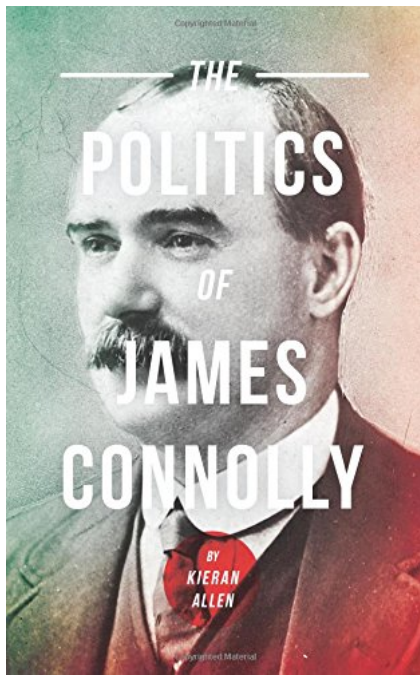


Review: Kieran Allen, *The Politics of James Connolly*

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Kieran Allen, *The Politics of James Connolly*, Pluto Press, 2016. £13.00

The timely re-publication of Kieran Allen's *The Politics of James Connolly*, first published twenty six years ago in 1990, should be read alongside his recent *1916: Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition*. The intervening years have demanded that we continue to review Connolly's legacy and measure it against changing political circumstances. In doing so we can affirm Connolly as the pre-eminent Irish revolutionary Marxist, despite continuing attempts to appropriate him for a range of competing traditions. The thrust of Allen's earlier political biography was to challenge this appropriation of his legacy, while his more recent book challenges prevailing assessments of the Easter Rising and identifies it as the harbinger of the revolutionary upheavals in the years that followed leading to partial independence in 1921. Connolly's role in this process was pivotal.

In his introduction to the political biography Allen identifies three competing versions of Connolly. Firstly, the sanitised view of him as an Irish patriot and Catholic apologist; secondly, the view epitomised in C. Desmond Greaves *The Life and Times of*

James Connolly that he had to subordinate any socialist ambitions to the primacy of the struggle for national independence and finally, the view of Austin Morgan and others who sought to repudiate his anti-imperialism and give pre-eminence to his work as a trade union organiser. Allen demonstrates beyond any dispute that Connolly's writings, his commitment to freeing Ireland from British imperialism and his understanding of the centrality of working class, place him in the revolutionary Marxist tradition. It is interesting to remember that the book was first published before the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the ensuing 'peace process' with its establishment of power-sharing in the North and before the collapse of the 'Celtic Tiger' and the imposition of austerity politics in the South. Its analysis has stood the test of time and is even more relevant to today's political situation. This is particularly true given the transformation of Sinn Féin from militant republicanism to constitutional nationalism, which has led it to take contradictory political positions either side of the border.

Connolly has suffered the fate of those who are vilified during their lifetimes as dangerous threats to the establishment only to be turned into harmless icons after their deaths. This is particularly true of the version that is happy to name railway stations after him and to herald his role in 1916 as a patriot. It coincides with the conservative counter revolution of 1923 and its aftermath described vividly in Allen's latter book as 'A most Conservative Country.' It is a version that seeks to either expunge Connolly's Marxism or to render it harmless as a form of guild socialism or mild social reformism. It also emphasises Connolly's Catholicism, even to the point of his biographer Owen Dudley Edwards arguing that he perceived essential interdependence of socialism and Catholicism and was 'one of the best and most enlightened apologists the Catholic church has seen since the industrial revolution' (O.Dudley Edwards *James Con-*

nolly: *The Mind of an Activist*). This assessment was clearly in tune with a country where the social conservatism of Archbishop Charles John McQuaid had been wedded to the conservative nationalism of Eamon De Valera.

To some extent this unconvincing version of Connolly was effectively repudiated by the Greaves' biography. Informed by the politics of the Communist Party it does give a more detailed account of Connolly as a lifelong activist and working class organiser, but is hamstrung by its adherence to one particular version of the stages theory of national liberation: namely that there should be an alliance between the working class and progressive sections of the bourgeoisie in order to fight for national liberation and that social demands should be postponed until after this had been achieved. This view was taken one stage further by Peter Beresford Ellis in his preface to the 1985 edition of *The History of the Irish Working Class* who wrote, 'In Ireland today as in previous centuries, the mainspring of socialism is in the national struggle.' Allen argues conclusively that far from Connolly subscribing to this view, in his most famous work *Labour in Irish History* he had argued exactly the opposite. In an argument that in many ways pre-figures Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, Connolly asserts that Nationalists like Sarsfield, Grattan and O'Connell all feared the masses more than the British rule because they threatened their own class position and material wealth and power. As a result, they could never deliver what they claimed to stand for and consequently '...only the working class remain as the incorruptible inheritors of the fight for freedom in Ireland.'

The third version of Connolly espoused by Morgan and other apologists for the British State- Bew, Patterson and Gibbon in *The State in Modern Ireland* - criticised him for linking working class struggle to the struggle for independence and went so far as to assert that the effects of imperialism in any classical sense on Irish affairs was slight. Their political motives were to distance themselves from any resistance to the state in Northern Ireland after the Civil Rights Movement of 1968. Morgan went so

far to argue that Connolly ceased to be a socialist in 1914 and instead threw his lot in with militant republicanism.

