

# Propaganda Wars:

Contexts for understanding the debate on  
the meanings of the Irish War of Independence

Margaret O'Callaghan

Legitimate force is the medium through which states assert their claims to legitimacy. But most states have their origins in violence, and the state apparatus usually contrives to mask the dead bodies and the bloody acts that brought the state into existence. Ceremony and ritual are the veiling mechanisms.

On Bastille Day the French state celebrates the Revolution by military displays on the streets of Paris and other French cities and towns. The French state does not flaunt images of the baskets of guillotined heads that formerly occupied the space now reborn as Place de la Concorde. On the Fourth of July the United States does not seek to tell the tales of defeated loyalists.

But states where the past is contested by present battles about legitimacy, or in the Irish case by the 'troubles' of Northern Ireland, find it harder to celebrate and commemorate their origins through acts of 'necessary' concealment.

The Irish state, or Ireland, or the Republic, would like to celebrate the past like other 'normal' western democracies, but the stubborn actuality of Northern Ireland and its existence has foiled the endeavour for over forty years; nearly as long a period as the years before 1976, the first decades of a partitioned Ireland. The debates around this present decade of anniversaries – of the Ulster Covenant, the Somme, the Easter 1916 Rising, the partition of Ireland, the War of Independence, the establishment of the Irish Free State, the establishment of Northern Ireland and its copper-fastening through the Boundary Commission of 1925, throw these difficulties of commemoration into high relief.

Historians cannot write history to gratify the state, or the desires of a time of commemoration, but historians too are produced in relation to their time and place, they interpret within the limitations of their time and politics.

Writing about the Irish war of independence is complicated by a whole series of constraints. Conor Cruise O'Brien, in *States of Ireland*, published in 1972, highlighted what he took to be marginalised political formations; like the Home Rule parliamentary party tradition of the Sheehy family, Tom Kettle, and Home Rulers who fought with the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. O'Brien condemned what he represented as the glorification of the militant tradition in Irish republican nationalism that he saw as having been celebrated as the origin story of the Irish Free State and the Republic. O'Brien claimed that it was such glorification of the 'four glorious years' that provided the cultural legitimacy and ballast for the Provisional

IRA campaign in Northern Ireland in 1972. Though O'Brien was widely vilified for this view at the time, the Irish state in effect over time adopted a dilute version of that perspective, through the marginalising of the 1916 Commemorations in 1976 and in succeeding years. This understandable state distancing substantially remained in place until Bertie Ahern staged a significant commemoration in 2006. Through special legislation, the interrogating of former nationalist pieties, and the RTE broadcasting ban, the stability of the Republic was protected. The banning from the airwaves of material that could be seen to celebrate the methods of the Provisional IRA made this manifest. This however included much material that could be designated Irish nationalist or republican cultural capital.

Until the 1970s the main medium of commemorating the war of independence was through locally written ballads and songs, that drew upon a pre-existing oral and written tradition going back through the Land War into the nineteenth century, and beyond. This practice persisted after the achievement of Irish statehood—its very partial quest-realisation; through 'subversive' republicans outside the state as evidenced in the IRA Operation Harvest or Border Campaign songs of the late nineteen fifties and early sixties, but also through a more broadly diffused and widely scattered repertoire of 'fight for Irish freedom' songs.

Joe Ambrose, in an interesting book on Dan Breen and the IRA during the war of independence in Tipperary, cites a ballad popular with the IRA in Bansha at that time. This song looks back to a surprisingly mixed and ambivalent set of local attitudes to the Royal Irish Constabulary. Until the 1970s, the main way that the war of independence was remembered was through these locally written songs. If the Volunteers mostly marched to 'Oro's ea do Bheath Abhaile, redolent with Jacobite associations, actual local exploits, from 1916 onwards were remembered in songs like 'The Foggy Dew', 'Kevin Barry', 'The Boys of Kilmichael', or 'The Galtee Mountain Boy'. These songs were variations on and within a pre-existing genre of nineteenth century songs, some national and universal, like Kells Ingrams' 'Who fears to speak of 98', or McColl's 'Boolavogue' or 'The Cliffs of Bawn'; a subset en bas of the written Irish nationalist patriotic corpus of self-presentation and narration in pursuit of freedom that went back into the eighteenth century and beyond.

Revived and popularised through the folk music revival of the nineteen sixties these songs and others like them formed the staple of many early Dubliners songs. Amazingly the so-called B side of Sean Dunphy's no 2 Eurovision song of the mid- nineteen sixties was 'The Lonely Woods at Upton for Sinn Fein'. These songs might well have faded due to changes in popular culture in any case, but they all became more publicly unacceptable from the 1970s. Bizarrely the only such song now in public popular memory is the recently-penned pastiche of the genre, 'The Fields of Athenry'.

