

The Starry Plough – a historical note

Damian Lawlor

On the 5th of April 1914 the Irish Citizen Army paraded their colours, the Starry Plough, at a meeting. The flag was unlike any other used in Ireland and is made up of an agricultural plough with superimposed upon its structure the star constellation Ursa Major (also called the Great Bear or Plough or Big Dipper). The flag had a gilt edge, the background is green, the plough itself is yellow and the stars are silver.

The original suggestion that the ICA should have its own flag came from Jim Larkin but the actual design of the flag is credited to Belfast artist William H. Megahy. At the time of designing the flag he was working as a teacher in the School of Art located in Kildare Street in Dublin. Sean O'Casey (the then secretary of the Citizen Army) carried out research into the origins of the flag and in 1954 submitted the original drawing of the design to the National Museum. The only major difference between this and the flag produced is that in the drawing the flag has a blue and not a green background. The identity of the person who decided to change the colour is not known. It was produced by the Dun Emer Guild. In a picture of the flag outside Croydon House, Fairview in the summer of 1915 the flag is being carried on a pole with a red hand on the top - this is the symbol of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union.

The Imperial Hotel on O'Connell Street was probably not occupied until the Tuesday of the Easter Rising, when a detachment of volunteers who had previously been based on Westmoreland Street were moved into the building. Later on in the day another section of rebels was sent from the G.P.O. to reinforce those already there and early on Wednesday the rebels hoisted a tricolour over the building. Later on during the day James Connolly sent over the Starry Plough

Frank Thornton tells how, 'During the Insurrection I received a request from my commander-in-chief, James Connolly, to erect 'The Plough and the Stars' on the Im-

perial Hotel alongside the Tricolour already flying there. I immediately agreed, and only succeeded after great difficulty as it had to be erected under fire, but up it went - 'The Plough and the Stars' -and there it stayed, although only the front wall of the building remained after the fight had concluded.'

Connolly would have been well aware that the Hotel was owned by William Martin Murphy, who was the employers' leader during the 1913 lockout. The message from Connolly was clearly that in the new Irish Republic workers would be in the ascendant over the exploiters who lived off their sweat and toil.

After the Rising it was widely believed that the flag had been burned along with the rest of the hotel. However it still flew over the front of the building and remained flying there right through till the following Saturday evening. A Lieutenant of the 9th Reserve Cavalry Regiment then occupying O'Connell Street spotted the flag flying above the G.P.O. With the help of a police officer he removed it and took it as a souvenir. The National Museum acquired it from him in 1955.

In 1934 it was decided to re-establish the ICA in conjunction with the launch of the Republican Congress. A number of the members of the original ICA were consulted and their recollections of the design of the original flag were recorded. Some of these differed radically. Eventually the new Starry Plough was produced but it was significantly altered with the agricultural plough now missing and the background colour blue. Seven white stars which make up the star constellation of the Plough were kept. It wasn't until 1955 when the National Museum managed to acquire the original and authenticate it that the difference in the two flags was accepted.

Sean O'Casey wrote the following lines about the flag, 'Be worthy, men, of following such a banner, for this is your flag of the future. Whatever may happen to me; though I should mingle with the dust, or fall to ashes

in a flame, the plough will always remain
to furrow the earth, the stars will always be

there to unveil the beauty of the night, and
a newer people, living a newer life, will sing
like the sons of the morning.'