

The IRA at War 1916–1923

Review Number:

416

Publish date:

Wednesday, 30 June, 2004

Author:

Peter Hart

Date of Publication:

2003

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

284pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

John Regan

Peter Hart's ten chapters explore the IRA in what is defined by him as the Irish Revolution of 1916–23. All essays save two have been published over the last decade as book chapters or articles in leading academic journals. All deserve to be revisited. Thematically organised, Hart examines the structure of revolutionary violence in Irish and wider British contexts. Essays on the geography of the Irish Revolution and the Protestant experience in it feature among some of the more stimulating writing on twentieth-century Ireland in recent years. OUP's decision to gather Hart's work in a single volume is therefore both welcome and timely. More than any other scholar of his generation, Hart has explored and questioned the violence which facilitated Irish state formation. The methodology owes much to the work of David Fitzpatrick: quantitative, forensic, thematic in approach and exhaustive in use of sources. Hart's comparative sociological approach is, as ever, invigorating. He has reinvented his subject and opened up new understandings of events, processes and personalities. It is, however, the opening mission statement – 'A new revolutionary history' – which provokes attention.

To those outside the field it may seem curious that the history of the Irish Revolution has received only sporadic attention since David Fitzpatrick published his seminal *Politics and Irish Life* in 1977. Hart's work on the IRA assembled here, and his monograph *The IRA and its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork 1916–1923* (Oxford, 1998), represent the most significant corpus of writing on the Revolution by any scholar. Hart's work, as with Fitzpatrick's, suggests that it was not availability of sources which retarded study. Inside Ireland the historicisation of the Revolution was problematised and impeded by the onset of violence north (and sometimes south) of the border. The full extent to which the recent civil war acted as a disincentive to historical scholarship on the 'Revolution' is a question to be answered elsewhere. Nevertheless, of particular sensitivity, for obvious reasons, is the issue of revolutionary violence and its relationship to political legitimacy.

Quite obviously, the history of the Irish Revolution is complicated by contemporary politics, and any book bearing the title *The IRA at War* cannot pretend otherwise. The problem is one of proximity: revolution in Ireland (or at least the Provisionals' attempt at it) was a contemporary experience for historians writing in recent decades. The historiography of an Irish Revolution has only of late (1998?) become post-revolutionary. Though the recent period of violence (1968–98) may be separated from the Revolution 'proper' (c.1912–23), this is not altogether convincing for two reasons. First, Northern Ireland's political culture, and the origins of the post-1968 conflict, was substantially a product of the earlier period. Second, post-1968 violence can be understood as an extension of the nationalist revolution pursuing a United Ireland. Whether this feasibly constitutes a 'Greater Irish Revolution 1912–1998' is a moot point which should not be hastily dismissed. Certainly it is difficult, if not impossible, to define the periods and processes as unrelated or unconnected. This, however, politicises a series of historical problems. The historical demarcation of revolution which brought an Irish independent state into being away from the Provisionals' attempt at revolution has been an imperative of the Irish Republic's (and to some extent British) counterinsurgency since 1970. It is argued here that the experience of revolutionary violence informs the historicisation of Irish state formation.

No serious scholar of Ireland's Revolution can avoid reflecting upon contemporary violence and its influence on historical conceptualisation. In choosing as his subject the IRA at war Hart negotiates history and politics in tandem. His strategy is to depoliticise the subject – or at least to ignore its political content. Hart's 'Irish Revolution' emphatically 'ends' in 1923. Problem solved?

The thrust of Hart's call for a new revolutionary history is to establish the Irish experience in a comparative framework alongside France, Russia, China, Cuba and Iran (p. 4). What follows is a consideration of themes worthy of greater explanation: the search for a non-nationalist narrative and periodisation; further explorations of gender, democracy, sovereignty, ethnicity, class and geography. His challenge to nationalist-driven narrative is well made but this innovation and much else – the dualist approach to Ireland north and south and the recognition of civil wars *plural* northern (sectarian, 1920–2) and southern (ideological, 1922–3) – are anticipated in Fitzpatrick's *The Two Irelands 1912–39* (Oxford, 1998). This prompts one to reflect on whether, in calling for a 'new' history, it is not wise in to consider what has gone before. Hart's approach to historiography is overwhelmingly congratulatory, though there is engagement with historians on points of detail, among them Michael Hopkinson on the assassination of Henry Wilson (p. 215), Joost Augusteijn on urbanization and republican violence (p. 48) and Michael Farry and Enda Delaney on the demographic decline of the protestant population in the early twentieth-century (p. 226). Hart finds remarkable concord with leading lights in his field, with Charles Townshend, Tom Garvin, Eunan O'Halpin, Ruth Dudley Edwards and David Fitzpatrick all receiving plaudits – and rightly so – for pioneering work. Hart is intent on building on existing scholarship by augmenting it with his explorations. Such an approach begs the question: is there not a case to be made for at least testing the foundations? It must be admitted the post-1968 generation of twentieth-century Irish historians wrote in difficult circumstances, especially those who addressed issues problematised by and, it is fair to say, influencing the contemporary war. At the very least – and this may seem self-evident – this difficulty needs to be recognised and articulated.

