

Roddy Connolly and the Politics of the Left in Twentieth-Century Ireland.

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*A review of*

**Charlie McGuire, *Roddy Connolly and the Struggle for Socialism in Ireland.***

(Cork: Cork University Press, 2008) ISBN 9-7-818-5918420-2, Hardback 318 pp., £42.

Providing a detailed examination of the political life of Roddy Connolly (the son of Socialist and labour leader James Connolly), Charlie McGuire (an active trade-unionist and history researcher at the University of Teeside) has produced an important contribution in highlighting the role of the diverse organisations of the Left in twentieth-century Irish politics. In addition, the work provides a valuable insight into the mindsets of the revolutionary Socialists of the period.

The book is largely based on McGuire's PhD thesis and is a welcome addition to the under-developed historiography of radical Irish labour. As an academic study, this work is extremely valuable in that this is the first biography of Roddy Connolly, with the only other historians who refer to Connolly with any significance being Emmet O'Conner and Mike Milotte. McGuire's work is not a traditional biography however in the sense that his focus is purely on Connolly's political life. There are only slight references to his private life and personal characteristics. However, in an academic study this is all that is necessary. In any case, by the end of the book, the reader can construct a picture of Connolly 'the individual' with little effort: this adds rather than detracts from the work.

Roddy Connolly (1901-1980) was the sixth child of James Connolly, and his only son. McGuire charts Connolly's political career which spanned more than sixty years, and ranged from the development of Irish communism and Socialist republicanism in the inter-war period, to the Labour Party. Connolly was only fifteen years old when he fought

in the Easter Rising in 1916 alongside his father in Dublin's General Post Office (GPO). It was only when the GPO came under fierce attack that Connolly senior sent his son away.

McGuire describes the political footsteps taken by Connolly in the years after 1916. For a brief period following the Rising he spent some time in Glasgow where he worked in the shipyards as a draughtsman. This was significant in that here Connolly became familiar with a group, later to be known as the 'Red Clydesiders', and got to witness the power of the organised working class for himself through the 'shop stewards' movement there.

Connolly's politics on his return to Ireland possessed a new accompaniment to the Socialist republicanism of his late father: Bolshevism. He joined the Socialist Party of Ireland and made a number of covert trips to the Soviet Union where he met, and was heavily influenced by Lenin. His actions during the War of Independence and subsequent Civil War are painstakingly examined, with McGuire describing the fascinating attempt by Connolly to propel the IRA towards the political left and convince them to adopt a programme of social reform and welfare.

As leader of the new Communist Party of Ireland (formed in 1921), Connolly was the first politician to publicly oppose the Anglo-Irish Treaty. He supported the Anti-Treaty faction throughout the Civil War. In 1926 Roddy helped found and lead the Workers Party of Ireland. Thereafter, McGuire describes how his politics interestingly moderated when he drifted towards the Labour Party in 1928 (founded by his father): a party that was staunchly social-democratic and thus often conflicted with his views on

republicanism in particular. Connolly was also involved in the Republican Congress which attempted to challenge De Valera's Government during the 1930s.

A particular highlight of the work was McGuire's exploration of Connolly's relationship with his father. In reverse contrast with James Connolly, Roddy Connolly gradually moved away from socialist revolution towards embracing democratic-socialism: a move of which McGuire is highly critical. However, despite this, Connolly always defended his father's views and considered him to have been Ireland's greatest revolutionary leader. Through this section, we also gain an image of James Connolly as a family man. Connolly senior is portrayed as someone who involved all of his children in political discussion from an early age. According to McGuire there was an argument between Connolly and his wife over Roddy's participation in the Rising. Despite Lilly's protestations that her son was too young, Connolly stated that as he was fifteen, Roddy was no longer a child but an adult.

The book also sheds some light on other little-known Irish socialists, such as Seán McLoughlin who was also in the GPO and who, after Connolly was wounded, was significantly given full authority over the Irish Citizen Army. McLoughlin later became a leading figure in the Communist Party of Ireland and remained friends with Roddy.

Overall, this is a richly detailed and meticulously researched study which adds greatly to our knowledge of the history of labour and socialism in twentieth-century Ireland. It is especially refreshing to read a book which is free from the confines of revisionist parameters, and which highlights that contrary to conservative interpretations, there was a thread of radicalism which ran through Irish social and political history during the twentieth century.

McGuire has succeeded in successfully illuminating the long and complex political life of Roddy Connolly. His self-sacrificing work as a lifelong socialist who although later moderated towards democratic-socialism, did not abandon his political principles, and who did not give up the struggle like many of his fellow activists did: these achievements cannot be dismissed as being purely based on being his father's son. In researching a wealth of new material, McGuire has demonstrated that Connolly was a courageous and politically-committed individual in his own right who spent sixty years embracing socialist, labour and communist initiatives. It is to be hoped that this work, especially in relation to the labour movement in Ireland during the 1920s, will stimulate further investigation on this under-researched subject area of Irish history.