

The Lost Revolution: The Story of the Official IRA and the Workers' Party

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Author:

Scott Millar

Brian Hanley

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Stephen Hopkins

This volume is the first to attempt a full historical treatment of a neglected subject. If there is a voluminous, though not always very analytical, academic and popular literature devoted to the Provisional republican movement since the onset of the violent conflict in Northern Ireland during the late 1960s, then it is fair to argue that the 'other' strand of the Irish republican movement derived from the split of 1969–70, the 'Officials', has rarely, if ever, been accorded a similar degree of scrutiny. For good or ill, the Official IRA and Sinn Féin (SF), which became the Workers' Party (WP) in 1982, has received nothing approaching the attention devoted to the Provisionals, and yet for a full understanding of the development of 20th-century Irish Republicanism, and particularly its ambiguous relationship to socialist politics, this strand of Republican thought and activity is an absolutely necessary component of any balanced historiographical reckoning.

The authors, one a lecturer in Irish history at Queen's University in Belfast and the other a journalist with the *Irish Examiner*, have written a highly readable and dense study of the movement. They take a broadly chronological approach, but begin with a contemporary prologue, which illustrates an implicit biographical dimension to their enterprise. In Dublin in 2005, Sean Garland, then President of the WP, is depicted by the authors addressing a rally organised to campaign against his extradition to the United States, where he had been indicted on charges relating to the alleged 'superdollar' conspiracy, a sophisticated network for the distribution of large sums of forged US dollars, emanating in North Korea. Garland, born in 1934, had joined the IRA in 1953, and was badly injured during the IRA's Border campaign (Operation Harvest)

during a raid against a Co. Fermanagh Royal Ulster Constabulary barracks in 1957; this action has become an integral part of the modern folklore of the Republican movement, ending as it did with the deaths of two young IRA ‘martyrs’, Sean South and Fergal O’Hanlon, who have been immortalised in storytelling and balladry. Garland subsequently became a key figure in the left-wing reorientation of the traditional, socially conservative movement during the 1960s, and he was to become a convinced pro-Soviet revolutionary socialist from the early 1970s onwards, this conviction surviving the collapse of the international communist movement in 1989–1991. His personal trajectory has, in most important respects, mirrored the evolution of this strand of Irish Republican thought, and indeed Garland, above almost all other individuals who feature in this exhaustive account, has been responsible for shaping the fundamental character and line of march of the Officials.

It is a measure of the timeliness of this book that one of the other critical historical personalities of the movement, Tomás Mac Giolla, a former TD (member of the Republic of Ireland’s Parliament, Dáil Eireann) and longstanding President of Official SF and the WP, died aged 86 in February 2010, and his crucial testimony concerning the history of the movement would have been lost were it not for the efforts of Hanley and Millar. Like Garland and many other leading figures from the various incarnations of the movement, Mac Giolla granted the authors extensive interviews, and they have also gained access to many internal documents of the movement, often unavailable to previous researchers. Indeed, it is one of the real strengths of this volume that oral testimonies from many, though not all, of the leading protagonists in this story, have been painstakingly collected and collated, permitting the discerning reader to form nuanced judgments concerning the often labyrinthine internal dynamics and personal inter-relationships of the movement. Of course, as with any oral evidence, the authors (and the reader) also need to be aware of the fallibility of memory, the self-justifying stance of many of the interviewees, the temptation to settle old scores, and the necessity to treat the claims and counter-claims of erstwhile comrades, who sometimes became bitter foes, with due caution. Perhaps it is no accident that the authors subtitle the book as the ‘story’ of the Officials, rather than claiming that they have produced its definitive ‘history’. However, given that much of the political and organisational work of the movement described here, and certainly all of the paramilitary activity, was clandestine and conspiratorial in nature, it is probably inevitable that researchers must rely upon these oral sources, even if the authors have made a gallant effort to support their judgments with documentary evidence. As a previous reviewer, and erstwhile protagonist in the Official republican movement, puts it: ‘as with the history of Irish republicanism generally, the oral tradition is crucial because this is a history of the defeated’.⁽¹⁾

The authors argue persuasively for the significance of the Official Republican movement to the wider history of both Republicanism and socialism in Ireland, and its importance to the political history of modern Ireland, both North and South. They implicitly reject the double marginalisation of the movement: both in terms of the conventional historical understanding of Irish Republicanism, and the alleged lack of influence of socialist theory and practice in Ireland. The story ‘encompasses armed insurrection, several bitter splits, and the development of the most successful radical political grouping in the Republic of Ireland in recent decades...’ (p. xiii). Perhaps of even greater significance, those who developed their political ideology out of the Official republican movement were, during the late 1970s and through the 1980s, at the forefront of attempts to undermine irredentist ideology in the South, and worked tirelessly, in an extremely dangerous environment, in an attempt to overcome the sectarian divisions of Protestants and Catholics in the working-class of Northern Ireland. In a certain sense, although sectarianism remains firmly rooted in Northern Irish society, and has been institutionalised in the post-1998 era of power-sharing devolution, nonetheless the contemporary dispensation owes a good deal to the willingness of anti-sectarians in the WP to stand up to the remorseless logic of communal conflict. This may still be true, even if the WP has been rendered largely irrelevant to contemporary political life in both Northern Ireland and the Republic. Several of those who played important roles in the movement during the 1970s and 1980s in the South, have since gone on to establish themselves as key parliamentary figures in the Dáil: leaders such as Pat Rabbitte and Eamon Gilmore (both subsequently leaders of the Irish Labour Party, after they left the WP in 1992), as well as the veteran Proinsias De Rossa, have been integrated into the mainstream of Irish politics.

