

Forum Kritika: Performance and Domination

## CONFLICTING COUNTER- HEGEMONIES?: THE DRAMATURGY OF JAMES CONNOLLY AND SEAN O'CASEY

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### Abstract

This paper examines the radicalism of James Connolly through the optic of theatre and performance. In particular, I test his only extant play-script—written shortly before his death—against the hostile critique of the dramatist Seán O'Casey. Despite the biographical similarities between these two men, O'Casey expressed deep disappointment with the climax of Connolly's career as a labor agitator, organizer and revolutionary socialist, criticizing him for having travelled from socialism to nationalism, a journey which O'Casey had seemingly made in reverse. I offer a rereading of Connolly's play to show that the situation is more complex than that envisaged by O'Casey. Although his dramaturgy is indebted to the nationalism of Yeats and Gregory, Connolly is eager to distance his play from the economic and social ordering endorsed by those Abbey Theatre directors. Furthermore, this essay subjects O'Casey's own critique to revision in the light of his own later playwriting. By examining his little-known *Oak Leaves and Lavender* I show that O'Casey was—like Connolly—ready to endorse military action in the name of nationalism, if such action provided the hope of ultimately advancing the cause of the left. The paper concludes with some reflections on O'Casey's late endorsement of English and Welsh nationalisms, by considering how the expression of socialism in colonized Ireland (1890-1916) might contrast with the expression of socialism among expatriate or second-generation Irish men and women in wartime/post-war Britain (1939 onwards). I therefore finish by examining the work of the Connolly Association, the plays of Margaretta D'Arcy and John Arden, and genesis of *The Dubliners*' 1970 LP, *Revolution*, to show how—as the twentieth century continued—the expression of Irish socialism may have continued to develop through contact with very different kinds of national sentiment.

### Keywords

James Connolly, Seán O'Casey, theatre/performance, socialism, nationalism

### **About the Author**

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**IF YOU VISIT THE EDINBURGH FESTIVAL IN THE SUMMER**, you may well find yourself on Cowgate. It is one of the most bustling locations for the event, and here you will discover three very popular late-night bars as well as the Underbelly site that has, in recent years, been the venue for lively performances by a number of reasonably well-known comedians. However, something that is far more difficult to see on Cowgate, but that you might nonetheless notice, is the reasonably small plaque that has been attached to one of the dark and dank walls of the George IV bridge. This plaque says:

To the memory of James Connolly born 5th June 1868 at 107 Cowgate  
renowned international trade union and working class leader  
founder of Irish Socialist Republican Party  
member of provisional government of Irish Republic  
executed 12th May 1916 at Kilmainham Jail Dublin.

James Connolly is one of the most intriguing figures of the revolutionary period in twentieth-century Ireland. Born to Irish parents in Cowgate, in Edinburgh, and at one point a member of the British Army, Connolly strongly denounced imperial force, came to advocate an advanced socialist republicanism in Ireland, and became a prominent labor leader and thinker, with his writings read and admired by figures including Trotsky and Lenin (Ellis 8). After the violent Dublin lockout of 1913, Connolly founded the Irish Citizen Army to protect picket lines from the police and to assist workers who might be threatened by the violence associated with landed or moneyed interests.

But as that plaque in Cowgate indicates, Connolly's story ends with the firing squad at Kilmainham Jail. There is something very fitting and quite poignant about the connection that we find on modern Cowgate between theatrical culture and Connolly. He combined his desire for justice with his ideas about theatre, and his playwriting sets out a number of his developing ideas about how to resist oppression. Nevertheless, the kind of thinking that Connolly articulated in his drama was not without criticism. David Lloyd, for example, describes "a massive counter-reading by revisionist historians for whom his [Connolly's] alliance with those they see as proto-fascist republicans in 1916 constitutes a capitulation to nationalist identity politics and romantic militarism and an effective abandonment of serious socialist principles" (*Why Read* 117). Perhaps the best known of such denunciations came from Seán O'Casey, the playwright who had, like Connolly, experienced poverty and the death of a parent during his youth, and who had similarly supported both socialism and Irish nationalism. O'Casey expressed deep disappointment with the climax of Connolly's career, and criticized Connolly for having journeyed from socialism to nationalism.

