

Kindling the Singing Flame: The Destruction of the Public Record Office (30 June 1922) as a Historical Problem¹

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The destruction of the Public Record Office by fire and explosion on 30 June 1922, marks both the opening salvo in the Irish civil war and a cultural atrocity unique in modern Irish history.² Housing Ireland's national archive, the Public Record Office, and its Registry building formed part of the building complex comprising Dublin's Four Courts of Justice. Containing documents dating to as early as the twelfth century, much of the archive was destroyed or irrevocably damaged in the conflagration of 1922.³ This article addresses the different ways historians have interpreted this tragic event, alongside the role the destruction of the Public Record Office plays in the contemporary public memory. What has been in question since 1922, is on whose shoulders responsibility for the destruction lies, and the extent to which blame can be apportioned to one or other party in the civil war. This article revisits the primary sources used by historians to examine how they have interpreted evidence and events before reaching their conclusions.

Answering somewhat mundane questions about causation and evidence, however, raises more challenging issues about the relationship between the professional historian and society at large. These issues concern the tensions between what may be called 'public histories' and 'historical research'. Public histories are identified here as histories produced for mass and, therefore, often easy consumption, in textbooks, newspaper articles, television and radio documentaries, dramas, websites,

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- 1 An earlier draft of this article was given as the plenary lecture at the Old Athlone Society's conference on the Irish Civil War (1922-3), held at Custume Barracks, Athlone, on 23 November 2013. I am grateful Dr John Keane for extending the invitation on behalf of the Old Athlone Society to me to give the lecture. I should also like to extend my sincere thanks to the Hon. Mr Justice Adrian Hardiman, who kindly launched my book at the Conference, *Myth and the Irish State*. The Carnegie Trust for Scottish Universities and School of Humanities at the University of Dundee helped fund the research on which the original lecture and this article are based.
 - 2 For a cultural history of the meanings and function given to the destruction of libraries, archives, and the printed word in the twentieth century see Matthew Fishburn, *Burning Books* (Basingstoke, 2008).
 - 3 Herbert Woods, 'The Destruction of the Public Records: the Loss to Irish History', in *An Irish Quarterly Review*, 11/43 (Sept., 1922), pp 363-78; Idem., 'The Public Records Office of Ireland Before and After 1922' in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th Series, 13, (1930), pp 17-49.

and the like.⁴ This approach to telling the past can be distinguished from historical research mostly published in scholarly monographs, and academic journals after being subjected to peer review by other scholars. Historical research advocates a rigorous empirical approach, and is written primarily with more expert audiences in mind. Historical research produces, for the wider public at least, less digestible renderings of the past. Partly this is because the conclusions historical research arrives at are always tentative, usually ambiguous (not to say messy), and are open to challenge and reinterpretation or what historians call ‘historical process’.

Public histories are seldom completely divorced from historical research. These days, most professional historians straddle both activities in their career, and are encouraged to do so. Nevertheless, where the aims of public history and pure research sometimes conflict, tensions can be observed. Notably, friction occurs where in comparison to historical research, public histories become oversimplified and even horribly distorted. Where it occurs, this kind of reductionism may alter the historical record so much as to make it wholly inaccurate and even unintelligible to the research historian. In the slide toward error, where the story departs so far from the source evidence that the interpretation no longer has any historical truthfulness, we observe public histories becoming ahistorical.

On the morning of Wednesday 28 June 1922, the anti-treaty IRA garrison inside Dublin’s Four Courts of Justice was given an ultimatum to evacuate the buildings by the pro-treaty Free State army.⁵ Opposed to the December 1921 Anglo-Irish treaty, the Four Courts’ garrison consisted of among the most hard-line of IRA Volunteers.⁶ Ostensibly, they opposed the treaty because they believed it disestablished the Irish republic proclaimed at Easter 1916, and after 1919 constituted in Sinn Fein’s Dáil Éireann assembly. The pro-Treaty position was that the treaty had made the eventual establishment of an Irish Free State possible, and that the Provisional Government, led by Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith, had received a democratic mandate in Southern Ireland in the June 1922 General Election. What was more, during June the British government insisted that the Four Courts garrison’s defiance of the treaty settlement had to be brought to an immediate end.⁷ Under combined pressure to establish its authority and the threat of British military re-intervention, the Free State forces issued an ultimatum to the Four Courts’ garrison to surrender. When shortly after four in the morning on 28 June 1922, this ultimatum was ignored, the Free State army began its bombardment with field guns hastily borrowed from the British.⁸ More than any action during the previous six months, the attack on the Four Courts propelled the pro- and anti-treaty forces toward all-out civil war.

Fire and two massive explosions (the second detonating after the IRA garrison had surrendered), levelled the Four Courts on 30 June, making the Public

4 For a fuller discussion see John M. Regan ‘Irish Public Histories as an Historiographical Problem’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 37/146, (Nov. 2010), pp 265-92.

5 Michael Hopkinson, *Green Against Green* (Dublin, 1988), p. 115-22.

6 J. M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936: Treatyite Politics and Settlement in Independent Ireland* (Dublin, 1999), pp 71-4.

7 Hopkinson, *Green*, pp 115-6.

8 Hopkinson, *Green*, p. 117.



Caption

[Photo: © credit]

Record Office and its Registry among the first casualties of a war lasting until May 1923. Ever since, responsibility for the destruction has been a source of disagreement among historians.⁹ That it was historical documents that were destroyed, the bricks and mortar of historical research, has sometimes infused this debate with professional indignation and the occasional emotional outpouring. In his memoir of the civil war, *The Singing Flame*, anti-treaty IRA leader, Ernie O'Malley, wrote about the final hours of the Four Courts' siege on Friday 30 June 1922:

As we stood near the gate there was a loud shattering explosion ... The munitions block [the Public Record Office] and a portion of Headquarters block went up in flames and smoke ... The yard was littered with chunks of masonry and smouldering records; pieces of white paper were gyrating in the upper air like seagulls. The explosion seemed to give an extra push to roaring orange flames which formed patterns across the sky. Fire was fascinating to watch; it had a spell like running water. Flame sang and conducted its own orchestra simultaneously. It can't be long now, I thought, until the real noise comes.¹⁰

9 See, Donal O'Sullivan, *The Irish Free State and its Senate* (London, 1940), p. 63; Dorothy Macardle, *The Irish Republic* (London 1951, 1st ed. London, 1937), p. 751; J. C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland 1603-1923* (London, 1966), p. 458; F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (London, 1971), p. 459.

