

Chapter Sixteen

The Man Who Answered the Irish Question¹

A Review of C. Desmond Greaves, The Life and Times of James Connolly

Mr Greaves has given us one of the books which was waiting to be written about James Connolly and has made a fine, scholarly job of it. Those who have a picture of Communist scholarship as partisan, falsifying, careless of fact could not do better than read Mr. Greaves. Here is enormous and scrupulous care over every detail of fact. We need no longer to puzzle over the dates or the places of Connolly's different activities. All the evidence has now been set out for us, all the conclusions are fairly drawn. Except the political ones. The field for a political biography of Connolly remains open and the need is urgent. For Mr. Greaves's book is a monument of bourgeois objectivism. On the one side there are the facts; on the other there are the political judgements. And this separation of factual material from political judgement means that, in these pages, Connolly is a dead man. The organic development of his thought is obliterated. His life is a mere chronicle of activity.

If Mr. Greaves's book had only brought Connolly to life it would have shown up all those who prefer him dead. The politicians of Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and

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the Labour Party in the Irish Republic, for example. They would like to forget what they dare not teach their own school-children, that the greatest founder of the Republic was a Marxist. But the majority of present-day Marxists are not that fond of Connolly either, for he was a syndicalist and a democrat. There has never been a revolutionary further away from elitism. To try to judge Connolly by the standards of Leninism, as Mr. Greaves does, is to miss the point, both by being unhistorical, and thus wronging Lenin as well as Connolly, and also by not seeing that Connolly's teaching provides some of the material for a critique of Leninism.

Who was Connolly?

'Who *was* Connolly anyway?' the English readers of *New Left Review* will be crying by now and although I hate to have to tell them, the circulation of *NLR* in Dublin and Donegal is probably not high enough to justify leaving this bit out. Connolly, like many other Irish nationalists (such as Parnell and Patrick Pearse) had strong non-Irish connections. He was born in Edinburgh in 1868. It was around 1890 that he learnt his socialism from the small group of SSF (Scottish Socialist Federation) and ILP members in Edinburgh. Invited to Dublin as a socialist organiser, he set himself the task of giving a socialist content to the Irish national movement:

If you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the socialist republic, your efforts would be in vain. England would still rule you. She would rule you through her capitalists, through her landlords, through her financiers.²

When Connolly went to the United States, he joined Daniel De Leon's Socialist Party and was a founder of the International Workers of the World, the 'one big union' of the songs. The arguments with De Leon and others led him to formulate slowly a Marxism with which he later analysed Irish history and politics. Connolly, like Marx himself, has no conception of the vanguard party. He would have agreed with Marx in seeing the essential *political* movement being that of the class as a whole and the party as merely an expression of the class. The transition is from the trade-union movement concerned with

² Quoted in Greaves 1976, p. 85. See also Connolly 1987, v. 1, p. 307.