At the time of Connolly's birth in 1868, the Cowgate area of Edinburgh had a somewhat different reputation than it has today. Then the locality was deeply

impoverished and had seen a great deal of migration from Ireland as a result of that hungry, mid-century period of devastating famine. The cultural significance of this Irish community is attested to by the fact that migrants here founded the Hibernian football club in Cowgate only seven years after Connolly's birth. Indeed, the area was known as "little Ireland" and was filled with 14,000 Irish men and women packed into the kind of slum tenements whose Dublin equivalents Seán O'Casey would famously describe in his trilogy of early plays (Nevin 5). For a poor youth living in Cowgate, then, joining the British Army may have seemed like less of a career choice than an essential escape route. Like Seán O'Casey, Connolly had a brother who joined up, and in 1882 (as a 14-year-old) Connolly followed the fraternal example by enlisting in the King's Liverpool Regiment, probably under a false name and giving an incorrect date of birth (Nevin 15). During the seven ensuing years spent in the army, Connolly may have served in Ireland in the Cork area, in Castlebar, at the Curragh, and in Dublin: as Nevin writes, "It is an intriguing thought that Connolly may well have been among the soldiers of the regiment who were dispatched to Belfast in 1886 to quell serious sectarian riots in the city. It is probable too that Connolly was among the troops who took part in the celebration of Queen Victoria's jubilee in Dublin in 1887" (Nevin 16-17). But Connolly deserted in 1888 or 1889, perhaps because of the threat of being sent to India (a place that he repeatedly dwells upon in his later writing). By 1890 he was living in Dundee, and actively engaged in trade-union activity, and later in the year he was mixing in socialist circles in Edinburgh. By 1892 he was active in the Scottish Socialist Federation and by the following year, the 25-year-old Connolly became active in Keir Hardie's Independent Labour Party (Nevin 33-4).

In this way, by his early adulthood the boy from Cowgate had connected the impoverished situation of his own upbringing with a set of broader struggles against capitalism and against imperialism, and both his family background and his military service had made him acutely aware of conditions in Ireland, where Connolly returned in 1896 after Keir Hardie had launched the Dublin branch of the Independent Labour Party. Connolly lived in the Irish capital, where he founded the Irish Socialist Republican Party and the socialist paper the *Workers' Republic* (Nevin 59). But although based in Dublin, he continued to think and act as an internationalist: in 1902 he conducted lecture tours of England, Scotland, and the USA. When splits appeared in his Irish Socialist Republican Party in 1903, he moved for seven years to the USA, where he joined the Socialist Labor Party of America, the Socialist Party of America, and the International Workers of the World. In his journalism, his interests were similarly wide ranging, discussing the political situation in Germany, India, South Africa and elsewhere. But in the USA, Connolly confessed that he was "always dreaming of Ireland, dreaming of going home" (qtd. in Nevin 315). By 1910, then, Connolly had returned once more to Ireland, where he worked with James Larkin in leading the Irish Transport and General Workers

Union, before co-founding the Irish Citizen Army in order to protect workers from violence during future strike action.

Yet despite all of these socialist connections, by the time of Easter 1916, Connolly was hailed by the leader of the middle-class Irish Volunteers, Patrick Pearse (a man who notoriously rode on the trams in defiance of the striking transport workers during the 1913 Dublin lockout), as “the guiding brain of our resistance” (qtd. in Ellis 31). Finally, Connolly’s execution in Kilmainham Jail, strapped to a chair because of the gunfire that had torn through his leg during the fighting, secured him a permanent martyr’s place in the hearts of nationalist Ireland, leaving scholars with—as Jonathan Githens-Mazer points out—a central set of uncertainties when discussing Connolly:

To what extent was Connolly a nationalist first and a socialist second or vice versa? Debates over his reasons for committing the Irish Citizens [sic] Army to and personally participating in the Easter Rising have been a focus for this question: was this part of a personal transformation into a romantic cultural nationalist, *à la* Patrick Pearse, or was it part of a systematic adaptation of Irish political symbols for a universal socialist project? (Githens-Mazer 86)

