

Zitierhinweis

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The Year of Disappearances. Political Killings in Cork 1921-1922

Gerard Murphy

Dublin, Gill and MacMillan, 2010, ISBN: 9780717147489; 408pp.; Price: £35.00

‘Madam, - Gerard Murphy’s ... contentious thesis ... deserves further indepth sincere evaluation and verification ... rather than an internet campaign of vilification against the author. If ... [it] holds up, I as a proud passionate Corkman will be saddened and profoundly ashamed of my heretofore understanding of this period of Irish history’.(1) Not many history books would inspire members of the public to write this sort of letter to the press, or the editor of one of the most important newspapers of the world, *The Irish Times*, to publish them. Even in Ireland, where people take a fervent interest in national history, *The Year of Disappearances* has made quite a splash. The ‘internet campaign’ to which the above-quoted letter alludes is merely the tip of the iceberg of media attention. The latter includes, besides academic reviews, fiery articles by well-known journalists in leading dailies.(2) One of Murphy’s most severe critics has even asked for the authorities to search the sites where some of the victims of the IRA are alleged to have been buried.(3)

The Anglo-Irish War of 1919–21 and the subsequent Civil War were particularly violent in Cork City and the surrounding County, especially in West Cork. This was partly because of the bellicosity of the IRA units in the region – including Cork No.1 Brigade, led by men of proven ability and ruthlessness, such as Seán O’Hegarty, Florence O’Donoghue, and Martin Corry. However, it was also because of a backlash against the region’s large number of Protestants, who were suspected of being actively loyalist. The late Peter Hart (in *The IRA and its enemies*, published in 1998) argued that the IRA deliberately targeted that particular religious minority, in a campaign of sectarian killings, culminating with the massacre of 13 civilian protestants in the Bandon Valley. Although some of Hart’s evidence has been disputed by scholars in reviews and other publications, his work has opened new questions and stimulated further studies. *The Year of Disappearances* is one of them. It argues that in Cork there was sectarian violence on an even larger scale than previously known, and that it continued for longer than previously assumed.

One of Murphy’s major, and particularly explosive, points is the allegation that *after* the truce the IRA deliberately and systematically targeted specific organisations whose membership was exclusively Protestant (including the Cork Freemasons, the YMCA and the Boys’ Brigade) in the belief that they had been operating, and potentially could continue to operate, as part of loyalist intelligence network. While the author provides strong evidence for some such killings (including at least two teenagers), his argument largely remains unsubstantiated because most of the other alleged ‘victims’ are simply hypothetical. Thus, the claim that 32 members of the Cork Freemasons’ lodge ‘disappeared’ under sinister circumstances is based on the fact that their names were struck off membership records by 1925: but it is not clear whether they had been killed or just left, as many other Protestants did in those years. What we know for sure is that their families did not submit compensation claims to the British government, and that there are no references to them being shot in the records of the relevant organizations. Murphy mentions gaps in Cork Grammar School’s records for 1922 as an indication that the headmaster had probably destroyed the relevant documents to protect his pupils from further attacks: however, these records contain so many other gaps for the whole period from the school’s foundation in 1881 through to 1947, when it moved to its current premises, that their non-existence for 1922 seems more part of a pattern than a suspicious exception.(4)

Thus, it is not the brutality of the IRA campaign as a whole which is in question here, but whether the killings about which we knew already represent the full horror of the situation, or, as Murphy claims, ‘the Compensation (Ireland) Commission account[s] for only around half of those killed’ (p. 296). Such a conclusion, however, is difficult to accept without

documentary support: absence of evidence cannot be read as evidence of massacres, especially since we have plenty of material on other murders or ‘executions’ – such as those of April 1922 in rural West Cork.⁽⁵⁾ The author argues that the silence of the sources is a product of a collusion involving both perpetrators and victims (the latter being eager to find a *modus vivendi* with the new regime). In other words, lack of evidence is invoked as evidence of a cover-up. It must be said that Murphy’s hypothesis finds some *ex-post facto* evidence in the unwillingness of Cork Protestants, even as recently as 2008, to speak publicly about the 1920–3 period.⁽⁶⁾ But even if we were to accept this approach, we would expect to find echoes of the killings at least in contemporary private letters and unpublished diaries, especially those produced by loyalist émigrés in Britain or elsewhere. However, again Murphy produces no such evidence. This documentary deficit is the most serious flaw in his argument, much of which depends on hypotheses-turned-into-assumptions and presented as factual statements.

