

# Making Myth: The Image of 'Big Jim' Larkin in Plunkett's *Strumpet City*

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## ABSTRACT

James Larkin is a revered figure in Irish history, remarkably so in view of his associations with revolutionary syndicalism and communism. Among the contributions to the creation of the myth of 'Big Jim', James Plunkett's novel *Strumpet City* takes pride of place. The book's treatment of Larkin is examined here as an outstanding example of Gramsci's call for the emergence of a popular culture that challenges the hegemony of the ruling classes. By getting into the desperate lives of the Dublin poor in the bitter industrial struggles prior to the First World War, Plunkett affirms the Gramscian idea of developing a new way of conceiving the world by presenting Larkin as the mythical embodiment of social justice and solidarity. Although the events are now in the distant past, images developed with the great affective power of this novel may jolt modern readers to a greater awareness of present-day global struggles.

**Keywords:** Solidarity, Lockout, Gramsci, Sorel, Catholic.

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James Larkin, colloquially known as 'Big Jim', founded the Irish Transport and General Workers Union in 1909 during a period of fiercely fought industrial struggles in Belfast and Dublin. Famous for his fiery rhetoric and his bold and volatile leadership of strikes, his stereotypical image is familiar to anyone with knowledge of Irish history. Arms outstretched, imploring the people to rise up and fight for justice, it is based on a photograph of him addressing a rally in Dublin in 1923 on his return from imprisonment in the United States for 'criminal anarchy'.<sup>1</sup> The pose is reproduced in Oisín Kelly's impressive bronze statue close to the place where he delivered that speech, in O'Connell Street, Dublin's main thoroughfare. The statue, only the second to be erected there in the twentieth century, was unveiled by President Hillery of Ireland in 1979. The image was reproduced on a special-issue stamp in 2009 to commemorate the centenary of the Union, and on most of the banners and backdrops that appeared at various meetings that year. It is somewhat remarkable that a man who espoused syndicalism and communism commands such public respect in a socially conservative country. He has been included in the pantheon of 'great Irishmen' for representing labour as a key social element in the establishment of the Irish state, recognised today in the 'social partnership' process of governance. Yet Larkin was not only a divisive figure within Irish society as a whole but even within the labour movement itself, inaugurating a split in the Union in 1923 that was not overcome until 1990.<sup>2</sup> His titanic battle with the Dublin employers, the great Dublin lockout of 1913, ended in complete defeat for the workers and their Union. There appears, therefore, to be a strong element of truth in the judgement of one of Larkin's biographers, Emmet O'Connor, when he says that 'Larkin's real greatness lies not essentially in what he did, but in image and idea: in the image of 1913 and the 'risen people', and the idea of workers' solidarity as a code of honour' (O'Connor, 2002: 1). It would be hard to disagree that the myth of 'Big Jim' far exceeds the concrete outcomes of his erratic leadership, but this raises an important question, namely, how did the myth develop?

This paper focuses on the contribution of the Irish writer James Plunkett (1920 – 2003), and particularly on his bestselling novel, *Strumpet City*, set in the convulsive industrial struggles in Dublin prior to the First World War, in which the figure of Larkin haunts the entire drama as a messianic background figure personifying the righteous struggle for social justice. This politically committed historical drama is an excellent example of what was conceived by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) as a counter-hegemonic project in which novels promote a popular awareness of the plight of the exploited and oppressed, anticipating social progress and contributing to that progress (Gramsci, 1985: 359-362; Gramsci, 1975; 63-64). Gramsci stresses the importance of intellectual and moral leadership in securing the legitimacy or 'hegemony' of a ruling social group (Gramsci, 1976: 12), and if that hegemony is to be challenged successfully by socialists then they will need their own expressions of popular culture in which the depiction of feeling and passion leads to understanding and knowledge (1976: 418). By presenting social struggles from the standpoint of what Gramsci called the 'subaltern' classes, Plunkett not only performs the role of Gramsci's 'organic' intellectual, intrinsically linked to the struggles of the oppressed, but he also presents Larkin in that image, exemplifying Gramsci's idea that 'myth' is needed to promote a successful socialist politics (1976: 125-133).

