

Songs of Struggle and Protest

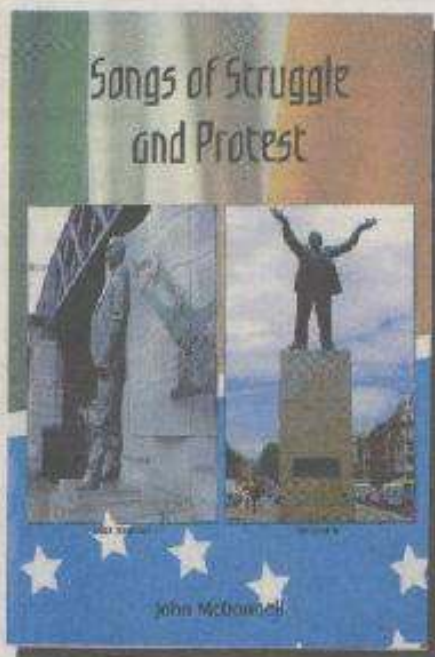
by John McDonnell
(Irish Labour History Society)

"Those in power write the history and those who suffer write the songs," as Frank Harte, Dublin's other great collector of songs, once put it. This also perfectly summarises John McDonnell's book on *Songs of Struggle and Protest*, now being re-published in its third edition.

McDonnell covers milestones of Irish history chronologically through song, starting in the 1300s and finishing somewhere in the early 20th century. But this history is not being told in a traditional academic way; rather, it is seen through the eyes of the ordinary man and the way he reflects on events in song.

The author, who has been collecting songs since the 1960s, prefaces each chapter of this wide-ranging collection with a brief socio-political overview covering relevant international events and especially their repercussions on Irish society. Also included are images, music scores and lyrics. This is a lot more than just a songbook; it demystifies traditional history while letting the actual contemporaries of a certain period speak.

The songs in this book reflect the experiences of people during the Great Hunger, the French Revolution, the beginning of trade unionism, the Irish



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Civil War, the Spanish Civil War as well as a more international perspective with such struggles as segregation and apartheid. Extra room is given to trade union pioneers James Connolly and Jim Larkin, too.

Included are such well-known songs as 'Skibbereen', 'The Rocks of Bawn', 'Joe Hill' and the songs of Robert Burns, but more interesting are the lesser-known ones that nevertheless reflect a very precise picture of the social situation of the time. The introductory notes clearly cement each song in a certain era while pointing out key events.

Unfortunately, a perspective that would pick up on the changes Irish society has undergone in more recent years, and the different struggles in relation to immigration or one of the many songs critically commenting on Celtic Tiger Ireland, is somewhat lacking.

However, with its 45 songs chosen to reflect 10 different chapters in Irish and, to a lesser extent, international history, a huge song territory is chartered.

McDonnell's book certainly achieves its appeal through its multiple facets and its open character, provoking the impulse for further thought rather than providing the reader with a finite analysis. It is a starting point not just for learning more about a certain period of history, but also for understanding history's impact on everyday life.

Songs of Struggle and Protest is definitely an interesting read, either as an alternative comment on Irish history, focusing on the 'underbelly' of society, or obviously for those interested in songs and their history.

Review by Isabel Roleff



Isabel Roleff is a member of the Irish Writers' Exchange, and has written articles and reviews for various magazines in her native Germany. More information can be found at www.Irishwriters-exchange.com