

Politics and the Irish Working Class, 1830–1945

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This Fintan Lane and Donal Ó Drisceoil edited work is a welcome addition to the existing historiography. It concerns the Irish working class and politics over the course of a century. As the introduction points out, the attention of historians has not been directed towards Irish labour to the extent seen in other western European countries. This volume seeks to widen the debate on Irish political working-class history, supplement general Irish political history and, rather more ambitiously, add to international working-class historiography. While establishing the aims of the book, the editors' introduction gives an overview of labour history in Ireland from the early eighteenth century, chronicling why the island never developed overt class-based politics. They adhere to the popular hypothesis that the labour movement did not become politicised enough due to the "'three evil geniuses of socialism': the priest, peasant and patriot' (p. 2), that is, that the people of Ireland were motivated by issues affecting religion, land ownership and the relationship with Britain (Home Rule and/or separation). The introduction culminates in a fine summarisation of the chapters. The reader is tempted with the briefest of outlines. It is evident that there is one overriding hypothesis: the individual chapters, although from disparate periods or topics, all appear to agree with the premise of a failed working class polity. They do, however, deviate on why this has happened, which in turn persuades the reader to delve further. The differences of the chapters dictate that they must be treated individually and hence this review shall analyse each in turn.

A strict enough chronology is imposed on the book. The initial chapter concentrates on the early nineteenth century. Vincent Geoghegan aims to chart embryonic working class politicisation in the Ulster of the 1830s. This politicisation was known as 'co-operation' and grew out of 'the economic vicissitudes of capitalism in the post-Napoleonic War period' (p. 6). Robert Owen was leading advocator of this, and the chapter addresses his impact on Ulster society. Geoghegan's premise is not so much that organised labour, as a political movement, failed, but that it actually existed at all in this period. This is illustrated through the author's use of the *Belfast Newsletter*. The paper began to register what Owen was saying on bettering the conditions of the lower classes as early as 1816. Its mainly critical stance exemplified the concern among the

upper classes. They were fearful of the working classes becoming a political force. If a slight criticism can be made, it is that Geoghegan does give greater context on Robert Owen. This is fine for those with a good knowledge of early labour history, but may not be enough for those using the book as an introduction to the topic.

The second chapter is more ambitious. Its time frame stretches from 1830 to 1945. The angle presented is also bold. It examines labour and politics through colonisation and, more interestingly, mental colonisation. O'Connor explains these two concepts at the start. The appeal for the reader is in examining the piece to see how O'Connor incorporates these concepts. He intends to deviate from the long-held reasons for labour's failure to politicise sufficiently in Ireland. Instead of laying the blame at religion, land or nationalism, he aims to illustrate that while labour was successful in the formation of trade unions, the more political aspect faltered due to colonisation or mental colonisation. The chapter provides a very clear and concise argument and successfully challenges the historiography. O'Connor's writing style lends itself to making the hypothesis persuasive; he contends that the labour movement in Ireland did not politicise successfully because labour was unable or unwilling to shake of the 'British yoke', despite the political revolution and establishment of the Free State. Even as late as the 1940s, O'Connor infers, British influence was seen to be impacting on decisions made by the representatives of Irish labour. Although his argument is persuasive, it is difficult to accept it as the major cause of labour's inability to make headway. The continued influence of Britain is too easy an assumption, and other accepted components are integral to the story.

Luddy's opening is captivating. She lays out an account of Irish women striking in 1912. One therefore expects to discover just what bearing women had on the labour movement between 1830 and 1945. The early momentum, however, is somewhat lost in her definitions of what 'work' is and the problems the term leads to in women's history. This is important to establish, nonetheless, so as to allow the reader to understand Luddy's parameters. The chapter concentrates on narrating instances of working-class women engaging in political activities. These are interesting in themselves but there is an impression that more is needed in terms of analysis. The impact of women on labour history is not really assessed. The author bemoans the lack of research into the role of women in the Land League and the Anglo-Irish War. She also highlights the little work that has been done on the suffragette movement in Ireland. The fact that the chapter has such a large time frame does not allow for greater analysis. An important achievement of the chapter, however, is that it clearly draws attention to an area that deserves greater research.