During the final weeks of his life, Connolly turned to the theatre in order to articulate his ideas about his developing revolutionary thinking, when he wrote and staged a play called *Under Which Flag?*. The plotline and timing of this premiere appears to confirm that Connolly had indeed abandoned socialism for nationalism. From January 1916, Connolly had known that he would help lead that real-life revolt for Irish independence at April 1916, and on 26 March he interrupted his preparations in order to produce his drama on the stage at Liberty Hall, the Dublin headquarters of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. The play is set during the insurrectionary year of 1867. It tells of a 21-year-old man who feels tempted to enroll in the British army, before eventually realizing that the correct course of action is to join the nationalist insurgents and fight against the British in that year’s ill-fated Fenian rebellion. The play concludes with this character and his fellow Irish rebels leaving the stage to fight British imperialism. Of course, life imitated art very shortly afterwards. On 24 April 1916, less than four weeks after Connolly’s play was performed, he and his comrades themselves left home to fight against British rule and to establish the headquarters of an Irish Republic at the General Post Office in Dublin.

Connolly’s play and his subsequent participation in the rebellion won little admiration from Seán O’Casey, a playwright who had himself experienced the poverty of another of the kingdom’s major cities: O’Casey had been born in Dublin in 1880, suffered throughout childhood with an infectious eye-disease associated with poor living conditions, and saw his family fortunes decline perilously upon the death of his father in 1886. Like Connolly, O’Casey became associated with



both nationalism and socialism, but whereas Connolly was a socialist to begin with, O'Casey was first and foremost drawn to nationalist organizations, joining the Gaelic League in about 1900 and the Irish Republican Brotherhood in about 1905. Subsequently, however, O'Casey found that socialism provided him with a more powerful political motivation: after being sacked by the Great Northern Railway in 1911, he started writing for James Larkin's union newspaper the *Irish Worker*. He then worked to bring humanitarian assistance to striking workers during the 1913 Dublin lockout; and afterwards helped to found the Irish Citizen Army alongside Connolly (although O'Casey resigned from the organization after a row about whether Connolly's friend, the aristocratic Countess Markievicz, should be acting as the organization's treasurer). Having moved his primary sympathies from nationalism to socialism, O'Casey identified something tragically misplaced and inadequate in Connolly's final political stance. O'Casey had personally helped to erect the Liberty Hall stage in 1912 where Connolly's play premiered, and in 1916 O'Casey was unimpressed by what he saw there, declaring "*Under Which Flag?*" blundered in a sentimental way over a stage in the Hall in a green limelight, shot with tinsel stars' (*Autobiographies* 646). O'Casey explained that the play was "a terrible, silly, sentimental thing [...] for he [Connolly] hadn't a glimmer of the artist in his whole make-up" (*Letters* 438). Similarly, in 1919, when O'Casey published a prose history called *The Story of the Irish Citizen Army*, he considered Connolly as a leader who sold out the cause of Labour at Easter 1916. In that history, O'Casey argues that Connolly had followed ideas "which were, in many instances, directly contrary to his life-long teaching of Socialism," claiming the siren call of Irish nationalism ultimately proved "in his ears a louder cry than the appeal of the Internationale" (qtd. in Ó Cathasaigh, *The Story of the Irish Citizen Army* 55). O'Casey's later, famous Dublin trilogy gives a still harsher critique of Connolly, with that celebrated play of 1926, *The Plough and the Stars*, castigating Connolly as the figure who directly coaxes men to their death, away from the love and comfort of home life. At one point, the play's main female character rages at her husband: "Is General Connolly an' th' Citizen Army goin' to be your only care?" (O'Casey, *Plays* 189)

Yet, if we look at the play *Under Which Flag?* we find a more complicated picture than that acknowledged in those words of O'Casey. In some respects, of course, O'Casey was correct to identify Irish nationalism as the dominant force that influenced the final weeks of Connolly's life, and we can find evidence of this at a formal level in *Under Which Flag?*. Connolly's play obviously follows the story-arc of Yeats and Gregory's play of 1902, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, which is perhaps the twentieth-century's best known theatrical depiction of Irish nationalism, and which tells of a young man from a peasant cottage going to sacrifice his life during the rebellion of 1798 on behalf of Irish independence. In his own play, Connolly used a setting and plot that strongly recalled *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, with the action of *Under Which Flag?* revolving around a peasant cottage at a time of rebellion,

and showing how the young son of the household might eventually be cajoled into fighting against British rule and into sacrificing his own life for the benefit of his nation.