The first section of the paper contextualises the novel and outlines Plunkett's narrative strategy in which he frames the novel in such a way as to stir the readers' sympathy in favour of the poor and against the callousness or indifference of the property owners. However, within this Manichean frame, an array of characters from all social backgrounds display more subtle forms of moral ambivalence in the protracted drama of this bitter struggle. In using the epic form and giving us this social panorama, Plunkett's novel re-presents the historical past primarily from the standpoint of the poor, their complex interactions with more powerful social groupings such as the employers and the Church, but he also deals with great sensitivity to the moral tensions within the propertied classes. The second section focuses on the portrayal of Larkin, arguing that the myth of Larkin is skilfully developed by his spectral

presence in the novel. Although he haunts the events, he is granted hardly any dialogue, hovering in the background as a symbol of hope to the poor and of destructiveness to those who support the status quo. Larkin is projected as the quintessential organic intellectual of the 'risen' people. The third and concluding section considers the role of fiction in constructing political myth, and how the reception of such works will vary according to culture and time. It will be argued that although the construction of myth is a necessary aspect of the politics of social justice, it carries with it inherent dangers that require a much clearer specification of the role of myth than that provided by Gramsci.

### **A SALUTE TO SOLIDARITY**

Plunkett worked briefly with Big Jim as an official of the Workers Union of Ireland in the final year of Larkin's life, having first met him in 1938, and it is clear that he wanted to convey the immense moral energy of the man (Plunkett, 2006: 110-115). He wrote a radio play, *Big Jim*, broadcast in 1955, with Larkin as the central figure, and it was revised for stage as *The Risen People* and performed in Dublin in 1958 and in Belfast in 1976. The stage play was promoted with the famous image of Larkin with his arms outstretched. *Strumpet City* was first published by Hutchinson in London in 1969 and serialized for television by the Irish state broadcaster RTE in 1980. The book was an immediate international success, and the television version also had world-wide appeal, being shown in 52 countries (Sheehan, 1987: 306-314). The novel owes nothing to the literary modernism pioneered by other Irish writers like Joyce and Becket. In his intimacy with the concerns, aspirations and vulnerabilities, Plunkett is closer to the playwright Seán O'Casey, who was a personal friend of Larkin. However, the novel is squarely in the tradition of Dickens, a 200,000 word epic with an array of characters from all social classes, against the background of the labour struggles that beset Dublin in the years leading up to the First World War, culminating in the lockout of

1913 in which the workers were finally forced into submission. Plunkett commented that just as O'Casey had dealt with the "submerged, deprived city" and James Joyce with the "seedy gentility", he thought he would "try to get the lot in – the company director types, the priests, the decent working men, and the utterly outcast" (cited in Sheehan, 1987: 307). The Dickensian style of the novel was well suited to television serialization, Hugh Leonard's screenplay is superb and it drew the best out of an array of Ireland's finest actors. Its ambition was seen in the casting of international stars Peter O'Toole as Larkin, Peter Ustinov as King Edward VII and Cyril Cusack as the sympathetic priest, Fr. Giffley. Shown at a time when Ireland, like the rest of the world, was deep in economic crisis, it delivered a highly charged moralistic indictment of the economic and social system that had prevailed in Dublin at the beginning of the century. It was shown shortly after Larkin's statue had taken its place, a public acknowledgement of the positive contribution of organised labour to the development of Irish politics and society.

One of the key concepts employed by Plunkett in order to steer the sympathies of the reader to the Dublin poor is precisely the one that O'Connor attributes to Larkin's legacy – the idea of solidarity. However, it is not simply solidarity among workers but amongst the poor as a whole, including marginalised characters such as Lily the prostitute and Rashers Tierney.<sup>3</sup> The desperate industrial struggles, conducted against a background of dire poverty, were part of a wider struggle across Europe in which the social demands of the poor expressed an emotional commitment to transform the intolerable conditions in which they lived out their existence. The strike leader, the Liverpool-born Jim Larkin, is, for the most part, a background character in the novel, yet his messianic presence inhabits the whole drama. He is a saviour to the workers and the devil incarnate to the bourgeoisie. The passionate, moralistic rhetoric that pours from Larkin elevates the struggle for union recognition and better pay into a moral struggle, a struggle not simply using solidarity as a weapon but a struggle for solidarity in society at large.

