

# Labour/Le Travailleur



## Ireland

Emmet O'Connor

Volume 50, 2002

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt50pre04>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

### ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Article abstract

Modern Irish labour history dates from the mid 1970s, years that saw the foundation of the Irish Labour History Society in 1973 and the launch of its annual journal, *Saothar* in 1975. While steady progress has since been made, the subject suffers from a popular perception of labour as marginal, a reluctance within the trade union movement to recover its often fractious past, and academic neglect. Ireland was not deeply affected by the “crisis” in labour history in the 1990s. It is likely that the flow of publications will continue. But without full-time practitioners, progress in method and theory will be patchy.

### Cite this article

O'Connor, E. (2002). Ireland. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 50, 243–248.

# PRESENTATIONS 2: LABOUR HISTORY IN OTHER LANDS

## Ireland

Emmet O'Connor

MODERN WRITING IN IRISH LABOUR HISTORY dates from the mid 1970s, years that saw the foundation of the Irish Labour History Society (ILHS) in 1973, the launch of its annual journal *Saothar* in 1975, and the publication of two surveys that did much to redefine the subject: Arthur Mitchell, *Labour in Irish Politics, 1890-1930* (1974), and Charles McCarthy, *Trade Unions in Ireland, 1894-1960* (1977). Before considering the ILHS and the current state of labour historiography, it is worth noting four main contextual problems.

### *A Partial Popular Memory*

The first problem is what might be called a limited and broken popular memory of labour history, and a narrow conception of the subject. In the 1970s there was a consensus that Ireland had “little labour history,” and less of any importance. Most people understood “history” to mean political history; and politically, the left in Ireland was marginal.<sup>1</sup> Since independence, successive generations have been

<sup>1</sup>Between 1922 and 1987 the Labour Party won an average of 11.4 per cent of the vote in general elections. See Michael Gallagher, *Political Parties in the Republic of Ireland* (Man-

schooled in the nationalist orthodoxy, which presented the past as a series of struggles against foreign occupation. Labour intruded into the story in only two respects; the Dublin lock-out of 1913, and the Easter Rising of 1916, in which James Connolly and his Citizen Army fought alongside the Irish Volunteers.<sup>2</sup>

*Trade Unions and History: A Willful Amnesia?*

The impression that labour relapsed into insignificance after 1916 was not due simply to neglect. Trade unions have been a vibrant feature of Irish life since the early 20th century. In the Republic, almost 50 per cent of employees belonged to unions in 2001, a high level of density by European standards. In Northern Ireland density was 36 per cent, reflecting the more hostile climate for unions in the United Kingdom. Workers are often aware of their own trade union's history, but lack a general narrative. One reason for this is that the continental European concern with the creation of research institutes, libraries, museums, and archives, has never been a serious influence on Irish labour. Another is that labour underwent a heroic phase of struggle between 1907 and 1923, but from then to the 1950s the movement was bedevilled by internal divisions, from which no one emerged with any great credit. William O'Brien, for example, refused to take his memoirs beyond 1923, although he did not retire as general secretary of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union until 1946.<sup>3</sup> Even today, it suits the trade union leadership to remember 1913 and 1916, and forget about subsequent events.

*Problems of Historiography*

Up to the 1970s the historiography was dominated by a radical pamphleteering tradition, which we might call the Connolly school, and by studies produced by scholars based outside Ireland.

The Connolly school was inaugurated by James Connolly's booklet *Labour in Irish History* (1910), and informed by this and other Connolly writings. Connolly wrote very much in the style of the Marxist strand in the first wave of European labour historiography. In other words, his primary focus was not on organizations; he wrote "people's history" from a radical perspective. More than that, he wrote from an anti-imperialist perspective, arguing that in Ireland the social and national struggles were complimentary. *Labour in Irish History* was followed by a dozen or so pamphlets on labour over the next ten years. Subsequently the tradition was continued more intermittently.

