

SOVIET HISTORIAN ON CONNOLLY

Translation from the Introduction by Professor Artemy D Kolpakov to *Rabochi Klass v Historia Irland* (Russian language edition of *Labour In Ireland*), Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1969.

At the beginning of the present century, when the Marxist trend in world historical science was still only in its formative stage, James Connolly revealed himself as both an outstanding and original Marxist historian, the first person to apply the Marxist materialist method to the study of modern Irish history.

During the years when he brought out his works on history, Irish historical science was completely dominated by the essentially idealistic, national-romantic approach: the bourgeois historians concerned themselves almost exclusively with the political, military or cultural history of Ireland, ignoring the socio-economic factors and the class struggle.

“Irish history has ever been written by the master class—in the interests of the master class”, wrote James Connolly.

First Irish Marxist Analysis

When one attempts to evaluate Connolly’s main work, *Labour In Irish History* (1910), one can only describe it as a feat. What strength of spirit, what deep conviction and selflessness it was necessary to possess to complete such a work; he was outside of academic and university circles, and did not have at his disposal the necessary leisure or means to carry through to its conclusion the first Marxist analysis of the national history of his country; his book has not lost its importance to this day.

Labour In Irish History does not claim to be an all-embracing treatment and analysis of events. Connolly says so frankly, pointing out that he set himself the task, not of writing the history of the Irish working class, but of clarifying its place in the history of Ireland. However, in spite of this, Connolly’s book is

an outstanding historical work based on a great number of sources and a considerable amount of literature. Here we get agrarian statistics, parliamentary documents, the immense pamphlet literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including pamphlets of the secret Irish revolutionary societies and organisations, a large amount of highly diversified material extracted from the Irish newspapers of different leanings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; there are documents of the first Irish socialist communes, materials from memoirs, numerous papers on the history of the Ireland of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, etc. All this varied material is used by Connolly to show the groundlessness of the bourgeois-nationalist interpretation of the history of Ireland, and to cast down the "idol" before which it was proper for the Irish to bow down. Instead, in the centre of the historical struggle he consistently puts forward the class struggle and social relationships as the origin of the economic processes. The Irish working people becomes the principal, active force in the historical process.

Materialist Approach

An example of Connolly's materialist approach to Irish history is his examination of the period of the Jacobite wars in Ireland (1689–1697), when the Irish Catholics stood behind the banner of the Stuart James 2nd, who had been driven out by England.

Basing himself on Marx's thesis of the key role of the means of production and exchange in any given historical period, Connolly states that "the prevailing method of economic production and exchange was the feudal method based upon the private ownership of lands stolen from the Irish people, and all the political struggles of the period were built upon the material interests of one set of usurpers who wished to retain, and another set who wished to obtain, the mastery of those lands".

There is manifested here, as in a number of other chapters in the book, a tendency—characteristic of early Marxist works—towards a purely economic explanation of historical events, against which Engels in his time warned, pointing out that various

elements in the superstructure can exert an important and, at times, decisive influence on the forms of historical struggle.

Of special significance are the chapters which throw light on the national revolutionary-democratic development in Ireland at the end of the eighteenth century. In those years there lived and fought the man to whom Connolly constantly pays honour—Theobald Wolfe Tone, the founder of the revolutionary-democratic Society of United Irishmen, which had as its aim the overthrow of English rule and the setting up in Ireland of a democratic republic.

Connolly knocks down from his pedestal the favourite of the bourgeois historians, Henry Grattan, the leader of the Volunteer movement of the 1780s, which had won certain political concessions from England. Connolly notes the compromising, class-limited character of the so-called Grattan revolution, which slid to a stop as soon as the question was raised of granting the poor the vote. Dethroning Grattan and his lieutenants, he exalts the revolutionary democrats of the Society of United Irishmen and their leader Wolfe Tone, who had tried to carry out a genuinely democratic revolution in Ireland. On the basis of documentary material, Connolly reveals the true character and the basic principles of the United Irishmen. He attaches particular importance to Tone's slogan of uniting all the democratic forces of Ireland for the common struggle, independent of their religious convictions.

Idol of the Bourgeoisie

Before the bar of scientific history, Connolly judges yet another idol of the bourgeoisie, the famous Daniel O'Connell, leader of the nation-wide movement for Catholic emancipation, which in 1829 extracted from the English Government a law which alleviated their position. He shows how this national leader was the bitterest enemy of the Irish workers who had joined together in trade unions, and how he was the staunch supporter of the English capitalists. Emphasising the class unity of the exploiters in England and Ireland, Connolly relates with

satisfaction the international links of the workers of both islands (in particular the Chartist organisations set up in Ireland in the 1840s).

Connolly frequently adverts to the Gaelic problem, telling of the English conquest of Ireland, affirming that in the course of the latter a struggle took place between two forms of landownership—the feudal-English one introduced from outside, and the truly Irish form of clan, or common ownership. The exploiting classes in Ireland—the landlords and capitalists—he shows, adopted the alien system and broke with the primordial Gaelic tradition. Connolly repeatedly notes the wholesomeness of the Gaelic principles and the attempt of the English conquerors, the Catholic Church, and later the Irish politicians too, to exterminate them from the memory of the people. This indicates a certain idealisation by Connolly of the primitive order of ancient Irish society and the primitive-feudal relations which lasted in Ireland up to the beginning of the seventeenth century, and also his over-estimation of the so-called Gaelic "Golden Age".

However, it should be noted that his conception of a Gaelic Ireland—a country strong, free, knowing nothing of private property and living by the common labour of the people—was nevertheless closer to the historical truth than the "aristocratic myth", created by bourgeois-nationalist historians, of an ancient Ireland as an association of kings, tribal aristocracy and their faithful men-at-arms, which left no place for the communal tiller of the land. Sharply opposing this myth, Connolly tried to create among the Irish people a correct notion of their historic past and traditions, and to use these in the interests of the struggle of the Irish workers for their freedom.