Connolly's decision to echo that play by Yeats and Gregory might appear to support O'Casey's argument that Connolly had sold out the cause of socialism in the spring of 1916. After all, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* depends upon Yeats and Gregory foregrounding an alternative idea of what the national might be: that is, Irish sovereignty rather than British sovereignty over Ireland. But surely, it seems, a socialist such as Connolly ought to have started out by operating elsewhere on the scalar hierarchy altogether, looking to supranational entities and affiliations in a way that challenged the very national imperatives upon which Yeats and Gregory made their case.

This was not, however, how Connolly saw the situation. As early as 1899 he used the *Workers' Republic* to state his position about international policy:

Scientific revolutionary Socialism teaches us that Socialism can only be realized when Capitalism has reached its zenith of development; that consequently the advance of nations industrially undeveloped into the capitalistic stage of industry is a thing highly to be desired, since such advance will breed a revolutionary proletariat in such countries and force forward here the political freedom necessary for the speedy success of the Socialist movement; and finally, that as colonial expansion and the conquest of new markets are necessary for the prolongation of the life of capitalism, the prevention of colonial expansion and the loss of markets to countries capitalistically developed, such as England, precipitates economic crises there, and so gives an impulse to revolutionary thought and helps to shorten the period required to develop backward countries and thus prepare the economic conditions needed for our triumph. (134)

That is to say that, long before any plans for rebellion, Connolly had formulated a position that meant he hoped for the defeat of England in a number of global arenas, but that such hopes did not necessarily depend upon any nationalist reasoning. For Connolly, England was the most capitalistically developed country in Europe and so every market lost by England, or every sphere of influence captured by England's enemies, could potentially shorten the life of capitalism itself. He acknowledged that such socialist arguments might indeed chime with the thinking of nationalists, but that his intellectual justification started from a different place to that of figures such as Pearse, even if the coincidence of their conclusion was something to be celebrated. As Connolly put it:

The mere fact that the inherited (and often unreasoning) anti-British sentiment of a chauvinist Irish patriot impels him to the same conclusion as we arrived

at as the result of our economic studies does not cause us to shrink from proclaiming our position, but rather leads us to rejoice that our propaganda is thus made all the easier. (*Socialism and Imperialism* 135)

Socialist justice and nationalist justice, for Connolly then, were not binary terms, but provided two different ways of reaching the same conclusion.

Hence, when Connolly wrote *Under Which Flag?*, although he follows the broad contours of the nationalist storyline that Yeats and Gregory had scripted, there are some important distinctions. Most notably, perhaps, in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* the Catholic household that is presented is a rather commercially minded one. The parents in the Gillane family are greedily anticipating the marriage of their son Michael because his would-be bride, Delia, will bring a “fortune” with her as a dowry, which will secure the family’s status as peasant proprietors. Peter, the father of this household, relishes his memory of bartering over the marriage, declaring, “I made the bargain well for you, Michael.” And Peter evidently enjoys the memory of his deal-breaker, exulting in his demand that: “the whole hundred pounds must be in Michael’s hands before he brings your daughter to the house” (Yeats 84-5). Lionel Pilkington, in his excellent study *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland*, has pointed out that:

It is this projected alliance that motivates Michael’s father to plan the purchase of a further ten acres for stock, and that inspires Michael’s mother to consider educating their younger son, Patrick, as a priest. Peasant *arrivistes* in the thrall of Roman Catholicism and plotting social Ascendancy was Irish unionism’s appalling vista. But what forestalls this traumatic prospect is the play’s nationalist call to arms. (32)

As Pilkington emphasizes, the plotline of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* therefore fits with an interpretation of the Abbey theatre that sees the playhouse as promoting an essentially quietest view of nationalism, in which nationalist energy is prevented from becoming an engine of radical social change.

