

Larkin, Emmet Joseph

by Douglas Kanter

Larkin, Emmet Joseph (1927–2012), historian, was born on 19 May 1927 in New York City, elder of two children, to Emmet Joseph Larkin, armoured guard, and Annabelle (née Ryder), cashier. Following service as a corporal in the United States Army (1944–6), Larkin attended university on the 'GI Bill'. He took his BA in history at New York University (1950), and his MA (1951) and Ph.D. (1957) in history at Columbia University. While completing the Ph.D., he spent a year at the London School of Economics as a Fulbright Scholar (1956–7). Larkin began his teaching career as an instructor at Brooklyn College in 1954, moving to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) as an assistant professor in 1960. Hired by the University of Chicago as an associate professor in 1966, he was promoted to professor in 1971, remaining at Chicago until his retirement in 2006.

Larkin's early interest in Ireland was shaped by his family heritage. His father, though born in Chicago, was raised in Co. Galway and fought in the Irish war of independence; his mother was Irish-born. His introduction to the academic study of Ireland came as an undergraduate at NYU, where David Greene, an expert on the Irish literary renaissance, mentored him. At Columbia, Larkin read English history, of which Irish history was considered a subfield, completing his MA thesis on Fenianism and his Ph.D. dissertation on James Larkin (qv) (no relation). During his early years at MIT, he attended an informal weekly seminar at the home of John Kelleher, the Shattuck chair of modern Irish literature and history at Harvard University, whom he credited with teaching him 'how to read texts and analyse their structure and patterns of presentation' (Larkin, 'Kelleher', 9). A revised version of his dissertation was published as his first book, *James Larkin. Irish labour leader, 1867–1947* (1965).

By this time, Larkin had commenced work on the subject that would occupy most of his professional energies for the next half century, the Roman catholic church in nineteenth-century Ireland. Larkin had recognised the need for a history of the church in the early 1950s, but the choice of topic was, in some ways, a curious one. Though raised in a catholic family, Larkin was not a practising catholic. He privately admitted to an 'anti-clerical bias' as a young man (Ryan papers, LA 10/116), but years of research left him with an abiding appreciation for the achievements of the church in nineteenth-century Ireland. Initially envisaging a two-volume study spanning the years 1780–1918, Larkin ultimately wrote eight books on the subject. He composed them employing his distinctive 'mosaic technique', which consisted of extensive, albeit selective, quotation from archival sources. He planned to complete an additional five volumes, which remained unwritten at the time of his death.

Larkin conceived of the bulk of this work – seven finished volumes, covering the period 1850–91 – as constitutional (rather than institutional) history, adapted to the peculiar character of nineteenth-century Ireland. This meant focusing on the relationship of the catholic hierarchy not only (or primarily) with the British state, but also with the Irish 'nation', which, in his view, had created a *de facto* counter-state by the 1880s. Larkin argued that Archbishop (later Cardinal) Paul Cullen (qv) made and consolidated the catholic church in Ireland between 1850 and 1870 by reforming and reuniting the bishops as a body. This development enabled the church to take its place as one of the constituent elements in the modern Irish political system, re-engaging with nationalist politics in the 1870s, establishing a 'concordat' with the Irish parliamentary party in the 1880s, and siding with the party against its quondam leader, Charles Stewart Parnell (qv), in the 1890s, thus helping to preserve those democratic norms that persisted in Ireland into the twentieth century.

Conceptually and methodologically, Larkin's project owed its greatest debt to English rather than Irish historiography, and particularly to the work of Sir Lewis Namier. Larkin did not share Namier's dim view of human nature, but his penchant for exhaustive archival research, his scepticism of theory, his interest in discerning the 'unwritten rules' of the political game, and his belief that history was an art rather than a science, were all 'Namierite'. A second major influence was Elie Halévy, who provided a model for composing a multi-volume history that was unlikely to be completed – the key was to write the most important volumes first, regardless of chronological sequence. Halévy also furnished an example of the powerful impact that religion and associational culture could have on politics and society. Larkin's emphasis on church-state relations and ecclesiastical elites was very much of its time, but also reflected his conviction that Ireland's political history had to be 'delineated' before its social history could be satisfactorily written (Larkin papers, 33/38).

