

tumour had eroded in his carotid artery and it exploded like a mini silent bomb just under the jaw.

Can you really get away with writing a 'funny' book about cancer? Yes, obviously, if your readers are fans of good writing, but hardly, one would think, if they've had any kind of brush with the disease. Or know someone who has. Which is probably about 99% of us, if not 100%.

The fact that we can push this to the back of our minds as we sample Duffy's eccentric exegeses is a tribute to his unique talent. A lifetime in research has inured his narrator to life's absurdities. He's adopted an 'Eat, drink and be merry' approach to it as a result. Maybe 'merry' is too strong a word. ('Eat, drink and be good-humoured?')

Some people will find parts of the book sick. They'll say the author wallows in death and disease. Others will just smile at his analytic mind, a mind that can place as much emphasis on a plant in a doctor's surgery as on a malignant diagnosis. One gets quite a shock when he throws up at one stage after an autopsy.

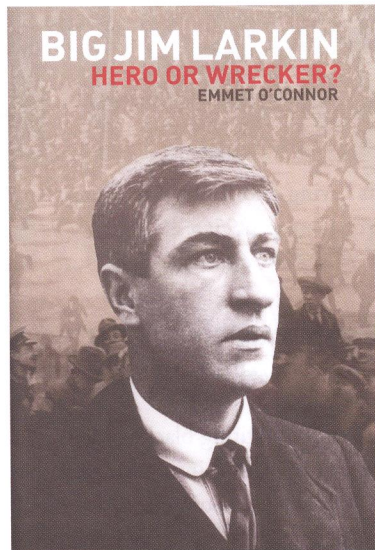
If you're of a nervous disposition, needless to say, this book won't be for you, but considering the present popularity of writers like Patricia Cornwell it will have a fan-base. Sample this: 'His lungs did have some fluid in them. When I took them out and weighed them they were heavier than you would expect.' Chilling, but it probably won't evince the kind of squeamishness it might have in a previous age, or have people rushing out of libraries in horror at having discovered another Jeffrey Dahmer in their midst.

What makes it all so intriguing isn't so much the central plot as the peripheral characters: his brother who has Down's Syndrome; the Russian translator who fascinates him at work; his pushy boss. There are also many whimsical ruminations on people's tics, and even the cultural divide between America and Ireland. And he has a facility for arresting images: 'Uri's attention descended on her like a small bird of prey coming out of the sky'. The book reads like Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward* written by Flann O'Brien in some dystopian netherworld. *Aubrey Malone*

## Biography

**Big Jim Larkin: hero or wrecker?** Emmet O'Connor. *University College Dublin Press; 371pp + 8pp of illus.; €40/£32 hb; 23cm; 978-1-906359-93-5.*

A great man despite himself



In Irish history, the titanic figure of the labour leader James Larkin transcends the cause he served. His reputation is crystallised in a singular event—the 1913 Lockout—and his politics in a single and simple message for the emancipation of Irish workers and the liberation of the poor: the great appeared great because the poor were on their knees, and Larkin would bid them rise with volcanic and unshakeable conviction. Larkin has, surprisingly, attracted relatively little attention from biographers, and for those who tackle the task Larkin's interior world remains opaque, for he left no private papers. Emmet O'Connor's excellent biography can surely stake a claim to definitive status. He reconstructs the career of the public man, and in fluent and often elegant prose steers a lucid course through the often convoluted and occasionally murky worlds in which Larkin operated.

Born in Liverpool to Irish parents, Larkin became a seaman, then a docker and then a trade union official, cutting his teeth as an organiser in Belfast from 1907 before moving to Dublin, which became the setting for the event with which he is

best associated: the 1913 Lockout. The centenary of the Lockout in 2013 struck a chord with the Irish public (in Dublin at least), partly, it seems, owing to its association with the appalling poverty of tenement Dublin. Given the availability of the 1910 and 1911 census returns on-line, one could determine in a matter of seconds whether one's ancestors lived in those tenements, and in the era of *Who do you think you are?* this could form a potent and meaningful bond with the past, giving the Lockout an added resonance. Yet the two were not as intertwined as is often assumed. True, Larkin sought to organise unskilled and semi-skilled labour, and these were precisely the type of people who lived in Dublin's slums. Yet he had spearheaded industrial action in Belfast, a city that was relatively devoid of slums, a few years prior to events in Dublin. The Lockout and the tenements went hand in hand, but one did not inevitably lead to the other. What prompted the Lockout was the desire of William Martin Murphy to smash 'Larkinism', the syndicalism that Murphy identified as a new and immensely dangerous threat to Irish capitalism in general. Larkin's brand of sympathetic strike action by unions had proven influential among Irish workers, especially against the backdrop of industrial unrest that swept through Britain in 1911. There was little scope for compromise with what Murphy and his fellow employers viewed as a new, more dangerous enemy.

