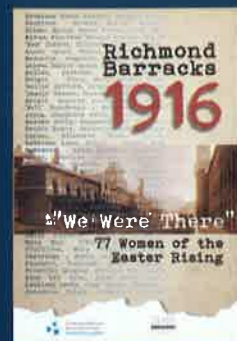


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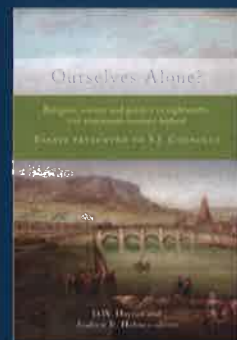
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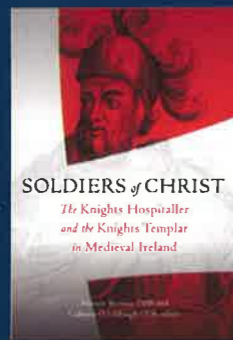
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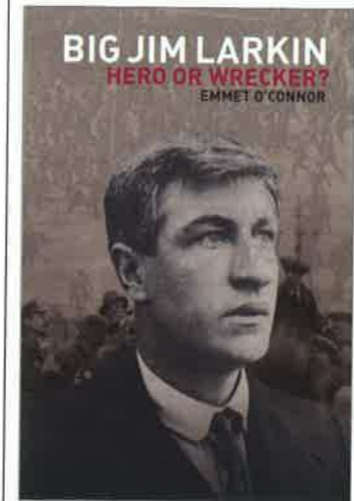


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## BOOK REVIEW



### BIG JIM LARKIN: hero or wrecker?

EMMET O'CONNOR  
UCD Press  
€40

ISBN 9781906359935

Reviewed by  
D.R. O'Connor Lysaght

*D.R. O'Connor Lysaght is the editor of One hundred years of Liberty Hall (ILHS, 2014). His From the GPO to the Winter Palace will be published shortly.*

James Larkin, 'Big Jim', provides a problem for academic historians, unlike his labour contemporaries. The common room could slot Connolly into a lecturership in the history department, Thomas Johnson into economics. As for William O'Brien, well, every college needs a good bursar. In contrast, it is too easy to see Big Jim in the quadrangle with a loud hailer, calling on college staff and students to demonstrate against the establishment.

This perception has restricted the quantity and quality of Larkin biographies. Until now, the standard work has been Emmet Larkin's 50-year-old *James Larkin, Irish Labour leader*; the title reflects its bland treatment of its subject, which is enlivened only by the writer's distaste for him. Its one supplement was Emmet O'Connor's *James Larkin* (2004), which pads out the earlier book's sketchy treatment of Larkin's last quarter-century.

Now O'Connor has produced a larger biography, unconstrained by the limits placed on his previous book and expanded accordingly by further research. The result may be his masterpiece. Certainly it is now the authoritative life of Big Jim. He is revealed warts and all, and though the warts are many the author does not let them obliterate the features of the real Larkin—the great agitator, emotional, egocentric, with greater intuitive powers than any of his contemporaries, but all too often too undisciplined to realise his visions.

That this work is particularly good on its subject's early and greatest years to the end of the Dublin Lockout might seem inevitable, considering the amount done on that period. What O'Connor adds to his narrative is the recognition of the size of the mountain Larkin climbed. After the ITGWU split, that union's loyal officials tended to talk down his achievements. The attitude was that 'Larkin organised his thousands but Foran and O'Brien their tens of thousands', a position encouraged by O'Brien, though he knew better. It affected Emmet Larkin's work. O'Connor shows how necessary Larkin was to the permanent organisation of the general workers of Ireland in the early years of the last century. The reader can appreciate this better today, when, once again, population movements and anti-union laws have created a new stratum of general workers that many leaders of established unions despair of organising.

There are flaws, of course. The title is too polemical for the analysis. Readers may object that the Lockout is not given its proper place. This, however, is Larkin's biography, and the six months of the Lockout were an episode, albeit the major episode, of his life. It should nevertheless have been added that, though defeated, the workers' resistance deterred the Dublin bosses from allowing Murphy to repeat

the Lockout to give the Transport Union its *coup de grâce*.

More important are the failings concerning the period immediately following the stoppage. O'Connor does not relate the overall analysis of Larkin's weakness to the facts of his failures then. His leadership of the Citizen Army is mentioned, but not its place in his post-Lockout strategy. Probably Larkin had learnt from the Lockout that a cadre outside the formal union organisation was needed to lead the workers to victory but could see it only in military terms. The world war cut the army's numbers and may have decided his departure for America.

Again, O'Connor does not look too deeply into Larkin's attitude to Ireland when away. Though jealous of Connolly's martyr status, he does not seem to have examined the situation across the Atlantic before his self-esteem was hurt by the withdrawal of his nomination to contest the 1918 general election. This may have caused him to examine his old comrade's strategy more carefully and to give more serious consideration to returning, before he was arrested and jailed.

Larkin's attitude to his comrades' work in Ireland raises the question of his behaviour on his return. O'Connor admits that his split with them 'echoed the earlier division of the European left into communists and social democrats', yet opens his account with the statement that Larkin 'couldn't bear the thought of others running "his" union'. In fact, it is difficult to know whether an openly communist general secretary less egocentric than he could have avoided challenging the other executive members. A communist could not simply have walked away from his job, nor administered a strategy that he recognised as mistaken. The contemporary capitalist attacks made a challenge to that strategy immediately necessary. Where Larkin is to be censured is in how he challenged it. He appealed to the law courts rather than to his union's membership and was defeated, leaving the way open for that membership to split.

Nevertheless, if O'Connor does not draw the logical conclusions from his facts, he provides those facts for the reader to decide. Moreover, he gives a good account of Larkin's wrecking of his own communist movement, albeit with the aid of the Comintern leaders. Generally, this reviewer agrees with Emmet O'Connor that Larkin was both hero and wrecker, though he disagrees as to the proportions in these qualities' relationship. He agrees more heartily with O'Connor's final verdict: 'He remains the greatest of Irish Labour leaders'. To this can be added the Brechtian caveat: 'Unhappy the land that needs such greatness'.