By not engaging with a critical historiographical approach Hart evades the necessity to re-examine and interrogate the strongest work in his area. This is, however, essential to any aspiration to developing the subject, quite apart from taking stock. What follows is a terse endorsement of a consensual approach to modern Irish history in which differences of opinion are suppressed at the expense of invigorating the subject. Nevertheless, perceptible tensions open up – to the *cognoscenti* at least – between orthodoxy and Hart's innovation. The one is, however, compromised by the other.

Hart identifies the crucial differentiation between the interests of southern and northern nationalists: 'Partition did not reflect the wishes of the nationalist majority in Ireland but it did reflect the priorities of those in the twenty-six ['southern'] Free State counties.' (p. 24) However, he is determined to bend his insight into conformity:

Those in favour of the Anglo-Irish Treaty would see it and the consequent Free State as the realization of national liberation. Those opposed demanded republican popular sovereignty to satisfy this goal. All would believe that the nation-state is incomplete without the territory and population of Northern Ireland. Further liberation required (p. 4).

Here Hart accepts pan-nationalist rhetoric over the southern nationalist *realpolitik* that he correctly identifies in the quotation cited first. It is difficult to reconcile the two interpretations within the same essay. Southern nationalists were not overly exercised by partition or the fate of their co-religionists in the north in 1920 or after. There was no cross-border civil war or invasion of Northern Ireland in 1920–2, nor in 1925 (nor for that matter after 1968). Southerners talked up the rhetoric of a united Ireland but their interest after 1920 lay with the stabilisation of the border and the northern minority on the other side of it. It may be observed that the greatest long-term threat to the southern state from 1920 came from radicalised nationalists escalating a cross-border civil war. For this reason southerners fought their own civil war in the south – on the issue of republican status not partition – abandoning the northern IRA’s offensive in May 1922. It took a further quarter of a century before republicans mounted a cross-border offensive: only to be jointly defeated by Dublin and Belfast governments. Southern nationalists may have *talked* ‘further liberation’: but their interest remained stabilisation. Partition was a symbiotic southern nationalist and northern unionist construct. Of course, this remains heresy within southern nationalism and the historiography that it influences.

Southern Irish nationalism is an unrecognised and, as yet, unaddressed historiographical problem. The preponderance of partitionist interpretations of post-revolutionary Ireland, which Hart rightly criticises, is in part a product of this. The triumph of ‘Irish democracy’ – meaning southern Irish democracy, the marginalisation of the northern sectarian violence of 1920–2, the apportioning of blame for partition, discrimination and sectarianism exclusively on the British and northern Unionist regimes and refusing to recognise southern investment in partition are all manifestations of southern nationalist ideology on historiography, only some of which Hart rejects. The Irish Revolution was predominantly a southern affair, driven by southern interest, led by Munster revolutionaries. What community had more to lose by the escalation of republican demands followed by violence than the minority in north-east Ulster, most especially in Belfast? This may explain Sinn Féin’s failure to achieve hegemony over northern nationalists in 1918. More pointedly, no Ulsterman sat on the IRA Executive/GHQ from January 1919 to March 1921, and no Volunteer from the six counties of Northern Ireland was appointed before the split in March 1922. In examining post-partitionist Ireland one is confronted not with southern and northern priorities, but with separate identities and diametrically opposed interests. In the south identity, narrow interest and survival forged a nationalist ideology which silently eschewed pan-nationalism. This became all the more acute – both politically and within the historiography – when northern nationalists imperilled the stability of the island after 1968.