By contrast, Connolly had written elsewhere to denounce the commodification of women in peasant communities<sup>1</sup> and in *Under Which Flag?* the O’Donnell family have taken their son’s prospective wife, Mary, into the house without hope of any resultant financial benefit. Mary has been similarly cherished by the wider community, receiving “presents galore from I think every family in the parish—even from them that had little to spare for themselves” (*Under Which Flag* 120). As Connolly’s play progresses, the Irish peasant woman is shown to have an importance that far outstrips her economic significance, and Mary’s volition becomes central to the drama in a way that contrasts with the entirely passive Delia in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. As Spurgeon Thompson puts it:



Connolly places in the mouth of the poorest, most thoroughly dispossessed character on stage a critique of the middle class character of the Fenian Rising. A town-orientated organization that had little membership among people like Mary, a dispossessed, doubly subaltern orphan who makes her living by weaving wool products, the Fenians failed not only because their timing was bad but also because they built no base of support among the population. (20)

In *Under Which Flag?*, Mary's decision about whether or not to become a British informer dominates the central scene, and it is her renewed nationalism, rather than the arrival of any phantasmal old women, that in turn leads Frank into fighting for Ireland. If the rural cottage in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* gave its ascendancy authors the comforting impression that the aspirations of the Catholic peasantry would be thwarted, and that the Gillanes and their ilk would be diverted from scampering up the social ladder, Connolly chose to replicate the setting in order to celebrate his idea of a rural community where men and women were valued as more than merely economic units, and where even the most apparently marginalized figure might play a pivotal role in the development of a more just society. As David Lloyd has argued, in some of Connolly's writings, "Connolly seems to have in mind the more substantial claim that a memory of an alternative system of property persists in the Irish consciousness, particularly among the peasantry, and that it has substantial political effect" (*Irish Times* 109).

Connolly's depiction of communal solidarities interestingly anticipates the centrality of women to the organic life of the tenements depicted in O'Casey's Dublin trilogy. O'Casey's very different characters of Minnie Powell, Juno Boyle, and Nora Clitheroe are central to the action of their respective plays and make key decisions based on moral imperatives that often have little to do with the accumulation of personal wealth. Nevertheless, Seán O'Casey felt disappointed with Connolly's playwriting, and felt that Connolly had failed to resolve the clash between socialist and nationalist imperatives. We can find O'Casey's riposte in his well-known play of 1926, *The Plough and the Stars*, which, as I have described elsewhere, contains a number of direct and indirect attacks on Connolly<sup>2</sup>. However, if we look more closely at O'Casey's other writings we find that his position was more nuanced than that outlined in *The Plough and the Stars*. In a little-known pamphlet of poetry that he wrote in 1918, O'Casey described Connolly as someone whose 'teachings true in Ireland soon / Shall flourish like the flowers in June' (*More Wren Songs* 6). And even in the generally negative assessment of Connolly that O'Casey includes in the prose history *The Story of the Irish Citizen Army*, O'Casey still describes Connolly as a "broad and noble soul" (*The Story of the Irish Citizen Army* 55).

Furthermore, when O'Casey visited Wales in 1937, more than two decades after the Dublin rebellion, he felt thrilled to find a 1916-style nationalist movement, allowing him to advocate exactly the course of action that he had condemned in

Dublin. He wrote: "Here I am, getting the sea breezes, & the mountain air, & trying to persuade the Welsh people I meet that Wales should, must break away from England, & establish her own independence. National Freedom must, unfortunately, come before Communism" (O'Casey, *Letters* 677). After that trip he described how:

We have just come back from a six week's ramble in North Wales, where there is a movement growing like the movement that grew in Ireland years ago, & startled England in 1916. The Nationalist Movement is growing in Wales, rank hatred of England is spreading amongst the young, & I have spoken to many young people with a "fierce light in their eyes" . . . I have impressed on all young (& old) Nationalists I met, that Communism isn't against Nationality, but will always help, instancing China's Red Army going into action against Japan. (*Letters* 681)

Here O'Casey supports Connolly's earlier approach, arguing—as Connolly had done before the Easter Rising—that the energies of nationalist enthusiasm might prove a useful ally in the broader workers' cause, and that it might be legitimate to support a nationalist battle because that battle might bring about the aims of the left.

