

EMMET O'CONNOR

*Rotten Prod.**The Unlikely Career of Dongaree Baird*

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James Baird was born in County Tyrone in 1878, the only son in a family of six children which came to Belfast in the 1890s. A Presbyterian and member of the Rechabite temperance order, a Home Ruler, an anti-partitionist, and a socialist, Loyalists saw him as, in their derogatory description, a 'Rotten Prod'. A skilled caulker in Harland and Wolff shipyard, he became a branch secretary of the Boilermakers' Union. In Belfast's two shipyards and other large industrial enterprises, Catholics were a minority. There was a history of workplace expulsions during political crises. In 1912, the Home Rule crisis led to the expulsion of around 8,000 Catholics, socialists and trade unionists.

After the Great War, Belfast experienced 'two red years'. The '44-hour' strike in 1919 aimed at reducing the weekly hours of engineering workers from 54 to 44. It was coordinated UK-wide by the Federation of Engineering and Shipbuilding Trades (FEST). On 25 January 1919, around 40,000 FEST workers in Belfast went on strike, later joined by 20,000 municipal workers. Baird was one of its leaders, chairing several mass meetings. The strikers were mainly Loyalist, and Edward Carson spoke at a strike meeting in the Ulster Hall. The strike was peaceful for the most part and the RIC even enrolled 300 strikers as special constables. By 12 February, the FEST in Britain accepted 47 hours. In Belfast, by 20,600 to 600, the workers voted to continue the strike. Due to his increasingly radical statements, Baird was excluded from the *Workers' Bulletin* strike paper and the GSC. The Unionist newspapers and the Corporation were increasingly hostile. The authorities sent troops to man the gasworks and electricity station. The strikers started drifting back to work and by 24 February 1920 the strike was over.

Nevertheless, the settlement of 47 hours was an improvement on the original 54 hours.

Working-class militancy was clearly still alive: 100,000 marched in the 1920 May Day parade to Ormeau Park in Belfast, where Baird was the main speaker on one of the three platforms. This spirit carried through to the Corporation elections 1920: ten Belfast Labour Party, and two independent Labour were elected councillors, including Baird. Not having had time to change after work, Baird turned up for the first Corporation meeting still wearing work clothes. His opponents dubbed him 'Dongaree Baird'. In response he proposed evening meetings to suit working-class members but this was defeated.

Unionists claimed that the Labour movement was infiltrated by Sinn Féin. Carson, at an Orange gathering, at Finaghy on the Twelfth of July 1921, stated, 'these men ... care no more about Labour than does the man in the moon. Their real object ... is that they may mislead and bring about disunity amongst our own people ... And these are not mere words ... I am sick of words without action'. This 'dog whistle' led to the expulsion of Catholics and 'Rotten Prods' from the workplaces. Expulsions were carried out by gangs with sledgehammers. Workers who jumped into the harbour to escape were peppered with red-hot rivets, nicknamed 'Belfast confetti'. Roughly 7,500 Catholics and 1,850 'Rotten Prods' were expelled, including Baird. An Expelled Workers' Relief Committee (EWRC) was set up by Campbell and Baird. An EWRC meeting at the Custom House steps was broken up by yardmen. Retaliatory attacks on trams carrying yardmen, passing the Catholic Markets area further inflamed the situation. Labour and Sinn Féin proposed a special Corporation meeting to set up peace patrols.

Due to increasing unrest in the city, Baird phoned the lord mayor to postpone the meeting. He claimed that this was agreed, but the lord mayor denied it and the special meeting went ahead. The visitors' gallery was filled with riotous yardmen, some sporting revolvers. Labour councillors were conspicuous by their absence. A Unionist amendment condemned peace patrols as an insult to the security forces, adding that there should be no reinstatement of expelled workers, 'until the Government had put down the bloody IRA campaign'.

Workplace expulsions were now part of wider dangerous communal strife. Baird, Harry Midgley and John Hanna had booked the Ulster

Hall for 17 May 1921 to open their campaign as Labour candidates in the Northern Ireland parliamentary elections. Before they could use it, the hall was commandeered by Loyalist yardmen who held their own triumphal meeting. The Labour candidates quietly exited by the back door. Baird continued to seek support for the expelled workers. However, he was now on the dole and the family was partially reliant on his daughter Nora's music teaching earnings. Baird got a job with the Irish Transport and General Workers Union and was sent to Waterford in 1922, as organiser of mainly of unskilled farm labourers and roadmen in the rural south east.

From 15 May 1923 Baird led a huge strike against wage cuts during an agricultural slump. He called for land redistribution, stating that the farmers held, 'no title to their lands other than English acts of Parliament'. Popular with the local rank and file, he was selected as a Labour candidate in the 1923 Dáil Éireann election. He very narrowly missed being elected. He was now seen as a dangerous agitator by the conservative Free State Government. Detained under the Emergency Powers Act and jailed without charge, he went on hunger strike and was eventually released on medical grounds. The strike ended in December and Baird continued as organiser until 1924 but he was now out of sympathy with the trade union and political scenario in the Free State.

He returned to Belfast but, disillusioned, he did not return to his old ways, and the Baird family emigrated to Brisbane in 1927. There Baird worked as a boilermaker and helped his wife run a boarding house. Although there was a vibrant left-wing labour movement in Brisbane, there is no evidence of Baird's participation and he died in Brisbane in 1948. In this work, Emmet O'Connor has produced a much-needed account of the life and times of Baird and his fellow 'Rotten Prods'. It is beautifully designed by UCD Press and, though a fairly slim volume, the text is supported by copious endnotes. One sentence sums up much of what the book is about: 'Like the militancy and radicalism of 1917–23 Baird was consigned to the dustbin of history.'

PETER COLLINS