

O'Connor, Emmet, *Rotten Prod The Unlikely Career of Dongaree Baird*, UCD Press, 2023, 130pp.

A “Rotten Prod” in Northern Irish Unionist and Loyalist circles denotes a traitor. This latest book by Emmet O Connor recounts the life of James Baird, Belfast Labour Party activist, Boilermakers’ union representative in Belfast’s shipyards, Belfast Trades Council delegate, Belfast City Councillor, Home Ruler and socialist, campaigner on behalf of the expelled workers and a candidate in both the Stormont (1921) and Dail Eireann elections (1923). He ended his time in the Movement as a full- time organiser with the ITGWU.

He drew the wrath and ridicule of the Belfast Establishment when he attended a meeting of Belfast City Council, in his boiler suit, thus the “Dongaree”.

Thousands of Catholics and many protestant trade unionists were, from late 19th Century onwards expelled from the Belfast Shipyards and other workplaces whenever the “Home Rule” question came to the fore. In 1920, Belfast’s shipyards were the epicentre of well organised and aggressive empire loyalism, a dangerous environment for Catholics and independently minded protestant trade unionists. This is the environment from which Baird emerged.

The book highlights the number of protestant trade unionists among the 1920 shipyard expulsions (2,000 out of a total estimated 8140 expelled workers), a figure which highlights, to some degree, the not insignificant number of workers from a protestant background who perhaps regarded Home Rule as a lesser evil to partition and the activities of the pro empire mob. If we fast forward to 1970, after the violent reaction to the civil rights campaign, the trade unions were clearly more effective than their counterparts in 1920, in preventing widespread expulsions in heavy engineering, something detailed in Michael McInerney’s 1970 “Trade Unions Bid for Peace in North”, a comparison well worth a more detailed examination.

Maybe, paradoxically, those British Headquartered trade unions (and their earlier incarnations) which held their ground in 1970, contributed more to the continued unity of the trade union movement on this island than is immediately obvious or credited.

In the current political disposition in the North, with the call for a border referendum, serious thought should be given to developing and strengthening the legacy of the likes of James Baird amongst the protestant section of the community in the North, especially in an environment where the threat of violence from the forces of the “State” and its unofficial enforcers has, for the time being, diminished.

“Rotten Prod” immerses the reader in a rollercoaster of political tension, tumult and turbulence, introducing us to a very determined, awkward, single minded and probably difficult customer who operated during the political upheaval at the birth of both the Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State. From the cauldron of “Hellfast” to the bitter Waterford agricultural workers strike, Baird was a bete noir of both the Unionist Establishment and the nascent Free State authorities. (He was released from detention in the Free State during the Waterford dispute after having gone on hunger strike). Baird’s trade union “career” ended abruptly in 1923 after which he retired into obscurity when the family emigrated to Australia. Emmet O Connor has commendably resurrected James Baird from this obscurity and has highlighted an important aspect of the Radical Protestant Tradition which, hopefully, will flourish once again in our political discourse.

Review by Brian Campfield, former General Secretary of Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) and former President of Irish Congress of Trade Unions.