In playwriting terms, perhaps the clearest example of how O'Casey came to follow Connolly's logic comes in a later script, written and set during the Second World War, called *Oak Leaves and Lavender*. This is far from O'Casey's best or best-known work, and it is hardly ever seen on stage, but it is revealing in terms of O'Casey's evolving ideas about political action. In the play, the hero of the piece (who is broadly modeled on O'Casey's own son) is a second-generation Irishman called Drishogue, who urges others to fight and die "for England." Drishogue is then asked by his friend Edgar "Which England? There are so many of them: Conservative England, Liberal England, Labour England, and your own Communist England—for which of them shall I go forth to fight and, perchance to die?" Drishogue replies:

For all of them in the greatness of England's mighty human soul set forth in what Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, and Milton sang; in the mighty compass of Darwin's mind, sweeping back to the beginning and stretching forward to the end; for what your Faraday did in taming the lightning to stream quietly about in the service of man; and, if these be indifferent things to you, then fight and die, if need be, in the halo of healing from the tiny light carried in the lovely, delicate hands of Florence Nightingale. Go forth to fight, perchance to die, for the great human soul of England. (*Plays* 29)

It may look rather strange for a playwright like O'Casey to be writing such a patriotic hymn to English values and to fighting for England. O'Casey was, after all, a former member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood who had originally made

his name by writing plays that included a scathing depiction of English soldiers in Ireland. Admittedly, O'Casey's eldest son now faced National Service in the British Army, which may have altered the playwright's perspective, but O'Casey also perhaps thought, just as Connolly had done, that a wartime context led to a certain rethinking about what the immediate political priorities might be (Murray 286-7). O'Casey knew that it wasn't the case that "neutral Ireland" had simply retreated in the face of fascist onslaught, but that, rather, Irish families like his own in the UK and USA had set about making the gravest sacrifices for the war effort. Although O'Casey had felt rather differently during the First World War, by the 1940s he came to believe that if the crisis meant temporarily supporting England in order to counter a greater evil then so be it. He now described how there was honor to be found in a certain sense of Englishness, as Drishogue's paean to Florence Nightingale and others was designed to show.

However, at the end of *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, the audience is shown that the support for an English nationalism has been given in order to advance a broader, socialist cause. Drishogue and Edgar each become RAF pilots, the "hearts of oak" who fight and die in order to defend England, but after these two pilots have been killed, at the very end of the play, O'Casey portrays the Red Army triumphantly joining the battle. He writes, "British people, the Red Army's with us now! To work! Tanks for us and for them; planes for them and for us; guns for us and for them! To arms! To work!" (*Plays* IV 104).

The intriguing message at the end of the play, then, is that through the arrival of the USSR there is the chance of equality and justice, but the characters have had to go through the battles of nationalism first. In a period of international war, the cause of nationalism and the possibilities of wider, global justice and solidarity are not entirely distinct, and one might lead to another. The script concludes with the idea that "Hearts of oak don't last; so hearts of steel we are!," an allusion to the fact that those "hearts of oak," the British forces fighting Hitler, needed reinforcement from the "man of steel," Joseph Stalin (*Plays* IV 107). Thus, nationalist and internationalist impulses are conjoined by the end of O'Casey's play, just as I have argued that the two impulses were combined by Connolly in *Under Which Flag?*. For all O'Casey's famous lambasting of Connolly, O'Casey did come to agree with a broadly similar approach. Ultimately, neither man can be easily characterized as swerving towards nationalism and away from socialism: in their work the two impulses are interlaced in a far more complex way. As David Lloyd puts it, "Regaining a sense of how, from the mid-1890s on, Connolly understood the inseparability of national and social questions a principle from which he never deviated allows us to estimate what was lost in the effective silencing of radical labor movements in 1920s Ireland and in the defeat and execution of so many left republicans in the civil war" (*Why Read* 118).