On the contentious subject of the Revolutionary IRA’s relationship to democracy, Hart cites Richard English’s observation they had ‘a complicated relationship’ with it. But English goes much further in a sophisticated survey of revolutionary republicanism, adopting the dichotomy which has preoccupied many historians in recent years: that the revolution and ultimately southern state formation can be understood as a contest between democratic and anti-democratic forces led by the IRA, more particularly the anti-treaty IRA of 1922. English subtly articulates this position: ‘The 1921 Treaty provided the clearest instance of this tendency, with clear popular majorities in favour of the agreement being brushed aside by the anti-Treatyites.’ (1) Anti-treatyite rejection of politics ‘carried with it distinct traces of the anti-democratic’. (2)

Revolutionary reaction against Britain involved rejection not only of British rule in Ireland, but also of the form of politics which accompanied it: the IRA philosophy was one which eschewed strict attachment to democratic principle. Yet the goal of Irish Republicanism did rest on rhetorical adherence to democratic notions, and once the Revolutionaries attained power they

adopted a very British form of parliamentary politics...the fact that the destabilization did indeed prove temporary owed much to the internalization within Ireland of that very political tradition of liberal democracy against which so much IRA activity was directed.(3)

English's interpretation of the anti-treatyite IRA of 1922 as broadly anti-democratic has been shared of late by Tom Garvin, Charles Townshend, Michael Laffan and Eunan O'Halpin in defining the causation of the southern civil war. English's (1996) interpretation while not as polemic as others, candidly places his argument in a present centred context:

the issue of one's attitude toward constitutional mandates...is one of undoubted significance to modern Ireland...should one respect the popularity expressed political preferences and the compromises which they usually entail, or should electoral endorsement be obscured by a preference for uncompromising, aggressive vanguardism?(4)

This is significant. Fitzpatrick's more recent work on the Revolution is distinctive in respect of its avoidance of using democratic legitimacy as an interpretative tool (see *Harry Boland's Irish Revolution* (Cork University Press, 2003)). The assumption appears to be that revolutions cannot be understood as democratic processes. Hart's 'ademocratic IRA', presumably (in the absence of a definition of what the term means), follows this lead. In the context of the historiography, defining the IRA as ademocratic not anti-democratic is an important distinction, particularly because from the late 1970s historians have, with increased emphasis, argued for the anti-democratic, and therefore illegitimate, use of violence by the IRA in 1922, and democratic legitimate force used by those creating the independent Irish state. It is no coincidence that this trend coincided with the Provisional IRA's campaign. For southern Irish nationalism, the fact that resurgent republican-militarism claimed historical legitimacy from the same sources as the southern state – the 1916 rising, Patrick Pearse *et al.*, the 1918 Sinn Fein general election victory and ultimately state formation through violence – proved, to say the least, problematic.

The 'ademocratic' definition of the IRA sets Hart (along with Fitzpatrick) apart from those defining them variously as anti-democratic, pre-democratic or non-democratic. These distinctions deserve engagement which Hart is determined, for whatever reason, to avoid. He is also inconsistent: 'The threat to democracy finally ended when the revolution did, with the IRA ceasefire in April 1923.' (p.27) This conceptualisation of the southern civil war – and arguably the IRA – owes more to Garvin, English, Laffan and O'Halpin than to Fitzpatrick, or perhaps his own 'ademocratic' interpretation. Democracy, as applied to interpretations of the Irish Revolution, has become in recent years a moralising political tool, more engaged with a contemporary ideological dialogue than with historical analysis. Hart stands on two stools.

In respect of a most troubled relationship between democracy and Northern Ireland, Hart again tries to reconcile his research with orthodox interpretation. For example, 'the Northern Ireland government and the Unionist Party certainly failed the democratic test in their exclusionary sectarianism and drive for one-party rule' (p. 24). But this again is at the expense of consistency:

Paramilitaries [republican and loyalist 1912–23] were a symptom of state and democratic failure...Only when the post-partition regimes were established did the majority of both ethnic groups transfer their trust and allegiance back to the state and its armed forces. Full democracy was restored once ethnic sovereignty or security was achieved (pp. 108–9).

Was or could Northern Ireland be so described? One possible answer lies with Hart's definition of British democracy:

As part of the United Kingdom, Ireland was then a part of an increasingly democratic political system: one which excluded no competitors, granted considerable freedom of speech, was relatively free of corruption, and allowed new anti-establishment parties to emerge and wield power' (p.16).

