“The great only appear great because we are on our knees: let us rise!” This statement, attributed to Connolly, (although Camille Desmoulins apparently said it first) used to appear among the banners in Civil Rights marches in Ireland. It is perhaps ironic that Connolly himself should be so much the “great man” among Irish political thinkers, something like Marx among leftists as a whole. At least this new selection of his writings provides, in the absence of a complete Collected Works, a useful guide to the sort of things he actually said.

**RELIGION**

The longest single item in the book is “Labour, Nationality and Religion”, pp.57-117, written in 1910 to refute a clerical attack on socialism. Here Connolly is strongly critical of priests’ attitudes and the record of the Catholic Church as an institution, and applies materialist analytical methods to religious history. His personal position on religion, however, remained at best ambivalent (1). He maintained that “Socialism is neither Protestant nor Catholic, Christian nor Freethinker, Buddhist, Mahometan or Jew; it is only HUMAN” (p. 117), and that personal religious beliefs were not relevant to politics.

This is to ignore the function of religious ideology, as a reactionary social force and a factor in the individual’s repression and authoritarian conditioning. Anyone who denies, either from a mechanistic materialist outlook or from concentration on “politics” as such, that such psychological influences are highly significant, runs the risk of perpetuating all sorts of ruling class assumptions. Connolly was not alone in falling into this trap. The results are apparent throughout his writings (2).

**WOMEN**

A good illustration of how received ideas can operate simultaneously with revolutionary intentions is provided by Connolly's attitude to the emancipation of women. In the section on “Women's Rights” the editor presents us with (pp. 189-195) an excerpt from “The Reconquest of Ireland”, 1915. In it Connolly follows Engels’ explanation of the “Origin of the Family”, describes the specific economic oppression of women in society, and in Ireland in particular – not without perception and sympathy – and expresses support for the women's movement. “But”, he concludes, “whosoever carries the outworks of the citadel of oppression, the working class alone can raze it to the ground”, which assumes a separation between women and the working class, and accords only marginal status to women's struggles. A similar attitude was apparent in the controversy with De Leon over August Bebel's book *Woman*. Connolly was not under
the illusion that economic revolution would bring the solution to all women's problems, but neither did he see sexual and psychological questions as having a direct bearing on the revolution itself (3). It would be a mistake to think that nothing more could be expected, even from conscious socialists, in the first decade of this century. Already the long tradition of sexual repression was meeting fundamental challenges, not only in theoretical works like Bebel's but in the life styles of women and men (4). Even in Ireland we have an example of a more genuinely radical approach in the life and writings of Francis Sheehy-Skeffington (5). Connolly, however, continued to make assumptions about "morality", "duty", and the desirability of monogamy which have quite counter-liberatory implications (6).

SYNDICALISM

What Connolly did regard as vital to the struggle for socialism was industrial organisation. He ascribed the weakness of the existing trade unions, as weapons of defence and as means of raising class consciousness, to their organisation on a craft basis, and became a strong advocate of industrial unionism (pp. 147-185). For this reason he is often described as a syndicalist, especially by syndicalists. But his ideas were in many respects different from those of anarcho-syndicalists.

For example, although he saw the conquest of economic power, through industrial unionism, as primary (p. 163), even considering that "the Socialism which is not an outgrowth and expression of that economic struggle is not worth a moment's serious consideration" (p. 165), he also considered it "ABSOLUTELY INDISPENSIBLE FOR THE EFFICIENT TRAINING OF THE WORKING CLASS ALONG CORRECT LINES THAT ACTION AT THE BALLOT BOX SHOULD ACCOMPANY ACTION IN THE WORKSHOP" (p. 159, his emphasis). Later, of course, he chose to make the bid for political power by means of insurrection instead, considering that revolutionary action was appropriate to extraordinary times.

In considering the future society, Connolly envisaged "social democracy" proceeding from the bottom upwards, but "administered by a committee of experts elected from the industries and professions of the land" (p. 151). This was intended to avoid bureaucracy, and extend the freedom of the individual, blending "the fullest democratic control with the most absolute expert supervision" (p. 152). In fact, as subsequent history has shown, reserving a special role for "experts" invites a new bureaucracy to create and perpetuate itself.

