Irish socialist republicanism is important for three main reasons. First, the forces implicit within it, namely a nationalism drawing sustenance from ethnic and religious roots, and a socialism heavily influenced by the thought of Karl Marx, are arguably the most important in modern history. In independent Ireland in the period 1922–49 they can be studied in detail on a small canvas. Such an approach can yield greater precision than is possible at the level of abstraction or of global generalisation. Second, while socialist republicanism has never sustained a position of dominance within the Irish nationalist tradition, its adherents have wielded considerable influence over Irish republicanism and, through this, over the development of Irish politics. This has been true at several crucial moments in the twentieth century: the establishment of Fianna Fáil hegemony in independent Ireland during our period, the 1916 Easter Rising before it, and later during the emergence of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement during the 1960s. On none of these occasions have the ambitions of socialist republicans even neared completion. Indeed, it is more plausible to argue that in each case their activities rendered even less likely the achievement of their goals. But their influence has been significant in driving Irish politics in new directions, even though these directions have not been those which they intended. Third, the socialist republican tradition is important because it has produced some of Ireland’s most talented dissident intellectuals. James Connolly is the most famous, but in the years 1922–49 Peadar O’Donnell, George Gilmore and Frank Ryan are examples of those who merit attention from historians keen to feel the rich texture of modern Irish intellectual life.

What was the socialist republican argument? Essentially it was this: that the struggle between the oppressed nation (Ireland) and the
oppressor nation (England) is necessarily interwoven with the struggle within Ireland between those classes oppressed by capitalism and those which benefit from it. Why? England’s control over Ireland – colonial or neo-colonial, depending on the period in question – is sustained with the purpose of economic exploitation. The means of such exploitation is the capitalist system and, therefore, while England controls Ireland it will ensure the sustenance of that system. Those classes which benefit from capitalism thus have an economic imperative to support some form of subservient political connection with England; those classes which suffer under capitalism (the working classes, urban and rural) have an equally compelling economic motivation to be separatists. So, the argument went, if you want to establish socialism in place of capitalism in Ireland then you have to end English rule, and if you want to end English rule then the only truly reliable forces on which to depend are those with an economic compulsion to see the struggle through: namely, the working class or as James Connolly put it ‘[the] incorruptible inheritors of the fight for freedom’.\(^1\) The two causes, that of class and that of nation, are necessarily interwoven; or to borrow another epigram from Connolly: ‘The cause of labour is the cause of Ireland, the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour. They cannot be dissevered.’\(^2\)

According to socialist republicans, therefore, true republicanism was driven by an anti-capitalist dynamic. As the 1930s Republican Congress movement declared: ‘a Republic of a united Ireland will never be achieved except through a struggle which uproots capitalism on its way.’\(^3\) The attempt to build a republican campaign by uniting classes which had competing interests was bound to fail. As Peadar O’Donnell – early-twentieth-century IRA leader and irrepressible zealot for the socialist republican cause – put it in 1927: ‘It is about time we heard the last of the childish talk of uniting all classes to free the country. Such balderdash is ages out of date.’\(^4\) O’Donnellite politics differed vitally from those of Eamon de Valera, with the latter emphasising the importance of justice between all classes and the deliberate avoidance of a class programme. A telling recollection of O’Donnell’s (about a conversation he had had with de Valera while the latter was President of the Republic of Ireland) captures the gulf between the two men, and also something of O’Donnell’s charmingly impish style:

‘You’ve got to remember, Dev’, said O’Donnell ‘... that damn nearly a million Irish people left there while you were Taoiseach.’