

The Irish Civil War: Some Reflections and Questions

Pat McCarthy

Very few single-volume histories of modern Ireland can compare with F.S.L. Lyons's magisterial survey, *Ireland since the Famine*. It is authoritative and readable, and combines critical analysis with deep insight. Writing about the Civil War he said:

It was an episode which has burned so deep into the heart and mind of Ireland that it is not yet possible for the historian to approach it with the detailed knowledge or the objectivity which it deserves and sooner or later must have. So many of the divisions and hatreds that were to scar the political and social life of Ireland for the next two decades – and are visible even to-day – stem from those months of internecine warfare that charity and the interests of truth alike demand a certain reticence about events which are still felt so profoundly and yet so little understood in their inner meaning.¹

In the forty years that have passed since Lyons penned those words, there has been immense progress in the historiography of the Civil War. In the last decade alone major works such as those by John M Reagan,² Michael Hopkinson³ and Michael Laffan⁴, have not only examined the war itself but also have placed it in the context of Irish political developments in the years preceding and following the actual conflict. Many heretofore accepted 'truths' have been challenged and that 'certain reticence' has been abandoned by a new generation of scholars. But many basic questions remain. Let us consider some of these:

Was a Civil War inevitable?

Much attention is paid to the treaty debates and to the split in Sinn Fein between those who supported the treaty – many reluctantly – and those who opposed it. In the context of the Civil War the split in the IRA was arguably more important. The IRA was initially reassured by statements like that of the Minister for Defence, Richard Mulcahy, who told the Dáil on 10 January 1922 'the army will remain the

1 F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine 1850 to the present* (London, 1971) p. 460.

2 John M. Reagan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936* (Dublin, 1999) pp 101-28;

3 Michael Hopkinson, *Green against Green. The Irish Civil War* (Dublin, 1988)

4 Michael Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland. The Sinn Fein Party 1916-1923* (Cambridge, 1999) pp 386-433.

army of the Irish Republic'.⁵ The IRA saw itself as the custodian of that republic, and many influential figures had little regard for democracy. Their view could be summed up in the words of Liam Lynch: 'We have declared for an Irish Republic and we will not live under any other law'⁶ and 'if I were to stand alone, I will not voluntarily accept being part of the British Empire'.⁷ For three months efforts were made to reconcile the pro- and anti- treaty factions of the IRA but these failed, and anti-treaty forces occupied the Four Courts in Dublin.⁸ Once that happened there were really only two possible outcomes: the Four Courts garrison would evacuate the building voluntarily in what would have been a humiliating climb down, or they would be forcibly evicted. Given the deep emotional and passionate attachment that the anti-treaty forces had to the ideal of the republic, such a climb down was very unlikely. These were men who had sworn an oath to the Irish Republic and would not live under any other law no matter what the politicians decided; some armed conflict was almost inevitable.

When did the Civil War begin?

At first sight this is obvious. The Civil War began at 4.15a.m. on 28 June 1922 when troops of the National Army, as the pro-treaty forces were designated, opened fire on the Four Courts. But then how do we classify the various armed confrontations, most notably at Limerick in March,⁹ and the occasional killings that happened between January and June that year? Was the shooting of George Adamson on the streets of Athlone in the early hours of 25 April the opening shot of the Civil War?¹⁰ Or was his death just a symptom of the drift towards anarchy and the law of the gun that characterised many parts of the country in that period, as opportunistic violence and the settling of old scores masqueraded as patriotism? On one side there was a marked reluctance by erstwhile colleagues to fire the first shot in open warfare, but at the same time there was a level of violence which anticipated the Civil War itself.

Was a Free State victory inevitable?

In the early months of 1922 the military balance favoured the anti-treaty side.¹¹ The most effective and experienced units of the pre-truce IRA, such as the First and Second Southern Divisions and the Dublin Brigade, went anti-treaty and they dominated large parts of the country. The new National Army could only rely on Michael Brennan's command in Clare, Sean MacEoin's Longford Brigade and

5 Dail Eireann, Official Report, Debate on the Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland, (Dublin, n.d.) 10 Jan. 1922, p.424.

6 Florence O'Donoghue, *No other law* (Dublin, 1986) p. 231.

7 Ibid, p. 191.

8 O'Donoghue *No other law*, pp 231-46; Joseph M. Curran, *The birth of the Irish Free State 1921-1923* (Alabama, 1980) pp 170-99.

9 Hopkinson, *Green against green*, pp 62-66.

10 Ibid, p. 74; Phil Tomkins, *Twice a hero*, (Cirencester, 2012) pp 188-90.

11 Paul V. Walsh, 'The Irish Civil War, 1922-1923: A military study of the conventional phase, 28 June-11 August, 1922', Paper presented to the New York Military Affairs Symposium, 1988 p. 8; Hopkinson, *Green against green*, p. 127.

Michael Collins's Squad backed up by a number of brigades in the east that had not been notably active during the War of Independence. Numerically stronger and relatively well armed as a result of imports and seizures such as the capture of HMS *Upnor* and its cargo of arms, the anti-treaty forces neutralised all their advantages by a lack of unified command, no proper planning and a defensive attitude. Yet one can sympathise with the thoughts of Free State Colonel Paddy O'Connor as he moved into position prior to the attack on the Four Courts: 'We will be beaten by the weekend. We have at most a thousand men in Dublin while the irregulars have an estimated force of 3,000 in Dublin alone and a force of 20,000–30,000 in the country'.¹² But strong decisive leadership by Collins and an imaginative use of combined armed forces by the national army backed up by a supply of arms and munitions from Great Britain secured country-wide victory in the conventional phase of the war within eight weeks. This was an impressive if underrated achievement.

