

O’Riordan—a visible source of concern and therefore more monitored, whether it by those around them, institutions, the media or indeed themselves. Despite the sexual double standards that existed, Mabel Smyly’s letters made clear her sexual desire. But as O’Riordan notes, the role of

moral watchdog was Mabel’s alone, leading her to restrict the time she spent alone with her fiancé. Their correspondence reveals how “the letter travelled where the author could not,” and such private correspondence provides insights into the sexuality of the individual that are invisible in the public

domain.

This collection reveals how in Ireland sexuality itself is often considered transgressive, especially for those operating outside the paradigm of heterosexual marriage. In opening up new areas of research and identifying the politicization of

gender and sexuality in the public sphere in such diverse arenas, this volume is a very welcome addition to a growing historiography.

—Trinity College Dublin

A Giant of a Man

BY GERARD HANLEY

IT IS REMARKABLE that Emmet O’Connor’s new biography of Jim Larkin is the first comprehensive study of one of the most iconic and complex characters in Irish labor history. Until now, our relatively limited knowledge of Larkin’s life had been informed by Emmet Larkin’s *James Larkin: Irish Labour Leader 1876-1947* (1965) and by O’Connor’s own *James Larkin* (2002), which was commissioned as a short, synoptic overview. Donal Nevin’s edited collection, *James Larkin: Lion of the Fold* (1998), is also a restricted but informative account of Larkin’s Dublin career.

Emmet O’Connor

BIG JIM LARKIN: HERO OR WRECKER?
DUBLIN: UCD PRESS, 2015. Hbk €40

It is no easy task to embark on a detailed investigation of Larkin’s life, as he left no personal records and he was notorious for the disorganized state of both his private and public business affairs. His distaste for paper work was probably driven by a fear of leaving himself and his affairs exposed to others. In addition, Larkin had a tendency to reconstruct certain details about his life. It is, therefore, to O’Connor’s credit that he has, as a result of meticulous research of newly uncovered police files on Larkin in The National Archives in London, FBI files not available to previous biographers, and the archives of the Communist International in Moscow, brought us a much more informed account of Larkin’s life, his conflicting personality and temperament and the forces which drove him into secretive and clandestine arrangements with certain individuals, organizations and, indeed, foreign governments. O’Connor’s work has also benefitted from the discovery of new intelligence on his sister, Delia, and his close friend and associate, Jack Carney.

Soon after his arrival in Ireland in January 1907, Larkin was involved in a series of strikes in Belfast, Cork, and Dublin. His personality and leadership allowed him to reinvigorate “new unionism,” thereby introducing general unionism and the concept of Larkinism into Ireland. Larkinism, which represented militancy, agitation and the sympathetic strike, transformed Irish working-class politics and laid the foundation-stones of the modern labour movement in Ireland, both indus-

trially and politically.

Larkin’s contribution to the historical narrative of Irish labor and trade unionism has been intrinsically linked to the 1913 Dublin Lockout and the titanic battle for the balance of power in industrial relations. However, Larkin’s centrality to the Dublin Lockout has generally been portrayed as having produced a positive, successful and significant outcome. This is debatable—in so far as both the Dublin workers of 1913 and those of later generations are concerned—and one which continues to be ignored. The tumultuous events of the Lockout did not produce a successful outcome for workers at that time or for those over the following decades. While O’Connor describes Larkin’s decision “to take on” William Martin Murphy as “a colossal misjudgement” (323), his assessment of Larkin’s role, conduct, and actions during the Lockout is not fully developed and, therefore, remains ambiguous. It is regrettable that the author did avail of the opportunity to explore this issue further. O’Connor is quite correct in claiming that “Larkin is the Lockout. The Lockout is Larkin” (322), but is it not time to extend the discussion and explain—why? In addition to the Lockout, Larkin’s legacy also includes his role in the foundation of the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union (ITGWU), in 1909, and the Irish Labour Party, in 1912. For those reasons alone, Larkin remains a central figure in both Irish labor and general history.

Larkin was a complicated and complex figure, undisciplined and given to destructive rages. He was worshiped by workers and, just as often, hated by employers. Despite significant character flaws, such as his egocentric, erratic, and jealous nature, Larkin had a genuine sense of compassion and a desire for social justice. For him, trade unionism was more than just the organization of workers. By founding the ITGWU Larkin not only sought to ameliorate workers’ wages and working conditions, but he also attempted to make the union an instrument for the material advancement of the workers and a vehicle for their social and cultural improvement. His union’s headquarters, Liberty Hall, became a center for socials, lectures, and concerts. Similarly, Croyden Park in Fairview, which the union rented in 1913, became a recreation center for union members and their families. Larkin’s command over the Dublin workers

was founded on his remarkable ability to identify with them and he soon became their idol.