But one big clash still apparently remains here. If Connolly in *Under Which Flag?* praised *Irish* nationalism as a necessary corollary to socialism, O'Casey in

*Oak Leaves and Lavender* praises *English* nationalism. Why did O'Casey do this? And does it constitute a contradiction in the thinking of the two men? Perhaps this seeming contrast might be reconciled through some consideration of those post-Civil War historical circumstances described by David Lloyd. Between 1949 and 1961, at the end of his writing career, O'Casey published a series of plays (*Cock-a-Doodle Dandy*, *The Bishop's Bonfire*, *The Drums of Father Ned*, and *Behind the Green Curtains*) that critique and condemn the post-revolutionary Irish state. O'Casey had an acute sense that post-revolutionary Ireland needed a second wave of decolonization. As Victor Merriman has written:

Experience teaches that their struggles [those of anti-colonialists] tend to result in the replacement of one elite by another, as the departing colonizers give way to a nascent indigenous bourgeois class. This outcome thwarts the achievement of a decolonized social order, and typically results in disillusion, voluntary exile or even persecution for some of the most radical persons and groups in the successor state. (18)

For O'Casey, a writer who had seen his own writings repeatedly censored by the Irish authorities, his late plays articulate this need for a second period of decolonization.<sup>3</sup> As one of O'Casey's characters declares in *The Bishop's Bonfire*, "You've escaped from the dominion of the big house with the lion and unicorn on its front; don't let yourselves sink beneath the meaner dominion of the big shop with the cross and shamrock on its gable" (*Plays* V 81).

O'Casey's praise of England in *Oak Leaves and Lavender* may seem paradoxical given his standpoint during the Irish revolution, yet in the mid-twentieth century, what O'Casey highlights as "Communist England" did provide fertile soil for the development of James Connolly's thinking. Of course, O'Casey could be a fierce critic of certain kinds of English identity. For example, the privileged worlds represented by the Oxford graduate and the London businessman are biting satire in his drama *Purple Dust*. But what O'Casey did find in the mid-twentieth century was that, in some parts of England at least, a space for certain kinds of political expression had emerged that contrasted with the silences of the post-colonial Irish state. After all, in Ireland after Connolly, no Labour Party contested the general elections of 1918 and 1921, meaning that Labour was not represented in Dáil Éireann during the final stages of the Irish revolution. The Labour Party did win 14 seats in the general election of 1923, but the party was relatively socially conservative when compared with its counterparts elsewhere in Europe. For example, William Norton and Brendan Coris the party leaders from 1932 to 1977 were both members of the Knights of Saint Columbanus, and Michael Gallagher describes the "cautious, reformist nature" of the party during this period (Gallagher 69, Devine et al 193). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the Connolly Association was founded in 1938 not in Dublin or Cork, but in Doughty Street in



Central London. A local system of branches was then established in major English and Scottish cities including Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, and Glasgow, and the organization then developed a presence in a range of smaller locations such as Portsmouth, Northampton, and Cambridge (“History of the Connolly Association”). Valentin Iremonger records that the Birmingham members of this leftwing organization held weekly meetings, met trains arriving in the city in order to enlist recruits from amongst the newly arrived Irish migrants, and sold the association’s newspaper inside the pubs and outside the church doors of the region. This caused great concern amongst the Dublin government and hierarchy of the Irish Church, which feared that such socialist tendencies might lead towards “godless” communism, and that the Irish in Britain had forsaken the scapular and beads for the hammer and sickle.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the British electorate’s willingness to elect a Labour government in 1945, despite Churchill’s wartime leadership, saw the implementation in the UK of a number of features that had been outlined in the Beveridge report of 1942, and reframed what the terms “national” or “nationalist” might imply. Hence by 1948, the Westminster parliament had passed the “national” insurance act, “national” assistant act, and “national” health service act, establishing a welfare state which although increasingly besieged by the malign conjunction of neoliberal political thinking and free-flowing global capital still manages to fuse a notion of British national pride with a concern for the state’s most vulnerable citizens (as manifested by Danny Boyle’s prominent celebration of the National Health Service during the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics).

