

(when Taoiseach) writing a letter in his support, Barry did not win his case until August 1940. Ferriter shows that many less prominent activists were in desperate need of what now seems very modest financial support. Nora Connolly O'Brien, a daughter of James Connolly and an active member of *Cumann na mBan* and the main organiser of its Belfast branch, wrote in July 1941 that she had not 'heard a word yet from the Pensions Board, so don't know what is going to happen in my case ... I am at my wits end. We are absolutely on the racks.'

Brian Maye writes an absorbing chapter on Michael Keogh's memoir (uncovered only in 2005) about working alongside Roger Casement as he tried to raise an Irish Brigade in Germany. Though the attempt to cajole captured Irish soldiers to fight for Germany failed miserably, those close to Casement like Keogh were most evidently spellbound by him. Keogh went on to take part in Ludendorff's spring offensive of 1918 and recalled that during it, almost certainly, he was partly instrumental in saving the life of Adolf Hitler.

Few Irish historians would pass up the opportunity to read new material by Tom Garvin, author of the final chapter on Seán Lemass. Garvin provides a sparkling account of Lemass' early years and then demonstrates, when he becomes part of the revolutionary elite, how Lemass, obsessed by economics even when seriously ill in hospital, was so utterly different from his boss de Valera, the man who supplied 'Kathleen ní Houlihan with green robes'. To Garvin 'the working partnership was not unlike the classic partnership between the rock and the wild man ... that between the dreamer and the practical man, each utterly dependent on the other, and each aware of the fact that he could not operate without the other'.

This is a handsomely produced volume with a couple of dozen well-chosen illustrations. It is certainly a fine tribute to an outstanding Irish historian.

JONATHAN BARDON

EMMET O'CONNOR

*Big Jim Larkin*

*Hero or Wrecker?*

University College Dublin Press, 2015

353pp ISBN 978-1-906359-93-5 hb €40.00

Labour leader James Larkin, the subject of this fine biography by Dr Emmet O'Connor of the University of Ulster, was born in Liverpool in 1874 to Ulster parents: his father came from Lower Killeavy in south Armagh, while his mother was from south Down. Indeed, as the author remarks, despite his birth in England, Larkin self-identified from at least 1909 as an Ulsterman and, like his colleague James Connolly, preferred to give the impression that he was Irish-born rather than the son of emigrants (p. 5). His pride in his Ulster background was deeply rooted and his supposed Ulster birth was believed as fact by his descendants, though not always by his political opponents. O'Connor records (p. 19) the following dismal exchange in Dáil Éireann in 1938 when Larkin was serving as an elected representative in his capacity as a TD:

*Mr Larkin:* I say that it is because of the men who drew the sword on behalf of this nation, few as they were, because of their sacrifice and the blood that was shed, that such as Deputy Dillon is allowed to speak in this house.

*Mr Dillon:* And you with a cockney accent.

*Mr Gorey:* And an Englishman.

*Mr Larkin:* I an Englishman? You are a liar, Sir, as I have had to tell you before.

*Mr Gorey:* It is a wise child that knows his own father ...

*Mr Larkin:* Go up to Killeavy, County Armagh and trace it. My mother's record can be found in South County Down.

The issue of birthplace, as Barak Obama has discovered in more recent times, can be a sensitive one when nationalist sensibilities are aroused and it is clear that Larkin and Connolly misled people to emphasise an 'Irishness' they felt was vitiated by their respective English and Scottish accents. In Larkin's case, in particular, strongly held nationalist beliefs underpinned his desire to be known as Ulster-born and thus an

authentic Irishman. There were always those among Irish nationalists, such as Dillon and Gorey in the exchange above, who felt it was enough to point to an English birth to dismiss an opponent.

Larkin's nationalism and republicanism receive considerable scrutiny in this book, an important adjustment to the traditional image of a man who is more often associated with the great Dublin lockout of 1913, trade unionism, communism and, later, the Irish Labour Party. O'Connor leaves us in no doubt about the extent of Big Jim's republicanism; in 1930, for example, though elected to the Dublin city council as a communist, Larkin declared he would vote for the Fianna Fáil politician Sean T. O'Kelly as Lord Mayor because 'I am a republican by conviction, a doctrinaire republican' (p. 286).

Considering his stature as an icon of the Irish labour movement, one would expect Larkin to have been comprehensively researched by now with little left to be said in a new biography. In truth, the literature on Larkin is relatively limited and narrow in scope (compared to the vast accumulation of studies on his erstwhile deputy James Connolly). In this context, therefore, O'Connor's tremendously detailed research published here fills significant gaps in our knowledge, particularly with regard to his subject's time in the United States and his interactions with Irish labour and international communism. For the first time, we have a textured, evidence-based analysis that grapples with the contradictions and complexities of Larkin as public figure and private person. And it does not always make for a pretty picture. Larkin, an inspirational figure for the Dublin working class after 1913, was idealistic and at times heroic, but also egotistical, vain, irrational, dictatorial and belligerently aggressive. The author is even-handed in his approach, but it is difficult to finish this book without the impression that Big Jim Larkin was, at the very least, a challenging person to work with. O'Connor has made many of these points before with regard to Larkin's personality and actions, most notably in a short biography of Larkin he published in 2002 as part of the 'Radical Irish Lives' series, but that earlier study, as he admits here, was missing much of the evidence he now provides to support his case.

As well as highlighting Larkin's weaknesses, there are also useful insights into his strengths and O'Connor has no difficulty in accepting

that Big Jim behaved heroically at times and played a huge role in the formation and mobilisation of the trade union movement in twentieth-century Ireland. It is a fair assessment and, for that reason, one wonders if the book's dichotomous subtitle – *Hero or Wrecker?* – is a mistake. Perhaps the question mark should have been omitted for, on the evidence provided here, it is clear that Jim Larkin was *both* hero and wrecker. A giant of working-class struggle, he was also an individualist in practice, despite his belief in collectivist objectives, and a bad man to put in charge of an organisation. This new book supersedes O'Connor's 2002 volume and should stand as the standard biography of James Larkin for many years to come. It is a superb study of a fascinating historical figure.

FINTAN LANE

NICOLA GORDON BOWE

*Wilhelmina Geddes*

*Life and Work*

Four Courts Press, 2015

pp 508 ISBN 978-1-84682-532-3 hb €45.00

How can an artist, once critically acclaimed by her critics and peers, disappear from view? This is one of many questions asked by the art historian Nicola Gordon Bowe in her meticulously researched and lavishly illustrated biography of the stained glass artist Wilhelmina Geddes (1887–1955).

An established lecturer and writer on the applied arts and design, Gordon Bowe has been researching the life and work of Wilhelmina Geddes for the past thirty years. Using diaries written by Geddes as a young art student in Belfast and Dublin, and those that document her later years as an independent stained glass artist at the *Glass House* in Fulham, London; correspondence between the artist and her life-long mentor, the Hollywood sculptor and illustrator Rosamund Praeger, and her major patron Sarah Purser, founder of the influential Dublin based stained glass workshop, *An Túr Gloine*, plus extensive documentation between the artist and her clients, Gordon Bowe has written an immensely readable text that is both scholarly and sympathetic.