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Emmet O'Connor's new biography of Jim Larkin is labour history writing at its very best. The author combines an exhaustive knowledge of the source material with a deep empathy for his subject matter while never losing the ability to make sound critical judgements.

It is remarkable to think that *Big Jim Larkin - hero or wrecker*, is the first full length biography of a man described by O'Connor as 'the greatest of Irish Labour leaders.'

The new book builds on O'Connor's mini biography of Larkin published by Cork University Press in 2002 and provides the reader with a comprehensive account of Larkin's life and work.

Importantly O'Connor explores the European influences on Larkin ideas and approach to radical politics. As a result Larkin, and more importantly Larkinism, is rightly presented as part of the wider rise in labour militancy in Europe during the early twentieth century.

The biography traces Larkin's early career from the National Union of Dock Labourers and its impact on Belfast labour during the great 1907 strike through to the establishment of the Irish Transport and General workers Union in Dublin in 1909.

O'Connor credits Larkin with introducing a new form of trade unionism to Ireland. The effect was not only to mobilise the great mass of unskilled workers but in doing so Larkin 'transformed the spirit of the working class.'

Larkin's embrace of syndicalism was about much more than securing better wages and working conditions. His aim was to instil a culture of class consciousness and solidarity that would incorporate all aspects of the lives of workers.

The 1913 Dublin Lockout is presented by O'Connor as both the high point and the turning point for Larkin the man and Larkinism the movement.

While the ultimate defeat of the workers was the result of a number of factors, O'Connor is unsparing in his critique of Larkin's actions during the latter half of the dispute. The ITGWU General Secretary emerges as a man of great talent and conviction but whose achievements are constantly being undermined by his own character flaws.

It is to O'Connor's great credit that a larger part of his book is devoted to Larkin's life post 1913 despite the author's own admission that 'It is unfortunate for [Larkin's] reputation that the story cannot be frozen in time'.

The Lockout defeat changed Larkin for ever, denying him much of what made him great while exacerbating many of his weaknesses. The following two decades saw him embroiled in perpetual conflict, not with the captains of industry but with his fellow workers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Controversy ranged over his absence from and attitude to the 1916 rising and war of independence. As always political considerations are hard to untangle from personal jealousies as evidenced in his tense relationship with James Connolly before and after the latter's execution.

When Larkin did return home in 1923 he was at the centre of a split within the ITGWU, leading to the creation of the Workers Union of Ireland. The ensuing dispute between the unions and their leaders –Larkin and William O'Brien- was to remain an open wound within the Irish labour movement that could only start to heal after Larkin's death.

The world of party politics was no less conflictive as Larkin's relationships with Irish, British, American and Russian communists and socialists repeatedly turned sour. His inability to work with others on anything other than his own terms was a major obstacle to the Irish revolutionary left during the 20s and 30s.

The last decade of his life brought about a certain degree of reconciliation. He became a TD in 1941 for the party he helped to found. Though for his old adversary William O'Brien this was a step too far precipitating the latter's split from the Labour Party. Meanwhile his long standing Catholic faith led to a number of surprising friendships including Archbishop John Charles McQuaid.

Emmet O'Connor has written a biography that is comprehensive and fair. It provides the reader with a detailed portrait of Larkin as trade unionist, socialist, republican, propagandist, organiser and family man.

Despite O'Connor's admiration for Larkin and his legacy the author never shies away from his subject's contradictions and failings. The book reveals a leader of great ability and conviction tragically undermined by his own human failings – a leader who was in the end both a hero and a wrecker in equal measure.

Eoin Ó Broin