of his wounds and so shot sitting in a chair in Kilmainham jail.

It is Connolly’s melding of syndicalism, insurrectionalism and militant nationalism that ensured his memory would live on but also that his legacy could be claimed by just about any vaguely radical political organisation. Yet in early 1915 he wrote in the *Irish Worker* that⁶ “the most sacred duty of the working class of Ireland is to seize every available opportunity to free itself from the ravenous maw of the capitalist system and lay the foundations for the Co-operative Commonwealth — the Working Class Republic”⁷ This and the program he published in January 1916 reveal he had not simply abandoned his revolutionary syndicalism for nationalism.

Nevin’s book, because of its exhaustive nature, is an excellent source of material for those who want to see how Connolly’s politics developed and how he tried to square the circle with regards to nationalism and revolutionary syndicalism. It is a useful tool in extracting the real James Connolly from the ideological resin he has been preserved in.

Revolutionary martyrs, being unable to speak for themselves, are liable to be claimed by all sorts of organisations with whom in real life they would have had little in common. When they are of national or international importance, like the Irish syndicalist James Connolly, this also means that biographies often tend to be very partisan affairs, aimed at recruiting the dead to one cause or another. The story of their life becomes reduced to a morality tale whose conclusion is whatever positions the author holds dear today. Donal Nevin’s biography “James Connolly: A Full life” is thankfully free from this approach. Nevin is a retired union official, a position which helped give him access to material not accessible to some previous biographers. The biography is however free of any open attempt to justify modern trade unions’ practices by discovering a reformist Connolly. Instead this massive volume is obviously the legacy of a long labour of love and many years of research. Its flaw is its vastness, running to 800 pages and divided not chronologically but into subject chapters. It would be a poor choice for someone new to Connolly or the period as an introductory text.

Because of Connolly’s place in Irish history and the problems that often come with partisan biographies, his early activity is often ignored or skimmed over in biographies, reduced down to a series of lessons learnt for his later life. Nevin’s biography covers his early activism in Dublin and New York in a detail that will be fascinating to any member of a revolutionary organisation. The frustration of members not turning up for events, of irresponsible behaviour in which the organisation’s premises are trashed and of not bothering with the vital work of distributing publications is all there. Likewise the day-to-day mundane economic difficulties of funding a life as a revolutionary activist are detailed. From his own writings Connolly comes across as someone who may have been quite hard to work with. The overall effect is to remove Connolly

⁵ p597

⁶ p572

⁷ p573

from the pedestal that the left has put him on and return him to the land of mortals.

IWW

The depth of detail on his early activism restores Connolly the Social Democrat. The early Connolly writes in 'Justice' that the Scottish Socialist Federation is sending a delegate to the Zurich Congress of the Socialist International who will have a free vote on every issue except that he is to oppose the admission of anarchists to the international!¹ Yet after migrating to New York and becoming a full time organiser for the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) Connolly writes that an ideal Socialist Labour Party would be "dominated by Industrial Unionists rather than 'pure and simplers'; if it was elected by the Industrial Unions and controlled entirely by them, and capable at any moment of having its delegates recalled by the unions and had also its mandate directly from the rank and file organised in the workplace, it would be just the party we want." Connolly acknowledged that his ideas had changed in this period, replying to a later syndicalist critique that 'Erin's Hope' failed to deal with the economic organisation of workers, by saying the reviewer had forgotten the pamphlet was first printed in 1897 and "We confess to have learned something since"²

Far from being uncompromising, Connolly is capable of being pragmatic, writing of his decision to join the Socialist Party that "I would rather have the IWW undertake both political and economic activity now, but as the great majority of workers in the movement are against me on that matter I do not propose to make my desires a stumbling block in the way of

¹ *James Connolly 'A Full life'*, Donal Nevin, Gill & Macmillan, 2005, p34

² p86

my co-operation with my fellow revolutionists"³ By political activity Connolly means standing in elections, the IWW had rejected electoralism.

Even on the question of industrial struggle, Connolly is capable of being pragmatic, writing in the Free Press in 1910 that "Strikes would be ordered at the moment when the boss was least able to meet them; would be refused, no matter what the provocation, when it was apparent the boss desired or expected them; and when strikes went on and would entail much suffering without great certainty of victory, the strikers would march back to work and bide their time for another strike at a more propitious moment. A general in command of an army does not consider it a point of duty to expand his last cartridge and lose his last man if his experienced eye tells him that for the time being the position is untenable. No, he retires at the first opportunity and rearranges his forces for another battle"⁴

Slaughter

It is interesting to compare this earlier pragmatism with his remarks in the more desperate time that followed the outbreak of World War One, when the world's workers were engaged in slaughtering each other over a quarrel between the European ruling class. Connolly had also seen the defeat of organised Dublin workers in the lockout of 1913 — these experiences shifted him towards an insurrectionalist politics where the possession and willingness to use arms came above political considerations, and propaganda was replaced by preparation for rebellion. Connolly in January 1916 wrote that "Revolutionists who shirk from giving blow for blow until the great day has arrived, and they have every shoe-string in its place, and every man has got his gun, and the enemy has kindly consented

³ p265

⁴ p303