

The Politics of the Irish Civil War

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Author:

Bill Kissane

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Anne Dolan

If you are shallow enough to buy this book because of its cover you will be heartily disappointed. The image of Arthur Griffith brandishing a Union Jack, with destruction in his wake and the bodies of women and children trampled under his feet, is possibly the most inappropriate that the author or his publisher could have chosen. Arthur Griffith is one of the most marginal figures in the book; Britain and British interests are largely ignored; violence and the conduct of war itself has little significance; and beyond fleeting appearances as voters, the downtrodden people have no place at all. On one level this is a terribly superficial criticism. The author 'makes no claim to be providing a transcendent interpretation' of the civil war (p. vii). He does exactly what he says he was going to do on the very first page. Bill Kissane has written 'a relatively balanced book on one of the most divisive episodes in Irish contemporary history'; he has brought to light 'aspects of the conflict that have not received sustained attention', and political scientists and historians will welcome this book because of that (p. vii). But the price of this achievement is to elide the very elements of civil war that the cover seems to revel in. Take what you can of violence and suffering, of destruction and personal enmity from that cover, because, for the sake of this achievement of balance, they have been banished from the pages inside.

Taking the book exclusively on its own terms, on the parameters that it sets itself in chapter 1, the question that keeps recurring is whether 'the politics of the Irish civil war', as examined in this book, can be understood without greater consideration of the nature and extent of the bitterness and the violence that infused them, whether they can be explored in this rather dismembered way. The assumption seems to be that politics can be wholly divorced from the context of bitterness and panic and human error, from bad judgment, from men who liked violence and being violent for its own sake, from the sense that government itself was often little more than the expedient measures of 'eight young men ... standing amidst the ruins of one administration' as the Minister for Home Affairs, Kevin O'Higgins, later admitted. (1) The location of the civil war in a comparative context (chapter 2), the discussion of the causes of the war in terms of rival definitions of democracy and self-determination (chapter 3), tracing the course of the war (chapter 4), the fate of peace initiatives (chapter 5), the role of civil society (chapter 6), examining protective democracy and

the new state (chapter 7), the extent to which the anti-Treatyites were democratic or not (chapter 8) and the historical treatment of the war (chapter 9), each and every one of these chapters makes a valuable and insightful contribution to the study of the war itself. The book is rigorous and challenging; the analysis is astute and demanding. The bare bones of the politics of the conflict have been laid out, classified and examined in the most minute detail here. The reader is informed of what happened, and challenged to imagine what could have happened instead. But at no point does the reader get any sense of the bitterness that beat at the very heart of the Irish civil war, that infused every part of it with such intensity that some parts of the country are uncomfortable with the memory of it still. Without taking full account of bitterness it is questionable whether one can begin to understand the Irish civil war at all.

Kissane quite sensibly revolts against the fascination with personality which seems to pass for analysis in much recent historiography of the civil war. The reduction of the conflict to a matter of being for or against Michael Collins or Eamon de Valera has proved as persistent as it has been limited. But it is an impulse which has not been resisted here quite as effectively as Kissane might have wished. But this is not necessarily the bad thing that the reader is led to believe. De Valera remains the focus of attention in terms of the anti-Treaty position, and rightfully so in the light of the book's preoccupation with the political dimension of the conflict. Yet given that the war was pursued most intensively by a band of men who at times did not know and cared less about where de Valera was or what he thought, the emphasis on de Valera seems somewhat overstated in the context of the type of war that was eventually fought. More consideration of people like Liam Lynch, Frank Aiken or Ernie O'Malley and de Valera's relationship with them might be useful here. The democratic tendencies which Kissane so vitally identifies in the anti-Treatyites would benefit greatly from a closer analysis of the relationship between the anti-Treatyite politicians and the men who only wanted to continue a fight they believed Britain had started, who stated again and again their contempt for politics and its power to corrupt the men in the field. It would also strengthen his arguments against the 'birth of democracy' view of the civil war. The de Valera of this book, however, is not the villain that we see elsewhere. While this is largely refreshing, there is no concession made to the fact that this was what he came to represent to many on the pro-Treaty side. However irrational, on some level he was the one man that his political opponents 'could never forgive', and there needs to be a greater concession towards an understanding of that point of view here. (2) The importance of Collins should also be considered in a little more detail. Kissane may wish to exclude personality in order to emphasise the other factors which caused the Treaty split, but there is a need to factor in its influence along with all the other considerations which he so ably outlines, if only to contribute to a fuller understanding of the force and extent of the bitterness of the division. However, Kissane compensates to some extent by what could be described as the reinstatement of W. T. Cosgrave into the political vista of the civil war. This is particularly striking in chapter 5, and militates against the predominant view which has come to dismiss him as an inadequate inheritor of a position he never wanted, or as a timid man who ruled in fear of some of his colleagues in government almost as much as he did his anti-Treatyite opponents. For this reason, the absence of Kevin O'Higgins, of Arthur Griffith and, indeed, the majority of the members of the various governments, provisional and otherwise, who had to cope with the political reality of the Treaty, its opponents and its aftermath, is worthwhile. The contemplation of Cosgrave's role in a considered and sophisticated fashion is really a welcome change to the clichés that have passed for analysis of him to date.

