



## Big Jim Larkin: hero or wrecker?

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unified football scene in Ireland for well over 100 years, and the history that Moore discusses stands firmly against the idea of a unified team. Moore also underplays the cultural and political significance of the Northern Ireland team to Unionists and Loyalists in a conclusion that is more ideological than logical.

To summarise, this book is a curiously framed history of Irish football governance from 1880 to 1940. The introduction is somewhat misleading about the content of the book and the conclusion is flawed, but when Moore's discussion of football governance engages directly with political events, it is very insightful. Chapters 1–16 can certainly be recommended to anyone looking for detailed analysis of the history of Irish football up until 1940, and ultimately, this means that *The Irish Soccer Split* can be considered a qualified success.

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**Big Jim Larkin: hero or wrecker?**, by Emmet O'Connor, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2015, xiv + 353 pp., €40.00/£32.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781906359935

Emmet O'Connor's latest work explores the life of Jim Larkin, one of the more enigmatic individuals in modern Irish history. Although a perennial figure in the histories of early twentieth-century Ireland, Larkin's life has rarely been examined, and in particular, the decades after his emigration to the USA have often been downplayed or ignored. Through his re-examination of established sources as well as a range of new material from British police, FBI and Comintern records, O'Connor seeks to present a more comprehensive study of Larkin's life and personality. We know little of his early years in Liverpool but his introduction to socialism is touched upon, including experiences with the Clarion movement which may have later influenced his attempts to expand the ITGWU (Irish Transport and General Workers' Union) into the cultural sphere. Although in later life Larkin would rightly earn a reputation as an extremely prickly individual, it is notable that as a youth in Liverpool he established long-lasting relationships with Fred Bower, Michael McKeown and Jack Carney. They remained comrades that he depended upon when working in Ireland, though even they found him difficult to deal with at times.

Despite fleeting references to Larkin as an intellectual, O'Connor quickly dismisses the idea that Larkin was an original theorist of socialism, describing his syndicalism as "stumbling" (77). Rather, the unique qualities of Larkin's career and success lay in his oratory, his familial relationship with the working classes, and his decision to organise unskilled transport workers, who were key to the success of sympathetic strike tactics. Perhaps desiring to reduce focus on the Dublin Lockout, the one period in Larkin's career that has been studied in depth, O'Connor confines the topic to a single chapter. The Lockout was, after all, less than a year of Larkin's life, but it had a decisive impact on the rest of Larkin's career. This decision allows O'Connor to begin expanding the image of Larkin from a one-dimensional demagogue to something more complex. Larkin's experiences as family man, international traveller, journalist, and communist provocateur both in America and Ireland are explored, providing us with a more rounded image of Larkin's life than has previously been available. O'Connor highlights the importance of the periodical press, both to the spread of Larkinism in Ireland as well as a creative outlet for Larkin as a writer and editor. It allowed him to feed his ego while maintaining a safe distance from detractors, and provided a space to expound

upon a variety of issues of personal interest. O'Connor writes that the original *Irish Worker* was "Larkin's triumph" (80), indicative of its impact on Irish society at the time. While in New York he wrote a response to the Easter Rising in *The Masses*, and later contributed to the *Revolutionary Age*, a socialist paper based in the same offices as Jack Reed's *Voice of Labour*. When Larkin returned to Ireland he revived the *Irish Worker* a number of times, though these iterations were never as successful as the original incarnation. At times Larkin seems to have been a frustrated editor who occasionally organised trade unions, rather than the other way around.

There are frequent references to occasions when Larkin suffered ill health, sometimes the result of incarceration, other times inflicted by the stress of his work. O'Connor writes that during the lockout Larkin's mood would change frequently: "One day he would be despondent, the next exhilarated" (115) and that in 1914 he suffered "bouts of depression and lethargy" (144). He describes Larkin's split with the ITGWU in 1923 as the result of "self-destructive egomania" (325) and notes that Larkin often acted in irrational ways, which ultimately prevented long-term success. His incarceration in the USA seems to have exasperated these tendencies. O'Connor pointedly quotes a British Special Branch report which notes that having spoken to Larkin, a friend claimed that "there is something missing mentally" (234). Though he refrains from offering a diagnosis, O'Connor's descriptions of his subject are suggestive of an individual with a personality disorder.

