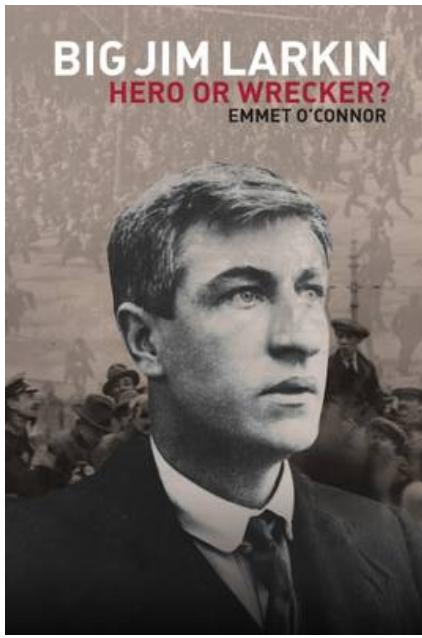


# Review: Emmet O'Connor, *Big Jim Larkin: Hero or Wrecker?*

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Emmet O'Connor, *Big Jim Larkin: Hero or Wrecker?*, University College Dublin Press, 2015. €40.00

## Larkin – the Whole Truth?

In his introduction to this comprehensive biography of James Larkin, Emmet O'Connor sets out the purpose of the book by challenging those who want to preserve what he regards as a partial, even blinkered picture of Larkin, either by trying to preserve an image of Larkin as an untainted hero or by glossing over the less appealing aspects of his life in the years after the Lockout. He asks: 'What is it that you don't want to know, how is Labour stronger by not squaring up to reality?' (By 'Labour' here he means the labour movement, as distinct from the Labour Party.) To support his stance, he refers to Marx's argument that 'the most radical expression of reality is the truth.' And so O'Connor sets out to present a more 'complete word-picture of Big Jim' by dedicating nine of the book's sixteen chapters to his life post-1913.

O'Connor previously wrote a short overview of Larkin's life in his 2002 book *James Larkin*. However, as he points out, around that time new sources were be-

coming available which he couldn't do justice to in a short overview; and, since that time, even more sources have become available. For his present biography of Larkin, O'Connor had access not only to the archives of the Communist International in Moscow and Larkin's FBI file, but also to police files from the National Archives of the United Kingdom, and to 'new intelligence on Delia [Larkin's sister] and Carney [his close friend]'. The latter in particular, he notes, provides 'an important window on the private Larkin.' The combined sources offer much more information on the post-Lockout years which, he says, 'present a radically different picture of the man to that in existing biographies.'

'Through exhaustive biography it is possible to construct a complete picture' O'Connor argues — and, after sixteen chapters, he comes to a number of conclusions about how we should understand Larkin. He describes Larkin as a 'reluctant trade unionist and therefore an inferior union leader' who suffered an 'enduring frustration that he wanted to be something more, but lacked the application to achieve it.' He 'took little interest in the backstage grind of union building, and showed himself to be egocentric, jealous, dictatorial and hyper-sensitive to criticism. His thirst for fame and restless mind began to draw him to a lengthy quest for a more glamorous role — in journalism, political agitation, public speaking, and cultural, social, and commercial projects.'

O'Connor argues that the extraordinary successes he achieved in revolutionising trade unionism (by breaking the dependence on the British unions and unionising unskilled workers) and his popularity 'exacerbated his personality problems, with disastrous results.' While the strategy to defeat the lockout was the correct one, 'the conduct of the campaign showed that Larkin put himself before anything else' and 'invariably his gut reaction to defeat was to walk away.' For O'Connor, the lockout was the

turning point in Larkin's life and he never had the same enthusiasm for union work again. His character flaws continued to damage his union work when he returned from the United States, by which time 'his egotism had degenerated into a self-destructive egomania. Hubris and jealousy caused him to split the ITGWU. Intolerance and mistrust precluded him from forming a communist party.'

Despite what might appear to be extremely harsh criticism of Larkin, O'Connor recognises Larkin's 'titanic achievements' between 1907 and 1913, how he transformed the spirit of the working class, broke the dependence on the British unions, and introduced a method of struggle that enabled him to organise unskilled workers, without whom the labour movement could not have become a significant force.

The reader might be inclined to draw the conclusion that Larkin was both a hero and a wrecker — but is that really the question that should be asked? Is O'Connor suggesting that but for Larkin's character flaws the outcome of the lockout might have been different? Can the fate of a movement be reduced to the character flaws of one of its leaders, albeit a towering figure like Larkin? O'Connor's view is that Larkin was an inferior leader because he was a reluctant trade unionist, who aspired to other more 'glamorous' roles — though he acknowledges that, at times, he was a great leader. However, it's important not to focus solely on the individ-

ual in trying to sum up Larkin the man; it's necessary to look at the circumstances and experiences that produced him. As John Newsinger puts it:

Larkin ... did not spring fully-formed from a Greek God's forehead, but was rather the product of working class experience and practice. He had been formed within the working class. There were many militants who shared his attitudes and outlook, but his exceptional abilities and forceful personality had pushed him to the fore. His weaknesses and inconsistencies were those of the movement, of the most advanced section of the working class that constituted Larkinism<sup>1</sup>.

O'Connor's book does help to create a more complete 'word-picture' of Larkin, which we shouldn't be afraid to look at more closely. It shows a very human Larkin, subject to all of highs and lows of the victories and defeats that are at the heart of real trade union struggle. Anyone who has been involved in trade union struggle will know how challenging leadership can be and will see Larkin as an enduring inspiration, someone who achieved so much in the face of the brutality of the ruling class assault on workers and the treachery of the union bureaucracy.

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<sup>1</sup>John Newsinger, 'Jim Larkin, Syndicalism and the 1913 Dublin Lockout' *International Socialism* 2:25, Autumn 1984. <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/newsinger/1984/xx/lockout.html>