The north-east corner of Ireland, and especially the city of Belfast, has long held an interest for those attempting to write a socialist history of Ireland. It was, of course, the most industrialised region of Ireland and hence resembled areas of Britain and Germany where socialism flourished and left-right politics emerged. Hirst's point in her chapter, 'Politics, sectarianism and the working class in nineteenth-century Belfast' is that this view is a misnomer. Left-right politics never had a chance in Belfast and, by extension, Ulster, as sectarianism had gained a hold much earlier than previously imagined. The strength of this argument is ably put across. The sheer quality and quantity of sources used by Hirst are testament to the persuasiveness of her argument. Although she reasons differently from the overarching causes as laid out in the introduction, the result is the same. Despite all the indicators that socialism should have emerged as a political force in Belfast, it did not due to the prevalence of a 'green-orange' polity. The nature of this argument does, however, see Hirst drift sometimes from the focus of the book, the working classes and labour, into areas where she seems more comfortable, namely discussing nationalism.

Kinealy examines Chartism and she links it to O'Connellites and the 1848 Uprising. The Chartists were attempting to reform the British parliamentary system, while tagging on greater autonomy for Ireland to their demands. This was mainly because a number of leading Chartists were Irish. This should have tied in neatly to Daniel O'Connell's efforts to repeal the Act of Union. Unfortunately it is only upon reaching Kinealy's conclusion is one totally sure what the argument is. The thesis presented is that there is crossover of cooperation between the working classes of the two islands, at least certainly at the leadership level. The British government became increasingly concerned about this crossover, especially after the revolution in France of 1848 and the radicalism that it inspired among the Irish, most notably the Young Irelanders. After reading the conclusion it becomes much easier to assess the main body of the chapter.

The great manifestation of Irish labour having a dramatic impact on society and politics is the land issue. This is an area where it is possible to see labour develop and achieve its aims. It can probably be argued, and Lane does, that this movement overachieved. Instead of creating left-right polity, the labouring classes became small landowners, which resulted in the creation of a large rural conservative society. This is the longest and most detailed of the chapters, as it perhaps needs to be because of the significance of this period in Irish history and its impact on the political revolution that occurs in the next century. Lane's chapter first explains the major shift among the working classes in the aftermath of the Famine. The labouring classes were particularly decimated. It is in the next section, assessing the Land League movement, that the piece gains its more powerful tone. Initially the movement was run by and run for the lower classes. The League was highly successful in achieving its aims. The response of the British government to the land issue saw the League lose some of its power. Land legislation was passed at Westminster addressing some of the grievances. As Lane also points out, it increasingly became a vehicle for mobilising the people on other issues, such as Home Rule. Effectively, the growing nationalism of Ireland saw the land movement lose focus: it 'had to subscribe to the belief that class interests are less important than the "national interest"' (p. 135).

Understandably, Belfast is the dominant city in this book when discussing politics and the working class, although it could be said that Dublin deserves mention too. Surprisingly, but positively so, Maura Cronin directs our attention to Cork and Limerick in an attempt to assess the role of labour and Parnellism. The chapter's introduction makes clear her aim to identify which interpretation of Parnellism was taken among the labouring classes of the two cities. She also lays out her justification for choosing Cork and Limerick: they have enough similarities to provide coherent comparison – something Dublin, due to its size, and Belfast, with its sectarianism, could not. The first section of the chapter concentrates on narrating the trade union activity of the two cities. The impact of the trade unions on Parnell and Parnellism is discussed but, as a central theme, it is not strong. Cronin does accept that nationalism, in its many forms, had a strong influence on the restriction of socialism, and she considers further the first of the 'evil geniuses', the priest, and religion in general. This, apart from in the sectarian context of earlier chapters, is the first time in the book that the Church is really tackled. Cronin asserts that the power that the Church was able to exert restricted socialism within the two cities.

The focus returns to Belfast for the eighth chapter. Patterson's 'William Walker, labour, sectarianism and the Union, 1894–1912' is an examination of socialist politics in the city before and during a time when the Union came under greater threat than ever before. Patterson asserts that between 1895 and 1905, when a Conservative administration in London was attempting to kill Home Rule with kindness, pan-Protestant unity was lost, allowing for class issues to come forward. That this was unsuccessful was no surprise, but again it offers a tantalising glimpse into a 'what if' history. Once a Liberal government was back in power, Protestant uneasiness over the Union returned, thereby suffocating the nascent socialist movement within the city.

Ireland's greatest socialist, James Connolly, casts a long shadow over working-class historiography. Helga Woggon's chapter on Connolly's legacy in the revolutionary period illustrates perfectly how socialism has been subsumed in Ireland. She considers the many ways in which Connolly's inheritance has been used and, at times, abused by various political parties in Ireland – a situation in some ways created by Connolly's

complex character: different political movements and parties have laid claim to whichever aspect of Connolly suits them. What really makes Woggon's chapter, though, is the way in which she weaves Connolly's legacy into areas less obviously connected to the man, offering evidence, for example, of how the Catholic Church was able to merge Connolly's idealism to their message.

