

# CLR James and the Irish Revolutionary Tradition

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The historic tradition of solidarity between the Irish struggle for national liberation, and black liberation and other anti-colonial struggles across the African diaspora, runs long and deep. In the period of colonial slavery, in Ireland, there was an identification among many with the cause of enslaved black people. The black abolitionist Olaudah Equiano had made an impact when he toured in 1790, and the United Irishmen who led the 1798 rebellion were inspired not only by the French Revolution but also the Haitian Revolution and its leaders like Toussaint Louverture. After the 1798 rebellion was brutally crushed, as Kevin Whelan notes, ‘many exiled United Irishmen had joined maroon communities in Jamaica in 1799’, as after ‘they were “incautiously drafted into the regiments”’, they ‘promptly fled to the mountains to fight with maroons and French against the British’.

When it came to the Irish Easter Rising of 1916, and the subsequent Irish War of Independence, black radicals in turn were inspired, even in America despite their common experiences of racism from Irish Americans. The Jamaican Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey repeatedly talked of the Irish struggle for liberation, and his dedication of his Universal Negro Improvement Association headquarters in New York ‘Liberty Hall’ in 1919 was an explicit homage to Dublin’s famous Liberty Hall. In 1919, Garvey announced that ‘the time [had] come for the Negro race to offer up its martyrs upon the altar of liberty even as the Irish [had] given a long list from Robert Emmet to Roger Casement’. The same year, the great black American thinker W.E.B. Du Bois wrote ‘let every coloured man read this month a history of Ireland. If he dies not rise from it bitter with English cruelty and hypocrisy he is callous indeed.’ The

Caribbean black radical Cyril Briggs wrote in 1921 in *The Crusader* an article whose very title speaks for itself: ‘Heroic Ireland: Irish Fight for Liberty the Greatest Epic of Modern Times and a Sight to Inspire to Emulation all Oppressed Groups’.

C.L.R. James – later famous for his classic history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins* (1938) – was unlikely to have been so inspired by the Easter Rising at the time it took place in 1916 like other black radicals, as he was just a fifteen-year-old schoolboy in colonial Trinidad. Yet not long after his move to the imperial metropolis of Britain in 1932 to try and make a career for himself as a writer, and especially after his turn to revolutionary Marxism and militant Pan-Africanism in 1934 James would have begun to meet Irish radicals and nationalists in London at various meetings. In 1935, James became chair of the newly formed International African Friends of Ethiopia, and as a Trotskyist member of the ‘Marxist Group’ inside the Independent Labour Party (ILP), now toured England, Scotland and South Wales making powerful anti-imperialist speeches at ILP meetings. James urged solidarity with the people of Ethiopia in the face of Fascist Italy’s barbaric invasion and occupation of one of the last independent states in Africa that year. He scorned liberals and others on the left who placed their hopes in imperialist bodies like the League of Nations. As he put it in one searing article at the time, ‘Workers of Britain, peasants and workers of Africa, get closer together for this and for other fights ... Now, as always, let us stand for independent organisation and independent action. We have to break our own chains. Who is the fool that expects our gaolers to break them?’

In Ireland, Nora Connolly O’Brien, daughter of the

martyred legendary socialist James Connolly, read a report of James's meetings in Wales and invited him to address the Irish Citizen's Army, which had recently re-emerged and included veterans of the 1913-23 period in its ranks, such as O'Brien herself and Seamus McGowan. In December 1935, James remembered he had 'a tremendous meeting' with the Irish Citizen's Army on Ethiopia in Dublin, while also taking the opportunity to go horse-riding in Phoenix Park. When Anna Grimshaw later asked James about the visit, he 'said that he didn't really understand what it meant to be revolutionary until he went to Ireland. The English "revolutionaries" - Marxists, Trotskyists, ILPers - were of a very different kind' to the Irish revolutionaries who 'really understood armed struggle and revolutionary conflict'.

Robert Alexander notes that this meeting by James represented 'the first exposition of Trotskyist ideas in Ireland'. One member of the local branch of the Communist Party, Pat Devine, was only too aware of this, and attacked James in the meeting for making 'the first attempt ... to try and disseminate such lying counter-revolutionary propaganda' inside Ireland. To criticise the Soviet Union under Stalin and the Communist International, Devine continued, meant James (despite the fact he was a black activist who was leading the anti-fascist struggle in Britain against Mussolini's war at the time) was objectively on the side of 'German and Italian Fascism, British imperialism and Japanese militarism' and so guilty of 'Fascist activity' himself. As James himself recalled:

They sent for me, and I had a tremendous meeting with them because I spoke against the British Government. When I had finished speaking a fellow got up to speak ... a young fellow, a good looking chap of about thirty, and he denounced me in one of the finest speeches I have ever heard or remembered. "Trotsky was this, Trotskyism was that, you come here disturbing everything", and so on. So I spoke to him after the meeting and said, "Let us go and have a drink somewhere. I have left politics now". "I am a member of the Communist Party and you are an enemy!" "So you say that I am a Fascist!" I said. "Oh that's all right", he said and we parted good friends.

