The 1985 Sinn Fein *Good Old IRA* pamphlet and historical revisionism – a response to comments

By Niall Meehan 16 October 2012 on http://cedarlounge.wordpress.com/

I commented on Brian Hanley’s discussion of the 1985 Sinn Féin pamphlet *The Good Old IRA* in his generally excellent contribution to *Terror in Ireland 1916-1923* (edited by David Fitzpatrick). This commentary was omitted from my original review of the book. It appeared as an addendum to my reply to David Fitzpatrick and Eve Morrison’s response to the review. See:

http://www.academia.edu/1994527/

and

http://www.academia.edu/1871818/

In the book Brian’s discussion of and use of the term ‘terrorism’ is more critical and objective than that of editor, David Fitzpatrick. His noting of historians’ failure to address state involvement in sectarian killings in Northern Ireland in the 1920s and post 1968 was spot-on in that book in particular.

However, Brian did not engage with criticism of the late Peter Hart’s approach, apart from mildly caricaturing it. Thus, he portrays critics of Hart’s republican sectarianism thesis as naïve upholders of the IRA’s ‘honour’. On the related controversy about Hart’s treatment of the November 1920 Kilmichael Ambush, they apparently believe Ambush Commander Tom Barry ‘wasn’t capable of lying’. His response on Cedar Lounge to my commentary on his discussion of the *Good Old IRA* pamphlet was:


8. Brian Hanley - October 6, 2012

Briefly re ‘The Good Old IRA’. It is far from the only example of republicans in the 1970s/80s dismissing that the idea that the 1919-21 war had a democratic mandate. It was a serious attempt to create a counter to the prevailing southern nationalist view that there was a fundamental difference between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ IRAs. Danny Morrison spoke about this at a debate in Drogheda during July and I didn’t get the impression that the project was intended to be ‘tongue in cheek.’

Perhaps Brian did not have time to contribute more. Also, he was responding to another poster who extracted the ‘tongue in cheek’ phrase from what I had written. I wonder how productive a discussion about that phrase might prove. As for the rest of Brian’s comment there is not a lot to go on. Brian may be of the view that the debate on ‘revisionism’ in Irish history had its day in the 1980s and that we should all be post-revisionists now.

Other posters on Cedar Lounge brought up the 1985 pamphlet independently. See,


As I pointed out (http://www.academia.edu/1994527/), the pamphlet was also presented recently by QUB’s Paul Bew as a significant precursor to the approach adopted later by Peter Hart. Clearly, there is more to this document than meets the eye,
particularly if historians like Bew and Hanley view it as important in the contentious debate about Peter Hart’s work.

I hope in what follows to illuminate the origins of the Good Old IRA pamphlet, its aims and limitations, plus its importance to ‘revisionist’ historians.

In relation to Brian’s Cedar Lounge observations, the point about the period 1919-21, 1921-22, 1922-23 War of Independence, Truce Period and Civil War, and the later 1968-1994 period of armed conflict in Northern Ireland, relates not merely to what republicans said about it, but what we say about what republicans (and others) said. It is also about the framework within which we examine the past. Is our approach to be IRA or society centred? The latter is the more appropriate approach, even when looking specifically at the IRA and its motivation.

First, a potted history.

In 1970, particularly after the Fianna Fáil arms crisis, the southern government set out to divide northern and southern nationalist opinion. Northern nationalists had become politically autonomous and were intervening popularly, largely from a left wing point of view, south of the border. Activists like Eamon McCann, Bernadette Devlin and Michael Farrell, plus John Hume and Gerry Fitt of the newly formed Social Democratic and Labour Party, appeared often on southern media. North fatigue of the type that descended with censorship and repression was at that stage some way off. Southern politicians were concerned about this newly self-confident absence of political subservience and the accompanying critique of conservative features of southern Irish society. They were determined to do something about it. IRA violence gave them their excuse.

Northern nationalists were alienated from the structures and forces of the northern state because those structures were sectarian and seemed irreformable. They had had enough. In June 1970, also, the newly elected Tory government in Britain backed the unionist administration in Stormont. The policy failed in 1972, in tandem with nationalists in even angrier revolt after experiencing internment and Bloody Sunday. Britain’s worldwide reputation for ‘fair play’ was in tatters and that was important in the context of the Cold War. After the British Embassy in Dublin burned down in early February 1972, it looked like the crisis might spread over the border. To forestall this, the British government abolished the Stormont parliament and 50 years of Unionist Party rule in March 1972. A reform agenda led to the short-lived 1974 power sharing arrangement that was not acceptable to unionism, whose violent reaction was either tolerated or colluded in by state forces.