10 Ernie O'Malley, *The Singing Flame* (Dublin, 1978), p. 115.

For many anti-treaty republicans, the Four Courts' siege was remembered as a heroic defence of their republic against the combined forces of British imperialism and the Irish Free State. O'Malley's lyricism turned the destruction of Ireland's documentary heritage into a maudlin elegy for the revolutionaries' republic. When his memoir was first published its dust jacket sported the striking image of an enormous smoke plume bellowing from the devastated Four Courts.¹¹ In the republican narrative, the treatyites' attack on the Four Courts signalled the betrayal of the struggle for the republic. Well into the 1970s, annually, Fianna Fail Presidents, Taoisigh, and senior government ministers attended mass in Dublin Castle and wreath-laying ceremonies at Glasnevin Cemetery commemorating the attack on the Four Courts and the later killing of the garrison's leaders in a reprisal.¹² In 1978, for many republicans the smoke plume remained emblematic of the inferno metaphorically consuming the republic below – O'Malley's eponymous 'singing flame'. In this view, the republic born in the flames of Easter week 1916, could be seen as being reduced to ashes in late June 1922, from where no doubt it would be seen to rise again. In this story, the contents of the Public Record Office were incidental, if not irrelevant.

More recently, that same image of the smoke plume has become closely associated with a determined act of cultural vandalism: the intentional destruction of Ireland's national archive. Rehearsing pro-treaty narratives from 1922, it is sometimes said that in an act egregious defiance against the Free State, at the end of the Four Courts' siege the surrendering IRA purposely destroyed the Public Record Office. Most often responsibility for this outrage is directed toward anti-treatyite IRA leaders like Rory O'Connor or Oscar Traynor or indeed, O'Malley. In recent years, this blame game has become integral to interpretations advanced by some professional historians, and likely their attribution of culpability has informed the public's memory of events in 1922. Moreover, the Public Record Office's destruction by so-called 'republican vandals' has become important to a revised foundation myth, which describes the birth of a democratic Irish state in opposition to a tyrannical IRA.¹³

Using the example of the Public Record Office's destruction, this article condenses a broader critique advanced since 2007 by the present author.¹⁴ At its core this critique explores the relationship between the Irish historical profession and its publics. It considers how some historians attempt to influence the public toward

11 The original photograph was taken by Dublin-based freelance photographer, Joseph Cashman.

12 Four Courts Garrison – Invitations to Functions, National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI), PRES/2005/160/66.

13 See Joseph M. Curran, *The birth of the Irish Free State 1921-23* (Alabama, 1980); Tom Garvin, *1922: the Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin, 1996); David Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands 1912-39* (Oxford, 1997).

14 John M Regan, 'Southern Irish Nationalism as a Historiographical Problem', *Historical Journal*, 50 (2007), pp 197-223; Idem., 'Michael Collins, General Commanding-in-Chief, as a Historiographical Problem', *History* 92/307 (July 2007), pp 318-46; Idem., 'Irish Public Histories'; Idem., 'The 'Bandon Valley Massacre' as a Historical Problem', *History*, 72/325 (Jan. 2012), pp 70-98. Idem., 'The History of the Last Atrocity', *Dublin Review of Books* no. 22 (Summer 2012). These articles and other review essays are republished in John M. Regan, *Myth and the Irish State: Historical Problems and Other Essays* (Dublin, 2013).



Caption

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adopting a revised, some will say ‘improved’, memory of the past it is said better suited to society’s needs in the present. This article also addresses the distorting pressures this approach places on the use of historical evidence in academic writing. The association of republicanism and cultural vandalism in 1922 has of course wider historiographical contexts. Other negative values, among them sectarianism supposedly leading to ‘ethnic cleansing’ (it has been argued), sexual violence, and the persecution of vulnerable minorities, have in some recent historical writing been exclusively associated with or used to explain anti-state republicanism in the civil war period.¹⁵ A problem with some of these associations is that they have been advanced by professional historians unburdened by the weight of verifiable evidence.¹⁶

15 On sectarianism see: Peter Hart, ‘The Protestant Experience of Revolution in Southern Ireland’, and ‘Ethnic conflict and minority responses’ in Peter Hart, *The IRA at War* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 223-40, pp 241-58. Garvin lists ‘rape’ among the activities engaged in by anti-treatyite IRA during the civil war, but this claim is unburdened by any reference to a source. On the persecution of minorities, see Fitzpatrick, *Two*, p. 95. In a discussion of republican violence Fitzpatrick writes: ‘Adulterers, homosexuals, tinkers, beggars, ex-servicemen, Protestants...[were] potentially lethal labels for Ireland’s inhabitants in the revolutionary period’ again this statement is made without reference to any sources. Sexual violence and the persecution of minorities was indisputably part of the revolutionary experience, but it is unlikely any such activities were confined to one group or, indeed, left no evidential footprint.

16 See, Niall Meehan, ‘Examining Peter Hart’, *Field Day Review*, vol. 10, pp 103-47.

The argument advanced in this article is organised around three discussions. The first of these explains why some historians see in the past doctrinaire certainties, where others recognise only ambiguity and contradiction. Using the destruction of the Public Record Office as a case study, the article examines how some historians have arrived at doctrinaire, sometimes ahistorical, conclusions from contradictory evidence or from unverifiable evidence or indeed from no evidence. Further, the article reflects on some of the implications of what is described as ‘ahistorical public history’ for the historical profession and its publics alike.

Once the interpretive infelicities of public histories are recognised, a complex and perhaps irresolvable question forces itself. Is society best served by striving for an accurate historical record or, alternatively, by a more inventive account of the past, supposedly tailored to society’s needs in the present? This article cannot attempt a definitive answer to any of this, rather it is concerned to discuss the implications of ahistorical public histories for the communication of ideas and understanding concerning the past.