When did the Civil War end?

The date usually accepted for the end of hostilities is 24 May 1923 when the republican chief of staff, Frank Aiken published an order to his men to cease fire and to dump arms. While republicans sought to avoid combat and to return to their homes, the national army continued to harry and to intern the remnants of their opponents.¹³ The numbers of republicans interned continued to grow, reaching over 12,000. A mass hunger strike by thousands of the internees in October and November failed to win them their freedom.¹⁴ The strike collapsed but not before two of the strikers had died. According to *The Last Post* at least twenty republicans were killed or died as a result of ill-treatment between June and December 1923.¹⁵ One can say that just as the country drifted towards civil war before the outbreak of hostilities in June 1922, the violence faded away in the months after the cease-fire order.

How many people died in the Civil War?

There has never been an accurate count of the fatalities of that brief but bloody conflict. Even the estimates differ widely, ranging from 927 to in excess of 4,000.¹⁶ Richard Mulcahy stated that around 540 pro-treaty troops were killed between the signing of the treaty and the end of the war in May 1923.¹⁷ Republican deaths can hardly have been less. No figure exists for the number of civilian deaths. A figure of around 2,000 for total deaths is probably as good an estimate as is possible at this stage. What is clearly needed is the type of forensic examination of all deaths attributable to the Civil War that Professor Eunan O'Hailpin and Dr Daithí

12 Paddy O'Connor in O'Malley notebooks, UCD Archives, P17/GB/100.

13 Hopkinson, *Green against green*, pp 259-62.

14 James Healy, 'The Civil War hunger-strike October 1923', *Studies* no. 71 pp 213-226; Denis Barry, *The unknown commandant. The life and times of Dennis Barry 1883-1923* (Cork, 2010) pp 79-137.

15 National Graves Association, *The Last Post* (Dublin, 1985) pp 152-4.

16 Curran, *Free State*, p. 26.

17 Dail Eireann, Official Report, Debate on Army estimates, 6 June 1923.

O'Corráin have carried out for the period 1916-1921 and which is due for publication under the title *The dead of the Irish revolution* by Yale University Press.

The War in the Localities

Writing in his classic War of Independence memoir, *On Another Man's Wound*, Ernie O Malley reflected:

Each county was different; the very map boundaries in many places seemed to make a distinction. The land seemed to determine the nature of the people often enough; whether pasture, grazing or tillage; good or bad; nearness to the sea; whether remote from towns and cities; hill, mountainous or undulating. Sometimes I came to a townland where there was a company of twenty or thirty men and boys, eager, willing to take risks. Six miles away across the barony the people were cowed; the men had no initiative. They were irresolute. The captain of the company sometimes made the difference, sometimes the men themselves.¹⁸

O'Malley was writing about his experiences as a GHQ organizer during the War of Independence, but his words apply even more to the Civil War. Every county was different and hence the importance of regional conferences such as this one. Key questions need to be addressed for each region. Why did the local brigade opt for a pro or anti treaty stance? Was it just loyalty to the brigade commander reflecting the intense localism of the IRA, or was it a decision arrived at after much soul searching? What was the level of violence and how does it compare with the level of violence during the War of Independence? Why were some counties like Sligo or Wexford particularly active in the Civil War when both were rather quiescent during the War of Independence?¹⁹ On 20 January 1923 five men, Martin Bourke, Herbert Collins, Thomas Hughes, Stephen Joyce and Michael Walsh were executed by firing squad in Athlone. All had been found guilty of unauthorised possession of arms and ammunition.²⁰ What was the local effect of these executions? In many parts of the country similar executions had the effect of fatally undermining the morale and determination of local anti-treaty forces. Were there unauthorised reprisals by Free State forces? To what extent did the republican guerrilla campaign disrupt life for the ordinary citizen? What was the attitude of the local clergy and of the local newspapers? These were key opinion-makers in their localities. All of these questions and others beside will provide ample topics for research, for publications and for conferences at regional level.

The organisers of this conference assembled a marvellous collection of speakers. Their contributions ranged from the international dimension to the war in the midlands and included key national aspects as well. The role of women, the remarkable and unusual unanimity of the Catholic hierarchy in support of the treaty and the memories of the war, all were covered in well-researched and

18 Ernie O'Malley, *On another man's wound* (Dublin, 1936) p. 129.

19 Michael Farry *The aftermath of revolution, Sligo 1921-23* (Dublin, 2000); Seamus Mac Suain, *County Wexford's civil war* (Wexford, 1995).

20 Martn O'Dwyer, *Seventy-seven of mine said Ireland* (Cashel, 2006) pp 221-38.

thought-provoking papers. The conference was an undoubted success but success like this, as in any other field, does not simply happen. It was due to a huge amount of work by the members of the Old Athlone Society, led by their indefatigable president Dr John Keane. They, along with all the speakers, deserve our deep gratitude for a very enjoyable and informative day – Thank you.

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