Plunkett puts the affective weight of the novel behind the poor by a sympathetic portrayal of a young couple, Bob Fitzpatrick, known to his friends as Fitz, a foundry stoker, and Mary, a maid in the Bradshaw family house in Kingstown. They marry, take a room in a tenement in Chandlers Court, and start a family. Fitz is drawn into the struggles for union recognition and improved conditions, but as he is blacklisted because of his involvement with the Larkenites in the lockout of 1913 he is forced to join the British Army at the outset of the War in order to provide for his family.<sup>4</sup> Early in the novel Fitz expresses a feeling of solidarity with his community, born not out of the confrontation of strike action but merely from the experience of working hard to put out a fire at a local coal yard:

‘Something had happened to him that night...He remembered the sharp morning wind and, far off, the shouts of the men. Isolated in the top gallery of the house, just before the water pipes rattled into life, he had felt the inward drag of compassion and responsibility, linking him with the others below. Some part of him had become theirs. It was a moment he had no way of explaining to anybody’ (Plunkett, 1978: 122).

In describing this epiphany Plunkett evokes the emotional power of cooperation when collective action is the only solution to the problem, and here, as elsewhere in the novel, solidarity is established as primarily an affective power. Fitz is lionized as a good man from start to finish, a loving figure whose actions seem always to be pointing to a realisable goal of human solidarity.

By the time of the decisive lock out of 1913 Fitz has been promoted to foreman and, as such, is not required to sign the employers’ document requiring workers to renounce their union membership or lose their employment. However, he refuses to stay in work while his friends are locked out, and through this action he sees himself to be part of a wider struggle for justice. He had witnessed a shocking industrial accident in which his friend Barney Mulhall, a union militant, had had his legs cut off, and he feels an

obligation to remain true to the cause that Mulhall and his other friends had sacrificed so much:

'He would never betray Mulhall's trust. But it was not altogether that. There were Pat and Joe and the men who worked with them. There were Farrell and the dockers and thousands of others throughout the city, some long resigned to perpetual squalor as to the Will of God, others rebelling with recurring desperation whenever there was a leader to lead them. Never before had they stood so solidly together' (1978: 415-416).

As bitter as the consequences are for the Fitzpatricks, Mary accepts the decision without demur. When Mulhall eventually dies there is no money for the funeral, and Mary resolves the problem by donating the money she had set by to send her children to relatives in the event that they could no longer be fed. Mulhall is buried, escorted by workers who had now joined the newly-formed Irish Citizens. They carry blazing torches and Fitz reflects that love was better than prudence, and, more in hope than expectation, that 'the flaming touches were telling the city that the people of his class would not be starved for ever' (1978: 467-469).

If Fitz and Mary are pure and heroic, the other end of the moral scale is occupied by Ralph Bradshaw, who, early in the novel, sends his old servant to the workhouse when she becomes too ill to work. He is a slum landlord who has such contempt for his tenants that he allows them to rent accommodation that is clearly unfit for habitation. He opposes the firing of a 21 gun salute to greet the visit of King Edward VII because he is worried that the reverberations will weaken his buildings, but he assures his family and friends that there is no cause for alarm. Later he is warned by an acquaintance that he must make them safe, but he refuses to heed the warning, blaming the problem on the nearby railway line for unsettling the foundations. Bradshaw knows that his connections with the political authorities will ensure that he has to take no action. When the acquaintance wonders how many people might die if the buildings were to collapse, Bradshaw thinks this to be a 'damned peculiar notion' (Plunkett, 1978:314).

The following year two of the houses fall down, killing numerous impoverished tenants. Bradshaw insists that a safety inspection had been carried out, with necessary repairs undertaken, and no action is taken against him (1978: 447). The analogy is clear; old and rotten structures are collapsing and those responsible are in denial. Plunkett bases this incident on the collapse of two tenements in Church Street, Dublin, in September 1913 in which seven people were killed. Larkin's paper, *The Irish Worker*, frequently issued the names of the 'respectable' citizens who were making profits as slum landlords (Nevin, 2006: 160).

Between the 'framing' extremes of Fitz/Mary on the one hand and Bradshaw on the other, there is an array of characters reacting to the successive social convulsions in complex and ambivalent ways. They are, in various ways, constrained by the expectations and assumptions of their social *milieu*, seeking compromises or else lashing out, searching their souls or rationalising their prejudices, surrendering to hopelessness or enduring stoically. The liberal company director Belton Yearling plays a pivotal role, for although he is part of the Bradshaw's social circle, he develops a growing sympathy for the workers. He is also an 'outsider' in another sense, being a Protestant in a largely Catholic country in which the Church has immense social power, used in the struggles for the most part against the Unions because of the alleged socialist and atheist nature of its leaders. Yearling feels increasingly helpless in his position and a stranger in his own country; he eventually flees to London even though in an earlier part of his life there he had been a victim of nationalist prejudice from the English bourgeoisie.