Hanley and Millar begin their chronological account with another biographical sketch, this time of Cathal Goulding, who became the IRA's Chief of Staff in 1962 after the ignominious defeat of Operation Harvest, which had begun in 1956. One of the key questions that has attracted debate in the existing literature is the extent to which socialist and/or communist ideas and activists influenced the direction of the movement in the 1960s. Rather than endorse one of the many conspiracy theories that abound with regard to the role played by the tiny communist parties in either the Republic or Northern Ireland, the authors correctly emphasise the disorientation in the ranks of Irish republicanism after the comprehensive defeat of the late 1950s, and the inchoate process of searching out a new direction. The very survival of the movement was at stake in these years, and the piecemeal adoption of leftist rhetoric was by no means universally popular within the movement. Several of those more 'traditional' Republicans, sceptical if not downright hostile to the 'social republicanism' enshrined by Goulding (who borrowed liberally from the Republican Congress experiment of the 1930s), dropped out of active involvement, and only returned to the movement after the explosion of violence in Northern Ireland during 1968–9. Some of these individuals, like Billy McKee and Joe Cahill, were instrumental in the split, and the formation of the Provisionals, and they were committed to a socially conservative movement, reliant upon the communal solidarity of the Catholic nationalist enclaves, both rural and urban, of Northern Ireland.

As the Goulding/Mac Giolla/Garland leadership groped towards a more coherent direction in the mid to late 1960s, socialist politics appeared as the 'coming wave', at least in the international arena, and even in Ireland it was possible to see a strategy taking shape that stressed the *revolutionary* credentials of the movement, as opposed to the traditional continuities. In its early stages, this leftism was certainly not Marxist or pro-Soviet as such, but found expression in support for the indigenous elements of 'social republicanism', as well as anti-colonial liberation struggles in Africa and Latin America. Goulding was critical of the militaristic elitism that had characterised Irish republicanism over the post-civil war decades, but this was a trend that had very deep historical roots, stretching back at least as far as the Fenians and the Irish Republican Brotherhood. However, although the movement was increasingly disdainful of the aloof position adopted by previous generations, it is a mistake to believe that the 'physical force' tradition was in the process of withering away. It was not militarism per se that the leadership argued was inhibiting the development of the movement, but its self-imposed distance from the daily struggles of the 'people'.

Hanley and Millar are assiduous in tracing the internal debates over the relationship between political activism and the commitment to violence during the fateful period from 1966–69, although their own judgments are sometimes less easy to discern. Although Goulding had also criticised the backward-looking culture of commemoration in the Republican movement, paradoxically it was the 50th anniversary of the Easter rising in 1966 that produced a renewed and broader interest in the movement amongst younger left-wing elements. Garda estimates put the strength of the IRA at approximately 1,000 in 1966, but only around a quarter of these were veterans of the Border campaign, illustrating the turnover in personnel and the influx of new recruits. Sinn Féin, which had not enjoyed an autonomous or powerful position within the movement, became of more significance. The aim was to build a 'political, national and social revolutionary organisation with an open membership and legal existence.' (p. 59) The IRA would maintain the upper hand in the relationship, however, with 'army' figures placed in strategic posts within the SF organisation. Ultimately, the Republican movement would remain under the firm control of its illegal and clandestine military leadership, and the transparency afforded by the open activity of SF was strictly limited in application. There was inevitably a tension between the sincerely held desire, to put the movement much more closely in touch with the popular struggles of the day, and the ongoing commitment to maintain a self-perpetuating vanguardist elite, responsible for overseeing the movement's strategic direction, often unbeknownst to many of the foot soldiers and ordinary party workers.

