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Book Review:

From Guns to Government: The IRA in context

Donnacha Ó Beacháin*

The IRA: The Irish Republican Army by James Dingley, 2012, Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

Why is the IRA important?

When asked to review a book on Irish republicanism, the first question that springs to mind is what new does it add to the already impressive library of knowledge on the subject? There has been no shortage of books and articles on Irish nationalism/republicanism during the last century, particularly after the eruption of the Northern Ireland 'Troubles' in 1969 (e.g. Anderson, 2002; Beresford, 1989; Bowyer Bell, 1979, 1997; Coogan, 2000, 2002; Cronin, 1972, 1980; English, 1994, 2002; Grant, 2012; Hanley, 2002; Moloney, 2003; Kelley, 1998; Maguire, 2008; Mahon, 2008; McCarthy, 2007; O'Donnell, 2012; Ó Beacháin, 2010; Regan, 1999; Taylor, 1997, 2002). Once a zone of what seemed an intractable conflict, Northern Ireland is now regularly touted as a model of conflict resolution with erstwhile adversaries sharing power. In his seminal *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, John Whyte (1991) calculated that at the time of publication there were 7000 major works relating to the Northern Ireland conflict. The volume has proliferated further since then. Learning more about the Irish republican movement, which has journeyed from armed resistance to government power, is surely helpful in understanding how peace can be forged in regions dogged by war. In his authoritatively titled *The IRA: The Irish Republican Army* Dingley acknowledges that the literature is numerous and diverse but argues that there has been a dearth of works attempting to theoretically analyse the Irish Republican Army. However, anyone seeking answers as to how Irish republicans constituted one of the most formidable guerrilla movements of their time and managed to engage the British, Irish and American governments in a peace process that has now endured for two decades, will be disappointed by James Dingley's polemical tract.

Explaining conflict in Northern Ireland

Dingley approaches the Northern Ireland imbroglio with a question that has been asked of many conflict zones – what is it that makes some people rebel? The repressive character of the state, its pervasive discrimination against the minority forced in 1920 to be part of the new Northern Ireland regime, is de-emphasised in favour of a pseudo-psychological presentation of Irish nationalists. Dingley's basic thesis is quite simple. There was/is a modernising, progressive, inclusive, prosperous and generous British system, which extends to Ireland. It has been based on reason, science, and industry. However, there is a faction in Northern Ireland – variously described as Irish Republicans, Nationalists, and Catholics – who, blinded by emotion and irrational hatred for contemporary society, have spurned the fruits of modernity for some inward-looking frugality.[1] They have also been woefully under-educated, particularly in the sciences, and therefore unable to participate fully in a modern society, such as the one offered in Northern Ireland by the British state. Lest it appear that I have somehow misrepresented or caricatured the author's thesis let me quote from the book:

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1 Throughout the book and this review Irish 'Catholics' and 'Nationalists', and 'Protestants' and 'Unionists', are used interchangeably. This is in part because the vast majority of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland vote for nationalist and unionist parties respectively. The conflict, however, has not been at heart a theological or religious one.

the PIRA can be seen as a blind child lashing out at a world it could not understand or find a place … Where men do not have the scientific or technical skills to analyse, comprehend, or enter the modern world, they violently react against it, staving it off in favour of 'alternative' values or simply to draw attention to their alienated selves. Whereas science and rationalism extol calm analytical and calculated understanding, alternative values imply the opposite – namely emotion, passion and violence. Irish Nationalism and Catholicism consistently rejected science, modernity and industry. Few Republicans (even fewer PIRA members) had any substantive education, especially of a scientific nature. [p. 108-9]

When resistance to the state is considered in terms of a childish tantrum by those ill-equipped to live in the modern world, there is no need – and certainly this book feels no need – to interrogate the state itself or its repressive apparatus.

