Mellows, William Joseph (‘Liam’) (1892–1922), revolutionary and socialist, was born 25 May 1892 at Hartshead military barracks, Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire, England, third of five children (four sons and one daughter) of William Joseph Mellows, soldier, son of Sgt John Mellows and Catherine Larkin of Co. Kilkenny, and Sarah Mellows (née Jordan), from Monalig, Castletown, Co. Wexford. The family moved to Ireland (1895) to live in Fairview, Dublin, but because of poor health Liam was sent to live with his maternal grandparents in Wexford until 1898, when the family moved to Cork, where they lived at 2 St Joseph’s Terrace, Ballyhooley Road. They returned permanently to Dublin in 1900 and lived in Mount Brown and later at Greenfield Place and finally at 21 Mount Shannon Road, Rialto, after his father’s retirement from the army (1904). Liam was educated in Cork at the military school in Wellington Barracks, in Dublin at Portobello garrison school and at the Royal Hibernian Military School. He disappointed his father’s wish that he join the army and on leaving school in 1907 he worked as a clerk in the Junior Army and Navy Stores, D’Olier St., and later at Goodbodies, James's St, Dublin.

In 1911 he joined Fianna Éireann, the republican boy scouts, and in the summer of 1913 he quit his job to take up an appointment as a full-time Fianna organiser: this was funded by Roger Casement (qv). He spent most of 1913 travelling around Ireland organising local Fianna groups and was the first point of contact with the new wave of militant nationalism for many of the young men who became the leaders of the IRA in the provinces. He was close to James Connolly (qv) and during the Dublin lock-out (1913) he directed two union men who were on the run to Robert Brennan’s (qv) house in Wexford where they were hidden. He had been sworn into the IRB in April 1912 by Con Colbert (qv) and in November 1913 was appointed IRB representative (and later secretary) to the provisional committee of the Irish Volunteers. After the Volunteer split (September 1914) he was elected to the executive committee of the Irish Volunteers and was sent to Galway to rebuild the organisation there. In July 1915 he was imprisoned in Mountjoy when he, Ernest Blythe (qv), Herbert Moore Pim (qv), and Denis McCullough (qv), refused to obey orders to leave Ireland issued under the Defence of the Realm Act. In Mountjoy he became friendly with Seán MacDermott (qv) and Seán Milroy (qv) and was released after three months. He returned to Athenry in November to a raucous welcome, but was rearrested and deported to Leek, Staffordshire, England, in March 1916.

He returned to Ireland in the days before Easter 1916 (disguised as a priest) and led a minor insurrection in Co. Galway. His small band attacked barracks in Oranmore and Athenry, but dispersed within a week. He went on the run, hiding in Co. Clare for several months before escaping to Liverpool (this time allegedly disguised as a nun) and on to New York where he worked for John Devoy’s (qv)
paper, the *Gaelic American*, writing articles on the Fianna and the Easter rising. In attempting to get to Germany to buy arms (October 1917) he was arrested, along with Dr Pat McCartan (qv), on charges of conspiring to impersonate an American seaman. He spent several weeks in the notorious ‘Tombs’ prison before bail was raised, and was eventually fined $250 in May 1919. Engaging in the schismatic politics of Irish-American nationalism, he came to distrust Devoy because of his support for the American involvement in the war. He was involved in the successful campaign to exempt Irish citizens from the US draft in 1918, accompanied Hanna Sheehy Skeffington (qv) on much of her successful lecture tour (1918), and (having survived influenza) became an indispensable organiser during Éamon de Valera’s (qv) activities in the USA (1919–20). He continued to attempt to acquire arms and became a trustee for the ‘external loan’ monies raised in America. However, he disliked America and returned to Ireland in October 1920 stating he was ‘very glad to have shaken for ever (I hope) the dust of the soul-less place off my feet’ (Fitzpatrick, 206).

In the meantime he had been elected MP for Galway East and for Meath (1918) and on his return was appointed to the staff at IRA HQ as director of arms purchases. In this task he found himself a pawn in the struggle between Michael Collins (qv) and Cathal Brugha (qv) for control of the IRA although he had some success working with Robert Briscoe (qv). He was reelected unopposed for Galway in 1921 and opposed the Anglo–Irish treaty, refusing to abandon the republic for ‘the fleshpots of Empire’ (Dáil treaty debate, 4 Jan. 1922, 231). He lost his seat at the 1922 ‘pact’ election, but was elected to the anti-treaty IRA’s army executive in April 1922. He was appointed to both dáil and army committees that tried and failed to find a compromise in the weeks before the civil war. He was among the leaders of the anti-treaty IRA garrison in the Four Courts under Rory O’Connor (qv). When this garrison surrendered in late June he was imprisoned in Mountjoy where a group of young left-leaning republicans, including Peadar O’Donnell (qv), came under his influence. While there he was appointed minister for defence in the republican government and began to develop a socialist programme for an independent Ireland, some details of which were published as ‘Notes from Mountjoy’. These notes reflected the influence of James Connolly and included the confiscation and redistribution of large landholdings. On 8 December 1922 he was executed by firing squad, with Rory O’Connor, Joseph McKelvey (qv), and Dick Barrett (qv), in reprisal for the assassination of pro-treaty TD Seán Hales (qv) by republicans. He was buried in Castletown, Co. Wexford.

For republicans, his early death enhanced the charisma he had possessed in life: to Ernie O’Malley (qv) he was ‘our greatest loss. One thought of him as a clear flame, steadfast, burning of its own strength’ (O’Malley, 198), while Robert Briscoe described him as ‘a bright golden flame of conscience and courage’ (Briscoe, 193). Mellows occupies a special place for those on the republican left, and was often represented as the great lost leader, especially by Peadar O’Donnell and his associates in Saor Éire. O’Donnell wrote of Mellows’ execution that the ‘richest mind
our race had achieved for many a long day had been spilled’ (O'Donnell, 89), while it is no coincidence that the only full-length biography of Mellows is the work of the socialist republican C. Desmond Greaves (qv). Fianna Fáil, too, have sought to claim and domesticate his memory, giving his name to a bridge over the Liffey (1942), an army barracks in Galway, and an agricultural college in Athenry, Co. Galway. He is also commemorated by a statue in Eyre Square, Galway, and GAA clubs in Renmore and Castletown bear his name.