

a powerful catalyst for the raising of funds, and, in a more practical sense, their elevated status essentially provided a cloak of invisibility under which funds could be hidden and transported without impediment. In summary, this work is highly accessible and pleasingly free of jargon, so should find broad appeal well outside of the discipline of economic history.

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KILMICHAEL: THE LIFE AND AFTERLIFE OF AN AMBUSH. By Eve Morrison. Pp 292. Dublin: Irish Academic Press. 2022. €19.95.

Eve Morrison's *Kilmichael* is an important study of the eponymous ambush, its contested memory and its historiography. On 28 November 1920 an I.R.A. column commanded by Tom Barry ambushed Crown forces at Kilmichael in west Cork, killing sixteen. Three I.R.A. volunteers were killed. In bloody accounting terms, this grim toll makes Kilmichael the most successful republican military action of the War of Independence. Controversy in its immediate aftermath over what exactly happened at Kilmichael was not unusual, and neither was subsequent dissension amongst old comrades. Since the late 1990s, however, there has been an extraordinary focus among historians on the minutiae of who did what at Kilmichael, and on how the story has been told: it is a battlefield in a wider historiographical conflict about the nature of the Irish Revolution and the writing of its history. Ironically, the point of broadest accord on Kilmichael, and one to which Morrison subscribes, is that it is impossible to establish precisely what transpired. As Morrison shows, people's memories are fallible, and when those memories are of individuals' experiences of chaos and carnage, they are especially likely to produce inconsistent accounts.

Disagreement centres on the narrative popularised by Barry's 1949 memoir, *Guerilla days in Ireland*, that crown forces staged a false surrender which cost Volunteer lives and forced him to take no prisoners. Alternative versions circulated before and after, without rivalling the renown of Barry's *Guerilla days* account. Peter Hart's 1998 book, *The I.R.A. and its enemies*, dramatically challenged this dominance. Hart queried not just the accuracy of Barry's evidence, but his integrity. Hart condemned Barry for leading a massacre at Kilmichael. Furthermore, Hart linked I.R.A. actions at Kilmichael and the killings of thirteen Protestants in west Cork over a few days in April 1922, presenting them as atrocities. While *Guerilla days* and the popular ballad 'The boys of Kilmichael' had fixed the ambush in public memory long before Hart's emergence, his airing of the 1922 attacks was badly needed. But both Kilmichael and the 1922 killings, which Hart characterised as sectarian slaughter, were exceptional events. Heightening tensions, his loaded language and more questionable conclusions (about 'serial killers' and 'ethnic cleansing', for instance) were appropriated by high-profile opponents of the 1960s–1990s iterations of the I.R.A. Hart 'could have made more of an effort to distance himself', suggests Morrison (p. 155). Hart slayed sacred cows, but his sensationalism took from his brilliance, enabling caricature by champions and critics alike.

So, there are wider political dynamics at play in the disputed history and legacy of Kilmichael, and some critics of Hart have argued that his revisionist questioning of the received knowledge of traditional nationalism was part of a project to undermine the republicanism of the 1990s–2000s. While acknowledging that 'significant cohorts of the Irish population' are comfortable with the complexities of Irish history, and that the 'real living memory of Kilmichael and the Irish revolution' (p. 175) is insightful, Morrison declares that Barry's false surrender story was 'what most people wanted' to believe, as opposed to confronting a 'merciless' reality (p. 130). The remembrance of freedom fighters was not always hagiographic and sometimes embraced clear-cut brutality, however. A case in point was the ruthlessness of the I.R.A.'s second most successful ambush of the war, at

Dromkeen in Limerick, including summary executions of surrendered opponents recounted almost uniformly by veterans, was celebrated locally:

Oh wipe them from earth the vipers unclean ...  
 For their blood we will be spilling this day in Dromkeen ...  
 Oh give them another sweet taste of the lead  
 to make sure none are living, they look better dead.

Beside this schoolchild's offering to the Folklore Commission, 'The boys of Kilmichael' is tame.

Morrison has been a central protagonist in the back-and-forth on Kilmichael for a decade. Much of the dense detail here has long been in the public domain. Her exposition is painstaking. She reconstructs the ambush forensically using maps, photographs and multiple witness statements, written and oral. She makes a strong case that false surrender, if such occurred, probably did not result in Volunteer fatalities. As a local history society advised Hart in 1996, and as Morrison recognises, 'each man had his own story to tell, from where he was positioned' (p. 151). Barry was a selective (not necessarily an unreliable) narrator, telling a different tale to different audiences in different circumstances.

Critiquing specific Kilmichael sections of *Guerilla days*, Morrison meticulously pinpoints divergences between it and other participants' accounts: it is 'the least supported by other veterans' testimony' (p. 112); 'almost none of the available evidence supports it' (p. 113); and there is 'very little evidence to support key elements' (p. 129). Less convincing is the reasoning that not citing a false surrender leading to Volunteer deaths was by 'inference and implication', 'contradicting' Barry (pp 129, 130). There were also veterans who fully backed *Guerilla days*, and Morrison does not make any grandiose claims to have created a definitive history of the ambush. On the 1922 killings, Morrison's interpretation of a nuanced study by Andy Bielenberg and John Borgonovo as confirming Hart's verdict of a principally sectarian episode (p. 163) requires qualification: they identify sectarianism as one major contributing dynamic among others. The distinction is crucial.

Morrison's scholarship is conceptually sophisticated, and she locates it above what she laments as the 'toxic analytical framework' (p. 174) of the revisionist/counter-revisionist arena. This does not quite chime with the sweeping dismissal of the arguments of Hart's critics, who are often Morrison's critics, as 'convoluted, speculative and hypocritical' (pp 163–4). Hart's mistakes, Morrison judges to be significantly less onerous than those of his 'detractors' (p. 174).

This book is the culmination of a substantive body of work, but it will hardly be the last word on the matter. 'Is there a Kilmichael around which all sides can rally and remember?' Morrison ponders in conclusion (p. 176). A productive exercise in reconciling seemingly incompatible positions could surely be facilitated by modest compromise, and without any surrender.

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