If one applies this interpretation to the post-partition Ireland almost any conclusion is possible. Could Northern Ireland's nationalists wield real power at any political level? Was Northern Ireland a threat to democracy on the island? An adequate definition of democracy is a root problem. The desire to use it as an interpretative tool is another.

There was no liberal-democratic solution – British or Irish – to the ethnic question in Ireland in 1920. The border – along with British-inspired institutional paraphernalia, proportional representation and a Council of Ireland – was the best that was on offer and it gained the acceptance of southern nationalists (more relieved than grudging) and northern unionists. The arbitrary nature of the boundary drawn is now accepted by almost everyone as 'democratic' in the sense of being as democratic as it is possible to be in the absence of viable alternatives; it is even accommodated, to a limited face-saving extent, by 'post-revolutionary' 'Provisionals'. But the Stormont regime to 1972 was not a shining example of democracy in any definition of the western liberal tradition. Hart has it both ways.

Hart is neither a statist nor a southern nationalist, though the influence of both ideologies can be traced through his work. His research on localised and specialised topics subverts orthodoxy, but it is his willingness to embrace it when dealing with general explanations which surprises. His exploration of the plight of Protestants in the Free State illuminates the sectarian underbelly of the revolution that a nationalist historiography prefers to ignore. In escalating violence in Cork, Tipperary, or Dublin could Michael Collins, Harry Boland, or Ernie O'Malley be held accountable for raising sectarian tensions in Antrim, Down or Belfast? Was the cost of a southern state the institutionalisation of ethno-religious tensions in a compressed and reactionary northern state? Could revolutionary violence in 1922 and 1968 conceivably be part of one grotesque, protracted process? To accept this argument would, however, be to shatter nationalist icons important to a southern nationalist identity still rooted in its own glorious revolution.

That open sectarian conflict was intrinsic to any war of 'national liberation' will remain a matter of embarrassment to those who conceive of the Irish Revolution as having wholly positive outcomes. In placing sectarianism at the centre of the Revolution, Hart does an incalculable service, retrieving his subject from the preserve of professional nationalists.

This compendium is the product of a gifted historian. Read chronologically (as the papers were first published) as opposed to thematically (as they are presented), degrees of development can be identified in which recent transitions in Irish political climates may be tested. The essay on paramilitarism (first published in early 2003) is subversive of much written on revolutionary republicanism: 'Patrick Pearse was not Charles Manson and the rebels were not members of a mystical republican cult.' (p. 105) Regrettably he does not tell us who said otherwise or, more importantly, why. This is not a monograph, and while inconsistencies and contradictions may cloud interpretation they serve to illuminate tensions under which Irish historians labour. This is a virtue of the volume.

Historiography remains a blind spot in a methodology which, in empirical mode, is dazzling. Hart's studies – clinical, quantitative and balanced – necessarily place him in conflict with existing approaches and conceptualisations of a different order to the ones he chooses to engage. Why this should be so is not clear. The impact of recent violence – call it 'troubles', 'attempted revolution', 'civil war' or by other designations – on historical writing is a question the post-1968 generation of historians has not faced squarely. It is imperative for an emerging generation not to follow this approach but instead to reflect critically upon influences imposing on the historical imagination. This is, quite obviously, historical process, but past experience (in Irish contexts) indicates that it may not be a pleasant one. Hart's invitation to historians of

Ireland to meet in pursuit of a new revolutionary history should be acted upon. A critical historiography is not an optional accessory.

Notes

1. It should be noted English has recently revised his position: 'there remains no simple equation possible between the 1921 Treaty and democracy on one side, and anti-treatyite politics and opposition to democracy on the other.' Richard English, *Ernie O'Malley IRA Intellectual* (Oxford, 1996), 84; *Armed Struggle: a History of the IRA* (London, 2003), 33. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. English, *O'Malley*, 84. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. English, *O'Malley*, 198. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. English, *O'Malley*, 204. [Back to \(4\)](#)

Other reviews:

Political Review

http://www.politicalreviewnet.com/polrev/reviews/POQU/R_0032_3179_164_1005141.asp [2]

History Ireland

<http://www.historyireland.com/volumes/volume12/issue1/reviews/> [3]

H-Net Reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php> [4]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/416>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2075>

[2] http://www.politicalreviewnet.com/polrev/reviews/POQU/R_0032_3179_164_1005141.asp

[3] <http://www.historyireland.com/volumes/volume12/issue1/reviews/?id=113692>

[4] <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10377>