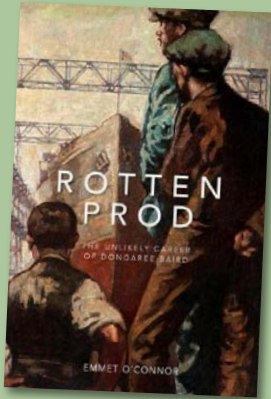


BOOK REVIEW

By Peter Connell



Rotten Prod: the Unlikely Career of Dongaree Baird

(UCD Press, 2022)

By Emmet O'Connor

Price: €30

Available in all good bookshops

Ten years ago in 2013, as the Decade of Centenaries started to impinge on the public's consciousness, commemoration of the Dublin Lockout of 1913 raised the prospect of the traditional neglect of working class history and the history of organised labour being addressed. At one level this has been achieved and there are dozens of publications which explore the role of labour in the Irish revolution, if indeed it was a revolution. Gaps, though, remain. The extent and depth of trade union and working class militancy in the years 1918-23, for example, do not fit comfortably within the dominant narrative of the war of independence, the civil war and the foundation of the new state. Nor do the 'rotten Prods' of Belfast, one of whose leaders, James Baird, is the subject of Emmet O'Connor's latest book. A largely forgotten figure, denigrated as a trouble-maker in

both parts of the island, O'Connor re-affirms Bards status as a significant figure in the history of working class activism in these years.

James Baird was born in Clogher, south Tyrone, in 1871. He died, aged seventy-eight, in Brisbane, having emigrated to Australia in 1927. O'Connor's biography is slim at just under a hundred pages, partly because there is a dearth of sources relating to Baird's life but, more importantly, because he was a public figure for just six of his seventy-eight years. A prominent trade union and socialist agitator in the Belfast shipyards between 1918 and 1922, and in the southeast of the country with the ITGWU, between 1922 and 1924, O'Connor notes 'he rose without trace and disappeared just as mysteriously'. But in those six years, he emerges as a distinctive working class leader.

Baird served his apprenticeship in Harland and Wolff shipyards in the 1890s and was a member of the Boilermakers' Society, one of the 'new model unions', formed by Britain's 'labour aristocrats'. He emerged as a radical leader of the strike for a 44-hour week which took place in Belfast in early 1919. His contributions at this time to the *Voice of Labour*, a paper edited by Cathal O'Shannon and reflecting the views of the ITGWU, saw him adopting syndicalist language, arguing for 'One Big Union' and the capture of the machinery of the state. He condemned the British-based unions involved in the strike for refusing to seek assistance from the Irish Trades Union Congress. Ultimately the strike was lost, partly because the authorities intervened, fearing the growth of 'Bolshevism' and the prospect of Protestant workers being drawn away from pro-unionist organisations such as the Ulster Unionist Labour Association.

In January 1920, Baird stood for the Belfast Labour Party in the local elections in the Ormeau ward and was

one of three party candidates elected to the Corporation. The Labour group won twelve of the fifty-two seats on the Corporation with 10,000 Protestants voting for Labour rather than Unionist candidates. Councillor Baird instantly infuriated the Unionists fellow councillors and earned himself the soubriquet 'Dongaree Baird' by attending the splendid City Hall in his working clothes, his cap sticking out of his side pocket. Hence the title of this book.

On the afternoon of the 21 July 1920, hundreds of apprentices and rivet boys, inspired by speeches from various Unionist leaders, including Carson, marched through the Harland and Wolff yards, swinging sledgehammers and ordering out Catholics and Protestant workers who were identified with socialism. At least 7,400 men and women, one quarter of them Protestants ('the rotten Prods'), were forced out of their jobs across a range of industries in the city by the end of the year. Finding little support from either the ITUC or TUC, Baird turned increasingly towards the ITGWU and in May 1922 was employed as an organiser with the union. He was heavily involved in a long-running and bitter agricultural labourers' strike in Waterford. Such was his immediate impact in the area, he was selected as a Labour candidate in the 1923 general election for Waterford and missed out on a seat by just twelve votes. His radicalism, however, was not viewed favourably by the increasingly pragmatic ITGWU leadership of William O'Brien and Tom Foran. The strike was lost and Baird returned to Belfast and to obscurity in mid-1924. Along with his family, he emigrated to Australia in 1927.

O'Connor openly admits the substantial gaps in our knowledge of Baird's biography. As a biographical study, *Rotten Prod* stands in contrast to Mike Mecham's study of William Walker, another leading figure in the Belfast labour movement, albeit a much less radical figure than Baird. Walker's life experiences and his

background clearly shaped his politics. We don't have the benefit of such insights to Baird's life. We know he left behind his wife, Frances, and their six children in Belfast in 1922 when going to the southeast to work for the ITGWU. But we have no indication of the circumstances of his leaving the union two years later and returning to Belfast or why they emigrated in 1927. Baird was an outstanding figure amongst the 'rotten Prods' but he represented an element of the Protestant working class who were radicalised by the political ferment of the post-war years and whose history O'Connor's book brings out of the shadows.

Dr Peter Connell worked for thirty years in the IT Department in TCD where, as a member of the FWUI and then SIPTU, he served as a shop steward and member of the Education Branch Committee. He recently completed a PhD on the history of public housing in Irish towns.



Dr Peter Connell



Jane Carty

OBITUARY

Jane Carty (1936 - 02.08.2023)

Jane was a remarkable person and an unforgettable colleague at RTÉ. She and I worked together on many projects stretching back to the 1980s, most notably the expansion of RTÉFM3 - a progression which led to the creation of Lyric fm. Jane's death in Dún Laoghaire on 2nd August, aged 87, was met with widespread sadness.

A graduate in music and modern languages (UCD), Jane went on to study in Paris, Strasbourg and Perugia. Her career began as a teacher at what is now TU Dublin. Later, as a senior music producer and presenter with RTÉ, her renown was extensive. She produced relays of Wexford Festival Opera and DGOS/Opera Ireland productions together with coverage of European Music Festivals including interviews with pre-eminent musicians, one being by Ian Fox with Herbert von Karajan. Jane adored international travel and her expertise as an adjudicator led to repeat invitations to Llangollen International Festival, the Belvedere International Singing Competition and further afield to Hong Kong and the West Indies.

Jane's enduring focus was on supporting young musicians at crucially im-

portant times in their development.

She originated and organised national competitions for choirs, singers, instrumentalists and composers and, most significantly, she was Founder/Director of RTÉ's Musician of the Future Festival. She introduced countless young musicians to the microphone.

A founding Patron and Jury Chairman of the Irish Freemasons Young Musician of the Year Competition, Chairman of the Veronica Dunne International Singing Competition and the Irish Qualifying Round of the Dublin International Piano Competition, Jane held directorships of the National Concert Hall and the National Youth Orchestra. She received a Jacob's Award for her services to music, musicians and public service broadcasting and in 2010 she was honoured by the RIAM with a Fellowship *Honoris Causa*.

Jane possessed inexhaustible energy, resilience, vision, exuberance and determination. She was a trailblazer who loved life and lively company. Above all, musical potential in young people excited her beyond measure and her deftness in identifying, supporting and fostering artistic talent is undoubtedly her abiding legacy.

Jane had exceptional capacities for friendship, loyalty and love, all of which ran very deep. She was blessed in so many ways.

With deep sympathy to Jane's family.

Séamus Crimmins