I

The past, or at least the past interpreted using a rigorous empirical method, is an uncertain place. Some historians wish to replace this uncertainty with more doctrinaire interpretations. On occasion, in their quest for more reassuring certitudes, doctrinaire historians provide us with the consolations found in binary interpretations of the past. That is to say, ‘black and white’ histories populated by recognisable ‘goodies’ and ‘badies’. Inevitably these accounts force gross reductions. Eliminating inherent complexities, binary histories brutally revise the past to produce easily digestible stories. Said to suit our needs in the present, sometimes these stories carry messages, often in the form of morality tales. These stories contribute to what are said to be ‘usable’ histories. Reviewing the present author’s recent book *Myth and the Irish State* (2013) in the *Irish Times*, Professor Diarmuid Ferriter referenced an example of usable history very relevant to our discussion. Ferriter observed ‘that the...reordering [of] the revolutionary generation as pro-State democrats or anti-State dictators was common, as numerous scholars felt it vital to define the IRA in 1922 as anti-democratic in order to undermine the Provisional IRA during the Troubles’.¹⁷ What Ferriter describes is commonly known as the ‘democrats and dictators’ interpretation of the civil war.¹⁸ Precisely how consciously biased writing on the Irish civil war (or any aspect of Ireland’s history), could be ‘vital’ to undermine the Provisional IRA goes unexplained by Ferriter or by anybody else. A problem with this approach as Ferriter concedes, is that despite endorsement by ‘numerous scholars’, the interpretation is also utterly ahistorical. Explaining why this might be acceptable to some, the work of Bernard Lewis is instructive. Lewis, an English-born historian of the Middle East, has since

17 Diarmaid Ferriter, ‘Picking a Fight Over the Rights and Wrongs of Our History’, *Irish Times*, 5 Apr. 2014.

18 See Regan, *Myth*, p. 4, p 31.

1974 been professor at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in the United States. Notable among Lewis' impressive corpus of writing is his brilliantly lucid 1975 collection of lectures, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented*.¹⁹ It is Lewis' lectures on the 'invention of history' which is of most interest here.

Following Lewis's example, we can identify some species of usable history as being what he labels 'invented history'. In these interpretations the usability of the history is dependent on degrees of fabrication, both great and small. Rejecting any strict empirical interpretation of the evidence, invented history offers possibilities for a purposefully more fictional rendering of the past. And where the invention is deemed to have a beneficial influence on public consciousness, Lewis calls this approach 'the improvement of memory'.²⁰

The improvement of memory approach is identified by Lewis closely with authoritarian regimes, notably the former Soviet Union. There a historical profession long existed, directed by the state to endorse the state. Historians who balked at this Soviet arrangement were customarily denounced. Commonly diagnosed as a form of mental illness, the condition of historical dissent sometimes led to incarceration by the authorities in asylums for corrective psychotherapy. Famously, the best exposition of the interdependency between invented history and authoritarianism is provided by George Orwell in his novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In Orwell's dystopian state of 'Oceania' we witness the all-seeing dictatorship of 'Big Brother' and the 'Party' propagating the slogan: 'Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past'.²¹ Applied to political realities (not the least in the former Soviet Union and its successors), the Party's statement is likely delusional, but it is, nevertheless, a delusion embraced by dictatorships the world over.

For authoritarian states, as Lewis explains it, the invention of history is a relatively straightforward choice between carrots and sticks; or state sponsored patronage and salt mines, (metaphorical and real). Lewis' innovation in 1975, was to advance a model for the invention of history in non-authoritarian societies, employing various methodologies and strategies, including patronage and as he admits, 'force'.²² Directed at the state of Israel, in his short 1975 book Lewis offers instruction on how to reconstruct a society's collective memory by embellishing certain helpful stories – part fact, part myth – when creating a bespoke 'improved' past. In 1986, Lewis' invented history impinged upon the Irish academy's consciousness when it was advanced by an upcoming historian, Ronan Fanning, as a possible approach to the writing of modern Irish history.²³ Anticipating Ferriter, Fanning appeared to endorse Lewis' invented history as a means of undermining the controlling narratives of Irish revolutionary republicanism, notably the strain

19 Bernard Lewis, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented* (New Jersey, 1977 ed., 1st ed. 1975). The book consists of Lewis's Gottesman lectures, originally delivered at Yeshiva University, New York, in 1974.

20 Lewis, *History*, p. 56.

21 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London, 2013, 1st ed. 1949), p. 40.

22 Lewis, *History*, p. 69.

23 Ronan Fanning, 'The Great Enchantment': Uses and Abuses of Modern Irish History', in J. Dooge, ed., *Ireland and the Contemporary World* (Dublin, 1988), 131-47.

espoused by the Provisional IRA.

Writing invented history, Lewis tells us, the search for evidence is always pre-directed toward information endorsing some or other improving narrative. Our enemies in the present have always been bad democrats, for example, or, alternatively, our friends in the present share in our glorious past. It is the pre-direction toward source evidence that differentiates invented history from scholarly empirical historical research: the latter properly resisting any temptation to seek evidence to bolster foregone conclusions. Inevitably, invented history involves ransacking archives for supporting evidence. And with equal inevitability, invented history demands ignoring or marginalising evidence that spoils the helpful stories that will populate the improved memory. By carefully selecting and arranging helpful historical information, gifted historians can conjure up from the archival morass almost any story that they wish. But where no suitable sources are unavailable, the improvement of memory approach may demand the fabrication of evidence.²⁴ This is a tricky procedure, but one not altogether unknown to some Irish historians. Embellishing the narrative is of course the oldest of tricks – as old as story-telling itself. In various guises, the improvement of memory approach is employed by historians, professionals, amateurs, propagandists and publicists, everywhere, and in every generation. As an approach, the improvement of memory technique works best where audiences are comforted by stories that they know to be true, or at least nearly true. In this manner, the past becomes the condescending mirror of the present.

Invented history is never about attempting to understand the past on its own terms. And this differentiates it from a quality intrinsic to historical research. Recognising all the available evidence, the results of historical research remain unpredictable, ever shifting, and, as sometimes, historical research unhelpfully may endorse the ‘wrong’ story at the ‘wrong’ time: our enemies were not always bad democrats or, conversely, our new friends were not always friends at all. This unpredictability greatly complicates the past. Conversely, because it is written to order, an attribute of invented history is an inherent predictability – inventive historians find in the sources what they look for or what they are told to look for. It is for this reason, that authoritarian and similar regimes take solace in the certainties invented history provides. Invented history’s primary function is therefore to control the past for some powerful interest, be it a government or a political party or the ‘establishment’ going by some or other appellation. These observations go some way toward identifying the oftentimes oblique connection existing between power-holders in society and the desire to own the past as a political commodity.