There is a sense that any form of comparative analysis is to be welcomed irrespective of its scope or its conclusions because context has been so sorely lacking in Irish history. However, the claims that this book examines the civil war in a comparative context are to some extent quite disappointing. The Irish civil war may prove to be the particularly specific conflict which Kissane considers it to be, but there is a sense in which it is difficult to make that conclusion based on the type of comparison engaged in here. The Irish civil war may not fulfil specified criteria which have been carefully and decorously divined by theorists of colonialism, post-colonialism and all that comes between, but there has to be a little more to the whole process of comparative history other than the extent to which the conflict fits or does not fit Melvin Small's criteria of conflict as set out in *Resort to Arms* (p. 17). (3) Lustick's notions of post-colonial hegemony are all very well, Fanon's theories are even better, but at no point does the use of their insights provoke the author to ask questions such as why the Irish conflict was so much less violent than so many of the conflicts

briefly alluded to. The points of comparison may not hold to their ultimate conclusion, the Irish civil war may fail to tick enough of the required boxes to be considered a full-blown, bona fide post-secession civil war, but surely there is much more to be gained from comparative analysis than the limited conclusions made in a little over eight pages in chapter 2.

The discussion of the war in the context of Ireland's relationship with the British Empire also lacks any real consideration of the most fundamental factor from the British point of view – Ireland's propinquity. The new state's loyalties and their implications for British security are as important, if not more so, than any consideration of Britain's 'colonial relationships' and whether they were 'more deep-rooted in Ireland than in the Third World' (p. 21). 'Deviance from the wider colonial pattern' is all very well, but there is a lot to be said for acknowledging the sheer force of proximity on the British mindset, particularly in the wake of the Great War (p. 21). It also might explain why the oath was as crucial to the British government as it was to either side in the conflict that followed the Treaty in Ireland.

To some extent the chapter on the course of the civil war is the weakest in the book precisely because it is the least political and demands some form of engagement with the very forces that threaten the cherished balance. 'A controlled if bitter phenomenon', 'a disciplined form of intransigence' do not adequately explain the violence of the war, the events at Ballyseedy Wood and elsewhere, that became part of the last months of the fighting (pp. 65–6). What strength the chapter has lies in the way in which it undermines the 'birth of democracy' thesis which has been championed most effectively by Tom Garvin's *1922: the Birth of Irish Democracy*, (4) but even this argument is put much more effectively in the chapters that follow rather than here. Throughout there is absolutely no sense of the type of war being fought, the difficulties in communication, the extent to which the republicans progressively lacked arms, military intelligence and, in many cases, the very will to fight. The resort to a purely political rationale is of little use when contemplating men whose sole raison d'être amounted to 'what then is going to defeat England?' (p. 93).

Chapters 5 and 6 are important in terms of uncovering the various efforts at brokering peace, in examining the forces in civil society which, though ultimately thwarted in their efforts, continued to try to bring a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Groups such as the National Economic Party, Clann na hÉireann and the Neutral IRA, amongst others, emerge from the obscurity which previous studies of the war have condemned them to. The book is strongest here, but arguably greater concession could be made to the problems of cultural demobilisation which are dealt with solely in the light of the persistence of lawlessness in the new state.

