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Peter Hart, *The I.R.A. and its enemies: violence and community in Cork, 1916-1923*

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- 1 In this outstanding excavation of the ground-level struggles of a war of independence, Peter Hart leaves the worst to last. We are not left to celebrate the heroics of the young men (mostly, but women too) who found themselves caught up in a tide of escalating violence, but rather to ponder the awfulness of vendettas pursued against 'neighbours and enemies'. For as Ireland stumbled from war into truce and treaty and then the civil war of recalcitrant republicans against treaty compromisers, the violence of the campaign against the police and British army spilled over into sectarian attacks on imagined enemies. Only an assiduous historian like Hart can document so persuasively the extent of misinformation, anxiety, fear that pervades civil conflict and renders it murderous. It is not surprising that this book's publication in Ireland has not been welcomed in all places, in a country which still labours under the myth of the romance of armed liberation.
- 2 Hart's study takes just one of Ireland's 32 counties as the focus of his study of the years between the Easter Rising of 1916 and the conclusion of the Civil War in 1923. But this is not an arbitrary choice of location, for Cork was the most violent and rebellious of districts. Both city and county were the location of some of the most notorious incidents of these years – the ambush at Kilmichael in November 1920 when 17 British Auxiliaries

were killed, for the loss of only 3 IRA Volunteers, perhaps the most famous and the focus of some thorough forensic work in which Hart demythologises an event that has given rise to balladry of the 'boys of Kilmichael' genre. The reality of the 7 years war was a death rate higher than anywhere else in Ireland, then and later – Hart's calculations suggest one 'political death' for every 530 people in Cork between 1916 and 1923, compared to one in 1,100 in Northern Ireland in the worst years of violence during the 'Troubles', 1969-1975 (p. 50). Were all the deaths incurred in battle? Hardly – at the height of the guerilla war in 1920-21 only a third of casualties of both sides, army and IRA, occurred in combat, and almost half of all victims were not combatants but civilians (p. 87).

- 3 While some dimensions of law and order in modern Ireland have been robbed of a history by the destruction of most of the nineteenth century court records in the civil war bombing of the Public Record Office at Dublin's Four Courts, this is not the case with the events of revolutionary years. Hart's study is a model of reconstruction of the forces on both sides, the events, the resources, the strategies, the toll and the destruction. His sense of the revisionist value of counting is unerring as the data quoted above suggests. But the richest dimension of the book lies in its excavation of mentalities and perceptions of those who became able to kill in the cause of independence, and of their victims.
- 4 This is necessarily a somewhat courageous investigation – for as the first chapter, dealing with the Cork City killing of a police sergeant (a long-serving officer simply a convenient target for an offensive action by the Volunteers) shows, the reach of memories of victims and assailants and their families is long. Some participants were still alive at the time of Hart's research, allowing him to bring their perspectives into the story. But the faultiness of memory and the desire of participants to re-tell the story in ways that justify, exonerate, glorify or disguise the past means the real riches of a history like this lie in the hand-written memos of the time, the brave journalism of the city's newspapers, the military archives, the extraordinary diaries and correspondence of those who lived then. Hart allows these records to speak to us of the confusion and the paranoia, the prejudice and rumour of the time – none more eloquently than the writer Edith Somerville, who rails in 1921 against the 'troublemaking « Irish intelligentsia [and] their disgusting class – the lower middle drawer!»' (p. 136). Just as there are no heroes in this story, neither do there appear to be many innocents, an effect of the terrible divide that escalating violence creates in its wake.
- 5 Hart's book contributes immensely to our understanding of the generation of civil war, through a methodology that deserves replication in studies of violence in other areas of social life. The historical sensitivity of his account is captured in his depiction of the background culture in which this violence developed. Especially noteworthy in this respect is the chapter on 'Youth and Rebellion' in which not only does Hart explore the socio-psychological formation of many of the Volunteers, influenced evidently more by their mothers than their fathers (pp. 174-175), but also unravels the ritualistic elements of IRA raiding parties. The overlapping worlds of revolutionary violence, agrarian rebellion and popular culture has been explored by others dealing with eighteenth and nineteenth century Ireland – but Hart's analysis of the ritualistic elements of Volunteers' raids brings out superbly the cultural underlay of these small-scale collective actions, found he suggests in the traditions of youthful gangs who signified their rebelliousness through masking and cross-dressing (pp. 178-183). Hart has written a book worthy of the

widest readership among those interested not only in the history of armed revolution but in the history of collective and individual violence in troubled times.

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