As in Israel-Palestine, Lewis’ example, where history informs identity politics or indeed in Britain-Ireland, the example advanced here, those who hold power take an interest in history and memory, towards their better management. Following hard on the heels of historical invention, and dressed in the tattered robes of the academy, the improvement of memory approach is really nothing more exotic than history as propaganda. In wartime, when anxieties about

24 For a discussion of the problem of fabrication and possible solutions see: John M. Regan, ‘West Cork and the Writing of Irish History’, *Dublin Review of Books*.
<http://www.dr.b.ie/ESSAYS/west-cork-and-the-writing-of-history>

identities are exacerbated (and may even become matters of life and death), history as propaganda will always be in high demand. In 1975, Lewis gave careful instruction on how to dress up propaganda as historical research in democracies, where sending dissidents to mental asylums or salt mines is seldom a realistic option. Because we cannot be sure what kind of history historians practise, it is always useful to attempt to differentiate historical research from invented history and its derivatives. The best procedure available to us to distinguish what methodologies historians employ is to compare their considered interpretations, alongside their original source evidence. This kind of scrutiny can be instructive, but it is a time consuming and very costly affair.²⁵

To be clear, what is not argued here is that any particular approach to the past intrinsically is 'right' or 'wrong'. Instead it is argued, that the approaches discussed, principally invented history and empirical historical research, while seldom totally divorced one from another, nevertheless, are different, and can be demonstrated to be different. Empirical historical research is grounded in verifiable and credible evidence, whereas invented history cannot be. Within recognisable legal and ethical bounds, historians should of course be free to propagate any kind of history they wish, be it empirical or invented or fictional or pure fantasy. Mine, therefore, is a permissive argument for freedom of expression. The corollary of this argument is, however, that historians should feel themselves free to engage other historians' work openly, and without fear of sanctions or denunciation. But it must not be forgotten that the modern approach to the improvement of memory originates in authoritarian societies, where such freedoms are at a discount, if indeed they are not denied altogether. And it is well to be reminded that the prescription of academic freedom in authoritarian societies exists for very good reasons.

An intractable problem in the improvement of memory approach is that its inventions rest on misinterpretations or unreliable evidence or on no evidence whatsoever. Consequently, the invention is always vulnerable to exposure as ahistorical nonsense. For the reasoning student of history, any such exposure dissipates the power to influence that the original invention might have had. Consequently, invented history must rely on unscholarly procedures to defend itself against adverse criticism. In the Soviet system in almost every sphere threats from within the state exerted their pernicious influence over the manufacture of knowledge. In the Irish example, denunciation of critics as 'cranks', 'conspiracy theorists', and, as sometimes, apologists for predatory paedophiles or republican terrorism or Nazi atrocities may suffice to inhibit unorthodoxy.²⁶ Inside most academies, in most circumstances, fears about unemployment and non-preferment may

25 For a lengthy but engaging exposition of this technique see, Richard J. Evans, *Telling Lies for Hitler: The Holocaust, History, and the David Irving Trial* (London, 2002).

26 The use of vitriolic personal attacks is an old tactic deployed by vested interests against academic scientists in recent years in the debate over global warming. Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (London, 2010), pp 216-7. See Eoghan Harris, 'Following IRA's bloody track from the Bandon Valley to South Armagh', *Sunday Independent*, 26 June 2011 (see also 17 July 2011); David Fitzpatrick 'Dr Regan and Mr Snide', *History Ireland*, 20/3 (May-June, 2012), pp 12-13; David Fitzpatrick, 'Ethnic Cleansing, Ethical Smearing, and Irish Historians', 98/329 *History*, (Jan. 2012), pp 135-44.

encourage self-censorship among scholars and lead toward uncritical conformity. If in authoritarian states or in liberal (and not so liberal) democracies invented history is to achieve success, it will be tempted to resort to illiberal practices to silence critics or it will risk failure.²⁷ Toward the end of this article we will briefly revisit these ethical issues. In the next section we return to a concrete example of the supposed ‘improvement’ of our memories – the destruction of the Public Record Office at the end of June 1922.

II

In a collection of essays marking the bicentenary of the Four Courts buildings published in 1996, in a collection of essays marking the bicentenary of the Four Courts buildings, the Honourable Mr Justice Ronan Keane (later Chief Justice of Ireland) wrote, ‘belief persisted for many years that Rory O’Connor, in a Samson-like gesture, had deliberately set fire to the Four Courts or exploded a mine before the garrison surrendered’. Justice Keane concluded: ‘There is no evidence to support that thesis’.²⁸ In 1996, Justice Keane likely did not reckon on contrary interpretations soon afterwards published by political scientist Tom Garvin, and historians David Fitzpatrick and Michael Laffan.

Also writing in 1996, in his book *1922: The Birth of Irish Democracy*, Garvin rightly noted: ‘Rory O’Connor...had been apprised by officials of the immense cultural value of the Public Record Office’.²⁹ Garvin then went on to say of O’Connor that he:

...deliberately mined the buildings and timed the mines to go off two hours after the surrender, which they duly did...and the contents of the Public Record Office...were distributed in tiny fragments all over the city. The enormous cultural loss to the Irish nation perpetrated by these putative patriots but actual vandals has been irreversible. Then Civil War then began in earnest.³⁰

The destruction of the Public Record Office frames Garvin’s thesis of a civil war, supposedly fought between the new democratic Irish state and the forces of anarchy following in the train of anti-state republicanism.³¹ To support this thesis, Professor Garvin identifies evidence in his footnotes apparently overlooked by Justice Keane, alongside several other historians. As his evidence, Garvin cited a handwritten volume of interview notes dating from the 1940s or 1950s, which

27 For the experiences of dissenting Israeli ‘new historians’, see Ilan Pappé, *Out of the Frame: The Struggle for Academic Freedom in Israel* (London, 2010).

28 Ronan Keane, ‘A Mass of Crumbling Ruins: The Destruction of the Four Courts in June 1922’, in Caroline Costello (ed.), *The Four Courts: 200 Years* (Dublin, 1996), p. 167

29 Garvin, *1922*, p. 130.

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid.*, p. 30, *passim*.

Ernie O'Malley had taken down from IRA veterans.³² After painstakingly reading O'Malley's notebook we find nothing to support Garvin's interpretation of the anti-treaty IRA setting mines to explode inside the Four Courts following their surrender. Additionally, Garvin cites two files in the papers of former Free State Attorney General, Hugh Kennedy.³³ In these files, alone, one contemporary document from 1922 entitled 'Destruction of the Four Courts' does indeed endorse Garvin's interpretation.³⁴ The value of the document as evidence helping to explain what happened in 1922 is undermined somewhat, because circulated by the Free State army after 4 July 1922, it is a propaganda leaflet. Where in 1996, he said there is 'no evidence' Mr Justice Keane was mistaken. It is however correct to say that the propaganda document is not 'credible evidence', where it is relied on in a reconstruction of contested events. The solution Garvin demonstrates to the problem of there being no credible evidence is to draw on unreliable evidence: although this procedure is obscured in a disarmingly short citation referencing many hundreds of pages of handwritten notes, letters, official documents, and other papers. The quiet substitution of war propaganda for want of more credible evidence, provides an example of embellishment intrinsic to Lewis' invented history.