British forces, initially welcomed in 1969, had backed the unionist regime with a counterinsurgency policy that enlisted the support of not merely the RUC and newly formed UDR, but also of the illegal UVF and the newly formed UDA. It looked to nationalists like the early 1920s all over again. In addition, significant right wing elements within RUC and British military intelligence used their newly confident post power sharing loyalist proxies to subvert the 1974 British Labour government. They also used sectarian killings and attacks to provoke the alarming prospect if not the full-scale actuality of sectarian war (see Paul Foot, Who Framed Colin Wallace, 1989; and Stephen Dorril, Robin Ramsey, Smear, Wilson and the Secret State, 1991). This high stakes strategy suited unionism politically and also the British state’s propaganda interests. It
was especially effective in the South after the 17 May 1974 British intelligence inspired Dublin-Monaghan bombings (see, www.dublinmonaghanbombings.org/).

In these circumstances the Official and Provisional IRAs grew substantially. They seemed to most nationalists like an obvious and logical response to repression. Nationalists who may have been ambivalent toward the IRA were not ambivalent toward the northern state. They rejected it since it rejected them and they largely withdrew from it where they could. The Official IRA withdrew from armed resistance, officially in 1972 but in fact some years later. Gradually, the Provisional IRA (now simply the IRA) had the field to itself. The tradition of republican electoral abstentionism was, however, an Achilles heel because it encouraged also an abstention from politics and a belief that victory would come from military action alone, in militarism. However, abstentionist thinking was also reinforced by the absence of democracy that masqueraded as democracy (or ‘majority rule’) in Northern Ireland.

As a repressed minority in the North, nationalists were never going to win either with traditional democratic, or so it seemed with purely military methods. The state was formed to institutionalise sectarian privilege in which a majority based all-class alliance gained material benefits, both relatively and absolutely, from the oppression of a minority. In this way, conflict was locked in to the northern sectarian state. Everyone was a prisoner of the situation, or of partition, however you may wish to express the point.

In these circumstances republicans could be politically outmanoeuvred even while their military campaign remained undefeated. Though repression was consistently sectarian, systemically brutal and frequently hypocritical, nationalists were determined not to give in again. This maintained the momentum of the IRA campaign. Repression was also, for political reasons, not repressive enough. The north’s physically proximity to Britain and the claim that it was part of the liberal democratic UK state acted to restrain Britain’s physical and military onslaught to some extent. So also did physical, therefore potentially political, attachment to the south. While the media was manipulated (censored in the south) and the judicial system corrupted, sufficient space existed in which to expose the worst effects of repression: internment, beatings, forced confessions, state killings, state sponsored killings, sectarian assassinations of ordinary nationalists and assassinations of nationalist leaders. In addition, through a continuing system of sectarian discrimination, nationalists continued to suffer greater deprivation and unemployment than unionists (see Bill Rowthorn, Naomí Wayne, Northern Ireland, the Political Economy of Conflict, 1988, http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/employ/rowthorn.htm). Wider public opinion mattered. It was difficult to portray the IRA as terrorists and criminals if the state did the same things the British government and its right-wing media allies complained of.

The experience of 50 years of Stormont and ineffectual counter efforts from Dublin helped set up a nationalist mindset in which resistance seemed an acceptable option after reform failed. But resistance could be worn down. It nearly was at the end of the 1970s. Politics came to the rescue. Resistance to Britain’s policy of ‘criminalisation’ of prisoners from 1977-81 gradually turned the Republican Movement away from a policy solely of attritional military action to one of reconnecting with a mass political movement. The movement was re-created by the anti-criminalisation struggle inside and outside the H-Blocks and Armagh Jail, and in particular by the campaign in support of the 1980-81 hunger strikers.
Not only did Bobby Sands win the 1981 Fermanagh South Tyrone by-election, but, significantly also that year, two H Block candidates won seats in Leinster House. The H Block Armagh movement was more or less completely won to the republican movement subsequently. Republicans gained a huge political victory in Ireland and internationally as a result of the hunger strikes. Ten hunger strikers had died but ‘criminalisation’ as the lynchpin of counterinsurgency strategy was defeated. Britain’s Cold War reputation as a liberal democratic society was severely dented and Irish American politics was given a new boost. The Irish question began to open up in Britain again, with Labour figures like Tony Benn, Ken Livingstone, Dennis Skinner, Chris Mullins and George Galloway addressing it critically. There was renewed questioning of the factors that closed down Irish politics in Britain during the 1970s: the Prevention of terrorism Act with its practice of exiling suspect Irish people to an integral part of the UK (Northern Ireland) and the conviction of innocent, but ‘guilty of being Irish’, people for IRA bombings. Campaigns on the Birmingham Six, Guildford Four and Maguire Seven gained new adherents leading to successful outcomes. Domestically, republicans built an increasingly successful electoral machine.

