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Compelling account of a Labour hero: James 'Dongaree' Baird

E O'Connor's new book, Rotten Prod, looks at the life of a boilermaker in Harland and Wolff's shipyard



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The Baird family

Emmet O'Connor

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James Baird was one of that extraordinary cohort of agitators thrown up by the wave of syndicalist unrest in Ireland between 1917 and 1923. Like most of his colleagues, he rose without trace, and disappeared just as mysteriously. Within a few years of his departure, it seemed incredible that he or his kind could ever have existed in Ireland. The enigma is compounded by the fact that since the growth of interest in Belfast labour history in the 1970s, his name has frequently popped into the literature on the shorter hours movement among engineering workers in 1918, the 44 hours strike in 1919, the 1920 municipal elections — the highpoint of post-war Labour radicalism in Belfast — the shipyard expulsions, and the first elections to the Northern Ireland parliament in 1921 with no biographical explanation.

Determination League in 1921–2, or on his family or personal life, though he was married with six children. In another strange instance of occlusion, Baird's first-hand reports and observations on the workplace expulsions were given prominence by Fr John Hassan in Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogroms, 1920–22, which Hassan published under the pseudonym G. B. Kenna.

The exposé was to be issued by the fictional O'Connell Publishing Company in Dublin as part of the Provisional Government's propaganda war on the Unionist regime, but a change in Dublin's Northern policy in early August 1922, from working against the Belfast government to working with it, led to Facts and Figures being regarded as so incendiary that the print-run was almost entirely pulped. Just 18 copies survived, and were circulated privately.

Baird then retreated into obscurity again until re-surfacing in 1922–4 as an organiser in the south east with the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU). After that, he vanished completely. A Rotten Prodigy hagiography of his more famous daughter avoided her father's turbulent life in Ireland.

Baird's career as a Labour agitator is all the more remarkable in that it took him from one extremity of Ireland's industrial, social, and political spectrum to the other. From the north-east to the south-east was a big step. In Harland and Wolff, he toiled as an artisan with the 'black squad', the men who did the heavy iron work, in the biggest and most technically advanced industrial site in Ireland.

Within three years, he would be organising agricultural labourers and county council roadmen in Carlow, Kilkenny, and Waterford. In the shipyard, he worked in an odd juxtaposition of Orangeism and militancy.



ITGWU officials in Waterford for the ITUC in 1918

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and a Rechabite, he was nearly elected to Dáil Éireann by the workers of Waterford in 1923. The transition from the 'black North' to a nascent state still shuddering from the effects of revolution at home and abroad, was one he was eager to embrace. His experiences in Belfast had alienated him completely, not just from Unionists, but from the amalgamateds, as the British-based unions were known euphemistically in Ireland.

In the process he moved from one of Britain's oldest craft unions to the upstart and pointedly Irish ITGWU, founded by the maverick Big Jim Larkin in 1909. The Boilermakers had originated as the Society of Friendly Boilermakers to cater chiefly for men in railway workshops in Manchester in 1834. Members addressed each other formally as 'worthy brother'.

Dublin members of the Society were reported to be meeting in 1836, though its first recorded Irish branch was the Good Samaritan Lodge established in Belfast in 1841. In 1845 the union was renamed the United Friendly Boiler Makers' Society. To stay independent of the recently formed Amalgamated Society of Engineers, Machinists, Smiths, Millwrights and Pattern Makers, soon to be known simply as the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), and to reflect its increasing presence in shipbuilding, the Society became the United Society of Boiler Makers and Iron Shipbuilders in 1852, and the United Society of Boiler Makers and Iron and Steel Shipbuilders in 1898.

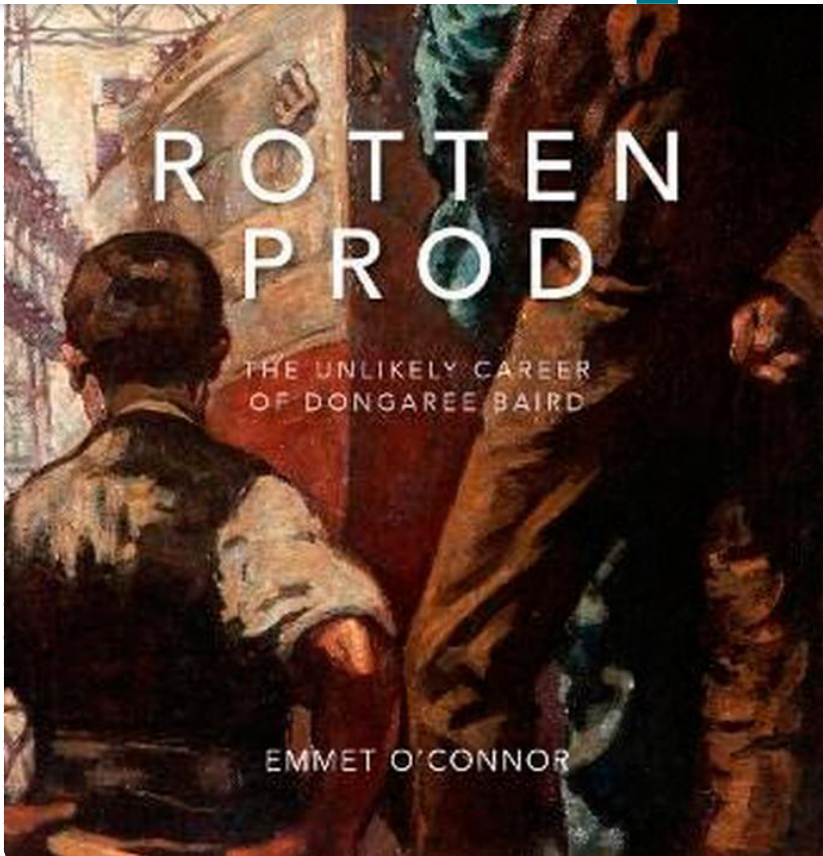
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The contrast with the syndicalist ITGWU could hardly have been greater. If the Boilermakers could afford the luxury of benefit, the ITGWU emphasised protection. And without an apprenticeship system to maintain a scarcity of labour, protection had to mean militancy. Larkin's union was largely made up of dockers to begin with, and remained a force of unskilled labourers in the main. Its early, revolutionary years took it on a roller-coaster ride. The 1913 lockout may have been heroic, but it left the ITGWU battered and bankrupt.

Drained by the defeat and the burden of running an organisation in retreat, Larkin handed the union over to James Connolly and headed to America in search of a new career in 1914. The ITGWU suffered further disruption after Connolly took the Citizen Army into the Easter Rising. Liberty Hall was shelled, members were interned, and Connolly was executed by the British on 12 May 1916. The tide turned in 1917, as the impact of the First World War on the Irish economy extended from production in the shipyards and engineering plants to consumption of food.





forgotten social revolution of 1917–23.

Extracted from Rotten Prod: The Unlikely Career of Dongaree Baird by Emmet O'Connor, UCD Press, £27.40, available now.

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