In 1997, David Fitzpatrick wrote of Oscar Traynor, the officer commanding the anti-treatyite IRA in Dublin at the end of June 1922, that Traynor 'demonstrated his regard for procedural niceties when ...blowing up the Four Courts in 1922, together with their archival contents'.³⁵ Fitzpatrick offers no citation or reference to support his statement about Traynor's supposed actions. A possible reason for this oversight is that no credible evidence is to hand.³⁶

In 1998, Michael Laffan, wrote of the Public Records Office: 'Some republicans stored petrol and paraffin in the Four Courts, determined to burn or blow up the buildings rather than obey any orders to hand them over'. Laffan continues:

In an act of vandalism pre-eminent amongst so many other comparable atrocities, the Public Record Office...was turned into a munitions factory and was mined by its defenders; as a result it was destroyed in an explosion when the building caught fire. Independent Ireland's opportunities for understanding the country's past were impoverished as fragments of irreplaceable documents floated over the city.³⁷

Laffan's account is more ambiguous than either Garvin's or Fitzpatrick's. The act of vandalism Laffan identifies is turning the Public Record Office into a munitions factory, and laying mines inside it. The reader is therefore left in no doubt where, ultimately, blame lies for the archive's destruction – with the IRA garrison. No consideration is given by Laffan to the cause of the fire. Nevertheless, Laffan

32 Garvin, 1922, p. 130, n. 7, citing, Ernie O'Malley notebooks, University College Dublin Archives Department (hereafter, UCDDAD), P17b/85.

33 Hugh Kennedy papers, UCDDAD, P4/283-4.

34 'Destruction of the Four Courts', in Hugh Kennedy papers, UCDDAD, P4/284 (ff. 210).

35 David Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands* (Oxford, 1997), p. 170.

36 See Regan, *Myth*, pp 16-7.

37 Michael Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 413.

is correct to identify some IRA volunteers who said they would destroy the Four Courts rather than surrender them to the Free State. Laffan cites no evidence to confirm this threat (endorsed and recorded by O'Malley), was ever acted upon.³⁸

In his memoir, O'Malley explicitly says that the IRA ordered the destruction of the Public Record Office on the evening of Thursday 29 June.³⁹ However, that order was rescinded when it was discovered that having entered the Public Record Office through a breach blasted by their artillery, Free State troops already occupied the building. Overnight explosive materials and munitions found inside the Public Record Office and Registry were removed by Free State engineers to garages at nearby Smithfield and stored in inspection pits.⁴⁰ According to a Free State source, no IRA mines or explosives were present in the Public Record Office and Registry when it was destroyed the next day.⁴¹

On the morning of Friday 30 June, the Free State soldiers launched their assault on the rest of the Four Courts from the vantage the Public Record Office offered.⁴² At about 11 am, accounts agree, a ferocious fire erupted. Ultimately, it was the fire that destroyed the Four Courts as it spread igniting mines, chemicals, commandeered vehicles, petrol, and as much as two tons of commercial explosives. The first of the two massive explosions (described by O'Malley above) happened shortly after mid-day. A second larger detonation happened at twelve minutes past five in the evening – shortly after the garrison vacated the Four Courts following their surrender.⁴³ The fire determined the siege's outcome by making the garrisons' position hopeless, and ultimately prompting Traynor's order for the garrison to surrender.⁴⁴

Precisely how the fire started remains of no small interest. In *The Singing Flame*, O'Malley offers no explanation for the fire's origins – though in his later interviews with veterans O'Malley would investigate its source.⁴⁵ Alongside IRA sabotage – although this seems illogical – possible explanations for the fire include the impacts from high explosive shells or the accidental ignition of explosives or chemicals. Simon Donnelly, a garrison officer and eyewitness, claimed that 'about 11 a.m. incendiary bombs thrown [by Free State soldiers] into the GHQ block in which there was the chemical shop took fire, owing to the inflammable substances in the building the fire made great headway'.⁴⁶ Donnelly's account may, however, be another piece of wartime propaganda.

In his memoir, one of the Free State officers leading the assault on the Four

38 O'Malley, *Singing Flame*, p. 78.

39 O'Malley, *Singing Flame*, p. 105.

40 Diarmuid O'Connor and Frank Connolly, *Sleep Soldier Sleep: The Life and Times of Pdraig O'Connor* (Dublin, 2011), p. 98.

41 Ibid..

42 O'Connor and Connolly, *Sleep Soldier*, pp 98-9.

43 Chief-of-Staff (Richard Mulcahy) to the Dáil Minister of Defence (Michael Collins), 1.30 pm, 5.15pm, 30 June 1922, UCDAD, Mulcahy papers P7/B/60

44 O'Malley, *Singing Flame*, p. 116.

45 See Volunteer Brogan interview, UCDAD, O'Malley Notebooks, P17b/98.

46 Simon Donnelly, 'A Brief Account of Attack on the Four Courts Dublin', unpublished handwritten manuscript (June, 1923), National Library of Ireland, Ms 33,063.

Courts, Pdraig O'Connor, recollected being supplied with rifle grenades in the Public Record Office and Registry.⁴⁷ These rifle grenades might be construed to be the 'incendiaries' Donnelly identifies in his account: although the word 'thrown' suggests something else, perhaps petrol bombs. For his part, Pdraig O'Connor denied responsibility for starting the fire, claiming it was already underway before he began his assault mid-morning, on Friday 30 June.⁴⁸

A week later on 5 July, to drive the anti-treatyite IRA from their strongholds the Free State army burned large parts of Dublin's city centre. The tactic of fire-bombing followed the British cabinet's decision the previous day not to supply the Free State army with poison gas.⁴⁹ Instead, IRA incendiary bombs recovered from the garages at Smithfield were used by Free State army officers to burn much of Upper Sackville Street (later O'Connell Street), including the Hamman and Gresham Hotels.⁵⁰ The order to fire Upper Sackville Street was given by general J.J. 'Ginger' O'Connell, but it was most likely sanctioned in advance by Michael Collins.⁵¹

None of these events exclude the possibility that the IRA garrison deliberately set fire to the Four Courts or planted mines to go off after the surrender. Nevertheless, to avoid assaulting buildings in the city centre, Free State soldiers resorted to incendiary bombs and this tactic may have been anticipated during the Four Courts' siege. Despite photographic evidence of the Free State's soldiers using incendiaries on anti-treaty strongholds, curiously few historians reference this tactic.⁵² As in the Four Courts, fire proved decisive when ending the anti-treatyite IRA's occupation in the city centre. Upper Sackville Street in flames, the battle for Dublin ended in a Free State victory on the evening of 5 July.