There were weaknesses in Connolly's analysis as Allen has consistently pointed out. In particular, the mistaken notion that militant republicans would automatically be drawn towards socialist politics after national liberation had been achieved and as a result he failed to establish a lasting independent socialist organisation, but the trajectory of Connolly's life and political commitment is a manifestation of the tension between his lifelong commitment to working class struggle and its centrality to the fight for national liberation. He argued that an all-class alliance based on 'nationhood' would fail to break the stranglehold of Britain. The tension is not just theoretical. The historical developments during the last three years of his life shaped his attitude considerably, but it's worth giving a brief summary of the years prior to that. From 1898 he had been a socialist and trade union organiser in Scotland; in 1896 he moved to Ireland and formed the Irish Socialist Republican Party; in 1903 he moved to the US where he became involved with the Socialist Labour Party and subsequently became an organiser for the International Workers of the World; finally he returned to Ireland in 1910. In 1911 he became the organiser for the Irish Transport and General Workers Union and then its General Secretary in 1913. The great Dublin lock-out of that year proved to be a watershed with a ruthless employers' offensive against Connolly's attempt to extend the unionisation of the workers: an offensive that led to the defeat of the union. The solidarity of rank and file workers in Britain was outweighed by the capitulation of their union leaderships and the TUC backed campaign of scabbing. An embittered Connolly described it as the 'sordid betrayal of our holiest hopes.'

This defeat was followed in 1914 by the outbreak of the First World War. Connolly was in the small minority of the international socialist organisations in opposing the war and the ITGWU campaigned against conscription. He believed the war presented revolutionaries with an opportunity, partic-

ularly in Ireland to strike a blow against the biggest imperial power in the world:

Starting thus Ireland may yet set a torch to a European conflagration that will not burn out until the last throne and last capitalist debenture will be shrivelled on the funeral pyre of the last war-lord.

Out of the carnage of war and the defeat of the working class he became increasingly drawn to the idea of armed revolt against Britain in alliance with the forces of nationalism. In order to follow this through he formed an alliance between his Irish Citizens Army and the National Irish Volunteers that led to his central role in the armed uprising of 1916.

Allen's political biography gives an invaluable and detailed account of this trajectory and at the core of it is the idea of history and the actors in it as part of a dynamic process not a series of static events. The book deals in detail with all the stages in Connolly's political journey and whilst recognising the towering role that Connolly had played in Irish working class history it avoids hagiography and includes detailed discussion of areas in his thought and political practice that merit more critical analysis.

For example, in the complex relationship that Connolly had with religion Allen distinguishes between his scathing attacks on the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church and his residual belief that there was no intrinsic incompatibility between religion and socialist politics. He felt that if the clergy confined themselves to the sphere of religious concerns and kept out of politics, socialists could deal with the latter. He concluded that 'the most consistent socialist or syndicalist may be as Catholic as the Pope if he is so minded.' There was a clear contradiction between his commitment to a 'materialist' analysis of the world and a belief that there were aspects of nature unfathomable to humans and these were the phenomena that religion could address. In engaging with this critical analysis, however, Allen keeps a sense of proportion and avoids the myopic scholasticism of those who make selective

reference to extracts from Connolly's writing to prove that his attitudes to religion were a fatal flaw.

Indeed, there is ample evidence in *Labour, Religion and Nationality* of Connolly challenging the interference of the church in the world of politics. In his polemic against the Jesuit priest Father Kane who in his Lenten discourses had railed against the socialist movement and denounced it as 'mob rule', Connolly 'turned the words round in his mouth' in a marvellous polemic.

There was a time stretching for more than 1,000 years when the mob was without power or influence, when the entire power of the world was concentrated in the hands of the kings, the nobles and the hierarchy. That was the bleakest period of human history... Then the mob started on its upward march to power—a power only to be realised in the socialist republic. In the course of its upward march the mob has transformed and humanised the world. It has abolished religious persecution and imposed toleration on bigots of all creeds; it has established the value of human life... there is not in history a record of any movement for abolishing torture, preventing war, establishing popular suffrage, or shortening the hours of labour led by the hierarchy... All hail to the mob, the incarnation of progress.

As a polemicist in the daily struggle for worker's rights Connolly did not shy away from criticising the role of the church and its representatives when they acted as ideologues for oppression and exploitation.

Allen applies the same degree of balance to his criticism of Connolly's view of political organisation and his relationship with republicanism. The crucial factor here is to be able to see the bigger picture, to keep a sense of perspective. In doing so Allen is able to acknowledge and affirm the crucial role that

Connolly played in the struggle for socialism and opposition to imperial oppression. This is particularly important today when we celebrate the anniversary of the Easter Rising and Allen's *1916: Irelands Revolutionary Tradition* provides the same level of consistency and dispassionate analysis as his earlier biography. In achieving that overall perspective of Connolly's contribution we are able to see his continuing relevance to the struggles of today and the need to continue to challenge the false narratives and ruling

class attempt to render him a harmless figure of the past. Today's struggles in Ireland against austerity, women's oppression and anti-immigrant racism owe an immeasurable debt to the real legacy of Connolly. I would strongly recommend everyone engaged with these struggles to take advantage of the republication of Allen's political biography to arm themselves with the lessons of history and Connolly's role within it as a revolutionary Marxist of distinction.