Another roadblock to success was Larkin's compulsive need to support and defend friends and family, even when they were in the wrong. He installed his sister Delia as an organiser for the Irish Women Workers Union, but as a result she was disliked by many within the ITGWU. In 1926 a lorry owned by Delia and her husband's company broke a picket line. Though Jim denied any knowledge of the company or his sister's ownership, he was devastated by the incident. According to a letter from Jack Carney to Séan O'Casey, Jim never spoke directly to Delia again, even though they lived in the same house. Additionally, Larkin's thin skin and inability to resist launching *ad hominem* attacks at his enemies frequently negated any lasting strategic organisation, and made him an isolated figure in the 1920s and 1930s.

Larkin's interest in Bolshevism and Young Jim's time in the Moscow International Lenin School are intriguing topics that will be new to many readers. Larkin attempted to court the Russians for monetary support and trade links. Such an agreement would have facilitated the spread of Bolshevism and provided a template to implement socialism in Ireland, removing the need for Larkin to build his own original movement. This was ultimately a failure for both Larkin and the USSR, as Larkin refused to organise a communist movement in Ireland but also prevented anyone else from taking his place. This fruitless encounter was just one of many factors that contributed to the stagnation of the Irish left after independence.

So much of Larkin's early success was based on his verbal contracts, friendships and personal relations, rather than material things that are easily collated and measured. In lieu of official union records his jacket pockets were packed with receipts, notes and letters, a habit that by the 1920s had already become a liability to his organisational attempts. This idiosyncrasy now prevents the reader from knowing the man as he was, or as he might have presented himself in letters or diaries. As part of his attempts to present a more rounded image of his subject, O'Connor introduces the reader to Larkin's wife Elizabeth. However, rather than generating fresh insight, this tends to highlight the lack of archival Larkin family material that has survived. It seems Larkin's contemporaries rarely took note of her presence or opinions, and the rare occasions when they did reveal little about her family or her relationship with Jim. If not for the periodical press, which recorded Larkin's speeches and through which he promoted his self-image, we would now have even less information about the man. Despite O'Connor's keen scholarship and attempts to fill this archival void through

sources culled from Larkin's associates as well as British, American and communist records, Larkin seems destined to remain a half-known figure in Irish history.

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**Partitioned lives: the Irish borderlands**, by Catherine Nash, Bryonie Reid, and Brian Graham, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, 157 pp., £95.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781409466727

Located at the intersection of geography and identity, borders prompt rich questions about the relationship between place and belonging. *Partitioned Lives: The Irish Borderlands* offers a thoughtful yet limited contribution to the growing canon of border studies. Readers will find a well-researched and nuanced exploration of the Irish border and its residents. Those looking for a strident argument or a comprehensive historiography may be left wanting.

Co-authors Nash, Reid, and Graham begin by clearly defining their terms and situating their study within current scholarship on border regions. Much of the existing literature reads borders as historical inventions or as systems of signs. The authors stress the uniqueness of their focus on the lived experience and material realities of the border. *Partitioned Lives* is not a history of the Irish border as a political construction. Rather, it is a collection of oral histories of borderlanders woven together to create a rich portrait of the depth and breadth of life experiences on both sides of the border. The authors buttress these first-person narratives with historical research and sociological data while extracting common themes and highlighting the variety of experience.

The second chapter provides the historical framework for partition, giving a serviceable and admirably succinct outline of the centuries of Anglo-Irish struggle. Focusing on the long-standing conflicts over land in Ulster, the authors provide two models for reading the Ulster border. The difference between these readings essentially boils down to the question of whether the Ulster border is *a* border or *the* border, and at stake is the uniqueness of Ulster: is the Ulster border one of many such ancient tribal divisions on the island of Ireland, or is it the defining border of the island? The authors make clear, but do not dwell upon, the political implications of this debate. Instead, they focus on the ways in which the border was understood by residents and enacted by state officials in the years following partition. In this discussion of the actual implementation of the border, the authors reveal one of the more interesting discoveries of the book: it was through the installation of customs houses along the border landscape, rather than through the Border Commission, that the border was actually felt and experienced as a new reality.

The next two chapters focusing on the 1950s–1990s make a case that everything is felt more deeply on the border. The economic recessions on both sides of the border had harsher consequences for borderlanders and the violence of the Troubles was uniquely focused on the border regions. Nash, Reid, and Graham offer rich perspectives on the oft-neglected IRA border campaign from 1956 to 1962. Unlike the IRA violence that was to follow, the border campaign exclusively targeted British army operations. Well-balanced interviews with those involved enrich and personalise the reader's understanding of the border campaign. Betty, the wife of an RUC sergeant in Crossmaglen, tells of the isolation and fear she lived with on a