

JAMES CONNOLLY

by Mike McCormack

On June 5, 1868, a boy was born of Irish parents in the section of Edinburgh, Scotland known as **Little Ireland**. That boy would become one of the most beloved leaders of his time, and one of Ireland's greatest patriots; his name was James Connolly.

The drastic class distinction and poverty caused by anti-Irish discrimination in 19th century Scotland was a heavy influence on young James. Working as an apprentice printer at the age of 10, he became an avid reader, and by the time he was 14 had read most of the literature of Michael Davitt's Land League on its war against the landlords in Ireland. It is no surprise that he grew extremely nationalistic, and citing the Fenian example of enlisting to learn military tactics, he joined the King's Liverpool Regiment. He was sent to serve in Ireland which was then entering the Gaelic Revival and there was no shortage of historical and nationalist oriented material for Connolly's hungry young eyes. Stationed in Dublin, he became aware of the close parallel between his Edinburgh environment and the pitiful conditions of the Dublin working class. Taking a note from history, he swore that as the Land League had successfully organized farmers against landlords, he would organize workers against the managers of industry.

After his discharge, he returned to Edinburgh, and began organizing labor. He was eventually blacklisted in Scotland, and was invited to be a labor organizer in Ireland where his knowledge of Irish history made him one of the most popular speakers of the Gaelic Revival. His popularity was so great he was invited on speaking tours of Scotland and England, and in 1902 was invited to America. He toured the U.S. lecturing labor unions and rallies, and eventually settled in Troy, New York. He started a monthly paper called **The Harp** to enlist Irish-American support for the labor movement, and filled its pages with news from Ireland. This news brought Connolly closer to Irish affairs, and he realized where his heart had always been. He returned to Ireland, and settled in Belfast in 1910 to help organize the Irish Transport Workers Union.

In August, 1912 Connolly was called to Dublin where one of the greatest labor struggles in the history of western Europe - the Great Dublin Lockout - had begun. Management, in an attempt to break the union, locked the workers out of their jobs. Violence was rampant, and Connolly was instrumental in forming a force to protect the workers from management-controlled police; thus the Irish Citizen Army was born. Though the lockout ended in favor of management, the workers had made it so costly that it would never again be used against organized labor.

Convinced that ties with England were hampering the labor movement, Connolly began to preach open rebellion. Unknown to him, Padraic Pearse and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) were already planning such action. Connolly's newspaper articles were so militant that IRB leader Tom Clarke was afraid Connolly would unknowingly tip their hand. On Jan 19, Connolly left for lunch and disappeared. For 3 days his kidnaping so infuriated the labor movement that his followers almost started a rebellion without him. On the third day, Connolly returned, and remained silent concerning his whereabouts. It was later said that he had been taken by the IRB to be briefed on the coming rising; Connolly was now a member of the IRB Military Council. He had pledged the support of the Irish Citizen Army, and was thereafter a leading figure in the march toward rebellion. When the Proclamation of the Irish Republic was drawn up, it was Connolly who made the final revision, and it was Connolly who had it printed in the basement of Liberty Hall - his union headquarters. On Easter Monday 1916, Connolly addressed his Citizen Army for the last time. *There is no longer a Citizen Army and a Volunteer Force, he said, there is now only the Army of the Irish Republic.*

The date of the Rising was set, and despite several mishaps during the week prior, like the capture of Roger Casement, the loss of an arms shipment, and Volunteer leader Eoin MacNeill's cancellation of mobilization orders, Connolly was determined to prevail. Yet, when William Smith O'Brien asked Connolly, as they left Liberty Hall on that fateful morning, *Is there any chance of success?* Connolly replied, *None whatever.* At 11:35 AM he led his men into the streets of Dublin, and the pages of history. In one bloody week it was over. Despite a wounded shoulder and a shattered ankle, Connolly remained (in Pearse's words) *the guiding brain of our resistance to the end.* With the Irish surrender, Connolly was taken to Dublin Castle as the executions of the leaders began. Day by day, one by one, the noblest men in Ireland were murdered by an English firing squad. On May 12, after 13 had been killed, Connolly was brought into the stonebreaker's yard at Kilmainham Jail to face the firing squad. In death Connolly would become an even greater inspiration than he had been in life. Within two months, he and the other leaders would take their place with Tone and Emmet; and the Irish people, their fury finally aroused, would pick up the cause left to them, and carry it through the War of Independence. In her book **The Fractured Emerald**, author Emily Hahn wrote, *It was probably the manner of Connolly's death that at last nauseated the public: his wound had been allowed to gangrene and he was in such a bad way that the soldiers had to carry him out on a stretcher and prop him up to receive the bullets.*