Following the surrender of the Four Courts on 30 June, Thomas Johnson, the leader of the Irish parliamentary Labour party, visited those of the garrison imprisoned in Mountjoy Gaol. Johnson became convinced that the garrison had not timed any mines to explode after their surrender, and he told the treatyite government: 'justice demands that this denial...should be made public'.⁵³ Unsurprisingly, the treatyite government replied in the negative to Johnson, adding it had evidence contradicting the prisoners' self-serving account.⁵⁴ The government did not disclose its evidence to Johnson.

Supporting the treatyite government's claim, that the garrison had indeed set mines to explode after the surrender, to date the only evidence to come to light is to be found in a government file documenting the Four Courts' salvage. It is a pencil note, unsigned and undated, written on a torn slip of brown paper and reads:

47 O'Connor and Connolly, *Sleep Soldier*, p. 99

48 Diarmuid O'Connor and Frank Connolly, *Sleep Soldier*, p. 99.

49 Cabinet Minutes Conclusions 4 July 1922, United Kingdom National Archives at Kew, CAB/23/30.

50 Diarmuid O'Connor and Frank Connolly, *Sleep Soldier*, p. 108.

51 Ibid..

52 See Tim Pat Coogan and George Morrison, *The Irish Civil War* (London, 1999), images, 226-9.

53 Thomas Johnson to the Secretary of Dail Eireann, 4 July 1922, NAI, D/T S 1581.

54 Colm Ó Murchadha to Thomas Johnson, 4 July 1922 NAI, D/T S 1581.

‘Sergeant Major Doyle 1st Batt. 1st Dublin Guards heard the click of a mine from the cellar when calling for surrender’.⁵⁵ Less than conclusive, this document helps explain why it is that those who say the IRA garrison booby-trapped the Four Courts look to war propaganda for their evidence.

Understandably, what is presented in this article is both contradictory and inconclusive, and this argues that the destruction of the Public Record Office remains a more ambiguous event than some historians would have it. In 2011, Liz Gillis, author of *The Fall of Dublin: 28 June to 5 July 1922*, wrote: ‘if the question of what actually caused the explosions [in the Four Courts] is to be answered definitively, further investigation is needed’.⁵⁶ As for establishing that the IRA garrison was responsible for the fire, Gillis echoes Justice Keane’s earlier conclusion where she writes: ‘no proof has been found’.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, the interpretation that anti-state republicans destroyed the Public Record Office proves useful when reshaping a particular memory of the Irish state’s birth. In the revised memory, where they are blamed for destroying Ireland’s national archive, inexorably, anti-state republicans are forever tied to an act of unforgivable barbarism. This is just another attempt to ‘reorder’ the past and retell it in a morality tale. For those accepting the argument that in 1922 the anti-treatyite IRA ‘prefigured what was to happen in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany during the 1920s and 1930s’, the destruction of the national archive finds powerful resonances in later fascist public book burnings.⁵⁸ In the popular imagination it is almost axiomatic that, as Matthew Fishburn has put it, ‘book burners are fascists, and fascists are book burners’.⁵⁹ Anticipating Fishburn by almost two hundred years, Heinrich Heine made another terrifying equivalence: ‘Where one burns books, one soon will burn people’.⁶⁰

The idea that in Ireland republicanism is essentially a manifestation of fascism gained some momentum among intellectuals and historians after 1970.⁶¹ If the idea of ‘green fascism’ had purchase, partly it was because militarist-republicanism had long been associated with authoritarianism. More importantly, equating republicanism with fascism also formed part of the contemporary propaganda war against the Provisional IRA. Conor Cruise O’Brien gave expression to a shared perception of equivalence in his familiar rallying call: ‘those who want to oppose fascism in Ireland will start opposing it where it is really to be found: at the heart of the Republican Movement’.⁶² The association, in 1922, of the anti-state republicanism with sectarianism, ethnic cleansing, persecuting of minorities, sexual and

55 The Four Courts 1922, NAI, AGO/2002/16/475

56 Liz Gillis, *The Fall of Dublin: 28 June to 5 July 1922* (Cork, 2011), p. 127.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

58 Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth Century Ireland: Nation and State* (Dublin, 1994), p. 5.

59 Fishburn, *Burning Books*, p. xii.

60 The untranslated wording is: ‘Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen’. Heinrich Heine, *Almansor* (2012, Altenmunster, 1st ed. 1821), p. 3.

61 The argument can be traced to the increasingly polemical writings of Conor Cruise O’Brien’s in the 1970s and 1980s. Conor Cruise O’Brien, ‘An unhealthy intersection’, *New Review*, 2, 16 (1975), p. 5; For the influence of the fascist interpretation of republicanism and separatist republicans in some academic writing see Regan, *Myth*, pp 94-112.

62 Conor Cruise O’Brien, ‘Blueshirts and Quislings’, *Magill*, (14 June 1981), p. 25.

other crime, no more than with the destruction of the Public Record Office, form part of the attempt to find equivalences with continental fascism. However, these associations cannot be historical where the interpretations are unsupported by credible evidence. Yet, such ahistorical constructions now form part of a sophisticated propaganda informing the collective memory of the Irish civil war.

All this is only to remind ourselves that burning a book, a library, or an archive, holds particular and powerful meanings for contemporary audiences. On this reading, the smoke plume rising high above the Four Courts signals a secular act of sacrilege, alongside the division of the revolutionaries into anti-fascists and fascists. Unsurprisingly, this binary reduction is just another rehearsal of the old 'democrats and dictators' story advanced by 'numerous scholars'.

