

# IRISH ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL HISTORY



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**LANDLORD MOTIVATION AND URBAN IMPROVEMENT ON  
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Joanna Bourke

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SOVIET, LIMERICK

Liam Cahill's *Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet 1919: a threat to British power in Ireland* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1990. Pp. 168. £14.95) is the first book-length study of the Limerick labour movement's takeover of the Limerick City economy during two weeks of April 1919. Based on a wide range of primary and secondary sources in Ireland and Britain as well as on local interviews, the work is meticulously researched and constitutes a valuable addition to local and national labour history studies in Ireland.

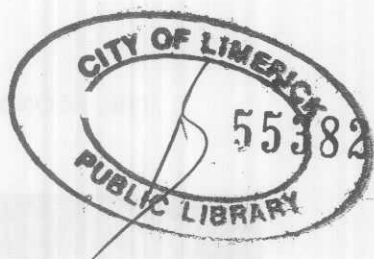
In using the word 'soviet' the author has accepted a usage current at the time and since then but is judicious in his conclusion that in strictly theoretical terms what happened in Limerick did not amount to a 'soviet' since it never contested the right to private property. For Cahill it was an emotional, spontaneous response of labour protest, inspired by a humanitarian and nationalist reaction to measures of the British government and its military measures.

The author casts his net more widely than the events of 1919 and has provided a most useful labour history of Limerick from the turn of the century. This has an intrinsic interest as in the way in which Limerick dockers as late as 1918 resisted the mechanisation of the port by dumping cranes into the Shannon. Given his stress on the retarded nature of the labour movement in Limerick, where a trades council was not formed till as late as 1905 and where the I.T. & G.W.U. did not penetrate until October 1917 and where May Day was not celebrated until as late as 1918, it is remarkable just how quickly labour radicalised in the city in the later stages of the First World War. The belated arrival of the I.T. & G.W.U. immediately revitalised the hitherto exclusive trades council. The process of awakening doubtless owed much to the War and the greatly adverse effects it had on Limerick port, as well as to developments arising from the nationalist struggle locally and in the country in general.

Nevertheless, the romance of the story does not cause the writer to exaggerate the extent of that radicalism and he is at pains to indicate its limits. This is clearly shown in the fact that the leader of the soviet, John Cronin, who was a carpenter in the old craft union tradition, as late as 1916 attacked the Dublin labour leadership as a socialist clique. Although the story of the soviet is strictly speaking not a chapter in the history of socialism in Ireland, Cahill's conclusion is an important one: that the defeat of the soviet under pressure from church, national labour leadership and the republican movement, constituted a turning point in subordinating Labour to a subsidiary role after it had played a critical and decisive one in the period 1916-1918.

Apart from twice referring incorrectly to Connolly as a founder of the I.T. & G.W.U., the work is one of accurate scholarship and sound judgement.

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