The story of Larkin’s life from 1907 to 1913 is well known and documented, and O’Connor justifiably declares that Larkin “deserves to be remembered as a hero for his titanic achievements” (326) during these years. However, the account of his life thereafter is less known and perhaps has been deliberately avoided by writers and historians for fear of damaging or tarnishing the cult of Larkinism and the myth of “Big Jim.” Emmet Larkin’s biography of Larkin provides little or no detail of the last twenty-five years of his life, as he claimed that, “To chronicle nearly twenty years of decline is depressing” (*James Larkin: Irish Labour Leader, 1876-1947*, 294). This neglect is thoroughly and properly addressed by O’Connor, who quite rightly states that “all biographers of Larkin are judged on how they handle the darker side of his life” (2). One can sense a certain affection by the author for Larkin and a reluctance on his part to explore the darker side, regretting that Larkin’s reputation and the account of his life up to 1913 “cannot be frozen in time” (326). However, any reluctance on the author’s part is put aside and the darker side is broadly explored.

O’Connor deserves much credit for how he has handled the hidden aspects of Larkin’s life. By undertaking “painstaking historical archaeology,” he has constructed a complete picture of Larkin’s life post-1913. By doing so, O’Connor had to surmount three significant challenges posed by “Larkinology.” The first of these is to be certain that one is dealing with the genuine Larkin, not the public persona. The second is to find evidence that will compensate for the absence of records. The third is to do justice to the fact that Larkin’s greatness lies not in what he did, but in image and idea. O’Connor provides answers to many questions about Larkin which had not been addressed to date. For example, why did he go to America in 1914? What was his relationship with Clan na Gael? What was the nature of his links with Germany? What was the purpose of his trip to Moscow in 1924, and why did he abandon the Communist International in 1929? While evidence would suggest that Larkin generally lived a frugal lifestyle, he had a preoccupation with money, and O’Connor’s research provides interesting details as to how Larkin support-

ed himself financially during the period 1914-29.

Larkin’s disruptive nature is best exemplified by his attacks on the ITGWU and its executive committee in his unsuccessful attempt to regain total control of the union following his return to Ireland in 1923. This led to Larkin’s suspension from the union and the commencement of a personal vendetta against that union, its dominant leader, William O’Brien, and the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress. His legal battle for control of the ITGWU also ended in failure. These events and the subsequent establishment of the Workers’ Union of Ireland led to a serious split in the Irish labor movement, paralleling the split in Sinn Féin on the treaty issue, and the resulting damage even threatened the very existence of the labor movement. It is extraordinary that these significant events in Irish labor history have not received sustained academic analysis.

Big Jim Larkin: Hero or Wrecker? can now claim to be the definitive account of Larkin’s life. It not only benefits from new and detailed research, it is also well structured. Its introduction provides a short but sufficient overview of both the themes and the phases of Larkin’s life which are presented chronologically over sixteen chapters. The book’s conclusion is also short, and this, too, is a further interesting and attractive feature of this work, as the author leaves it totally to the reader to decide on the question contained in the book’s title. O’Connor provides the facts and draws little or no conclusions, apart from one. His concluding sentence describes Larkin as “the greatest of Irish Labour leaders” (326). It is difficult to understand why this fine work should conclude with this comment because the foregoing account of Larkin’s life does not necessarily lead the reader to this deduction. However, greatness takes many forms, and O’Connor does confine Larkin’s heroic achievements to the years from 1907 to 1913.

This work tells the story of the real Jim Larkin and exposes many of the myths about the man. It is essential reading, not only for anyone interested in discovering the true Jim Larkin, but also for those who wish to expand their knowledge of Irish labour history. As to the question—“Hero or Wrecker?”—he was probably both.

—Dublin City University

Waterford Did Much

BY MARIE COLEMAN

PAT MCCARTHY’S account of Waterford during the revolutionary years is the third in a series of county studies planned by Four Courts Press under the general editorship of Mary Ann Lyons (Maynooth University) and Daithí Ó

Corráin (Dublin City University), following those on Sligo and Tyrone by Michael Farry and Fergal McCluskey, respectively. Waterford is an especially useful one because it has not been the subject of such a previous study—both Farry and McCluskey had previously published on the period from their county perspectives.

Pat McCarthy.

WATERFORD: THE IRISH REVOLUTION, 1912-23.

DUBLIN: FOUR COURTS PRESS, 2015. € 19.95.

Some of the characteristics of Waterford in the period set it apart from many other

counties and suggest that some of the experience here was unique. Most importantly, Waterford was the political base of the Irish Parliamentary Party leader John Redmond, and this accounts for Waterford bucking the national political trend, especially in the aftermath of the Rising. It was the site of one of the few IPP electoral