

Shipyards Radical

Henry Patterson

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Rotten Prods: The Unlikely Career of Dongaree Baird, by Emmet O'Connor, UCD Press, 130 pp, €30, ISBN: 978-1910820858

“Rotten Prods” were defined so by their unionist opponents, who accused a spectrum of dissidents from Presbyterian tenant farmer radicals to, in the case of James Baird, a trade union militant with syndicalist views, of being part of a traitorous fifth column undermining the communal unity which was the bedrock of Ulster Protestant resistance to Home Rule and later to Sinn Féin. As Emmet O'Connor points out, there were hundreds of such working class radicals in the heartlands of Belfast's engineering and shipbuilding industries in its glory days from the 1890s to the end of the First World War. But Baird would mark himself out as distinct in his commitment to revolutionary socialism and a republican analysis of the Ulster question. The “dongaree” label came from his first entrance to Belfast council chamber after Labour's gains in the 1920 municipal elections, when he was wearing his work clothes. Scorned for an act of performative proletarianism by the unionist press, he pointed out that if the corporation would meet in the evening not during the working day he would have been able to dress appropriately.

Baird worked from the 1890s to the early 1920s as a caulker in the Harland and Wolff shipyard complex on Queen's Island in east Belfast. Caulkers were part of the so-called “black squad”, who, along with riveters, platers, angle-iron smiths and other trades, put together the iron and steel plates that comprised the structure of the vessel. They used a pneumatic, chisel-edged tool to crimp the plates after riveting to ensure water-tightness.

These workers were part of Belfast's labour aristocracy, enjoying the highest wage rates in the UK industry and living in some of the best working class housing in Ireland or Britain. However, although wages were high, work was insecure, due to the very severe business cycle in shipbuilding, so unemployment was common even in periods of prosperity. Working on the hulls of ships in all weathers was dangerous and deaths and injuries from falls or objects falling on workers were common. O'Connor quotes James Connolly's estimate that seventeen workers died during the construction of the *Titanic*. Simon Purdue's research on gender and occupational health in Belfast between 1870 and 1914 gives a figure of 1,600 separate accidents in Harland and Wolff between 1911 and 1913 a high proportion of which were severe or fatal. Caulkers and riveters were also often deaf by their thirties, due to the incessant hammering involved, and there were frequent eye injuries due to sparks and metal fragments.

Baird left no papers and O'Connor has consulted a wide range of sources to fill the gap. Born near Clogher, south Tyrone, in 1871, he was the son of a Presbyterian tenant farmer. This may explain his interest in the land question and support for land nationalisation and perhaps even his socialism. When he arrived in Belfast, or how he ended up in the shipyard, are still unknowns, but according to his own recollections by 1893 he was a

 inced socialist and home ruler and working on Queen's Island.

That year, after the Home Rule bill received its second reading in the House of Commons, nationalists celebrated and the next day half the Catholic workforce on Queen's Island did not come into work, anticipating trouble. Some of those who did where threatened, as were a number of Scottish workers who were identified as Home Rulers. In response Gustavus Wolff, one of the founders of the enterprise and Unionist MP for East Belfast, returned to the city to berate the workers involved in the expulsions and threaten to close the works unless all the expelled workers were allowed to return. His reasoning was the damage such intimidation did to the unionist cause in the rest of the UK.

All the main unions in the yard, including Baird's boilermakers, assured the management that they would exert themselves to ensure an end to intimidation. Of course that was easier said than done. In 1893 there were around 9,000 workers on Queen's Island and it was already one of the largest shipbuilding enterprises in the world. By the end of the First World War the workforce had expanded to 20,000 and the complex covered 135 acres, with four individual shipyards each with up to six slipways. Apart from the shipyards there were fifty other foundries, forges, boiler shops, engine fitting and turning shops and the massive joiners' shop with hundreds of carpenters and joiners. It was unpoliceable in part because since the Belfast riots of the 1886 the RIC were assured of a violent response if they went anywhere near the Queen's Island.

Shipyard workers were in the vanguard of trade union organisation and industrial action throughout the period that Baird worked on Queen's Island. Their political loyalties were strongly unionist and loyalist but it is an oversimplification to claim that the bulk of Protestant workers had Tory politics. This ignores a tradition of populist radicals defeating Conservative candidates - William Johnston in 1867, Edward de Cobain in East Belfast in 1885, Tom Sloan in South Belfast in 1902. The anti-British Labour and anti-Gladstonian Liberal politics of the Protestant working class was not based on Toryism but on Labour and Liberal support for Home Rule.

