

IRELAND AND THE LEFT IN AN AGE OF REVOLUTION



Ireland is one of the few European countries, where the left has been marginalised and it has played only a peripheral role in shaping the new Irish state that emerged in 1922. In an age of revolution, the left and the labour movement found it impossible to assert itself against conservative nationalism and too often complied with the demand that it should wait until the ‘national question’ could be resolved. In Peadar O’Donnell’s memorable phrase, Labour “confused the prompter’s stool with a place on the stage”. The aim of this series of six talks is to examine the role of the left from 1880 to 1930, from the Land War to the establishment of the Irish Free State. The left and its failure to find a voice in the new Irish state will be explored through six notable figures who attempted to bridge the gulf between Irish nationalism and socialism. Each session will look not only at the lives of these six individuals but also at how the left was marginalised in the most turbulent period in modern Irish history.

The course, which is online, is open to everyone and no previous knowledge of Irish history is necessary. The link to enrol is:

<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/continuing-education/choose-your-course/programme/ireland,and,the,left,in,an,age,of,revolution,michael,davitt/>

Michael Davitt -Tuesday 5th October at 7pm

More than other notable figure from the Irish nationalist left, Michael Davitt's early life inspired his politics and spoke of suffering, endurance and resilience. Born in the midst of the Famine, his family were evicted by their landlord because they were in arrears with the rent. The family moved to Lancashire where, aged nine, he started work in a cotton mill and, two years later, lost his right arm in an industrial accident. He became active in the Fenian movement and was sentenced to a fifteen-year prison sentence which he served in harsh conditions. These experiences forged a fierce determination to fight oppression and injustice. He was instrumental in founding the Land League to fight for a fair land dispensation for Ireland's tenant farmers and impoverished rural working-class. His influence as a nationalist leader, campaigner for land reform, writer and politician has been widely underrated but his story is one of the most inspiring in Irish history.

James Larkin – Tuesday 2nd November at 7pm

Like Michael Davitt, Jim Larkin's personal experience of poverty while growing up in Liverpool drove his relentless energy for social justice and the transformation of society through militant working-class struggle. Larkin succeeded where many had failed in organising unskilled workers into Ireland's first 'One Big Union', the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. In 1913 he led the union in an epic struggle in the Dublin Lockout and, with James Connolly, founded the Irish Citizen Army. Larkin is now seen as a divisive figure but, by his charisma and sheer energy, he had the ability to inspire those who had been previously ignored by the political elite and the trade union movement. In the words of Constance Markievicz "his personality caught up, assimilated and threw back to the vast crowd that surrounded him every emotion that swayed them, every pain and joy that they had ever felt made articulate and sanctified".

Sean O'Casey – Tuesday 7th December at 7pm

Sean O'Casey was born to a Protestant working-class family in Dublin. He was attracted to politics initially through his interest in Gaelic culture and the Irish language, but his conversion to socialism was triggered by the Dublin Lockout after which he was blacklisted and became unemployable. He was briefly involved in the formation of the Irish Citizen Army, and famously fell out with Countess Markiewicz. However, his legacy is not that of a political activist but as a writer and playwright who was willing to take on contentious issues that other writers ignored. In what is thought of as his greatest play, *The Plough and the Stars*, he explores the conflict between the lives of working-class people living hand-to-mouth in the Dublin slums and a narrow conservative nationalism that takes no account of their interests.

James Connolly - Date in January to be arranged.

James Connolly is an iconic figure in Irish nationalism. Known as much for the manner of his death following the Easter Rising as for his political accomplishments. For Connolly, independence was about far more than breaking the link with Britain. He opposed conservative nationalism, arguing that for the working-class “a change from Toryism to Sinn Feinism would simply be a change from the devil they do know to the devil they do not.” But in the end, he and the Citizen Army he led, joined with nationalists in a rebellion that led to the kind of independence he had feared and predicted. Yet, his searing analysis of the limitations and the debilitating effect of nationalism has stood the test of time.

Constance Markiewicz – Date in February to be arranged

Constance Markiewicz, ‘The Red Countess’ was born to one of Ireland’s leading Anglo-Irish families, the Gore-Booths. Yet her life was marked by a rejection of comfort, privilege and position. Both she and her sister, Eve Gore-Booth, became involved in radical politics and she played a leading role in the Irish Citizen Army and

was the only woman sentenced to death (commuted to life imprisonment) for her role in the Easter Rising. She was also the first woman to be elected to the House of Commons and the first female cabinet minister in the pre-independence Irish government. Throughout her life, Constance Markiewicz refused to be defined by restrictions of gender or class and, for that, attracted much criticism and many detractors. However, Sean O'Casey, not one of her greatest admirers, said of her: "One thing she had in abundance — physical courage; with that she was clothed as with a garment"

Peadar O'Donnell – Date in March to be arranged

Peadar O'Donnell was a republican, revolutionary socialist, intellectual and writer. He was politically active from a young age, as an organiser for the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. He went on to become an IRA leader in the War of Independence and on the anti-Treaty side in the Civil War, and later a founding member of the Republican Congress, an attempt to forge a socialist republican movement. He was a prolific writer and journalist and produced memoirs, novels, and edited *The Bell*, a literary journal which led the intellectual assault on the insular and conservative society which evolved after independence. His prison memoir *The Gates Flew Open* is one of the most widely read books of the revolutionary period. O'Donnell was a rebel to the end, leaving instructions for his funeral that there were to be "no priests, no politicians and no pomp".

Dr Patrick Murphy is originally from Cork and his academic interests include the political history of Cork from 1900 to 1925 and the dichotomy between socialism and nationalism. His PhD at the University of Liverpool focused on the All for Ireland League, a Cork-based political party that existed from 1910 to 1918. He is a founder member of the Nottingham Irish Studies Group.