Identities have apparently been so reconfigured on this island through the new discourse of the Peace Process, and the assimilation of the First World War experience into Irish modern memory, that John Horne could entitle his recent essay collection on Irish involvement in the Great War as *Our War*. It was promoted extensively by both RTE and its publisher, the Royal Irish Academy, under that title, to no public protest.

If the Conor Cruise O'Brien analysis of the motivation for IRA violence in Northern Ireland in the 1970s was partially wrong, and also initially highly unpopular, it has nonetheless proven to be the most decisively public affirmation of what was to become the response of most of the Irish political elite to the Northern Troubles. From Ronnie Drew, eventually even to Christy Moore, singers and balladeers too retrospectively repudiated their former excesses; with the Wolfe Tones and certain significant northern bands being the exceptions. Revisionism, so-called, had a role in all of this, because it was clear that all of this had implications for the writing of history.

In 1975 Charles Townshend could still write his brilliant book *The British campaign in Ireland* in the old manner – a story largely of the oppressive nature of the British military campaign in Ireland from 1918. It is interesting to contrast this with the more recent book on the Black and Tans by Leeson, and Townshend's own most recent study of the War of Independence.

Initially the changed climate of the Troubles did not affect the writing of the Irish Revolution. David Fitzpatrick's book on provincial life in Clare was a path-breaking work of 1970s scholarship, because it was a local study. But the unease of his supervisor Nicholas Mansergh at its focus was partly due to what Mansergh saw as the potentially distorting lens of the local, if abstracted from the high political climate within which the local operated. On a journalistic level until the 1990s the consensus seemed to be that the Irish war of independence had a democratic mandate through the 1918 general election, and that the twenties war was a straightforward anti-colonial fight in which the good guys won. Eamon De Valera's anxieties about the methods of guerrilla warfare did not surface.

The prevailing view of the political establishment in Dublin was that the Provisional IRA campaign was evil because it was sectarian, had no mandate, and as the seventies moved into the eighties the Irish media increasingly highlighted what was later to be called the ethnic cleansing of border Protestants. RTE throughout this period covered 'the North' in a manner wary of giving any support to the disturbing scale of apparent northern nationalist support for the hunger strikers.

This was partly a response to the threatened destabilisation of 'the South' due to the hunger strikes, because the calls to ancestral memory could not be neatly corralled north of the border, or not as safely as during the Second World War and the late fifties border campaign of the IRA. The attempted reconfiguration of Irish nationalist identities through the New Ireland Forum, the growing cooperation between the British and Irish governments, by the late eighties set the stage for the peace process that seems to be dating back earlier and earlier.

There was a loose consensus among historians that the Irish war of independence could only be written from the top down until the nineteen eighties, though Fitzpatrick's book provided a model of Clare that could serve as a future template. An assumption prevailed that the actualities on the ground of what happened, and who did what from 1919 to 1921, were lost in the mists of time and could perhaps be commemorated by local history societies, but that the totality of the revolution could never be told by historians. There was also a view that the details were perhaps best left untold or simply the stuff of local historians.

Both within the historiography and at the journalistic level the consensus seemed to be that the Irish War of Independence had a democratic mandate through the 1918 general election, though historians like Paul Bew might dispute this, and others might question whether or not war was voted for in 1918. That of course opens up the whole complex question of British aims and intentions at the time. But the view prevailed that the mandate was there, and that the Anglo-Irish war of the early nineteen twenties was a straightforward fight, in which the Irish nationalist side partially won. De Valera's anxieties about the methods of guerilla warfare at the time did not resurface in later narratives, and his pro-Treaty opponents saw that they were rendered redundant retrospectively, through what they saw as his role in fomenting civil war later. There was of course another more sceptical historiographical tradition, initiated by W. Alison Phillips' Unionist interpretation of the Irish revolution in the 1920s. But victors usually get to tell the tales of emergent states, and the loser's side gets publicly untold, at least for a time.

The Provisional IRA campaign of the 1970s was distinguished in public analysis from the 1920's war that was seen to have delivered an at least partially independent Irish state. The IRA campaign in Northern Ireland was sectarian, had no mandate, and in the late seventies and early eighties the desire to set a public distance between the past and the present in defence of the legitimacy of the Republic of Ireland, the Irish state, was partly a response to the threatened destabilisation of 'the South' through contagion from the north. There was high-political fear in Dublin of the rattled ghosts of ancestral memory, and the steady reconfiguration of the language and self-understanding of Irish nationalist identities and self-narration through the New Ireland Forum, the growing reconfiguration of British and Irish intergovernmental relations through the nineteen eighties, signalled the route ahead. Indeed the behind the scenes threat of British withdrawal represented a low-watermark for the Irish government in these years.

