

Booked: James Connolly's Irish Socialism, with Shaun Harkin

James Connolly's legacy is often wrongly shrunk down to that of a martyr for Irish freedom. A new collection of his writing aims to correct this record and reclaim him for the left.

Sarah Jaffe June 21, 2018



James Connolly Memorial, Dublin (William Murphy / Wikimedia Commons)

Booked is a series of interviews about new books, hosted by Dissent editors. For this edition, contributing editor Sarah Jaffe spoke with Shaun Harkin, editor of The James Connolly Reader, out now from Haymarket Books. Listen to the full interview, or read a transcript, edited for length and clarity, below.

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This month marks the 150th birthday of James Connolly, a central figure in the Irish struggle for independence as well as

its labor movement—and, for a pivotal period of time, the American labor movement as well. Yet Connolly's legacy is often wrongly shrunk down to that of a martyr for Irish freedom, leaving his history as a socialist thinker, strategist, and labor organizer in the dust. A new collection of Connolly's works, out to coincide with his 150th birthday, aims to correct this record and reclaim Connolly for the left. Dissent's Sarah Jaffe sat down with the book's editor, Irish socialist organizer Shaun Harkin of People Before Profit, to talk about Connolly, then and now.

Sarah Jaffe: A lot of readers probably don't know who James Connolly is. Give us a brief introduction.

Shaun Harkin: James Connolly is probably the most important revolutionary figure in Irish history. He played a leading role in the Irish 1916 Rising, also known as the Easter Rising. He was also a leader of the Dublin lockout in 1913, a major working-class struggle in Ireland, and he made very important theoretical contributions to Marxism, especially on Irish politics.

Jaffe: He got started as a labor organizer. Talk a little bit about that and how it shaped his work in politics.

Harkin: Connolly was born in 1868 in Edinburgh, Scotland, in what was known as the Little Ireland ghetto. His parents had come to Scotland after the famine. He grew up very poor. He started working manual jobs as a child, but he also struggled with poverty in his adulthood. Even when he was a labor organizer or socialist agitator, economic challenges were always with Connolly.

He joined the British Army out of necessity when he was fourteen, and he served for almost a decade. Historians think that his first trip to Ireland was as a British soldier. When he leaves the army and goes back to Scotland, he gets involved in the labor movement. There was a strike movement there and his brother, who had also been in the army, had become a socialist agitator.

This was the first wave of the new unionism that swept across Britain and Ireland, where previously unorganized workers

began to fight for better conditions and challenge the exclusionary practices and strategies of the craft unions. The unionist movement was very much about mass organization, using the strike as a weapon to force concessions from the employer. Socialist ideas were beginning to get more of a hearing in Britain and Ireland, and across Europe. It was very much connected to the radicalism of fighting for a different kind of society.

Jaffe: He ended up in the United States and was influential in the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), among other things.

Harkin: Connolly becomes a recognized socialist agitator in Scotland and then poverty forces him to think about where he is going to live. Back in the mid-1890s, he doesn't actually consider going to the United States. He thinks about going off to South America and maybe doing farming. But a socialist organization in Dublin contacts him and invites him over to be their organizer and he helps found a new socialist organization in Ireland called the Irish Socialist Republican Party, which made a very significant contribution to activism and developing socialist ideas in Dublin and Ireland.

In 1902 Connolly does a U.S. tour organized by the Socialist Labor Party. His eyes are opened to socialist politics in America, the challenges faced by Irish migrants, but also the challenges faced by the American working class. In Ireland he's put on the employers' "Don't Hire" list for being an agitator, so in 1903 decides to leave Dublin for the United States. He has a much larger family at this point.

When he gets there, he joins the Socialist Labor Party, becomes more involved with trade-union issues and workplace organizing, and joins the IWW, the Wobblies, when they are founded in 1905. Like many other socialists in the United States, including Eugene Debs and Big Bill Haywood, he becomes an advocate for the IWW. He also works as an organizer in New York and creates propaganda leagues to publicize the IWW's broader goals, which were about creating a kind of workers' republic, where the working class would control

the means of production right from the workplace up.

Jaffe: The labor movement in the United States and in Ireland is on the back foot in a lot of ways. What is important about that moment, and particularly about the arguments that Connolly was making about the IWW?