The illusion of oppression and the modernising zeal of imperial rule

The book's first page boldly states that it will look at problems confronting "the men who made up the IRA", at a stroke airbrushing out the women who were involved in that movement. Things rapidly go downhill from there. Chapters 2 and 3 provide a potted history of Ireland throughout which Dingley clearly has a normative appreciation for enlightening British imperialism over the inward-looking, self-pitying Irish nationalism. As the notion that Britain was a democratising force against an irrational and/or terrorist opposition is so deeply engrained, it requires stretching facts to fit the narrative. Thus, the republican claim to achieving a mandate for self-determination in 1918 can not be entertained for "Sinn Féin won only 48 per cent of all Irish votes cast (68% in what became the South of Ireland), and rumours of widespread electoral malpractice abounded" [p. 55]. This statistic cited is accurate but deceptive. What it (no doubt deliberately) omits is the fact that in 25 constituencies – all Sinn Féin strongholds – republican parliamentarians were returned without a contest thus obviating the necessity of votes being cast. In fact, Sinn Féin took 70% of the seats in Ireland, north and south, and a further half dozen constituencies were won by parliamentarians committed to autonomy for Ireland. As for the rumours of electoral malpractice, the author does not feel obliged to supply any sources.

The war of independence involves the IRA murdering many people, while the British forces merely kill. On Bloody Sunday, for example, Dingley recounts how the IRA murdered 14 "alleged Crown agents" and 2 RIC officers who, we are told, were all unarmed, in their beds and wearing pyjamas. The British army in response killed 12 'individuals' watching a football match, and we are helpfully informed that "the association between Gaelic sports and the IRA was well recognised" [p. 57]. For the revolutionary period, Dingley relies heavily on the controversial historian Peter Hart, who is quoted liberally without reference to the vigorous debate surrounding his findings.[2] Chapter 3 concludes that "the anti-Treaty individuals were those with no jobs or career prospects in the new Free State" [p. 74]. In this Dingley puts the cart before the horse. Individuals did not oppose the Treaty because they had no jobs or prospects. Rather they had no job or prospects in the new order for the very reason that they opposed it. While there was a class dimension to the Treaty division, the civil war split families and communities. We can hardly assume that the family member with prospects backed the Treaty and his or her feckless sibling cast his lot in with the 'irregulars'.[3]

Rather than seeing Irish republican resistance as resulting from British government misrule, Dingley concludes that they "rejected modernizing British values, which became objects of hate" [p. 74]. Consequently, he has a problem recognising that there was any real oppression of the Irish.

2 See for example Murphy and Meehan (2008).

3 Subsequent splits within the republican movement, with the exception of that in 1969-70 receive scant attention in the book. For an account of the 1926 split see Ó Beacháin (2009).

Their largely imaginary grievances were those of a people insufficiently rational to appreciate that by residing in the United Kingdom they had won the winning ticket in the lottery of life. Dingley writes of "an Irish nationalism that is acutely Catholic in identity and emphasises centuries of persecution and suffering for which there is often little empirical evidence. As often happens when there is little empirical substance, emotions fill the void and lead to grossly distorted views" [p. 83]. We are told that Catholics "felt like second-class citizens in a Protestant state" [p. 90] as opposed to the fact that they were treated that way. The famine of the 19th century "became another symbol of British 'oppression', of starving Irishmen forced to leave their homes for foreign lands" [p. 43]. For some reason, 'oppression' is in inverted commas. Derry's Bloody Sunday in 1972 is explained away by reiterating the now discredited view that emphasises the illegality of the civil rights march and the perception of the British paratroopers that they were fired on first, so that the marchers were killed "in disputed circumstances" [p. 98].

Anti-Catholic discrimination is described in the book as "an article of faith among Nationalists", implying it was a belief rather than a state-sponsored reality. Furthermore, Dingley argues that "Catholics were equally adept at discriminating" [p. 91]. To sustain this claim, he writes that the Nationalist Party leader Eddie McAteer employed 60 people at his business during the 1960s, all of whom were Catholic. But to maintain that this in some way implies parity of injustice is absurd. If the state was not employing Catholics as a matter of policy and was encouraging Protestants to do likewise, it would be ridiculous for Catholics not to use the very few opportunities they had to employ fellow Catholics. Otherwise Catholic unemployment would have been even greater. The reality of economic discrimination pervaded every aspect of Catholic life in Northern Ireland. The Catholic unemployment rate was 2.5 times that of Protestants,[4] while the rate of emigration was 2.4 times higher.[5] While extolling the privileges bestowed by the British welfare state, Dingley makes no mention of the fact that the Unionist government at Stormont tried to prevent its extension to Northern Ireland, as they knew that the chief beneficiaries would be Catholic nationalists.

Why was Northern Ireland created and how was it governed?