The same idea that certain people, whether called leadership, vanguard or experts, have a special function is present in Connolly's strategy for struggle. He endorsed (p. 167) the statement of the Communist Manifesto that "the Socialists are not apart from the Labour movement, are not a sect, but simply that part of the working class which pushes all others, which most clearly understands the line of march". In the industrial organisation he eventually suggested a form of Cabinet, with "the power to call out members of any union when such action is desirable, and explain the reasons for it afterwards" (p. 184).

Admittedly this is not the whole picture. Connolly also wrote in favour of the retention of officials "only as long as they can show results in the amelioration of the conditions of their members and the development of their union as a weapon of class warfare" (p. 180). He contended that "the fighting spirit of comradeship in the rank and file was more important than the creation of the most theoretically perfect organisation – which could indeed be the greatest possible danger to the revolutionary movement if tending to curb this fighting spirit" (p. 176). He was aware that the "Greater Unionism" might serve to load the working class with greater fetters if infused with the spirit of the old type of officialism (p. 180).

All the same there are enough signs that his ideas on organisation left the way open for the domination of a minority group of leaders (7). And the record of a "great Industrial Union" such as the American U.A.W. (8) shows that the creation of "One Big Union" only gives such a group more scope for exercising bureaucratic power.
NATIONALISM

Perhaps the aspect of Connolly's thought most relevant to the present time is his concern with Irish nationalism. He was concerned with it despite socialist internationalism, despite the effort to continue emphasising the class struggle, despite the ability to see through the aims of straight Nationalists.

It has been observed that the sense of Connolly's writings is the sense of revolutionary movements in the underdeveloped world today (9); certainly they have a lot in common with the ideology of "national liberation" as supported by so much of the left. We can find most of it here: emphasis on the "main" – imperialist – enemy and his foreign-ness, on the specific oppression of the natives and their assumed common interest in liberation, on the importance of this conflict along with the claim to be engaged in class politics.

Even the well known statement "If you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the Socialist Republic your efforts would be in vain" continues: "England would still rule you..." (p. 124). The text in which this is contained, from "Shan Van Vocht", January 1897, is all the same a more convincing attempt to get to grips with socialism and nationalism than many of Connolly's later efforts. It is a long way from the emotive nationalist rhetoric with which he celebrated his own hoisting of the green flag over Liberty Hall in April 1916 (pp. 143-5), but the progression is not accidental. The supposedly saving clause about the cause labour being the cause of Ireland and vice versa is still present.

The point is not whether Connolly continued to believe in class struggle and had some sort of vision of a socialist future, but whether the tendency of his thought and action was consistent with this. In fact the Irish dimension led him into tortuous paths which are now familiar. Although in an ideal society states were to be mere geographical expressions (p. 152), the validity of the concept of a nation is assumed to be self-evident, and "peoples" are entities capable of autonomy. The notion that "the enemy of my enemy must be my friend" is made explicit in Connolly's pro-German stance during the First World War (p. 259) "the instinct of the slave to take sides with whoever is the enemy of his own particular slave-driver is a healthy instinct and makes for freedom". The German Empire is also represented as being more "progressive" (10).

But socialist ideas about progressive development were not followed uncritically. "North East Ulster" (p. 263) is described as being contrary to all Socialist theories, "the home of the least rebellious slaves in the industrial world" while "Dublin, on the other hand, has more strongly developed working class feeling than any city of its size in the globe". In practice, the "least rebellious slaves" were to be denied the right to opt out of Connolly's "United Ireland – and Ireland broad based upon the union of Labour and Nationality" (p. 279); the project of letting them vote on the question of partition was denounced (p. 283).

Connolly tended to get exasperated with British and other socialists who called critical attention to his nationalism (11), asserting the need for an indigenous Irish socialist party with its own literature. Perhaps he would be better pleased with some of their present-day counter-parts of the left. At least he had the excuse of lacking the evidence we now have of what "national liberation" regimes mean in practice, and how far they are from leading to socialism.

INSURRECTION

In 1897 Connolly regarded "the unfortunate insurrectionism of the early socialists" (p. 125) as having been abandoned by modern Socialism in favour of the "slower, but surer method of the ballot-box". He continued to advocate the parliamentary road, although ideally the socialist vote was to be directed by a revolutionary industrial organisation. But he believed that in Ireland independence was a pre-requisite, so that the Irish Nationalist was seen as "an active agent in social regeneration" (p. 126) "even when he is from the economic point of view intensely conservative".
The method of physical force, while not to be favoured for its own sake, was not excluded from the "party of progress". There were, however, certain conditions which should precede its adoption; first, perfect agreement on the end to be attained, then presentation of the demand for freedom through elected representatives. Discussing street fighting, Connolly assumes a large scale rising with the support of the populace (pp. 228-30). The implication is that success will justify the method.