Harkin: Connolly was attracted to the radicalism of the IWW. The IWW rejected the craft practices of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), as well as its conservatism in terms of its overall goals and its relationship with employers. The IWW was anticapitalist. It was for a different kind of society run by workers. In its founding document, it says that there is a gulf between the two classes—the ruling class and the working class—and it is very firmly on the side of the working class. Connolly was attracted to the socialist element of the IWW, as many other people were, but he was also very attracted to its strategy of agitation and seeing working-class struggle—strikes, action, demonstrations—as the way to bring about changes for working class people, in an immediate sense, but also in the long-term. This came at a time when people had become increasingly frustrated with the electoralism of some of the socialist parties.

These issues are very relevant today. Connolly never rejected political parties. He was in favor of building parties and standing in elections. But he tried to synthesize the relationship between the two, meaning that you could do both. The point was not to undercut working-class struggles, but to encourage those struggles and then to amplify them through electoral challenges.

Jaffe: After some time in the United States, Connolly ends up back in Ireland in time for the 1913 lockout, a massive labor struggle in Dublin and attempt to break the union Connolly was associated with, which is when the Citizen Army is formed.

Harkin: Connolly goes back to Ireland in 1910, and he brings back to Ireland a version of syndicalism. One of the reasons he goes back is because he's been following Irish political developments very closely and he senses something is happening. Over the preceding ten or fifteen years, there had

been the development of an Irish cultural movement, new political organizations that were for separation from Britain. The trade union movement was growing. There was a vibrancy and vitality to Irish politics, and I think Connolly sensed that there would be a space for a socialist movement to get a hearing. He comes back and immediately engages in political debates as an organizer for the Socialist Party of Ireland and is traveling around the country making the case for working-class organization, and for a workers' republic. The 1913 Dublin lockout is a very significant struggle and it has a lasting legacy on Irish politics. The trade union movement still measures itself up against what the Dublin lockout was able to accomplish, but also up against the leadership of people like Connolly and Jim Larkin.

Jim Larkin had helped to found the Irish Transport and Workers' General Union, out of a conflict with a British-based union and a series of struggles that happened in Ireland. He was for one big union, and they wanted to build a mass working-class union that could involve workers with different skills to fight together for immediate gains. Irish unskilled workers were some of the lowest-paid in Europe.

They believed in the sympathy strike, meaning if one section of the working class was fighting an employer, it was the duty of other sections of the working class to come out in solidarity and to support those strikes.

As the transport workers' movement grew, it alarmed the employers of Dublin and the Irish establishment. The Dublin lockout emerged in a conflict with one of Ireland's biggest employers. William Martin Murphy was a nationalist who had ownership of the transport system in Dublin. When a number of workers there decided that they wanted to join the union, he put his foot down and said that this was unacceptable. He rallied the employers of Dublin to break the Transport Workers' type of trade unionism, which he called "the Terror of Larkinism."

That led to an all-out war between the working class of Dublin and the employers, who essentially tried to starve the working class into submission by locking them out of their jobs.

Connolly was an active participant and leader, and he wrote about the importance of this struggle. There was a tremendous amount of sacrifice by working-class people in Dublin, and it gained the support of workers all over, not just in Ireland. In Britain workers went out on strike in solidarity, and sent boatloads of food and other necessities across the water. The strike was ultimately defeated and there are political lessons to draw from that.

The Citizen Army came about because the employers were violent. The British state was lined up on the side of Irish employers. The Dublin Police battered strikers and their supporters off the streets. The scabs that were brought in from elsewhere were armed, and shot and killed strikers and their supporters. In order to defend the workers' meetings and rallies, Connolly and others set up what was called the Labour Army to make sure workers felt confident when they went out and had a meeting or a demonstration. And from there, the Irish Citizen Army developed.

Jaffe: Connolly always wrote very thoughtfully and critically about nationalism and the tensions between the need to free Ireland from colonial rule and the idea that "If we just get rid of the British, then everything will be magic." I would love for you to talk a little bit about his writing in that particular area and how that shaped his participation in what became the Easter Rising.