Plunkett's portrayal of the ambiguities of the Catholic Church is drawn with great skill (see Newsinger, 1989: 65-76), and it is vital to our understanding of the creation of the Larkin myth. It would have been tempting to fix the Catholic position as reactionary, but Plunkett recognises that there are not one but many positions within it. His intuition here chimes with Gramsci's observation that even within an authoritarian religion like Catholicism there is, 'in reality a multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions'; he rejected Bukharin's argument that a popular socialist ideology



must be totally opposed to everything taught by existing religions (Gramsci, 1976: 419-20).<sup>5</sup> Just as it was evident to Gramsci that historically there had been variants of Catholicism that had argued strongly for equality and justice, Plunkett also shows a willingness among the striking workers to argue that their cause was closer to the essential social message of the Church than was the cause of 'order' and 'property'. Larkin is presented as a leader who consciously appeals to a sense of social justice grounded in religious morality, as he hurls jeremiads against the rich in his fiery speeches and the coruscating columns of the *Irish Worker*.

The tensions within the Church are illustrated in the characters of the three resident priests of the impoverished parish of St. Bridget's. The parish priest, Fr. Giffley, is from an educated middle class background, but he has developed genuine sympathy for the poor and, at the same time, despairs at their condition and the complacency displayed towards it by his class. He is a drunkard, and his drinking is almost the only rational response to a condition that is unacceptable and yet has to be endured. As we shall see in the next section, Fr. Giffley eventually offers his full support to Larkin, but Larkin knows that the contradictions are too formidable to overcome. Fr. O'Sullivan is a simple priest who offers comfort to the poor but cannot bring himself to take a stance on the causes of misfortune, and struggles to reconcile it with God's word. Fr. O'Connor is from a middle class background, and although he feels it his calling to do good things for the poor, he is revolted by them, and for this he earns the freely expressed hatred of Fr. Giffley. Fr. O'Connor opposes the strikers because socialism is an atheistic abomination, and, as such, he represents the official view of the Church. In this detailed and highly critical portrait of Fr. O'Connor, Plunkett moves into dangerous territory, for even in 1969 to criticise the Church was to invite trouble. Plunkett himself had almost lost his livelihood as a Union official in 1955 after going on a visit to the Soviet Union and coming under public criticism from the *Catholic Standard*. The anti-socialist priest, Fr. O'Connor, is the only one who explicitly talks about morality and claims the moral high ground simply because he is the representative of the Church. At one stage during a strike Fr. O'Connor

had ordered some of the lay workers in the parish to issue food parcels only to the families of workers who were not on strike but were out of work because of the action. The militant striker Barney Mulhall goes to Fr. O'Connor to protest, but the priest tells him that he has no business coming to the Church if he is a follower of Larkin. Mulhall avers that he thought the Church should be on the side of the poor, to which Fr. O'Connor replies:

Socialism is an evil doctrine and Mr. Larkin is one of its propagandists. It attacks property and the Church Herself. If you are a Catholic you should do what the Church tells you. You must trust the wisdom of your priests' (Plunkett, 1978: 258-259).<sup>6</sup>

Mullhall counters that he would trust the priests 'in their proper sphere', acknowledging their authority in matters spiritual but not in matters political. Plunkett's exposition of the priest's arrogance and unwillingness even to deign to engage in moral argument again brings to mind Gramsci's words on the growing irrelevance of old modes of demanding obedience – 'the old intellectual and moral leaders of society are feeling the ground give way under their feet and realising that their "preaching" has become just that...pure form without any content, an empty, mindless shell'" (Gramsci, 1995: 276).

### **THE MYTH OF 'BIG JIM' LARKIN**

Larkin's presence inhabits the whole drama but he hardly appears as a character. He is the elusive champion of the oppressed, thundering his Biblical rhetoric against the greed and selfishness of the bourgeoisie, and he is also the scourge of the employers. He is first mentioned in the novel in a discussion in the Bradshaw household when Yearling alleges that Larkin has Belfast in a state of revolution (Plunkett, 1978: 41), clearly conveying the enormity of the threat posed by Larkin's unionisation of dockers and carters that briefly promised to override the sectarianism that had long divided people in the north of Ireland (Larkin, 1989: 25-40; O'Connor, 2002: 10-17).