Conor Kostick's political leanings are evident in this chapter. He gives great credence to the involvement of the working classes during the Anglo-Irish War. He infers that it was labour militancy that contributed in a significant fashion to the success that was achieved by December 1921: 'In so far as the core administration of the colony was rocked, it was by the intervention of the working class.' (p. 190) How well does Kostick defend his claims? The chapter works, on the whole, and his hypothesis certainly holds firm when re-assessing the War of Independence. Kostick is able to present many instances where organised working-class action resulted in the British authorities being unable to administer their rule in Ireland. He does allow the significance of the impact labour had to be exaggerated though, especially in the post-Treaty period. He proposes that the pro-Treaty government was so repressive against the Munster Republic because of the growing socialism visible throughout this period. A long quote from Larkin about the state of Ireland in 1923, which closes the chapter, is further testimony to the author's personal politics and his feelings towards the new Irish establishment.

The years after revolution can lead to radicalism. However in Ireland this was not to be the case: conservatism was the prevalent ideology of the Cumann na nGaedheal government. Even the election of Fianna Fáil, which had a solid working-class electorate, failed to see labour achieve much between 1923 and 1939. Fearghal McGarry's detailed chapter explains exactly why working class politics failed to ignite in Ireland. He does not necessarily reveal anything new in his piece, but the comprehensiveness of the work makes it essential reading. It recounts the moment at which the Labour party looked as if it were about to make an impact on the political landscape, only for it to fall back at the next election due to the re-awakening of non-class-driven issues, such as nationalism and republicanism, anti-British sentiment or the role of the Church. McGarry's chapter clearly, and with great attention to detail, supports the volume's central hypothesis.

In the post-partition era, and with nationalists unsure of participating in the new government structures, it looked as though the labour movement might be able to make an impact in Northern Ireland. Graham Walker illustrates why the Northern Ireland Labour Party failed to find a dominant voice in the region's political scene. The Ulster Unionist Party recognised the threat from the left, and, as a party intent on consolidating its position, set about removing the need for a labour party. It did this by accepting decisions from Westminster that were liberal or even left-leaning, while continuing to play up threats to the continued existence of Northern Ireland. Walker, succinct as ever, gives the reader a brief background of labour in Ulster before going on to map out the NILP's organisation and development. He is somewhat sympathetic to the NILP – 'the party's dissenting voice was a valuable contribution to a troubled society and polity' (p. 243) – but concludes that the overbearing sectarianism of Northern Ireland nullified the impact the NILP had.

Richard Dunphy's examination of how Fianna Fáil cultivated support among the working classes in its first decade provides material for the penultimate chapter. The party managed to weld together the rural working class, socialist or leftist republicans as well as members of the proletariat (urban workers). Not only was it able to take on the established Cumann na nGaedheal but it also took support from the Labour Party. Dunphy sets out to explain why Fianna Fáil was able to do this. He does manage this, but unfortunately the vast majority of his sources seem to be secondary. Margaret Canovan's article for *Political Studies* seems to dominate the first section of the chapter, detracting from Dunphy's hypothesis somewhat.

The final chapter by Donal Ó Drisceoil typifies much that is excellent in this book. The chapter is well structured and well argued. It centres on working-class politics during the 'Emergency' and how, once again, there appeared to be a chance that a left-right politicisation of Ireland might happen. This ties perfectly into the whole concept of the volume, and is something that the majority of the authors seem to adhere to. Ó Drisceoil alludes to the fact that this period can be used as a near perfect case study of why socialism never achieved a lasting impact in Irish politics. At the centre of this is Fianna Fáil, pulling the various strings to

thwart labour.

Taken as a whole, this edited volume is a welcome addition to Irish working-class historiography. It goes some way to tighten the accepted reasons for the lack of left-right politics in Ireland, north and south, while offering glimpses of when this development may have broken through the barriers of religion, nationalism and ownership of the land. Rather surprisingly, the Dublin Lockout of 1913 and a substantial study of Larkin are not included. One would have imagined that Dublin as a whole deserved greater attention. This, however, should not take away from the importance or enjoyment of the volume. The reading of *Politics and the Irish Working Class, 1830–1945* prompts the reader to delve further, and the range and wealth of sources contained within illustrate plenty of scope for further research.

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The editors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further.

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