III

Broadcast in June 2010, 'The Limits of Liberty', was a three part documentary series commissioned by the Irish state's broadcaster RTE, and substantially funded by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI).⁶³ Co-written by historian Diarmaid Ferriter and writer Nuala O'Connor, the series offered a purportedly left of centre critique of political power in independent Ireland. Once again, the destruction of the Public Records Office framed the origin story of the Irish state. To contextualise fully the documentary's treatment of these events it is necessary to reproduce two extended extracts from the programme. Delivering to camera, Diarmaid Ferriter says: 'In April 1922 the anti-treaty IRA took possession of the Four Courts Building, which included the Public Record Office'. Ferriter continues:

Two months later the army of the pro-treaty Government began a military bombardment of the Four Courts in order to force the republicans out. This marked the opening phase of the Irish civil war. Two days after that bombardment began a huge explosion ripped through the Public Record Office destroying most of the contents. Some of the charred fragments of the documents were blown as far as the Bailey Lighthouse nine miles away. At the time of the IRA's occupation of the Four Courts its commander Rory O'Connor was interviewed by the Irish Independent, 'Every care will be taken to preserve all documents', he said. But the IRA had packed the Public Record Office with gelignite and munitions in the midst of a priceless repository of Irish history. Some seven hundred years of documents went up in smoke including census returns, Land Registry deeds, baptismal certs,

63 South Wind Blows Productions received a grant of €350,000 under the Broadcasting Authorities of Ireland's (BAI) Sound and Vision Scheme for the series. BAI to author, 3 Feb., 2015. The three programmes aired on RTE 1 television on 1, 8, and 15 June 2010, under the auspices of RTE 'Factual'.

marriage certs. During the occupation they barricaded the windows with the 1821 County Antrim census returns. The cultural vandalism involved in their destruction was not deemed significant by those inside. They were consumed with the internal power struggle of the Irish republican movement. Rory O'Connor was visited by two scholars and republicans, Eoin Mac Neill and Seamus Ó Ceallaigh, they implored him to keep the records safe, but their pleas fell on deaf ears.⁶⁴

In the interest of balance and accuracy, it might be fairly said that the cultural vandalism involved in the destruction was not deemed significant by those inside or outside the Four Courts. Earlier in the proceedings, the British army contemplated an aerial bombardment of the Four Courts should they have to intervene.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, Free State gunners lobbed hundreds of shells into the Four Courts, and on the second day of their bombardment they targeted the Public Records Office in order to make a breach. During three days of siege, this was the only violence purposefully directed at the Public Record Office. All of this is only to notice that the Four Courts' garrison did not have sole responsibility for the destruction of the national archive. It is also true that in the conflict all sides subordinated any desire to conserve the national archive to the achievement of strategic military objectives. In time of war, such are the lamentable priorities of soldiers. That in his treatment Ferriter loses sight of any of this identifies his as a partisan treatment.

Immediately following Ferriter's presentation to camera, the documentary enlists the testimony of archaeologist, Dr Niamh Whitfield. A problem with Ferriter's interpretation of events remains the absence of credible evidence apportioning blame exclusively to the IRA garrison. Superficially, Whitfield's testimony addresses this problem. While apparently restoring a degree of balance to the programme's interpretation, she recounts a story told about her grandfather, the physician Dr Seamus Ó Ceallaigh, who in 1922, Whitfield tells us, was an opponent of the treaty. 'Well now as I have been told this as a child', Whitfield begins, 'and I cannot remember who told me but it is something I feel I have always known'. She continues:

Our story is that the Irregulars were holed up in the Four Courts for three months, at the end of the three months it became apparent that they would have to surrender. Initially [Rory] O'Connor, who was an engineer, his plan was to tunnel out under the Liffey and get his men out but that way but that turned out not to be feasible. So he wanted to go out with a bang rather than a whimper and he planned a gesture of defiance, and that was the destruction of the Public Records Office. And my grandfather [Seamus Ó Ceallaigh] got wind of this plan, as did Eoin Mac Neill, they were both northern Catholics, they were both on the side of the [anti-treaty] Irregulars,

64 Programme one of the series, including sections quoted above, can be viewed on 'Youtube' beginning at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wABVOa-BaHE>

65 Hopkinson, *Green*, p. 121.

but they were both historians, and they both appreciated the value of the records in the Public Record Office. They were horrified, they went together out to the Four Courts under fire, I believe, and they pleaded with [Rory] O'Connor not to blow up the Public Record Office. And their argument was that it was completely mistaken to believe that these were records which were solely concerned with the English. That these were actually records of the Irish people, so, if they blew them up what they would be doing would be destroying part of the history of their own people. They went away and a few days later my grandfather was in the street on a beautiful sunny day and he heard a huge explosion and he was so horrified he burst into tears. And that was the only time he wept in public. So his reaction was absolute horror and I think he was completely right it was an extremely vandalistic and stupid thing to do.

Dr Whitfield's testimony rehearses the story of Rory O'Connor's 'Samson-like act of defiance'. She also recounts another story circulating in 1922, that of two respectable professional men pleading with Rory O'Connor to save the Public Record Office.⁶⁶ It may be that Dr Seamus O'Ceallaigh, as Whitfield says, did approach Rory O'Connor during the bombardment. Endorsed by Ferriter there is, however, no evidence corroborating the statement that Eoin Mac Neill remonstrated with Rory O'Connor during the siege. And contrary to Whitfield's testimony, Eoin Mac Neill was not an 'Irregular' opponent of the treaty. Instead, Mac Neill was not alone a supporter of the treaty, but also a prominent member of the treatyite government. That, unnoticed and unrecorded, a government minister entered the Four Courts during the bombardment to plead with Rory O'Connor seems highly unlikely.