This middle class fear of what Larkin represents is shown at a number of points in the novel. Early on in the 1909 strike of the carters Doggett, one of the coal yard owners, dismisses his foreman, O'Connor, for merely having a sound knowledge of Larkin and union matters. Plunkett portrays the callousness of the employer by relating that although O'Connor was proud to have worked for the company for 30 years, Doggett could not remember his name (Plunkett, 1978: 139-140). Eventually, the employers, led by William Martin Murphy, owner of the Dublin Tramcar Company and three major newspapers, cooperate to break Larkinism decisively by requiring all workers to resign from the ITGWU, and locking out all who refused (1978: 402).

The fear of the middle class is not simply based on Larkin's threat to private property but also on the feeling that he represents a form of socialism so radical that it imperils the existing moral order. This position is most directly expressed by Fr. O'Connor, who is particularly distressed that 'some of the well-to-do class' were openly sympathizing with Larkin when he was released early from his prison sentence, including Countess Markiewicz (1978: 230). Yearling is the middle-class character who personifies this conversion to recognising the justice involved in 'Larkinism'. He is excited by Larkin's moralistic attacks on William Martin Murphy in the newly produced *Irish Worker* because the voice of the workers was never heard in the established press. Plunkett makes it clear, however, that Yearling will find it difficult to obtain the paper on a regular basis because normal distributors won't handle it (1978: 379).<sup>7</sup> Later he becomes involved in the fighting on the workers' side in the riot that developed when Catholic groups attempted to stop the strikers sending their children to England to be looked after until the dispute was resolved. There are echoes here of Marx's prediction in the *Communist Manifesto* that at the height of class struggle 'a part of the ruling class renounces its role and commits itself to the revolutionary class' (Marx, 1996: 10), but here the situation is more complex. Yearling, as a Protestant, feels Irish in England and English in Ireland, and it is to England that he eventually retreats, feeling isolated and helpless (Plunkett, 1978: 577-578).

If Larkin is perceived as a mortal threat by the conservative middle class, he is seen as a beacon of hope by the workers. His power is first invoked by Barney Mulhall, a militant worker who threatens to involve Larkin in demanding a higher rate of pay, drawing an aggressive anti-Larkin response from the pay clerk (1978: 89). Larkin is also portrayed as an opponent of alcohol, an indication of moral probity. A few pages on the shadowy presence of Larkin is pushed further when he passes Rashers and Hennessy in the street, pauses to pat Rusty the dog and wish them good night, and Hennessy is pleased that he could so readily identify someone who was rapidly becoming 'the talk of Dublin' (1978: 100).

It is not until page 148 that Larkin enters the narrative in his own right, speaking to the striking carters in 1909, and even then it is mediated through Fitz's description. Larkin's voice is the strongest Fitz had ever heard, and he remarks on the 'strange' Liverpool-Irish accent as the leader decries the British executive of the union for withdrawing strike pay because they are 'indifferent to the sufferings of the people in Dublin.' This is one of the first indications of national tensions within the union movement, but this is not presented by Plunkett as a major theme in the book. Larkin tells the strikers they will carry on without union strike pay, relying instead on collected funds, and he implores the strikers to think of themselves as 'soldiers in the field'. He promises to bring the dockers out on strike to prevent the importation of scab labour, and he speaks to them from a boat in the River Liffey. Plunkett presents a vivid visual image of Larkin's power as gradually the cranes stop moving while 'yard by yard and ship by ship, the port was closing down' (1978:152).

A little further on in the narrative Fitz describes a Larkin speech at a meeting of the strikers, now deprived of their strike pay and without any real hope of victory. In this description we see for the first time an acknowledgement that the strike is unlikely to achieve its immediate goals, but also an affirmation of the long-term value of the struggle. Fitz recounts the magnetism of Larkin's presence in the drama of a night-time meeting lit by torches, painting shadows on the hungry faces of the strikers:

Yet they cheered when he said he could promise them nothing except hardship, and felt that somewhere at the end of the road there was a better world waiting. Like heaven, it was very far away, and like heaven it would be very hard to reach. Yet when before the only certainty had been obscurity and want, now at least there was that hint of hope. Hope for what, Fitz, in the calm after the speechmaking, could not quite remember. He could only remember that it had been there, that it had infected him in company with thousands of others crushing and jostling and listening; perhaps it was a feeling of movement that remained, a journey beginning, a vague but uncertain purpose (Plunkett, 1978: 165-166).