The subsequent trajectory of Larkin's life and career has received far less attention, which in many ways was good for his posthumous reputation. As O'Connor notes in his conclusion, 'it is unfortunate for his reputation that the story cannot be frozen in time'. His subsequent departure to the USA, with its copious speaking engagements, brought him to the unwelcome attention of J. Edgar Hoover and a spell in Sing Sing prison. The extent to which Larkin was a figure of international repute cannot be underestimated. Yet what O'Connor describes as his penchant for 'irrational political vandalism' shines through in the latter stages of his career, as an extraordinary and appalling capacity for hubris, self-aggrandisement and vindictiveness is evident. Even the Soviets to



whom he gravitated in the 1920s gave up on him, though it should be said that he returned the favour. The last years of his life saw Larkin mellow with age, sitting in the Dáil and on Dublin Corporation and contributing to a range of constructive initiatives.

So does this large and extremely impressive biography constitute revisionism? Yes, in a true sense: O'Connor has scoured US and Russian archives in pursuit of Big Jim and the results are remarkable. There is more than enough within these pages to mount an attack on Larkin's reputation. And there is much to criticise. But it is not necessarily enough to dislodge him from his pedestal. Larkin remains significant both for what he was and for what he symbolised.

O'Connor's assessment of his actual relevance is unambiguous: Jim Larkin is responsible for creating the ITGWU as a distinct entity. His symbolic value remains that of a champion of the oppressed, as a man who stood his ground on behalf of Dublin's urban underclass. It is worth considering the verdict of Jack Carney, who broke with Larkin in relatively cordial fashion after Larkin sought to purge communism from the ranks of his Workers Union of Ireland during the Spanish Civil War, in a fashion that Carney felt was designed to make his own position untenable. Nevertheless, Carney recalled 'disagreements with him, partings, bitter words ... but always to me he will be the big hearted champion of his class—incorruptible and unpurchasable'. It is the latter that will continue to temper history's harsher judgements on 'Big Jim'.

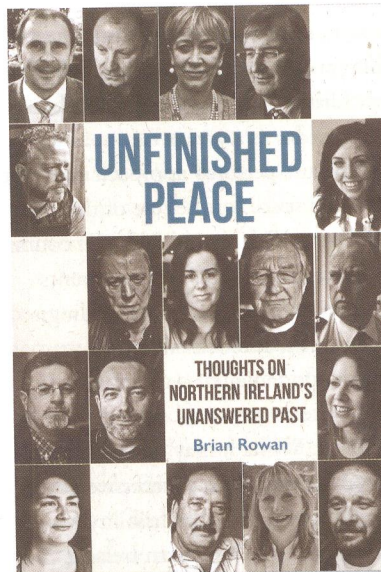
*John Gibney*

## Northern Ireland

**Unfinished Peace: thoughts on Northern Ireland's unanswered past.** Brian Rowan. *Colourpoint; 186pp + 64pp of illustrations; £9.99 pb; 23cm; 978-1-78073-092-9.*

**An uneasy approach to a difficult subject**

This will be a useful book for anyone interested in the Peace Process in



Northern Ireland, as it contains many first-hand accounts from people who were key players or who were affected by the Troubles. Brian Rowan was a journalist for BBC Northern Ireland in the latter years of the Troubles and throughout the long, tortuous Peace Process, a process that is still ongoing. As such, he was on the scene of, or arrived soon after, many events and incidents in this period. The book is based on his notes and observations made at the time, supplemented by his own recollections and the accounts of others.

Rowan is meticulous in his approach, in terms both of getting the testimony of people involved and in providing a quite detailed account of events supplemented by lengthy quotations from documents. Oddly, this is probably more interesting in examining the response of the Loyalist groups to the beginning of the Peace Process. They were always divided and many were thrown off kilter by the IRA's announcement of a ceasefire. The interplay between the leaders of Loyalism, the prisoners in Long Kesh and Mo Mowlam, the Secretary of State, makes for fascinating reading.

The book provides an insight into what was going on at the time and, to a degree, how things were explained in hindsight, from a personal perspective. While reading it I was at times saddened, at other times angered. It is more a chronicle of the North from 1993 onwards, however, rather than an analysis of events and their causes. The 'unanswered past' of

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