In the absence of credible evidence, the documentary makers employ hearsay oral testimony to re-tell the story of the IRA garrison's vandalism. Rehearsing a usable story, this testimony introduces inaccuracies into the programme's account of events, if not elements of fantasy. This is not to dismiss Dr Whitfield's testimony, which is of intrinsic value to any study of the relationship between narrative, memory, and history in the Irish civil war. However, her testimony is less useful where it is employed in an 'expository history', attempting to show how and why events happened. Employed in an expository mode, the use of Whitfield's testimony provides an example of dire methodological confusion, because she is a witness to her family's story about the destruction of the Public Record Office,

66 See Elizabeth Yeates to 'Mrs Dickie', 12 July 1922, National Library of Ireland, Ms. 24, 584.

not the event itself.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Whitfield's testimony is indispensable to the documentary-makers, because it lends credence to the blame game being played out in the programme. In these ways, the 'Limits of Liberty' provides an example of the ahistorical public history identified at the beginning of this article.⁶⁸

IV

While we can never definitively establish what motivates historians to produce their histories it is, nevertheless, fair to speculate that the association by some historians of the anti-treaty IRA with cultural vandalism is related to the exclusive association of the same IRA, as Ferriter identifies, with anti-democratic values. Indeed, sometimes these and similar interpretations have been advanced in parallel by the same authors. Yet it is true, a television documentary broadcast in 2010,

67 A similar fusing of expository history with memories of stories about 1922, is represented in the RTE television documentary, *An Tost Fada*, broadcast on 16 April 2012. The documentary alleged experiences of sectarianism in 1922, of a West Cork Church of Ireland family, the Salters, partly through the testimony of the Reverend Canon George Salter. Identifying factual errors in the programme in a complaint to RTE, Tom Cooper contended that there was bias toward a sectarian interpretation of contested events surrounding the so called, 'Bandon Valley Massacre', of late April 1922. RTE conceded factual mistakes were transmitted, and undertook to correct these should the programme be broadcast in the future. RTE's response did not address Cooper's assertion that the narration in the programme falsely claimed that a 'sense of fear and series of threats' forced nine members of the Salter family to leave Ireland, and that only one returned. Cooper appealed RTE's response to the Compliance Committee of the BAI. Cooper contended the programme was an infringement of current affairs broadcasting, notably in standards relating to 'fairness, objectivity, and impartiality'. On this point the BAI found: 'While the programme focused on a matter of debate and controversy amongst historians...it did not...constitute news and current affairs as it was not a matter of current public debate or controversy'. In the *Sunday Independent* on 26 June 2011, Eoghan Harris wrote: 'last Wednesday, neither Morning Ireland, Pat Kenny nor the News at One made a single mention of the report of the [PSNI's] Historical Enquiries team on the Kingsmill Massacre [1976]. This is no time for tribal reporting. By reminding us that sectarianism is not confined to one tradition, RTE would have removed some propaganda ammunition from the arsenal of the Recurring IRA'. Harris continued: 'Just as IRA apologists, supported by some academics, created a moral fog around the Bandon Valley murders to protect the myth of a non-sectarian old IRA as a necessary force for Irish self-government, so the same forces conspire to protect the myth of the Provisional IRA as a reaction to sectarian Loyalism and as a necessary prelude to the peace process'. Harris, the narrator and scriptwriter of *An Tost Fada*, does not claim to write as a historian. *The Irish Times* reported that five hundred people attended public lectures given by the present author and Andy Bielenberg (UCC), in the Imperial Hotel, Cork, on 28 April 2012. Tom Cooper to RTE 14 May 2012; Kevin Cummins (RTE) to Tom Cooper, 18 June 2012; Chris Morash (BAI) to Tom Cooper 5 Oct. 2012. *Irish Times*, 30 Apr. 2012. *An Tost Fada* claimed to be a response to another RTE documentary, CSÍ: Cork's Bloody Secret, broadcast 5 Oct. 2009. On that documentary, see Harris's *Sunday Independent* column, 4 Oct. 2009, alongside hundreds of pages of comment on discussion boards on Politics.ie and other websites such as The Cedar Lounge Revolution. I am grateful to the BAI and Tom Cooper for information.

68 For a more balanced interpretation of the destruction of the Public Records Office drawing on much of the primary evidence cited in this article, see Director Andrew Gallimore's 'An Léigear' ('The Siege') 1922, Fastnet Films, first broadcast on TG4, 23 Oct. 2013.

cannot realistically be said to have been directed at undermining the long defunct Provisional IRA. Describing the origins of the state, the 'Limits of Liberty' subscribed to a foundation myth endorsed by Garvin, Fitzpatrick, Laffan and treatyite propaganda dating to the civil war. What make that myth attractive to so many historians are the still current polemical responses to the Northern Ireland crisis. These reconceived the democratic Irish state as being in perpetual opposition to fascist republicanisism.

The destruction of the Public Record Office offers concrete examples of the demands 'reordering the past' place on historical evidence. This is because historical experience, complex, ragged-edged, and frustratingly elusive, resists being forced into pre-formed boxes. Nevertheless, pouring the past into binary moulds is what some historians' attempt to do. Writing in 2001, Professor J.J. Lee has reflected that in recent decades much historical scholarship, 'reverted to being a variety of war propaganda'. Continuing, Lee said that it is 'one of the sadder features of the intellectual history of the past generation that the standards of use of evidence set in the first generation of the Irish Historical Studies school lapsed so lamentably'.⁶⁹ What some historians have achieved when writing and broadcasting is the seamless integration of civil war propaganda into the historical record. Lending their professorial authority to this error, unavoidably, they influence the public's memory. Historians have every right to revise the past as they wish, or indeed to invent it anew in more satisfactory forms. Invented history is not necessarily wrong in any moral sense (as long as it involves no deception), and like other forms of expression, it should not ordinarily be censored. Instead, invented history must be loudly applauded, if only to draw attention to its form and function, not to mention its occasional creative ingenuity.

Introducing error into historical knowledge, unconsciously or consciously, debases historical understanding of the past and our memories. Where the error services crude propaganda, that debasement finds its completion. This is only to remind us that historical information, no more than the news information conveyed to us by journalists, has a particular value where it informs our decision-making in the present. It is for this reason, those who seek to control memory and historical understanding have always resorted to various forms of coercion. Some will deem this unavoidable and often necessary. What matters in the end is the value society as a whole places on both its memory and its historical understanding, and by what manner and means this value is defended or indeed allowed to lapse for the want of effort.

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⁶⁹ 'Irish Historical Studies school' refers to the historians associated with the journal *Irish Historical Studies*, notably its founding editors in 1938, T.W. Moody and R. Dudley Edwards, who advocated an unbending positivist approach to historical scholarship. J. J. Lee, "'The Canon of Irish History – A Challenge" – Reconsidered', in Toner Quinn, ed., *Desmond Fennell, his Life and Work* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 59–60.

later elected to a Research Fellowship at Wolfson College Oxford, and awarded a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship. In 1999, he published *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-36: Treatyite Politics and Settlement in Independent Ireland* (Gill & Macmillan), and in 2013 *Myth and the Irish State: Historical Problems and Other Essays* (Irish Academic Press). He has published extensively in *Historical Journal*, *Irish Historical Studies*, *History*, *Reviews in History*, *Dublin Review of Books*, and *The Journal of British Studies*.