This theme is continued in chapter 7 in the context of the emergence of a protective democracy in the new state. There are interesting and challenging interpretations here, but there is something terribly depressing in the tone adopted throughout. The desire for law and order is dismissed as being little more than adhering to 'the values of Victorian Britain' (p. 151); the formation of the state is dismissed as 'the project of a triple alliance between the British government, the Catholic Church and the Irish middle class in which none had an overriding interest in promoting an expansive conception of democracy' (p. 175). It is in these contexts that it might be useful to make comparisons with other states at the same time. Bemoaning the paradox of repressive measures being instituted to preserve a paternalistic democracy in the light of what was going on in much of the rest of Europe at the same time makes these sentiments seem rather churlish indeed. There is a similar sentiment in the conclusion when the author wonders if the state was worth all the violence, particularly given the state's 'poor record on policy issues and little civic pride' (p. 237). Hindsight, which seems to weigh particularly heavily throughout the book, might have been a little more usefully apportioned here.

Chapter 8 is arguably the most important, not so much for its sense of surprise at the rise of Fianna Fáil in the particular form that it took, but in its championing of a more complex understanding of the anti-Treaty position during the civil war itself. Nowhere is the 'birth of democracy' thesis more forcefully challenged, and the notion of the pro-Treatyites as a force for right and good, fighting a band of brigands and savages is laid to rest here in a fashion which will make it very difficult for advocates of that view to continue to argue their case. The only weakness of this section is a failure to fully account for the opinions of the fighting men,

who provide, with some of their more extreme pronouncements about the inadequacies of politics and democracy, the real force behind the 'birth of democracy' argument.

The examination of historians and the civil war is provocative, particularly in terms of the contradictions it points out in Michael Laffan's and Tom Garvin's theses. However, it is questionable whether the historical debate is still formed by the positions set by P. S. O'Hegarty and Dorothy Macardle in 1924 and 1937 respectively, as argued here. (5) Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will never agree on their interpretations of the civil war, or possibly any other aspect of the 1916–23 period. It is arguable that they never can and never should. There is similarly a lack of understanding of the extent to which civil war bitterness was ingrained but also propagated for political advantage. At the same time there is a failure to appreciate that there could be anything but civil war politics dividing the two main parties in Ireland. Why is it so surprising that Irish politics is still dominated by the three main parties of the late 1920s? Why lament the fact that 'Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have yet to form a coalition government together'? (p. 2). Why should they? The question might be more accurately put in terms of how could they, but that might involve exploring Irish political life on an almost instinctive level that stretches far beyond the confines of the political elites explored here. It requires more than can ever be conveniently explained by recourse to Vanhanen's 'index of power resources', $(IOD \times IKD \times FF)/10,000$, or any other equally esoteric formulae or theories (p. 222). It requires just a little more sensitivity to the popular culture of Irish politics itself, a sensitivity which is sorely lacking given the author's inability to spell Dáil Éireann, Saorstát Éireann, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin correctly throughout the book.

Given its provocative and combative style, given the nature and the legacy of the war itself, it would be foolish to expect agreement about this book. It conceives of a much more complex polity both before, during and, arguably, after the civil war, than has ever been conceded before. Some will lament that it did not go further; others will argue that it has already gone too far, that it has upset the founding notions of the state and all they stand for. However, in the end, I leave this book unconvinced about the extent to which the analysis of politics can be isolated from violence in the context of a civil conflict. I leave it still looking for the bitterness that was such an integral part of the Irish civil war.

Notes

1. See Kevin O'Higgins, *Three years' hard labour: an address delivered to the Irish Society at Oxford University on the 31st October 1924* (Dublin, n.d.), p. 7. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See Maryann Valiuslis, "'The man they could never forgive" – the view of the opposition', in *De Valera and his Times*, ed. J. P. O'Carroll and John A. Murphy (Cork, 1983), pp. 92–100. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J. D. Singer and M. Small, *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1816–1980* (1982). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. T. Garvin, *1922: the Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin, 1996). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Michael Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin Party, 1916–1923* (Cambridge, 1999); Tom Garvin, *1922*; P. S. O'Hegarty, *The Victory of Sinn Féin: How It Won It and How It Used it* (Dublin, 1924); and Dorothy Macardle, *The Irish Republic: a Documented Chronicle of the Anglo-Irish Conflict and the Partitioning of Ireland, with a Detailed Account of the Period 1916–1923* (1937). [Back to \(5\)](#)

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