In the event, the Easter Rising of 1916 was put into effect by a group of leaders with differing ultimate aims, united by nationalism and the intention to turn the opportunity afforded by the First World War to what they saw as Ireland's advantage. Connolly was a prime mover (12), committing the Irish Citizen Army despite his reported conviction in the end that there was no chance of success and they were "going out to be slaughtered" (Introduction, p. 30).

It was no monstrous aberration that he ended his career as a martyr for old Ireland and is often remember as such, however unjust it would be to claim he was no more than that. He has a place in labour history as well as in the history of socialist thought. The Selected Writings are divorced from the context of action and controversy in which they were produced, but it is useful and legitimate to judge them on their own merits and see where the ideas tend.

Perhaps, after all, it is to Connolly's credit that his writings are not fully and exclusively compatible with any one of the theoretical traditions claiming affinities with him – less so, that they endorse sentiments and ideas present in so many of them.

L.W.

QUOTES FROM SELECTED WRITINGS

"...this is what Father Kane said: 'Divorce in the socialist sense means that women would be willing to stoop to be the mistress of one man after another'. A more unscrupulous slander upon womanhood was never uttered or penned. Remember that this was said in Ireland, and do you not wonder that some Irish women – some persons of the same sex as the slanderer’s mother – did not get up and hurl the lie back in his teeth, and tell him that it was not law that kept them virtuous, that if all marriage laws were abolished tomorrow, it would not make women 'willing to stoop to be the mistress of one man after another'. Aye, verily, the uncleanness lies not in this alleged socialist proposal, but in the minds of those who so interpret it...."  
James Connolly, Labour, Nationality and Religion, 1910

"...The frontiers of Ireland, the ineffaceable marks of the separate existence of Ireland, are as old as Europe itself, the handiwork of the Almighty, not of politicians. And as the marks of Ireland's separate nationality were not made by politicians so they cannot be unmade by them.

As the separate individual is to the family, so the separate nation is to humanity..."  
J.C., Workers' Republic, 12-2-1916

"The Council of the Irish Citizen Army has resolved, after grave and earnest deliberation, to hoist the green flag of Ireland over Liberty Hall, as over a fortress held for Ireland by the arms of Irishmen.

This is a momentous decision in the most serious crisis Ireland has witnessed in our day and generation. It will, we are sure, send a thrill through the hearts of every true Irish man and woman, an send the red blood coursing fiercely along the veins of every lover of the race..."  
J.C., Workers' Republic, 8-4-1916

(2) "As a rule the socialist men and women are ... immensely cleaner in speech and thought ... devoted
husbands and loyal wives ... industrious workers...” from *Workshop Talks*, quoted in *Voice of the People*, vol. 2, no. 6.

(3) *Connolly in America*, pp. 16-17. For Solidarity's views on "The Irrational in Politics" see our pamphlet of that title, price 15p.


(5) *1916: the Easter Rising*, ed. O.D. Edwards & F. Pyle, McGibbon & Kee, 1968, includes "Francis Sheehy-Skeffington" by O. Sheehy-Skeffington, and "An Open Letter to Thomas McDonagh" by Francis Sheehy-Skeffington who expresses the opinion that the exclusion of women from the Volunteers was deeply significant

(6) *Connolly in America*, pp. 16-17

(7) e.g. *Labour and Easter Week*, ed. Desmond Ryan, 1949, p. 114: leaders have a right to confidence, "let them know that you will obey them...let them know what the rank and file are thinking and saying." They are to be challenged but not rashly.

(8) see *Solidarity Motor Bulletin* No. 2, "U.A.W. Scab Union". (price 5p)

(9) by Conor Cruise O’Brien in *1916: Easter Rising*

(10) *Solidarity* has discussed this type of theory in "Whose Right to Self Determination?" and “Thesis on Ireland”, in vol. 7, no. 1.

(11) Many British socialists may of course have been chauvinists. But *Labour and Easter Week* provides an example of Connolly describing British draft-dodgers in Ireland as "cowardly runaways" and "shirkers", and defending this against criticism from a Glasgow reader.

(12) The editor's introduction to *1916: Easter Rising*, p. 19, states that the I.R.B. Military Council was forced to establish an alliance with Connolly lest he should start his own insurrection.