After and during the Yugoslav war of the 1990s the work of Peter Hart broke down the apparently neat division between violence in Northern Ireland in the late twentieth century, and the War of Independence of the early twenties. His work was lauded and demonised, because it changed the debate. Building on broader reconfigurations, he presented the war in Cork as a sectarian horror tale. He framed his work in the language and preoccupations of his time, as all historians do, and his version of the war of independence was one in which amiable and neighbourly RIC men, the cream of rural Ireland, were gunned down by their neighbours in a nasty little local war. Through Hart's work the vocabulary of ethnic cleansing, pervasive in the media through Srebrenica and a thousand other Balkan locations, did not remain north of the Irish border, but seeped south and seeped back, right down to Cork and back into the years from 1919 to 1921.

More importantly Hart's work showed that there were in fact ample sources for the reconstruction of the war of independence at a local level. There had been no Irish state archives release policy, until Garret Fitzgerald's government introduced the thirty year release rule in the mid-nineteen eighties. This transformed the evidential base from which twentieth century Irish history could be written. This has been transformative in the interval. But Hart's work also showed that materials available for years, like those of Richard Mulcahy and Ernie O'Malley could

be more fruitfully used. More importantly, Hart's work showed the wealth of local material and personal papers that could be found by a passionate historian. The Bureau of Military History papers so recently released allow us to reconstruct in minute detail later versions of the personal experiences and actions of hundreds of Volunteers. Even more significantly, the Military Pensions Records in the process of release now, will present an extraordinary further archival resource for what now looks like a remarkably documented revolutionary period.

Historiographically what we have had in the public polemical and historiographical ongoing war on Hart's work is a battle in which the Troubles are being refought, and the battle for interpretation of their meaning is being conducted, through the medium of the war of independence. This is less what historians are doing than what the commentariat has taken over. Eoghan Harris in the *Sunday Independent* is the most striking publicist of this line.

Because of the debate about commemorations, because of the artillery that history-writing provides for passionate polemicists and some historians, it is very hard to separate out the historiographical debate from the public polemics around it. It is also of course difficult because political parties in the present battle over the version of the past they require for present purposes.

Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* caused a furore on its peace-process release, because it rather disingenuously read the Collins story through the then-recent Northern Troubles. Also, it presented the story as an epic national tale of liberation. For Ruth Dudley Edwards, Eoghan Harris, Kevin Myers and Paul Bew it lent legitimacy to the Anglo-Irish War; and for them in so doing it lent legitimacy to the IRA campaign in the contemporary Troubles. From this perspective, as night followed day, these legitimacies were co-dependent, and no future without renewed conflict could be assured unless the earlier story was stripped of its former consensual Irish state narration and meaning.

So, allied to the dirty local war presented in Hart's work emerged the rereading of the negotiations of the early 1920s through the peace process of the 1990s. In this view, best presented in Paul Bew's *The Politics of Enmity* Andy Cope becomes Alistair Campbell or Jonathan Powell or any one of Blair's aides. According to this interpretation, the British government in 1920 had a clear view of how they wanted a settlement to go, and retrospective talk of the IRA's brilliant guerrilla war was hyperbolic nonsense. In this view the London government gave what they were going to give anyway, and the deaths of the Irish war of independence were all unnecessary, vicious and irrelevant; just as irrelevant as the Provisional IRA campaign of the 1970s forward had proven to be. The debate around *The Wind that shakes the Barley* was yet another similar, though less charged, episode.

Ronan Fanning's intervention on the military significance of Kilmichael in Gabriel Doherty's book on Collins can be seen as an example of an attempt to counter Bew's Enmity line in advance. His more recent book underlines his earlier point.

Eoghan Harris upbraids historians for their timidity and pillories them for what he sees as their *trahison des clerics* in their failure emphatically to brand the Irish war of independence a sectarian nightmare. Meanwhile the Aubane History society, policing revisionism, systematically battling from the Bandon Valley to

Coolacrease and Altnaveigh to defeat what they see as this propagandistic slur, see all historians as occupying a quasi-Harris-like position.

Like the return of the repressed, we now have documentary sources from the war of independence period in astonishing abundance. Irish historians need to read the new records and find out more, but the documenting the details of every individual death and atrocity ditch by ditch will not solve the more demanding task of understanding the extraordinary complexity of a revolution operating in a range of theatres – psychological, familial, ideological. Detail matters; so does perspective and ideology. Things happen and are done and propaganda – contemporary and later – battles to shape them. Historians should try to pick the propaganda apart, but understand that they are at the heart too of a battle about ideology.