James now put Nora Connolly O'Brien in touch with Leon Trotsky (then in Norway), who responded to her letter in June 1936:

I was very touched by your kind letter. A great deal



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of circumstances prevented me from writing to you immediately. I always have been greatly interested in Ireland, but unfortunately my interest remained only platonic. I never had the opportunity to study in detail Irish history and politics. Since my early days I have got, through Marx and Engels, the greatest sympathy and esteem for the heroic struggle of the Irish for their independence. The tragic fate of your courageous father met me in Paris during the war. I bear him faithfully in remembrance. I made up my mind to read your book about your father in the very next time.

James also invited O'Brien to London to address a meeting of the Marxist Group on Ireland.

I remember that woman, because in those days the

British Trotskyite revolutionaries were no more than left wing Labour. So I went to meet her and invited her to come over here and speak, and she did. Coming from the railway station we crossed the river by Parliament, and she said, "You should have done away with that years ago, it is easy from the river." So I said "Yes, we are revolutionaries, but bombing the Houses of Parliament is useless". "You're talking of something that you know nothing about!" She instinctively saw the revolutionary possibilities. From this side of the river you could bomb the Houses of Parliament and get away with it.

In his 1937 history of the Communist International, *World Revolution*, James paid a brief tribute to James Connolly himself, and the Irish Citizen Army.

In the years before 1916, when revolution seemed dead in Ireland, James Connolly had studied the history of every revolutionary movement in Europe, preparing for the moment to overthrow British Imperialism in Ireland. The discipline and organisation of his Irish Citizen Army was in its own way quite comparable to that of the Bolshevik Party.

In April 1941, James, having moved to America in 1938, penned a fine article 'On the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the Easter Rebellion: Ireland and the Revolutionary Tradition of Easter Week' for the American Trotskyist paper *Labor Action*. James again paid tribute to the Irish Citizen Army, 'a force consisting at the most of a few hundred men centering chiefly in Dublin' but 'apart from Lenin's Bolshevik Party, this was the most extraordinary revolutionary organization that Europe had seen for centuries'. It is perhaps fitting to conclude with his homage to James Connolly:

Connolly hoped to set fire to the tinder which he knew Ireland was. He failed. The shot which killed him seemed the end of revolutionary Ireland for a generation. But he died full of hope. He was a thousand times right, mistaken though he was in his tactics and immediate objectives... his faith, in the Irish hatred of British imperialism was a profound revolutionary faith, based on knowledge of his people, revolutionary courage and intuition, and a deep understanding of Irish history. His rashness was valuable beyond the timid caution of a thousand lesser men.

## Notes

- 1 Kevin Whelan, "The Green Atlantic: radical reciprocities between Ireland and America in the long eighteenth century", in Kathleen Wilson (ed.), *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) pp. 232, 234.
- 2 Robert A. Hill (ed.) *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Vol. I* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983), p. lxxii. The Green in the UNIA colours, Garvey declared in 1920, showed 'their sympathy for the Irish in their fight for freedom'.
- 3 See Cathy Bergin (ed.) *African American Anti-Colonial Thought, 1917-1937* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp.58-81.
- 4 *New Leader*, 4 October 1935.
- 5 *Socialist Platform*, C.L.R. James and British Trotskyism: An interview (London: Socialist Platform, 1987), p. 3. See also C.L.R. James, *The Future in the Present; Selected Writings, Vol. 1* (London, 1977), p. 226. On the Irish Citizen Army I am grateful for background information found in Donal Fallon, 'When C.L.R. James came to 1930s Dublin', Come Here to Me! (10 September 2017), <https://comeheretome.com/2017/09/10/when-c-l-r-james-came-to-1930s-dublin/>.
- 6 Ciaran Crossey and James Monaghan, 'The Origins of Trotskyism in Ireland', *Revolutionary History*, 6/2-3, (1996), p. 54.
- 7 Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929-1985* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).p. 568.
- 8 Crossey and Monaghan, 'The Origins of Trotskyism in Ireland', p. 53.
- 9 *Socialist Platform*, C.L.R. James and British Trotskyism, pp. 3-4. Accordingly, the local Communist Party's report of James's meeting in their paper, *Workers' Voice*, now condemned him in slightly less harsh terms, for merely 'devoting his main conclusions to a most irresponsible attack on the Communist Party and the Soviet Union'. Crossey and Monaghan, 'The Origins of Trotskyism in Ireland', p. 53. See also TNA: KV/2/1824/33a, which reports on 9 September 1938 that James had been invited to Belfast to speak at the Irish Socialist Party's weekend school, again something local Communists were not happy about.
- 10 The correspondence is reprinted in *Revolutionary History*, 6, nos. 2/3 (1996), pp. 54-55.
- 11 *Socialist Platform*, C.L.R. James and British Trotskyism, p. 4.
- 12 C.L.R. James, *World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 141.
- 13 J.R. Johnson [C.L.R. James], On the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the Easter Rebellion: Ireland and the Revolutionary Tradition of Easter Week, *Labor Action*, 5, no. 14, 14 April 1941, p. 3. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1941/04/easterweek.htm> In later years, James would write on Ireland, but mainly with respect to its rich literary tradition and writers such as Bernard Shaw, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, Sean O'Casey and, J.M. Synge.