One of the problems of the British left, of course, has been a frequent failure to identify and build upon appropriate international solidarities, including the failure of British unions to support Irish strikes such as the Dublin lockout of 1913.<sup>5</sup> Yet in the post-war era, certain Irish men and women came to discover a type of Irish socialism through left-wing affiliations developed in England. For example, Luke Kelly, the lead singer of the Dubliners, travelled to Birmingham as a young man, and lodged with a communist family in the city. Kelly sang with Birmingham’s labour-movement choir, the Birmingham Clarion Singers, and lived in Birmingham with the exiled Dublin communist Seán Ó Maolbhríde, who had abandoned a teaching career in Ireland after clashing with the Church (Geraghty 40).<sup>6</sup> It was perhaps little surprise that, in 1970 the Dubliners released their remarkable LP *Revolution*, an album that includes “The Peat Bog Soldiers,” a song popularized by the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War; as well as a setting of Alfred Hayes’s poem “I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night,” about the union organizer Joe Hill who was executed on a trumped-up murder charge in the USA in 1915.

Similarly, when a play celebrating Connolly’s socialism was staged in Dublin in the mid-1960s, the work had again developed in part through left-wing thinking in England. *The Non-Stop Connolly Show* was premiered at Liberty Hall on 29 March

1965, and the play revealed an international focus similar to that of the Dubliners' *Revolution*. The play ends by picturing Connolly thinking about events

[...] in Russia, China, Cuba, Africa, Vietnam  
 And indeed once more in Ireland, my own home . . .  
 We were the first. We shall not be the last.  
 This was not history. It has not passed (D'Arcy and Arden 106).

The play was of course written by the Yorkshire-born Englishman, John Arden, and London-born Irishwoman, Margaretta D'Arcy. The drama bears the marks of Arden's time at the Royal Court Theatre in London, where he participated in the theatre's new-writers' group alongside playwrights such as Edward Bond and Arnold Wesker.<sup>7</sup> So again, as O'Casey had implied in *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, English nationalism could be tolerated or even celebrated because certain tendencies in the country did provide a route through which Irish socialist sentiments might be developed.

By contrast, in Ireland, James Connolly's posthumous fate has often been characterised by what Merriman calls the thwarted "achievement of a decolonized social order," with Connolly's image forming an ossified centerpiece of a post-British Irish state that, despite paying lip-service to Connolly, has consistently sidelined and expressed hostility towards his brand of socialism (Merriman 18).

I began this essay by describing the Connolly plaque in Cowgate, but a public memorial with more pathos can be found in Dublin. In the Irish capital, the Connolly memorial statue at Beresford Place is located only one block away from the International Financial Service Centre, where, of the worlds "top 50" banks, more than half have operations. One must wonder what the bankers feel as they pass Connolly's statue, just as one must wonder what goes through their minds as they pass the statue memorializing the Irish potato famine that is also on their doorstep. Following the Irish banking crisis, in which Irish banks overextended their borrowing and heavily invested in the housing industry, the Irish state financially intervened to save Irish banks from bankruptcy and foreclosure. The Irish government's banking bailout of 2008 amounted to a colossal sum. Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole states that each Irish family of four will be liable for €200,000 of public debt by 2015, with today's Irish children left paying off these debts for decades to come (O'Toole 10). My own modest proposal would be that the Connolly statue in Dublin could usefully be re-engraved to include the sentiments that he urged in 1899; that the working class ought to be:

resolved that capitalist society, which starved and stunted our childhood, and debases and exploits our manhood, shall, at least, be compelled to take its clutches off the lives of our children and leave the rising generation

physically and mentally capable of accomplishing the glorious task of social reconstruction now awaiting it. (Connolly "A Plea for the Children")

## Notes

1. See Connolly, "The Reconquest of Ireland" 296.
2. See Moran 53-4.
3. In 1934 the state banned his collection *Windfalls*; between 1939 and 1947 the state banned two volumes of O'Casey's autobiographies; in the 1950s all copies of his essay collection *The Green Crow* were mysteriously impounded by the Irish customs office; and in the 1960s the Irish government warned the Abbey Theatre and RTÉ television against allowing O'Casey's work to be seen during the golden jubilee of the Easter Rising.
4. See National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs, 402/222.
5. See Lloyd, *Irish Times* 106.
6. I am grateful to Annie Smith and the Birmingham Clarion Singers for this information.
7. The Royal Court staged Arden's *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* only one month after staging Seán O'Casey's play *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* on 17 September 1959, with O'Casey warning the theatre that "*Cock-a-Doodle Dandy*, being a criticism of Lourdes, will probably raise a storm" (see Roberts, 63, 72).

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