At this point, still in 1909, a temporary resolution is secured between the employers and the official union leader, James Sexton, who is determined to curtail Larkin's influence. Larkin is suspended from the Liverpool-based National Union of Dockworkers and responds by founding a new, independent union (1978: 166-167). Later, in a conversation between Fr. O'Connor and Yearling, it is established that Larkin had been sentenced to twelve months hard labour on charges of misappropriating union funds. Fr. O'Connor laments that Mr. Sexton had been forced to go armed with a revolver during the trial, in which he was chief prosecution witness, while Yearling bristles at the trumped-up charges and the savagery of the sentence, predicting that it will make Larkin a 'popular martyr' who will have 'the dregs of the city flocking to him' (1978: 188).<sup>8</sup> Fr. O'Connor condemns Larkin for being a 'self-proclaimed socialist' who criticises priests, and bemoans the fact that the people still flocked to him. When Yearling asks the priest what is his answer to poverty, Fr. O'Connor recites the answer, 'from those who have wealth, charity for the sake of God; for those who suffer poverty, resignation for His sake also' (1978, 189). Here, in a nutshell, Plunkett implies the inadequacy of charity and the need instead for solidarity, the argument made by the first theorist of solidarity, Pierre Leroux, back in 1840 (Leroux, 1985: 157-172).

This contrast between the hope generated by the oratory and aggression of Larkin and the lack of material progress is remarked on much

later in the book. The action has moved on to 1912 and Fitz reflects that for all Larkin's thundering messages and industrial militancy, 'the immediate gains, where they came at all, made little difference' (Plunkett, 1978: 315). So, there are no illusions that the social revolution is at hand, but there is, nevertheless, a conviction that social justice can only be won in the long term by an incessant clamour for recognition. This message is not dissimilar to William Morris's in *The Dream of John Ball*, when a time-traveller comforts the leader of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. That particular revolt may fail, but it is part of a longer struggle that will eventually produce a situation in which the goal of social justice becomes a real possibility – 'the Fellowship of Man shall endure, however many tribulations it may have to wear through' (Morris, 1993: 36).<sup>9</sup> This linking of the particular struggle to a broader goal of social justice, in which the particular solidarity developed contributes to a broader social solidarity, is brilliantly carried off in Plunkett's novel.

It is not until near the end of the novel that Larkin speaks directly. Fr. Giffley is outraged when he stumbles upon the police beating up Fitz in his tenement room in Chandler's Court and he goes to see Larkin to ask advice about how to complain about the incident. At first Larkin thinks that the priest has come to complain about him, for he regularly has priests visiting to berate him for his work, but he also sees priests like Giffley whose sympathies are for the workers. But can the priests who *are* on the side of the poor be seen to be on Larkin's side? Larkin comments that he sends away these sympathetic priests 'for their own sakes.' He tells Fr. Giffley that it would be useless to complain:

'Nothing is ever done, because the Government is committed to the employers and the police can indulge in any lawlessness they like so long as it's aimed at the poor' (Plunkett, 1978: 527).

Fr. Giffley offers to take part in the forthcoming protest march, and although Larkin expresses his gratitude for the offer he tells him 'it wouldn't be wise for either of us' (1978: 527). Fr. Giffley departs, urging Larkin to continue with his work, but he is unable to bear the helplessness of his own situation. He ends the day found drunk in public, and at the conclusion of the book he is in

the priests' home by the seaside, far from the world of the parishioners he had come to love. In the case of Fr. Giffley, as indeed with Belton Yearling, Yeats's line from the "The Second Coming" seems apposite – 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold' (Yeats, 1974: 99). Fr. Giffley had thought himself wise to the truth, and he had excoriated Fr. O'Connor for his myopia, reminding the young priest that Dublin has 87,000 people living in 6,000 tenements. However, the limitations of his own class background are brought home to him in his naivety about the impartiality of the police and the illusion that he could give material assistance to Larkin.

Although Plunkett portrays Larkin as a heroic figure, he is also, in this particular battle, a loser. The novel closes in the aftermath of the lockout, with no further mention of Larkin. In fact Larkin departed for America shortly after the defeat and did not return until 1923, after serving time in Sing Sing prison for revolutionary activity. Such was his celebrity that he was visited there by the world-famous comedian Charlie Chaplin (O'Riordan, 2006: 72). He died in 1947; his requiem mass was conducted by the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin. Donal Nevin points to an interesting contrast in the lives of the rival leaders of the 1913 lockout – Larkin left just over £16 in his will, plus the balance of his week's wage of £4.10 shillings, whereas William Martin Murphy, who died in 1919, left £264,000, of which £2,000 went to charity (Nevin, 2006: O'Connor, 2002:114).