---

chester 1985), 158. To this figure should be added a few percentage points for smaller parties. In recent elections the aggregate left wing vote has risen to 20-25 per cent.

<sup>2</sup>The memory of the lock-out survived partly because of the scale of the dispute: some 25,000 workers were locked out for over four months. Labour leader Jim Larkin's theatrical flair for myth and imagery also ensured that the Dublin conflict was well remembered.

<sup>3</sup>William O'Brien, *Forth the Banners Go* (Dublin 1969).

The handful of other publications from the 1920s to the 1970s may be divided into three categories: a few general studies by scholars based in Britain, the United States, or Germany; a few biographies; and a few official trade union histories. It is fair to say that they had little popular impact. It was typical that probably the best general survey, J. Dunsmore Clarkson, *Labour and Nationalism in Ireland*, was written by an American, published in New York in 1925, and not available in Ireland.

### *Academic Neglect*

Why did Irish academics ignore labour? It has been pleaded that up to the 1970s most university history departments had a staff of no more than four or five, who were expected to teach broad survey courses ranging from the middle ages to the 20th century, and had little time for research. Certainly there were many major mainstream topics that were severely under-researched in the 1970s. Yet, since then staff numbers have grown. Various new fields of enquiry have been established, notably in social and economic history, emigration studies, women's studies, and industrial relations. But there is still not a single person employed as a labour historian in any college or research centre in Ireland.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the explanation reflects an ingrained conservatism. Ciarán Brady, in a defence of the inclusiveness and heterodoxy of what he called "the historical establishment," conceded one exception:

The one partial exception to this rule of inclusiveness is in itself significant. For it is an instance of marginalization within the historical world which neither historians nor the majority of their critics have been anxious to consider, that is of course, Ireland's Marxist historical tradition ... Marxist scholarship has encountered considerable resistance within Irish historiography ... this neglect of Marxism can be associated with the ambivalence of many Marxists toward the problem of Irish nationalism [and] the relative insularity of the Irish debate.<sup>4</sup>

Note the phrase "the problem of Irish nationalism." Most Irish academic historians have seen nationalism as a problem, because it posed a threat to law and order, even if that law and order had no democratic basis and was maintained by British imperialism; and latterly because the old nationalist view of history has been cited as a cause of the violence in Northern Ireland.

Undoubtedly the identification of labour history with the Connolly school led it to be regarded as ideological and subversive, and not a suitable field of enquiry for people who saw themselves as "value free" and, in recent decades, in the front line of the struggle between liberal democracy and the Provisional IRA.

<sup>4</sup>Ciarán Brady, *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism* (Dublin 1994), 15.

### *The ILHS*

The 1970s witnessed a mounting curiosity with the absence of labour from Irish history; on the left at least. As Ireland became predominantly urban and industrial, popular historical interest widened from nation-state building to questions of class and social formation. The ILHS was founded with the affiliation of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and numerous individual unions. From its inception, the society has been reliant on union subvention and the voluntary effort of trade union officials and activists. At the same time it is formally a discrete association and unusual among cognate European societies in being a largely non-academic fraternity and independent of universities or labour institutes. As with most learned societies in Ireland, it operates on an all-island basis. In 1990, with the aid of a state grant, the ILHS was able to acquire a premises that now houses a museum, library, and archive. Subsequently the society was better placed to run courses for trade unionists and conduct archival surveys. Yet it has also become more “institutionalized,” and less evangelical. Branches outside Dublin have collapsed, and little has been done to promote the society or its publication, *Saothar* internationally. In 2001 the ILHS had over 300 individual and 64 corporate members.<sup>5</sup>

Over the past 30 years the profile of labour history has gradually improved. There is now a steady stream of postgraduate research in the field, and about ten labour related courses are offered by universities at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