Harkin: There has been a long attempt to incorporate Connolly as a nationalist or as a kind of militant Republican. That serves the interests of the Irish state, but it also serves the interest of people who are interested in limiting the self-determination struggle in Ireland. Connolly was a Marxist. Marx and Engels wanted to see British rule ended in Ireland, and they supported the struggles of Irish activists in places like Manchester. Ireland was very central to their understanding of how a revolution could happen in Britain, which was the main place where industrial capitalism had developed and which had a big working-class movement. They also wrote about the relationship between working-class struggles and anticolonial revolts.

Connolly participated in the 1916 Rising as somebody who wanted to see not just the end of British rule, but wanted to move towards a socialist workers' republic.

Even the way that Connolly thought about the reasons for the Rising has been narrowed down. The Rising happens in the middle of the First World War, and Connolly immediately said that the outbreak of the war should be used as an opportunity for working-class revolutions all across Europe. He was distraught at the fact that the Socialist International and the bigger socialist parties were either supporting their own ruling classes in the war, or had become passive and were essentially doing nothing to try and stop it.

Connolly believed it was important for socialists to act in any way possible to stop the slaughter, but he also saw it as an opportunity because he understood that despite the initial support for the war, that support would wane as the number of people killed rose and as cuts and austerity impacted working-class people.

Jaffe: While we are here talking, people are canvassing to repeal the Eighth Amendment of the Irish Constitution [which made abortion illegal]. The Irish state has not been great to women. But Connolly included women in the Citizen Army and in all of his organizing.

Harkin: Connolly was ahead of his time when it came to understanding the importance of women's struggles. That is reflected in some of his organizing activities and his theoretical work. He was described by some of the leading feminists and women's rights campaigners of his time as the staunchest feminist of all the labor men.

Again, in the aftermath of the Irish Revolution, or the counterrevolution in the 1920s, the aspirations of women were pushed back and we are now dealing with the rotten, reactionary legacy of that. Connolly was a big supporter of women's unions. He was a supporter of the movement for women to have the right to vote. Women were in the Irish Citizen Army and there was far more equality in that organization than in any of the other Republican or Irish

nationalist organizations.

Connolly's writings [on this] are very important. He looks at how women have been treated for centuries in Ireland and he describes women as the slave of a slave, meaning that working-class men are oppressed and women, as their partners, are even more oppressed. When he talks about women's struggles he says that the entire working class should back the struggle of women, because they are trying to throw off the shackles that have developed over the centuries. He says, it is not up to us to decide what the struggle should be. He says, "None so well equipped to decide what is a fetter" than those who wear them.

Jaffe: Circling back to the Rising, when I was in Ireland in 2016 for its hundredth anniversary, somebody tweeted, "Why do Irish women still have to fight for equality? Because the Brits shot Connolly and not de Valera."

To spoil what happens in the Rising: the Brits shot Connolly. And quite a few other people, as well. You mentioned this idea of the blood sacrifice—the reclamation of Irish identity was very important, but you had people who were obsessed with the romantic idea of Ireland and of this blood sacrifice.

Harkin: We always say that the victors write the history of struggles and, unfortunately, the people that came to run the liberated twenty-six-county state after the Irish Revolution had very little in common with any of the leaders of the 1916 rebellion. This was a very conservative leadership that had been won over to Irish Independence, but was not interested in changing the social order that British domination had created. They were Catholic and they created Ireland as a Catholic state.

The Rising itself was about British rule and there were debates within those who organized the Rising about what kind of new Ireland they wanted to see.

Connolly would have been on the far left of those who were participating in the Rising. He says in April before it, what kind of Ireland are we fighting for? and "[W]ho 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.”

Even the blood sacrifice idea has to do with the fact that Ireland became a Catholic nation, because it fits with this idea of Jesus martyring himself. The leaders of the Irish Revolution are raised up and placed above the Irish people and everybody is supposed to genuflect in front of them for their great sacrifice. The Catholic Church was given a special place in Ireland and was essentially allowed to write the Constitution. This was a disaster for women’s rights, it was a disaster for the education of Irish children, but it really infected every aspect of Irish society and we are still undoing the legacy.

Shaun Harkin is an activist and writer presently based in Derry City, Ireland. He is a member of the Irish Socialist Workers Party and the People Before Profit Alliance.

Sarah Jaffe is an editorial board member at Dissent, co-host of its Belabored podcast, and the author of *Necessary Trouble: Americans in Revolt* (Nation Books, 2016).