

JAMES CONNOLLY

James Connolly. By Desmond Ryan (Labour Publishing Company. Paper 2s. 6d., cloth 5s.).

DESMOND RYAN has made a brave effort and it is more his misfortune than his fault if his book fails to be the ideal life of James Connolly, for which many would gladly spend twice the price of this present volume. It is not a bad book by any means. Great care has been taken with it and the numerous and apposite quotations from Connolly's various writings help to maintain its interest as well as its value. Moreover Ryan's sympathy with the subject is shown on every page and in several places his first hand acquaintance with the facts and personalities incidental to his narrative breaks through even in spite of himself. The loving description, for instance, of Con Colbert (executed as one of the leaders of Easter Week), with its vivid little memories of St. Endor's school, could only have come from direct experience.

The book, too, contains many details (probably all the most diligent search could recover of the facts of Connolly's life,) and deals more or less conclusively with every aspect of his propaganda and policy. Certainly for want of any better biography of James Connolly this one should be read, and no better one has yet been written.

Yet for all that one puts the book down unsatisfied. It is not, I repeat, a bad book—either in point of style or arrangement; and the facts (or most of them) are all there. Yet after reading it through a second time to find what was wrong with it, I am forced to the conclusion that it is not a *good* life of James Connolly for the plain reason that the author could not without working a miracle prevent himself from sub-consciously spoiling his own work.

The book is dedicated "to all who fell in the Irish Civil War, June, 1922—April, 1923"; and this is the clue to the whole mischief. If Desmond Ryan had sat down in 1916 and written, hot after Easter Week, a description of James Connolly as he had known him and what he stood for, and how he

fought his great fight for Ireland, the book might have been a good deal less of a magazine of biographical information, but it would have been a much more lifelike (and therefore useful) book about the man Connolly. If it had been compiled at odd moments and finished in the rough amid the thrills and turmoils of the battle against the Black and Tans it would have contained all that it does and much more of the living soul.

But—it wasn't. And only those who had thrilled to see the flag of the Irish Republic flying in battle against the historic foe; who, schooled in the faith of Patrick Pearse, had seen his cause grow in the face of stupendous odds until an Irish Republican Army could extort a truce and a treaty from the British Empire freshly victorious over its continental foe—only those could or can understand all the terror and the tragedy and numbing disillusionment of the dark days indicated in that dedication. He meant to write a life of James Connolly and a description of his works, but the very subject forced him to think of Cathal Brugha, scarred all over with the wounds received in 1916, falling riddled again and fatally before the guns of the very men he had led in Easter Week—of Liam Mellows dead before an Irish execution squad, of Liam Lynch dead on the hill-side, and De Valera, whom no English prison could hold, a prisoner in the hands of an army commanded by one of the few who, with him, rose in Easter Week.

Desmond Ryan is too close to the events and the personalities of the drama to disentangle the objective facts from his subjective valuations. Try as he will he cannot do the impossible. He cannot pretend to be impartial, and reverence for the dead prevents him being candid. The result is that he slurs over the very things upon which we have the most need for enlightenment. Moreover he is to his misfortune very little grounded in Marxism and only in Marxism can be found the real explanation of James Connolly.

The great problem which every

biographer of Connolly must unriddle lies in the paradox that the revolutionary internationalist was the one nationalist leader who spurred on all the others to make a national rising inevitable and so quicken into life the greatest nationalist revival that modern Ireland has known.

The answer is simple provided your Marxism is good enough. The Russian Revolution—less than twelve months after Easter Week—is, if you have the clue, Connolly's vindication. Patrick Pearse held with mystical fervour to the faith that a blood-offering—an atoning sacrifice—was needed to save the soul of Ireland. Connolly had no such illusion. But he did know as Lenin knew that there are worse things

than death. "If there is a 25 per cent. chance of success for a proletarian Revolution, Lenin will take it," said one of his comrades. And James Connolly's mind and temper was much nearer to that of Lenin's than many seem to realise. It is not impossible that the desperate venture of assaulting the British Empire with the force and arms of 700 men all told may have set in train the series of consequences that stand expressed to-day in the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics.

And when at long last the Workers' Republic of Ireland is included in that Union James Connolly will be valued, and his Blood Atonement appraised, each at their proper worth.

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