



Decade of Centenaries grant report

Recipient name:	Emmet O'Connor
Amount and year awarded:	€5,050 in 2022
Title of project:	The Waterford Farm Strike

Summary of project:

In May 1923, farm labourers in the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) in County Waterford struck against efforts of the Irish Farmers' Union to introduce wage cuts. What followed would be the most protracted and violent strike of the 1917-23 unrest, an extraordinary period of militancy and radicalism, remembered as 'the Red Flag times'. It affected about 1,500 labourers directly and led to sympathetic strikes and lock-outs of another 2,000 workers in Dungarvan, Kilmachtomas, and Waterford city. On 15 December, it was called off by the ITGWU. Labour had emerged from the War of Independence in good heart. Thanks to the war economy and the post-war boom, membership of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILPTUC) stood at nearly 200,000, double the 1917 figure. Labour now expected the Anglo-Irish treaty to settle the national question and clear the decks for class politics. Instead the boom yielded to a slump and employer demands for wage cuts, and the Civil War would make the national question more intractable. The collapse of the Waterford strike signalled the end of 'the Red Flag times' and Labour's withdrawal from the spirit that went with it. By 1924 the Labour movement was battered, divided, and demoralized. Trade unionism collapsed on the land and contracted severely among unskilled urban workers. The ITGWU had 120,000 members in 1920 and 14,600 in 1930.



Objectives of the project:

- Publication of a 100,000 monograph by a reputable publisher.
- Public lectures to labour and local historical societies.
- Academic seminar papers.



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Promotion of the book online and in social media in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Australia.

Promotion of the book through reviews in academic journals and newspapers.

Methodology used in conducting the research:

Notes of interviews with veterans of the 1923 strike survive from the 1970s, and relatives of participants will be interviewed to elicit second hand recollections on the impact, memory, and retrospective perception of the strike. However, the research will be based largely on primary source documentation, including private papers, local government archives, trade union records, public records, parliamentary debates, and newspapers. As the dispute was given regular coverage in local newspaper, it will be possible to compile a detailed narrative of events. There are numerous secondary sources of contextual relevance (books, articles, dissertations, and e-sources), but few of direct value. The research will require some field work in Belfast, Dublin, and Waterford. The structure will follow a chronological approach, concentrating on incidents between May and December 1923, but with substantial introductory and concluding sections on social unrest between 1917 and 1922 and on the consequences of the conflict for the Free State's public policy and for the labour movement under Cumann na nGaedheal.

Findings of research and milestones achieved:

The stated aims were:

1. To present an objective and balanced account of events as they happened, giving fair weight to the competing claims of both the farmers and the labourers.
2. To place the local history in its national and international context, showing how wider developments affected local events, perceptions, and values.
3. To examine the relationship between contemporary social struggle and the Civil War.
4. To build a picture of the personalities in the story and capture the mentalities of the time.
5. To explore the 'afterlife' of the 'Red Flag times' and understand why such an important chapter in Irish history was not remembered.
6. To discuss the relevance of the story to the historiography and assess the degree to which it revises the conventional wisdom.

To date, two chapters have been completed:

Chapter 1: The antagonists (introducing the political and economic context and the organisation of farmers and labourers)

Chapter 2: Vinegar and milk (detailing the emergence of conflict between farmers and labourers, 1918-21).

Dissemination of the project outcomes:

1. A keynote paper was presented on the farm strike at a conference in Dungarvan on 4 May, sponsored by Waterford City and County Council and Waterford Council of Trade Unions
2. An X account, Waterford 1923, has been created
3. A talk on James Baird is planned for the Waterford Imagine festival in October 2023
4. A talk on James Baird was given at Queen's University, Belfast in March 2023.



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Published work/plans:

A book proposal will be submitted to UCD Press.

Lectures given/outreach activities:

Two lectures given.

Media coverage:

Reviews of a biography of Baird have been published in the Belfast Telegraph, Irish Times, and the Munster Express.

Plans for continued communication of the project's results:

Through conferences and the media.

Plans for furthering the project:

Further research.

More extensive dissemination publications.

How the bursary enhanced professional development:

The bursary was invaluable in persuading the university to award supplementary funding for the project and in convincing bodies in Waterford to commemorate the centenary of the farm strike.