It was this potent national and international cocktail of politics and armed conflict, of ballot and bullet box, that excited in particular the southern government. It was desperate to resuscitate the flailing SDLP. This led to the setting up of the New Ireland Forum whose 1984 report critiqued the Northern state. It was a political vehicle for providing a bulwark against the advance of Sinn Féin by propping up the SDLP. Far from welcoming Sinn Féin into the political arena, the southern state much preferred Sinn Féin out of it and excluded Sinn Fein from the Forum. After British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s ‘Out… Out… Out’ rejection of the Forum’s suggested solutions, the 1985 Anglo Irish Agreement (AIA) was achieved with the British government now in tow. Britain was finally convinced of the disastrous pathway provided to Sinn Féin and to the IRA by Britain’s policy of repression without reform.

The AIA offered the prospect of repression with reform. The necessary casualty was the political interests of unionism. In fact unionist opposition, the sense of betrayal (due to increased Dublin involvement) that settler communities express from time to time to colonial masters, provided political entertainment for nationalists that rebounded to the electoral credit of the SDLP. It also provided a basis for continued repression (ironically, while utilising loyalist anger), but with the justification, important in the South, that the IRA was spoiling the party. IRA actions such as the Enniskillen bombing of 1987 resulted in unintentional but inevitable civilian deaths. These were military but, more importantly, political setbacks. In the competition between Sinn Fein and the SDLP the AIA produced a political stalemate, but no solution. The SDLP leader John Hume then broke the prevailing right wing consensus and that broke the stalemate. He talked to the Sinn Fein leader, Gerry Adams and received considerable political and media abuse for his efforts (in particular from the Sunday Independent).

_GOOD OLD IRA _pamphlet

The _Good Old IRA _pamphlet appeared in November 1985, the same month as the AIA was signed. The pamphlet depicted contemporary newspaper reports of 1919-21 IRA shootings during the War of Independence (which the pamphlet termed ‘the Tan war’), concentrating on individual assassinations. It pointed out that accounts of IRA actions
against British forces were excluded. It was lop-sided as a historical account because it also excluded the considerable violence against Irish people and the Irish economy contributed by British forces. The purpose of the pamphlet was to establish political continuity between two periods of conflict by establishing military continuity.

The introduction incorporated then An Phoblacht Editor Mick Timothy's 17 September 1984 letter to the Irish Times (writing as ‘Kevin Burke’) directed at then Justice Minister Michael Noonan’s August 1984 Beal na mBlath Michael Collins commemoration speech. Noonan criticised the absence of democracy in Northern Ireland as part of the then policy of giving nationalist cover to the SDLP against Sinn Féin. The Fine Gael Minister went on to attack the IRA. He suggested that War of Independence IRA head of intelligence Michael Collins would not have done what the later IRA was doing. That opinion was historically if not politically foolish. Timothy’s response was a piece of polemic. Its references to the Irish people not voting for war in 1918, and to Sinn Fein candidates being ‘selected’ not elected in the January and June 1920 municipal and rural district elections are cited from the pamphlet as ‘stirringly ‘revisionist’ stuff’ in Brian’s contribution to the Terror collection. Timothy’s letter ended with a rhetorical flourish, a reference to ‘Beal na mBlather’.

Is the view expressed in this Irish Times letter on candidates being selected not elected in 1920 (and in 1981) what interests the historian? Perhaps so, but in its relationship to the actual historical record, and that was distorted in the interests of argument. The record is, I suggest, enumerated in, amongst other places, Dorothy Macardle’s The Irish Republic (3rd ed, 1999, p. 326), citing Hugh Martin in the 14 January 1920 London Daily News on the municipal elections: ‘in candidates, in organisation and in enthusiasm the Republican party is supreme. All other groups are depressed and leaderless’. In other words the overwhelming general election victory of Sinn Féin in November 1918 was consolidated. Macardle wrote that, despite arrests and harassment, ‘of the twelve cities and boroughs of Ireland eleven declared for the Republic. The only city left to Unionists in all Ireland was Belfast… a great number of I.R.A. officers were returned unopposed…. Out of two hundred and six Councils elected throughout Ireland one hundred and seventy two had been returned with a majority of Republicans’. These results were consolidated further in June’s rural district elections (ibid, p. 352)

This was an expression of popular will after British suppression of the Dail and other violent activities, and after the emergence of IRA counter violence and preparations for going on the offensive. There is no compelling evidence other than that this election, like Fermanagh South Tyrone in 1981, was a fair and free, apart from the arrests and harassment suffered by republicans on both occasions. Failure of other parties to stand was a reflection of their organisational disarray due to absence of support. So keen was ‘Burke’ to undermine Sinn Fein electoral support in 1918 that in a second letter (12 October 1984) he committed the classic gaffe of placing it at 47.7%. He failed to note that Sinn Fein won 25 of 73 seats (from a 105 total) in uncontested constituencies. No votes were counted, thus artificially depressing Sinn Féin support conservatively estimated at 65-70%. Stirringly revisionist, but mistaken, stuff indeed.