## **MYTH, HISTORY AND MOBILIZATION**

*The Risen People* and *Strumpet City* contributed significantly to the development of the myth of Big Jim Larkin. In the novel, the device of keeping him hovering in the background, either talked about or reported, adds mystery and expectation to his image. Although it clearly calls on the reader to sympathize with the plight of the poor, its subtle characterisations and acknowledgement that the bitter struggles led to no immediate improvement ensure that it avoids the danger pointed to by Gramsci when he

implored progressive writers not to expound their drama 'like a thesis or a propaganda speech' (Gramsci, 1985: 362). The great strength of the novel – and the television version – is the magnificent authenticity of his representation of language and personality across the social classes, capturing the humour, bathos, anger, humiliation and despair of those extraordinary times. It is a novel that simply could not have been produced by a young writer, but equally a young reader today may not find it so easy to recognise that authenticity. In one sense this evocation of the solidarity of the exploited and oppressed appears to be part of a very distant past. The struggles depicted occurred a century ago, the book is 40 years old, and the television series 30 years old. This raises questions about the sustainability of political myth and the continued relevance of novels like *Strumpet City*.

As Gramsci himself acknowledged, his concept of myth was largely adapted from the work of the French theorist Georges Sorel (1847-1922). Sorel argued for the need to develop an inspirational *mélange* of images to produce a radical shift of consciousness, identifying the general strike as the paradigmatic expression of that myth in his 1906 work *Reflections on Violence* (Sorel, 1974: 126-129; Vout and Wilde, 1987: 2-7). Sorel was one of the theoreticians of the revolutionary syndicalism that swept Europe in the period prior to the First World War, but although his notion of myth provides an excellent way of understanding both the motivation and volatility of Larkinism, it is important to note Plunkett's reservations about the consequences of spontaneous militancy in key parts of *Strumpet City*. Nor are these reservations of the same nature as those expressed by Gramsci when discussing Sorel's position on the myth of the general strike. Gramsci argued that Sorel's myth lacked a constructive aspect and needed to be extended to include the party political organisation of the working class (Gramsci, 1976: 125-129). In Gramsci's view, the political party, in this case the Communist Party, would play the role of the 'Modern Prince'. However, there are serious problems with both these conceptions.

In the case of Sorel, Gramsci is right to see that his myth of the general strike is devoid of a constructive element. Sorel saw the general strike



not as a means to a specific goal but as an end in itself, as 'undivided whole' so that 'no details about ways and means will be of the slightest help to the understanding of socialism' (Sorel, 1974: 129). In placing *all* the emphasis on the emotional force of protest the question is left begging as to why it should be this myth rather than a variety of other myths that may be promoted. In Sorel's case, within four years of the first publication of *Reflections on Violence* he was flirting with representatives and ideas of the extreme right (Wilde, 1986: 361-374), before veering to enthusiastic support for Lenin following the Russian Revolution. Here the conception of myth has lost all dependence on truth, on the justice of a cause that must be rationally justified and open to contestation. In Gramsci's case, the desire to extend the myth to the political party may also invite authoritarianism and dogmatism, unless there is an unequivocal commitment to democracy within the state and within the party. For political myth to be progressive, therefore, the 'constructive' moment must be more explicit and more specific than Gramsci admits. If this is fulfilled, the myth is likely to be more sustainable, as part of a longer struggle for social justice, rather than being restricted to the context in which it arose.

Can this be said of the Larkin myth that Plunkett helped to develop? Perhaps the most significant implication of presenting Larkin as myth in *Strumpet City* is that it raises the question of the role that inspirational figures can play in the broader struggle for social justice. In the novel the key to success for the workers is the use of their collective strength, but it takes the volcanic power of this individual leader to mobilise that latent strength. The dangers of that sort of unrestrained and unaccountable leadership are well documented by Larkins' biographers, and indeed by many who were broadly supportive of him. It is not, therefore, the organisational feature of his leadership that constitutes the progressive aspect of the myth, but rather, as was stated in the introduction, the ideas of justifiable resistance and solidarity. I would not restrict this to simply to the idea of 'workers' solidarity as a code of honour,' as does O'Connor (2002: 1), but rather to an experience

of solidarity forged in a particular struggle that cries out for a broader solidarity centred on dignity in work and decency in life.