Dingley writes that "Catholics in Northern Ireland were actually denied very few rights, having the same rights as anywhere in the United Kingdom" [p. 91]. It is difficult to reconcile such a bold statement with the reality that Unionist control in Northern Ireland was consolidated by the arbitrary distribution of employment at state and local level to their co-religionists and by the allocation of public consumption benefits, particularly in the area of housing. At state level, the bureaucracy was almost entirely Protestant in composition with Protestants holding 91.6% of all civil service positions in 1927, a figure that had increased to 95.4% in 1959 (Barrett & Carter, 1962, p. 96). Successive Stormont Prime Ministers and Unionist leaders exhorted their followers to emulate the example that the Government had set. Sir Basil Brooke, who was Prime Minister from 1943-63, was reported by his own newspaper the *Fermanagh Times* as stating that:

> *... a great number of Protestants and Orangemen ... employed Roman Catholics. He felt he could speak freely on the subject as he had not a Roman Catholic about his own place (cheers). He appreciated this great difficulty experienced by some of them in procuring suitable Protestant labour, but he would point*

4 The 1971 figures were 17.3% Catholic male unemployment compared to 6.6% for Protestant males. The figures for female unemployment were 13.9% Catholic, 5.6% Protestant. Fair Employment Agency, *Second Report of the FEA for Northern Ireland, 1 April 1977 – 31 March 1978* (FEA, Belfast, 1979) p. 8. I would like to thank the late Bob Cooper, Chairman of the FEA 1976-1990 and of the Fair Employment Commission 1990-1999, for making these reports available to me.

5 Figure calculated from Simpson (1983, p. 102). Between 1961 and 1971 Catholics emigrated at a rate of 6.9 per 1,000 per annum compared to a rate of 2.8 for Protestants. See also Walsh (1970).

out that the Roman Catholics were endeavouring to get in everywhere and were out with all their force and might to destroy Ulster. There was a definite plot to overpower Unionists in the North. He would therefore appeal to Unionists wherever possible to employ good Protestant lads and lassies (cheers). [quoted in Peled, 2014, p. 27]

Brooke later clarified his comment by saying that "when I made that declaration last 'twelfth' I did so after careful consideration. What I said was justified. I recommended people not to employ Roman Catholics, who were 99 per cent disloyal" (Belfast News Letter, 1934, March 20). When asked by Cahir Healy, the MP for South Fermanagh, whether Brooke's speech represented Government policy, the then Prime Minister James Craig told parliament that Brooke had spoken "as a Member of His Majesty's Government" and that "there is not one of my colleagues who does not entirely agree with him" (Northern Ireland House of Commons, 1934).

The Northern Ireland state was sectarian in concept and in practice. In order to satisfy the demands of a regional majority and preserve British hegemony, a new regime was established ostensibly to protect an 18% minority, while simultaneously creating a new minority that constituted 34% of the population. In not one of the six counties was the unionist majority greater than the nationalist majority in Ireland as a whole. Partition did not separate two peoples that could not live peaceably together. It brought them closer together.

With the partition of Ireland, northern nationalists found themselves transformed into an artificial minority that could never aspire to exercising or enjoying political power for the very reason that the system was constructed to thwart this very eventuality. Moreover, they were to be entrusted to the care of a new regime that, like its predecessor, treated their culture, heritage and beliefs as hostile and subversive. They were to be subjects of a state that from its inception would rely upon armed partisans and repressive legislation to enforce its authority. The manipulation of 'problematic' electoral wards was executed with remarkable efficiency so that whereas nationalists controlled twenty five of the eighty local councils in the North in 1920, in 1924, they controlled only two.

The aim of partition was clearly to produce unionist rule in perpetuity even in areas with nationalist majorities (Lee, 1989, p. 113). As Michael McDonald (1986, p. 55) has cogently argued, partition institutionalised the colonial dynamic "driving Catholics from positions of authority, encouraging the Catholic disloyalty that justified the hegemony of Protestant loyalists". But rather than sufficiently contextualise the root causes of the conflict, Dingley describes an exotic species, the 'men of violence', who like King Canute struggle futilely to push back the tide, an anachronism trying to stem the inevitable progress of humanity:

Thus much of PIRA's violence may be regarded as acting out deeply ingrained socio-religious messages and symbolism against a Unionist and/or modern world that PIRA members found incomprehensible, as well as a moral community from which they felt excluded. [p. 109]

Dingley is keen to point out that nationalists excluded themselves from Northern Ireland as they "erected [their] own cultural and political barriers to participating in northern society" [p. 91]. It is not considered that rather than nationalists finding the Northern Ireland state incomprehensible, they understood its *raison d'etre* very well. In another passage, Dingley writes:

One needs to clearly visualize PIRA's position. A bunch of backstreet boys, most having left school before they were 16 years old, who had never lived outside their own neighbourhoods, with no electoral mandate (in either North or South) or administrative or governmental experience, had decided that they alone constituted the only legitimate government of the entire island of Ireland. It was more like the plot for a Marx Brothers or Carry On *film [author's italics].* [p. 110]

The mystery left untouched is why such a group was considered worthy of negotiations that involved the British, Irish and US governments, and how many republicans went on to serve in senior political positions on both sides of the Irish border. At the time of writing, Sinn Féin is in government in Northern Ireland, and in the European elections of May 2014 the party took the largest share of the vote in Ireland. Dingley never attempts to square this circle. How did these loutish ill-educated hoodlums, steeped (according to Dingley) in German romanticism, Greek scholasticism and Gaelic sophistry, journey to the centre of politics in both jurisdictions in Ireland? As the question does not fit the narrative nor its underlying assumptions, it is never embraced. Instead, the book takes refuge in the 'men of violence' caricature, propagated during the Troubles, of people wedded to force as a means without providing the necessary context that has made Ireland a site of conflict for centuries. By contrast, the violence of the British state, which was implemented through a panoply of oppressive legislation, is considered by Dingley to have been sensible and necessary to combat an irrational terrorist threat emanating from the Irish republican community. He writes that:

> *Lack of clear, rational thought leaves wide-open spaces for emotional expression, such as violence … most Republican minds [were] notoriously hostile to rational analysis … [they] saw violence as pure, unmediated, and direct from the soul, in contrast to science, which was viewed as artificial, constructed, and material … The strategic aim of much violence became simply violence, as the expression and emotional outlet of frustrated feeling and aspirations. Real solutions to real problems in a complex world require great thought, analytical skill and extensive training.* [p. 112]

There is nothing intrinsically new in this depiction. It simply echoes the caricature of the wild, unstable, emotional Irishman that justified repression and camouflaged a coercive strategy rooted in dispossession. Scientific racism flourished in Victorian Britain and was applied liberally to explain the impoverished rebellious people on the periphery of the United Kingdom. Citing the Celts generally and the Irish in particular, the anatomist Robert Knox noted their "furious fanaticism; a love of war and disorder; a hatred for order and patient industry; no accumulative habits; restless, treacherous and uncertain" (quoted in Curtis, 1968, p. 70). *Punch* wrote of the 'Irish Yahoo' who "sallies forth in states of excitement, and attacks civilized human beings that have provoked its fury"(quoted in Curtis, 1971, p. 100). The stereotype is not new. The only surprising thing is that it resurfaces in a book published in the 21st century by a mainstream academic publisher.

Concluding Points

At its heart, the book labours under a basic and irredeemable flaw. It does not understand its subject. It is very much an outsider account but without the virtues of detachment and objectivity that sometimes come with observing from afar. The book is a poorly executed attempt to present partisan assumptions as the product of scholarly inquiry.

Remarkably, no republicans – be they former members of the IRA or of Sinn Féin – seem to have been interviewed by the author in the preparation of this book. There are thousands of former activists available for interview now that the conflict has subsided, but for some reason Dingley did not consider it necessary to interview them. At the end of chapter 6, which deals with IRA weapons and targets, Dingley inserts a special acknowledgment to "security sources who cannot be named but to whom I am indebted" and from whom much of the information for the chapter was obtained. While certainly it is of interest to gain the perspective of the British/Northern Ireland security forces, it is quite bizarre to base an analysis of the IRA exclusively on the testimony of its erstwhile adversaries and without recourse to republicans themselves.

Moreover, despite the existence of a wealth of archival material relating to the IRA and the Northern Ireland conflict, none seems to have been consulted. There is the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, the British National Archives at Kew Gardens, the National Archives of Ireland, the National Library of Ireland, not to mention some useful archives in the United States such as the national archives in Maryland.

The fact that simple words such as Sinn Féin, Dáil Éireann, Saor Éire are misspelt throughout the book without the necessary fádas only emphasises the unfamiliarity and/or lack of respect for things Irish. It is notable, by contrast, that words in other languages foreign to the author, such as German and Latin, are italicised.

There are many ways that one can try to better understand the motives and actions of the IRA. Certainly, this deeply flawed book is not the place to start.

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