Although the Republican movement made some modest gains in the post-1966 period, it was with the civil rights agitation in Northern Ireland that the movement hit upon a strategy that would lead to an authentic sea-change in the movement's fortunes. Unfortunately, this growth was predicated upon the resurgence in sectarian confrontation in Northern Ireland, for which the Republican movement must take its share of the historical responsibility. The events of summer 1969 have been carved into the historical psyche of the

Ulster population, both Protestant and Catholic, but Hanley and Millar demonstrate convincingly that the prevailing narrative (associated with the Provisionals), that the IRA was hardly present, and left Catholic districts undefended while a Loyalist pogrom unfolded, is a conscious distortion of the facts. Nonetheless, the Goulding leadership's insistence on their desire to reach out to the Protestant working-class could not mask the contradictions of the movement's position. New recruits flooded into the movement, and some of the older traditionalists returned, seizing their opportunity to act as a thorn in the flesh of the Dublin leadership group, and preparing the ground for the eventual split in December 1969. But, many of these recruits were explicit in their motivation: they wished to defend their areas from attack by Loyalists, but also to retaliate against the Protestants. This outcome was precisely the opposite of that intended by Goulding and the other genuine anti-sectarians, but they had no capacity to engineer a new emphasis upon working-class unity. Although Hanley and Millar do not argue this case, we can perhaps speculate that in the crucible of sectarian violence in August 1969, it was inevitable that the universalism of the movement's rhetoric would be found wanting. The arrival and continuing presence of the British Army on the streets only served to reinforce the (anti-)colonial prism through which events were interpreted, to disastrous effect for all concerned.

The book deals well with the complexity of the split, in its ideological, geographical and generational dimensions. In many rural areas, it was some time before the split was formalised, whereas in Belfast and Derry, there were swift recriminations and confrontations. Decisions were often made on the basis of a complicated mixture of personal loyalties, ideological convictions and strategic judgments. In the end, the formation of the Provisionals ultimately permitted the Officials to develop a principled anti-sectarian politics in Northern Ireland, but not before the latter had 'stumbled into an armed campaign' against the British (and on occasion those Unionists who were members of the 'Crown forces') in the spring of 1971 (p. 164). After approximately 50 deaths caused by the Officials (and 20 killed from within their ranks), the movement called an open-ended ceasefire in May 1972. However, the Official IRA continued to operate, partly as a retaliatory armed wing involved in periodic feuding with the Provisionals and the Irish National Liberation Army (a splinter group from the Officials lead by Seamus Costello, who was killed in 1977), and partly as a 'fundraising' unit engaged in armed robbery, extortion and other illegal activity.

Perhaps the most significant role played by the Official IRA (also known internally as 'Group B') in the post-1977 era was as a 'party within a party', attempting to ensure the revolutionary spirit of the movement was not adulterated. This revolutionary elitism and vanguardist approach sat easily with the cultural and organisational antecedents of the new avowedly class-based socialist movement, and it also chimed closely with the Leninist concept of 'democratic centralism', which increasingly came to dominate inner-party ideological thought. By the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the distinctively Republican heritage of the movement was giving way to a party model that resembled an orthodox communist party much more closely. Aiding this transition, which actually maintained many elements of organisational continuity with past practice, was the close relationship cultivated by WP leaders with the USSR and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and its position within the international communist movement. As Hanley and Millar make clear in the second half of the book, the WP, whilst remaining relatively small in terms of its membership base, had good claims to be considered the most dynamic party in the Republic during the 1980s. Modest electoral growth reached a peak of 5% of first preference votes in 1989, with seven TDs elected (six of these in Dublin, where the party won 11.4%, overtaking the Labour party). The tension between a conspiratorial Leninist core group, basing its politics on secretive manoeuvring behind the scenes, and a more transparent parliamentary presence, basing its activities upon reformist constituency work, was becoming ever more difficult to manage. The collapse of the international communist movement helped to bring this tension into the public domain, and six of the seven TDs took the decision to leave the WP in 1992, creating the Democratic Left. Only Mac Giolla remained with the WP, and he subsequently lost his seat later that year. As so often in the past, the split was accompanied by bitter recrimination, but this time significant violence was averted, even if it was threatened on occasion. In Northern Ireland, the WP through the 1980s found itself increasingly marginal, winning very few votes, but steadfastly refusing to abandon its principled anti-sectarian message, even in the face of opprobrium from almost all quarters.

The authors have made a very good job of narrating the story of the Official Republican movement and the Workers' Party, and of rebalancing the historiographical record with regard to the wider history of Irish Republicanism and socialism. Hanley and Millar end their account by pointing out the various groups and movements that have a vested interest in either drawing a veil over the past or attempting to rewrite the history of the Officials, including some who remain within the remnants of the WP and some who have moved into the political mainstream within the Irish Labour Party. For the Provisionals, who have marched painfully slowly along much of the road travelled by the Officials, shedding blood liberally along the way, the parallels with the historical trajectory of their bitter rivals are all too evident, although many would prefer to ignore them. And for the small band of 'dissidents', who in fact remain wedded to orthodox Republican principles of the 1950s, this book will confirm their view that they are the Last True Republicans. *The Lost Revolution* will remain lost to them.

Notes

1. Pdraig Yeates, 'A revolutionary Janus', *Dublin Review of Books*, 11–15 November 2009. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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