

# **LABOUR IN IRISH HISTORY**

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Labour in Irish history by James Connolly

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**JAMES CONNOLLY**

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## FOREWORD

In her great work, "The Making of Ireland and its Undoing," the only contribution to Irish history we know of which conforms to the methods of modern historical science, the authoress, Mrs. Stopford Green, dealing with the effect upon Ireland of the dispersion of the Irish race in the time of Henry VIII. and Elizabeth, and the consequent destruction of Gaelic culture, and rupture with Gaelic tradition and law, says that the Irishmen educated in schools abroad abandoned or knew nothing of the lore of ancient Erin, and had no sympathy with the spirit of the Brehon Code, nor with the social order of which it was the juridical expression. She says they "urged the theory, *so antagonistic to the immemorial law of Ireland*, that only from polluted sinks of heretics could come the idea that the people might elect a ruler, and confer supreme authority on whomsoever pleased them." In other words the new Irish, educated in foreign standards, had adopted as their own the feudal-capitalist system of which England was the exponent in Ireland, and urged it upon the

Gaelic Irish. As the dispersion of the clans, consummated by Cromwell, finally completed the ruin of Gaelic Ireland, all the higher education of Irishmen thenceforward ran in this foreign groove, and was coloured with this foreign colouring.

In other words, the Gaelic culture of the Irish chieftainry was rudely broken off in the seventeenth century, and the continental Schools of European despots implanted in its place in the minds of the Irish students, and sent them back to Ireland to preach a fanatical belief in royal and feudal prerogatives, as foreign to the genius of the Gael as was the English ruler to Irish soil. What a light this sheds upon Irish history of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries! And what a commentary it is upon the real origin of that so-called "Irish veneration for the aristocracy," of which the bourgeois charlatans of Irish literature write so eloquently! That veneration is seen to be as much of an exotic, as much of an importation, as the aristocratic caste it venerated. Both were

". . . foul foreign blossoms  
Blown hither to poison our plains."

But so deeply has this insidious lie about the aristocratic tendencies of the Irish taken root in Irish thought that it will take a long time to eradicate it from the minds of the people, or to make the Irish realise that the whole

concept of orthodox Irish history for the last 200 years was a betrayal and abandonment of the best traditions of the Irish race. Yet such is undoubtedly the case. Let us examine this a little more closely !

Just as it is true that a stream cannot rise above its source, so it is true that a national literature cannot rise above the moral level of the social conditions of the people from whom it derives its inspiration. If we would understand the national literature of a people we must study their social and political status, keeping in mind the fact that their writers were a product thereof, and that the children of their brains were conceived and brought forth in certain historical conditions. Ireland at the same time as she lost her ancient social system, also lost her language as the vehicle of thought of those who acted as her leaders. As a result of this twofold loss the nation suffered socially, nationally and intellectually from a prolonged arrested development. During the closing years of the seventeenth century, all the eighteenth, and the greater part of the nineteenth, the Irish people were the lowest nelets in Europe, socially and politically. The Irish peasant, reduced from the position of a free clansman owning his tribelands and controlling its administration in common with his fellows, was a mere tenant-at-will subject to eviction, dishonour and outrage at the hands of an irresponsible private proprietor. Politically



he was non-existent, legally he held no rights, intellectually he sank under the weight of his social abasement, and surrendered to the downward drag of his poverty. He had been conquered, and he suffered all the terrible consequences of defeat at the hands of a ruling class and nation who have always acted upon the old Roman maxim of "Woe to the vanquished."

To add to his humiliation, those of his name and race who had contrived to escape the general ruin, and sent their children to be educated in foreign schools, discovered with the return of those "wild geese" to their native habitat that they who had sailed for France, Italy or Spain, filled with hatred of the English Crown and of the English landlord garrison in Ireland, returned as mere Catholic adherents of a pretender to the English throne, using all the prestige of their foreign schooling to discredit the Gaelic ideas of equality and democracy, and instead instilling into the minds of the growing generation feudal ideas of the divine right of kings to rule, and of subjects to unquestioningly obey. The Irish students in the universities of the Continent were the first products of a scheme which the Papacy still pursues with its accustomed skill and persistence—a persistence which reckes little of the passing of centuries—a scheme which looks upon Catholic Ireland simply as a tool to be used for the spiritual re-conquest of England to

Catholicity. In the eighteenth century this scheme did its deadliest work in Ireland. It failed ridiculously to cause a single Irish worker in town or country to strike a blow for the Stuart cause in the years of the Scottish Rebellions in 1715 and 1745, but it prevented them from striking any blows for their own cause, or from taking advantage of the civil feuds of their enemies. It did more. It killed Gaelic Ireland; an Irish-speaking Catholic was of no value as a missionary of Catholicism in England, and an Irish peasant who treasured the tongue of his fathers might also have some reverence for the principles of the social polity and civilisation under which his forefathers had lived and prospered for unnumbered years. And such principles were even more distasteful to French, Spanish or Papal patrons of Irish schools of learning on the Continent than they were to English monarchs. Thus the poor Irish were not only pariahs in the social system of their day, but they were also precluded from hoping for a revival of intellectual life through the achievements of their children. Their children were taught to despise the language and traditions of their fathers.

It was at or during this period, when the Irish peasant had been crushed to the very lowest point, when the most he could hope for was to be pitied as animals are pitied; it was during this period Irish literature in English was born. Such Irish literature was not written for Irish-

men as a real Irish literature would be, it was written by Irishmen, about Irishmen, but for English or Anglo-Irish consumption.

Hence the Irishman in English literature may be said to have been born with an apology in his mouth. His creators knew nothing of the free and independent Irishman of Gaelic Ireland, but they did know the conquered, robbed, slave-driven, brutalised, demoralised Irishman, the product of generations of landlord and capitalist rule, and him they seized upon, held up to the gaze of the world, and asked the nations to accept as the true Irish type.

If he crouched before a representative of royalty with an abject submission born of a hundred years of political outlawry and training in foreign ideas, his abasement was pointed to proudly as an instance of the "ancient Celtic fidelity to hereditary monarchs;" if with the memory of perennial famines, evictions, jails, hangings, and tenancy-at-will beclouding his brain he humbled himself before the upper class, or attached himself like a dog to their personal fortunes, his sycophancy was cited as a manifestation of "ancient Irish veneration for the aristocracy," and if long-continued insecurity of life begat in him a fierce desire for the ownership of a piece of land to safeguard his loved ones in a system where land was life, this new-born land-hunger was triumphantly trumpeted forth as a proof of the "Irish attachment to the principle of private property." Be it under-