While working on his multi-volume history, Larkin sought to place his research in perspective by completing three major articles on the economic, social, and political role of the nineteenth-century church. These essays, which originally appeared in the *American Historical Review* and were subsequently republished as *The historical dimensions of Irish catholicism* (1976), represented his attempt to understand the church over the long term. The second article in the series, 'The devotional revolution in Ireland, 1850–75' (1972), constituted Larkin's most influential contribution to Irish history. In it, he outlined a dramatic transformation in Irish catholic devotional practice over just a quarter century. Before 1850, he claimed, the church in Ireland struggled to meet its pastoral obligations owing to institutional poverty, a rapidly growing population, and problems of clerical indiscipline. As a result, most Irish catholics in the decades before the famine were nominal. Under Cullen's reforming leadership, however, 'the great mass of the Irish people became practising catholics' in the span of a generation. Cullen's pastoral efforts benefited from the famine, which reduced pressure on the resources of the church and left it with a stronger devotional nucleus, as well as better economic prospects.

Fundamentally, however, the devotional revolution was the product of an 'identity crisis' among the laity, brought about by Anglicisation. Catholicism 'provided the Irish with a substitute symbolic language and offered them a new cultural heritage with which they could identify and be identified and through which they could identify with one another' (625, 649, 650).

Toward the end of his career, Larkin returned to the subject of catholic devotional practice. In his final book, *The pastoral role of the Roman catholic church in pre-famine Ireland, 1750–1850* (2006), he softened his earlier criticism of the pre-famine church, paying tribute to the heroic attempts of the clergy to surmount the economic and demographic challenges of the era. In his final, posthumously published, article, 'The beginnings of the devotional revolution in Ireland. The parish mission movement, 1825–1846' (2014), Larkin subtly revised his functionalist view of the devotional revolution, ascribing the laity's enthusiastic reception of parish missions to 'the pervasive and widespread pastoral and spiritual destitution among all classes of the catholic community in Ireland in the 1840s' (91).

Larkin's other lasting contribution to scholarship was his role in co-founding the American Committee (later, Conference) for Irish Studies in 1961. An interdisciplinary organisation, ACIS counted over 750 members by the time of his death, making it the largest scholarly society devoted to Irish studies in North America. Larkin served as treasurer of ACIS in its formative years (1961–66) and later as its president (1978–81).

Larkin was also a dedicated teacher. He was particularly committed to graduate education, and supervised some forty doctoral dissertations. He held graduate seminars around the dining room table at his family home, where student work was subject to rigorous critique leavened, as one former pupil recalled, with 'teasing and banter, pound cake and clementines' (Brillman, 'Eminent historian', 5).

Larkin married Dianne Willey in 1966, and had two daughters, Heather and Siobhan. With his rich tenor, patrician accent, broad frame, and forceful personality, Larkin cut a formidable figure. But he was also a charming host, a generous scholar, and a loyal friend, with a wry, self-deprecating sense of humour and a sympathetic understanding of human weakness. Reflecting on his career in 1991, he sought to account for his remarkable productivity: 'Vanity and ambition have played a great part, but I have also been very "lucky". I have always had a great deal of energy, enjoyed excellent health, and had the advantage of both time and money. For the twenty-five years I have been at the University of Chicago I have taught six months and been free to research and write for six months, interlaced with numerous years off. I have also been the fortunate recipient of numerous grants and fellowships. Above all, I have had the blessing of a wonderful marriage, which has given great stability to my personal life' (Larkin papers, 4/1). In recognition of his contributions to scholarship, Larkin received a Government of Ireland Cabinet Citation in 1981

and a D.Litt. from the NUI in 1987. He died in Chicago on 19 March 2012 of multiple myeloma and renal failure.

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Larkin papers, Burns Library, Boston College; Ryan papers, Archives Department, UCD; Emmet Larkin, 'The devotional revolution in Ireland, 1850–75', *American Historical Review*, lxxvii, no. 3 (June 1972), 625–52; Stewart J. Brown and David W. Miller, 'Introduction', in Stewart J. Brown and David W. Miller (eds), *Piety and power in Ireland, 1760–1960. Essays in honour of Emmet Larkin* (2000); Lawrence J. McCaffrey, 'Emmet Larkin. A memoir', in *ibid.*; Helen Mulvey, 'Principal works of Emmet Larkin (to 1998)', in *ibid.*; Emmet Larkin, 'Archival odyssey, 1958–1995', *New Hibernia Review*, i, no. 2 (Summer 1997), 9–20; *idem*, 'John Kelleher. An appreciation', *Irish Literary Supplement*, xxiii, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 9; *idem*, *The pastoral role of the Roman catholic church in pre-famine Ireland, 1750–1850* (2006); *Chicago Tribune* obituary, 2 Apr. 2012; Michael Brillman, 'Eminent historian. Emmet Larkin', *Irish Literary Supplement*, xxxii, no. 1 (Fall 2012), 5; Emmet Larkin, 'The beginnings of the devotional revolution in Ireland. The parish mission movement, 1825–1846', *New Hibernia Review*, xviii, no. 1 (Spring 2014), 74–92; personal knowledge; information from Siobhan Kates