### *Perceptions*

When the ILHS was founded there existed two normative conceptions of Irish labour history. The first, well worn by the Connolly school, understood the working class as the vanguard of the still uncompleted struggle against imperialism, and considered labour primarily in relation to that dynamic. The second believed that labour history should be about labour and nothing but. The ILHS gravitated towards the second conception. Radical history was felt to be endemically biased. Much of it indeed was poor in quality, and jaded in its endless re-working of the Connolly theme. Connolly’s politics no longer enjoyed an unquestioned status on the left, and a number of those who formed the constituency of the ILHS were attracted to labour history as a post-nationalist terrain. Crucially, the Connolly school had neglected labour organization, the central fascination of the new generation of researchers. The English example was influential too, and the ILHS was conscious of how a form of history that was both objective and engaged had won academic

<sup>5</sup>The latter include 26 trade unions, 22 trade union groups, divisions, or branches, 6 trades councils, 4 labour related bodies, and 6 educational bodies, archives, and libraries. There are in total about 70 trade unions in Ireland.

and socialist acceptance in Britain in the 1960s. Thus, Irish labour history was to be linked organically with the labour movement, but scholarly rather than agitational, to deal primarily with labour, and to serve the intellectual palate of an emerging industrial, secular, and (in the eyes of some at least) post-national society.

Early writing in this new style defined labour history in the strictest sense, and counterposed it with nationalist history. This narrow understanding of labour history drew inspiration from the British academic example. And with an articulate normative conception of the discipline, but no empirically grounded overview, researchers often made assumptions about the course of events from the British experience, applying the familiar periodization of British trade union development to Ireland, and searching for Irish comparisons with the myth of British labour's "forward march." Anglocentrism complimented a more popular and political view of labour history, which existed not as a narrative, but as a template into which the past was to be poured. In 1980, for example, the ILHS convened its biggest ever conference under the title "The Making of the Irish Working Class." The image of Irish labour's past as a "forward march" spangled by nationalism and economic backwardness appealed to an Irish left seduced by modernization theory, and convinced that post-1950s industrialization was finally eliminating those three great enemies of class politics: the priest, the peasant, and the patriot. The avant-garde of a secular, liberal, post-nationalist Ireland wanted a past that would reflect its future.

Undoubtedly this approach has itself been revised over the past twenty years. There is now a corpus of work defining the course and periodization of Irish labour history, and research mentalities are no longer anglocentric.

### *Publications*

Labour historiography commonly evolves through four stages: identification, exploration, overview, and inclusion. Mitchell's and McCarthy's books especially identified the content and method of the subject. Both were novel in providing scholarly accounts of the political and trade union leadership respectively, but limited in being written "from above," Dublin-centred, and narrow in their definition of labour. Digging deeper and wider, subsequent research has become more conscious of workers as well as leaders, rural workers as well as urban, women as well as men, and the provinces as well as Dublin, and sought to push the frontiers back and forth from the Connolly-Larkin era.

John W. Boyle, *The Irish Labor Movement in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington DC, 1988) was the major contribution to further exploration, a magisterial opus of the old school, sternly fixed on labour organization. There have also been two overviews of the course of labour history, but this stage is in its infancy, and writing labour history that is inclusive of general history has yet to be attempted.

Unfortunately, what might be called the fourth wave of labour history — the alternative approaches to the subject associated with journals like *ILWCH* and *History Workshop* — have not much impinged on Ireland. Scholarship remains dog-

gedly empirical, and focused on structures and leaders or movements. Topics like culture, religion, social life and leisure, mentalities, and values have received little attention from labour historians. Most work in these areas has been undertaken by social historians, sociologists, or anthropologists.

*Challenges ahead*

Ireland was not deeply affected by the “crisis” in labour history that emerged after “the fall of the wall” in 1989. You can not lose what you never had. Nonetheless possibilities were missed in that window of opportunity that was the 1970s and 1980s to put the discipline on a stronger scholarly foundation, by establishing academic lectureships or studentships, or a professionally based research centre, archive, or library outside the academy. It is likely that the flow of publications since the 1970s will continue. But most publications will come from occasional scholars who dip into the field and then move on to greener grazing. Without full-time practitioners, progress in method and theory will be slow and patchy.