Baird has already featured in previous accounts of the 1919 engineering and shipbuilding workers' strike for a forty-four-hour week, of the Labour victories in the 1920 municipal elections, in which he won a seat, and as a courageous and eloquent spokesman for the workers who lost their jobs in the expulsions of July 1920. However up until now nothing has been written on his background and career before 1918, when he emerged as a leading representative of the movement for a reduction of the working week in the shipyards and engineering plants. O'Connor admits that even after his researches major gaps remain: why he became a socialist and home ruler; why he was not noticeably active in trade unionism and politics before 1918, and whether his political values were influenced by his Presbyterianism or Ulster's pervasive sectarianism.

But perhaps the greatest unknown is the process by which Baird emerged as one of the most radical of the strike leaders in 1919 and was soon picked out by his unionist and loyalist critics as a "Bolshevik" and "Sinn Féiner". Even in his heyday there is little record of what he did or the speeches he gave before the expulsions. "Sinn Féiner" was a dangerous label, particularly for someone living in one of the heartlands of working class loyalism off the Cregagh Road in east Belfast. After the expulsions Baird doubled down and became the most prominent of the leaders of the expelled workers and the most militant in support of the Dáil's economic boycott of Belfast which he wished the British labour movement to amplify by blocking the supply of coal and steel to Belfast industry.



llied with nationalists and Sinn Féin in portraying the expulsions as a state-sponsored pogrom prompted by Belfast industrialists who had been alarmed at the

emergent class militancy of the forty-four-hour movement and the municipal election results. O'Connor is sympathetic to the view that, in the words of one of the representatives of the expelled workers: "It is first, last and all the time an economic question." However, there is no evidence that for example William James Pirrie, the managing director of Harland and Wolff, was worried about the socialist threat. He was approached by members of the committee which ran the forty-four-hour strike to make clear that speeches by "extremists" like Baird had no support among them or among the vast majority of the strikers. He was worried about the ongoing IRA campaign and its potential effects on Belfast, to such an extent that he was making contingency plans to shift production to Scotland. Pirrie's attitudes were revealed in Moss and Hume's comprehensive and invaluable business history of Harland and Wolff published in 1986.

Baird is portrayed as one of the subalterns in the failed and forgotten social revolution of 1917 to 1923. Never has something that did not occur generated so much historical writing as this far from forgotten revolution, as books by among others Conor Kostick and Eoin Ó Broin illustrate. By way of contrast, work on the Belfast capitalist class, which is attributed such a key role in subverting working class unity in this period, is virtually non-existent.

O'Connor seems to agree with his subject that unionism was a reactionary and counter-revolutionary force. However, the question of whether working class Protestants had anything to gain from the Sinn Féin project is not considered. The polarising effect of the onset of the IRA campaign in Ulster in early 1920 is not adequately registered. Baird was a victim of loyalist violence, but if the British trade union movement had followed his advice and instituted a blockade of Belfast it would have empowered those loyalist militants pushing for separate Ulster unions and further weakened the union movement.

Shortly after the McMahon murders in Belfast, which had reduced his wife to a nervous wreck, Baird shifted his organising talents and eloquence to the southeast of the island, where he became an organiser of rural workers for the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. He was soon as unpopular with the leadership of that union as he had been with the more conservative elements in the Belfast movement. Denounced by farmers' leaders as a Bolshevik and by Kevin O'Higgins as a dangerous radical during a bitter farm workers' strike in Waterford in 1923, he managed to come within a few votes of winning a Dáil seat and also to be arrested and imprisoned for alleged incitement to arson. Released on grounds of ill-health he found himself with no future in either Irish state and he and his family emigrated to Australia.

In the introduction to this book the former shipyard worker and playwright Wilson John Haire is quoted speaking about the yard in the 1940s and 50s: "The surprising thing was the number of radical Protestant workers that existed who didn't belong to the Orange Order, B Special and Freemasonry. Generally the vast majority of the shipyard Protestant workforce got along with the Catholics in their midst." What happened to workers like these in 1920? The vast bulk of the workforce that had struck in 1919 remained in place after the expulsions and maintained their support for their unions despite the activities of loyalist extremists. Baird's alliance with Sinn Féin, particularly when the IRA began to throw bombs into trams carrying shipyard workers, would have made his politics anathema not just to unionist and Orange elements but to the bulk of the Protestant workforce.



It has long been an icon of dissident Protestant radicalism for anti-partitionist Protestants - he featured in the opening chapters of Michael Farrell's *Northern Ireland The*

Orange State. His analysis of the expulsions as a Unionist Party/capitalist ramp against the labour movement is a central part of the nationalist historiography of the period as evidenced in Brendan O'Leary's recent *Treatise*. The Haire quotation raised hopes for a more nuanced analysis of the Belfast "pogrom" that this book only partially fulfils. Nevertheless, it remains an eloquent memorial to the man Jim Larkin described as "a sober, intelligent and strangely honest and courageous spokesman for his class".

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