The main thrust of the pamphlet itself was serious in intent, but also, in my opinion tongue in cheek. It cleverly used an uncritical mindset that accepted newspaper reporting on the present and transposed it to the past. The recitation of newspaper reports looked remarkably like reporting of the conflict in the 1980s. However, that
reporting no more tells the story of the 1919-21 conflict on its own, than does reporting of violence explain what happened after 1968. Reporting in both periods was affected by official 'spin'. Look at:


- Frank Gallagher’s analysis of the propaganda war in the same period in *The Four Glorious Years* (1953, 2005);

- Liz Curtis’s work on media propaganda in the post 1968 period, in *Ireland, the Propaganda War* (1999, 2nd Ed);

- Also look at, on the UofU CAIN website archival critiques of British and Irish media coverage of the North at, [http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/media/docs/freespeech.htm](http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/media/docs/freespeech.htm), and [http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/media/mccann72.htm](http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/media/mccann72.htm) [http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/media/meehan/meehanhorgan070187.pdf](http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/media/meehan/meehanhorgan070187.pdf) [http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/media/meehan/meehan93.htm](http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/media/meehan/meehan93.htm)

The Sinn Féin pamphlet defeated ahistorical and political attempts to divide two periods of conflict one from the other in terms of military ferocity. But the picture of the conflict built up by newspaper reports in both periods demonstrates either inadequacy or (generally) bias in favour of the status quo. The pamphlet exacerbated the latter sensation by citing mainly the anti-Sinn Fein Redmondite Belfast *Irish News*. The pamphlet emphasised anti-republican commentary in order to link journalism in two phases of Irish history. In actuality the two periods were similar but different, with the introductory ‘Kevin Burke’ polemic over-compensating for the fact that the IRA in 1984 did not enjoy a conventional democratic mandate (the Partition settlement excluded that), whereas in 1919-21 it may be argued strongly, it did.

The irony is that this Sinn Féin pamphlet, a propaganda vehicle, was transformed by historians with a unionist and/or revisionist perspective into reverse propaganda about the War of Independence. As I noted in the introduction to my original commentary, [http://www.academia.edu/1994527/](http://www.academia.edu/1994527/), that is the framework within which QUB’s Paul Bew expressed himself recently in Dublin and within which the historian Peter Hart wrote (with serious intent and his tongue, so it appears, partly in his cheek). They pursued further continuities. Sectarianism within the unionist political, economic and ideological system in the north was transposed on to the War of Independence in the South. It was then projected forwards to account for the IRA campaign in Northern Ireland. Historical, political and actual responsibility for sectarianism as an active ingredient in Irish politics was reversed. A neat trick. Many clever people were taken in by the analysis, which seems to me to have little evidential value and to be implicit propaganda, as compared to the explicit sort demonstrated in the ‘Good Old IRA’ pamphlet.
NOTE ‘IRISH BULLETIN’, VOLUME 1

In relation to tabulating the violence of the period, the publication of the ‘IRISH BULLETIN’, VOLUME 1 - 12 July 1919 – 1 May 1920 (2012, forthcoming) by the Aubane Historical Society will put into the contemporary historical record a vital missing source of information. The authority of the Bulletin was based on its reputation for accuracy. With publication, this reputation may be observed and tested.

According to the blurb publicising the launch by Brian P Murphy on 16 November 2012 at 8pm in the Ireland Institute, Pearse House, 27 Pearse Street:

‘The aim of the Irish Bulletin was to provide people outside Ireland – particularly politicians, diplomats and journalists - with the Irish Government’s case and the facts of the war that it had to wage, given the suppression by the British authorities of all press and other publications putting that case.

Compiled and issued for the Dáil by Erskine Childers, Robert Brennan, Frank Gallagher, Desmond Fitzgerald and Kathleen McKenna, the Irish Bulletin was a simple newsheet produced with minimal resources and under constant threat of suppression. It was an underground publication, though the voice of a legitimate government, but became one of the most powerful weapons in the war that eventually succeeded.’