

John Horan's speech on James Connolly

James Connolly was born on June 5, 1868, at 107, the Cowgate, Edinburgh. His parents, John and Mary Connolly, had emigrated to Edinburgh from County Monaghan in the 1850s. His father worked as a manure carter, removing dung from the streets at night, and his mother was a domestic servant who suffered from chronic bronchitis and was to die young from that ailment.

Anti-Irish feeling at the time was so bad that Irish people were forced to live in the slums of the Cowgate and the Grassmarket which became known as 'Little Ireland'.

Overcrowding, poverty, disease, drunkenness and unemployment were rife — the only jobs available was selling second-hand clothes and working as a porter or a carter.



James Connolly went to St Patricks School in the Cowgate, as did his two older brothers, Thomas and John. At ten years of age, James left school and got a job with Edinburgh's Evening News newspaper, where he worked as a 'Devil', cleaning inky rollers and fetching beer and food for the adult workers. His brother Thomas also worked with the same newspaper. In 1882, aged 14, he joined the British Army in which he was to remain for nearly seven years, all of it in Ireland, where he witnessed first hand the terrible treatment of the Irish people at the hands of the British. The mistreatment of the Irish by the British and the landlords led to Connolly forming an intense hatred of the British Army.

While serving in Ireland, he met his future wife, a Protestant named Lillie Reynolds. They were engaged in 1888 and the following years Connolly discharged himself from the British Army and went back to Scotland. In 1890, he and Lillie Reynolds were wed in Perth.

In the Spring of 1890, James and Lillie moved to Edinburgh and lived at 22 West Port, and joined his father and brother working as labourers and then as a manure carter with Edinburgh Corporation, on a strictly temporary and casual basis.

He became active in Socialist and trade union circles and became secretary of the Scottish Socialist Federation, almost by mistake. At the time his brother John was secretary; however, after John spoke at a rally in favour of the eight-hour day he was fired from his job with the corporation, so while he looked for work, James took over as secretary. During this time, Connolly became involved with the Independent Labour Party which Kerr Hardie formed in 1893.

Cobbler's Shop

In late 1894, Connolly lost his job with the corporation. He opened a cobblers shop in February 1895 at number 73 Bucclevch Street, a business venture which was not successful. At the invitation of the Scottish Socialist, John Leslie, he came to Dublin in May 1896 as paid organiser of the Dublin Socialist Society for £1 a week. James and Lillie Connolly and their three daughters, Nora, Mona and Aideen set sail for Dublin in 1896, where he founded the Irish Socialist Republican Party in May of 1896.

In 1898, Connolly had to return to Scotland on a lecture and fund-raising tour. Before he left Ireland, he had founded The Workers' Republic newspaper, the first Irish Socialist paper, from his house at number 54 Pimlico, where he lived with his wife and three daughters. Six other families, a total of 30 people, also lived in number 54 Pimlico, at the same time!

In 1902, he went on a five month lecture tour of the USA and, on returning to Dublin he found the ISRP existed in name only. He returned to Edinburgh where he worked for the Scottish District of the Social Democratic federation.

He then chaired the inaugural meeting of the Socialist Labour Party in 1903 but, when his party failed to make any headway, Connolly became disillusioned and in September 1903, he emigrated to the US and did not return until July 1910. In the US, he founded the Irish Socialist Federation in New York, and another newspaper, The Harp.

In 1910, he returned to Ireland and in June of the following year he became Belfast organiser for James Larkin's Irish Transport and General Workers Union. In 1913 he co-founded the Labour Party and in 1914 he organised, with James Larkin, opposition to the Employers Federation in the Great Lock-Out of workers that August. |Larkin travelled to the USA for a lecture tour in late 1914 and James Connolly became the key figure in the Irish Labour movement.

Irish Citizen Army

The previous year, 1913, had also seen Connolly co-found the Irish Citizen Army, at Liberty Hall, the headquarters of the ITGWU, — this organisation, the ICA, was established to defend the rights of the working people. In October 1914, Connolly returned permanently to Dublin and revived the newspaper The Workers' Republic that December following the suppression of his other newspaper, The Irish Worker.

In The Workers' Republic newspaper, Connolly published articles on guerrilla warfare and continuously attacked the group known as The Irish Volunteers for their inactivity. This group refused to allow the Irish Citizen Army to have any in-put on its Provisional Committee and had no plans in motion for armed action.

Republican SINN FÉIN Poblachtach

The Irish Volunteers were by this time approximately 180,000 strong and were urged by their leadership to support England in the war against Germany. It should be noted that half of the Provisional Committee of the Irish Volunteers were John Redmonds people, who was the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party. The Irish Volunteers split, with the majority siding with Redmond and becoming known as the National Volunteers — approximately 11,000 of the membership refused to join Redmond and his people.

However, in February 1915, The Workers' Republic newspaper was suppressed by the Dublin Castle authorities. Even still, Connolly grew more militant. In January 1916, the Irish Republican Brotherhood had become alarmed by Connollys ICA manoeuvres in Dublin and at Connollys impatience at the apparent lack of preparations for a rising, and the IRB decided to take James Connolly into their confidence. During the following months, he took part in the preparation for a rising and was appointed Military Commander of the Republican Forces in Dublin, including his own Irish Citizen Army.

He was in command of the Republican HQ at the GPO during Easter Week, and was severely wounded. He was arrested and court-martialled following the surrender. On May 9, 1916, James Connolly was propped up in bed before a court-martial and sentenced to die by firing squad — he was at that time being held in the military hospital in Dublin Castle. In a leading article in the Irish Independent on May 10, William Martin Murphy, who had led the employers in the Great Lock-out of workers in 1913, urged the British Government to execute Connolly.

At dawn on May 12, James Connolly was taken by ambulance from Dublin Castle to Kilmainham Jail, carried on a stretcher into the prison yard, strapped into a chair in a corner of the yard and executed by firing- squad. Connollys body, like that of the other 14 executed leaders, was taken to the British military cemetery adjoining Arbour Hill Prison and buried, without coffin in a mass quicklime grave.

The fact that he was one of the seven signatories of the 1916 Proclamation bears evidence of his influence.

As a post script, and on a personal level, I will quote James Connollys words to the Irish Citizen Army on 16 April, 1916.

“The odds are a thousand to one against us, but in the event of victory, hold onto your rifles, as those with whom we are fighting may stop before our goal is reached.”

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To those people whom Republican Sinn Féin would consider having “stopped before the goal is reached”, I point out that the fact that James Connolly died on a chair should not be seen to infer that he wanted that chair placed at a table where a compromise would be the outcome.

– John Horan