Pitched at that level of generality, the novel is a resource for the sort of shift of consciousness conceived by Gramsci:

'What matters is that a new way of conceiving the world and man is born and that this conception is no longer reserved to the great intellectuals, to professional philosophers, but tends rather to become a popular, mass phenomenon, with a concretely world-wide character, capable of modifying...popular thought and mummified popular culture' (Gramsci, 1976: 417).

It may not be obvious that this 'concretely world-wide character' attaches to myths of the past set in social struggles quite different from those experienced in twenty-first century societies. However, the enduring strength of myth-making of this quality may be found when the reader of today relates that myth to the multifaceted struggles intrinsic to the contested development of globalization. The relevance of past struggles to current global struggles has been vividly brought to life recently by Paul Mason in his *Live Working or Die Fighting*, in which he compares present-day workers' struggles in parts of the newly industrialised world with historical struggles of the past in Europe and the United States. Indeed, on the final page of that book Mason holds up Larkin as one who fought 'for the flower in the vase as well as the bread on the table' (Mason, 2007: 283).<sup>10</sup> Art in general, and the novel in particular, illuminates the subjective experience of developing and maintaining solidarity in the course of specific social struggles, and the reception of such artistic contributions plays a vital role in the battle of ideas. In personifying what in effect are struggles for recognition, art forms can offer valuable insights into theoretical problems concerning the reconciling of differences and the obstacles to social inclusion. Additionally, a popular novel can make its own political contribution through its power to incite an emotional engagement against social injustice. Fictionalised accounts of past struggles, when dramatised as brilliantly as *Strumpet City*, can jolt the reader into confronting the persistence of poverty and exploitation everywhere.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The photograph is credited to J. Cashman – see Nevin, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Shortly on returning from the USA, Larkin went into dispute with the acting leader of the ITGWU, William O'Brien, and his brother Peter founded the breakaway Workers' Union of Ireland in 1924 when Big Jim was in Moscow as the Irish delegate to the Fifth Congress of the Communist International (Larkin, 1989: 261-293; Greaves, 1982: 136-324). The unions merged into the current SIPTU (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union) in 1990, and it now has over 200,000 members.

<sup>3</sup> Amongst these marginalized characters should be included Rashers' dog Rusty, for not only does the relationship between them show love and loyalty in the direst of circumstances, but also reveals the absence of compassion in the priest, Fr. O'Connor, who refuses to say prayers over the dead body of Rashers until the 'brute beast' was removed (Plunkett, 1978: 571; Behrend, 1979: 310).

<sup>4</sup> Plunkett's father had also joined the British Army to make his family secure – obituary, *The Independent*, 2003, May 30.

<sup>5</sup> Gramsci devotes a large section of his *Prison Notebooks* to discussing the social significance of different modes of religious consciousness (Gramsci, 1995: 1-137). There is an interesting connection between Gramsci's criticism of Bukharin's insensitivity to radical possibilities of some religious thinking and Bukharin's incredulity at Larkin's belief in God. This was expressed in a conversation between the men in 1928 after Larkin had addressed a meeting of the Moscow Soviet, of which he was an elected member (Larkin, 1989: 290-291).

<sup>6</sup> In attributing these words to Fr. O'Connor, Plunkett almost certainly had in mind the view printed in the *Irish Catholic* of September 6, 1913 that 'socialism is essentially Satanic in its nature, origin and purpose' (see Keogh, 2006: 54). The paper was owned by William Martin Murphy, who coordinated the lockout.

<sup>7</sup> An important point because it is tempting to compare insults from the *Irish Worker* with insults from the established press without acknowledging that the papers owned by William Martin Murphy and other employers possessed all the resources, controlled the distribution, and saturated the market (e.g. O'Connor, 2002: 41-42).

<sup>8</sup> For details of the trial see Larkin, 1989: 68-72 and O'Connor, 2002: 23-30.

<sup>9</sup> At a speech in Sheffield in 1913 in which he was appealing for British support for the locked-out Dublin workers, Larkin invoked William Morris's "The Day is Coming" (Cited in Nevin, 2006: 470).

<sup>10</sup> Mason's reference is to the playwright Sean O'Casey's characterisation of the man (Larkin, 1989: xxi).

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