Yet, this raises another interesting question: as the author himself has noted in a response to a previous review, if *The Year of Disappearances* is ‘a work of fiction, or ... poorly researched and badly written’, why do so many scholars bother to review it at all?⁽⁷⁾ In my view, there are at least three reasons for the attention the book has received. The first is that, although Murphy’s evidence and arguments are patchy and at times confusing, parts of his book are actually meticulously researched. Even some of his harshest critics acknowledge his skilful use of sources such as the Cork Military liaison record, Registry of Deeds, the petitions of the Irish Compensation Claims Committee, and the records of the census of 1911. Thus, in an otherwise damning review, John Borgonovo admits that ‘Murphy’s hard work rewards him with a series of impressive nuggets found in forensically researched chapters’.⁽⁸⁾ Second, the story is engagingly presented as a personal journey of discovery into Cork’s troubled past. This rhetorical strategy makes it more intriguing, but it also has its drawbacks in that it compounds the reader’s difficulty in trying to assess how precisely the author reaches his conclusions. Such narrative technique betrays the book’s origins as a novel, based on local folklore about an IRA ‘killing field’ outside Cork city. Indeed, the author is not a professional historian; and it shows. *The Year of Disappearances* is his first non-fiction work. It was because of the controversial nature of the stories Murphy heard, that he decided to turn his projected novel into a history book, a process which has required, we are told, seven years to complete, but which would clearly have required more months of work and proof reading to be satisfactorily completed. Finally and most importantly, the sensation which Murphy has provoked in both the scholarly world and the general public can be explained as a reflection of the delicate nature of the political issues at stake, involving – to an extent – big questions about the plausibility of the whole republican interpretation of Irish history, at a stage when the scandals besetting institutions such as the Catholic Church and Fianna Fáil cause people to re-examine the received version of the national self.⁽⁹⁾ In other words, here we have ‘public’ history in the raw, but – alas – without enough historical discipline in it.

Notes

1. ‘Political killings in Cork’, letter to the editor of *The Irish Times*, 13 January 2011, p. 17. Back to (1)

2. Kevin Myers, ‘The IRA campaign in Cork against protestants and non-republicans was on a truly vast scale’, *The Irish Independent*, 15 November 2010 <<http://www.independent.ie/opinion/columnists/kevin-myers/kevin-myers-the-ira-campaign-in-cork-against-protestants-and-nonrepublicans-was-on-a-truly-vast-scale-2417300.html>> [accessed 1 February 2011].

Back to (2)

3. Niall Meehan, ‘An “amazing coincidence” that “could mean anything”@ Gerard Murphy’s *The Year of the Disappearances*’, *Spinwatch*, 17 November 2010 <<http://www.spinwatch.org/reviews-mainmenu-24/book-reviews-mainmenu-23/5401-an-amazing-coincidence-that>>

could-mean-anything-gerard-murphys-the-year-of-disappearances> [accessed 1 February 2011]. Back to (3)

4. I am grateful to Dr Ian d’Alton for this piece of information and for the reference contained in endnote 6, below. Back to (4)

5. Some of such evidence has been used for example, by Murphy himself, pp. 324–30 and by P. McMahon, *British Spies and Irish Rebels. British Intelligence and Ireland 1916–1945* (Woodbridge, 2008), pp.75 and 446. Back to (5)

6. A conference on the period 1920-23 organised by the Anglican Diocese of Cork in December 2008, addressed by younger historians, was tightly controlled – invitation only to members of the diocese and their guests, publicity virtually non-existent. Members of the public were not permitted to attend. The bishop wrote of this gathering: ‘... for now ... this will be an in-house conference principally for people from this diocese alone’. Back to (6)

7. G. Murphy, ‘Political killings in Cork’, *The Irish Times*, 6 January 2011 <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/letters/2011/0106/1224286878725.html>> [accessed 1 February 2011]. Back to (7)

8. J. Borgonovo, *History Ireland* (January-February 2011), 56. Back to (8)

9. The climate is so incandescent that in a recent newspaper interview Murphy himself added a disclaimer, to the effect that his book should not be read as ‘part of some conspiracy to denigrate the Republic’ (‘Author owns up to errors in IRA Cork deaths book’, *Sunday Tribune*, 16 January 2011 <<http://www.tribune.ie/news/home-news/article/2011/jan/16/author-owns-up-to-errors-in-ira-cork-deaths-book/>> [accessed 1 February 2011]). Back to (9)

Author's response

I have to say I was flattered to discover that my book, *The Year of Disappearances*, has caused ‘quite a splash’, especially among the dreaming spires of Cambridge where, I’d imagine, I’m hardly flavour of the month, at least in some quarters. Eugenio F. Biagini’s review is a fascinating piece of writing though. It is clear that the intention is to find fault with my book while at the same time putting plenty water between the academic community and the shriller of my critics. It does all this without getting down to specifics, except for the case of the Freemasons where the evidence I present is ignored.

There is plenty of evidence in Cork YMCA records and the records of the Grand Lodge of Freemasons of Ireland that significant numbers of both organizations left Cork city in 1920–3 under mysterious circumstances. Many of those, presumably, left for England or the colonies; others fled in fear of their lives, as their submissions to the Irish Grants Commission tell us. There is no question, however, that others disappeared at the hands of the IRA. Martin Corry stated that he executed seven members of the YMCA and buried them at his farm; Frank Busteed claimed up to a dozen loyalists were shot as ‘reprisals’ and buried at Rylane; Mick Murphy and Connie Neenan between them claimed that an unnamed but still significant number of ‘Anti-Sinn Fein League’ members – almost certainly a euphemism for Freemasons – were shot ‘singly and in pairs’ and buried in Carroll’s Bogs just south of the city, Connie Neenan separately claimed that three Protestant boys were shot and buried at Douglas. Finally, Florrie O’Donoghue stated that half a dozen members of what he termed a ‘Freemason Intelligence Organization’ were rounded up and shot. These all add up to a substantial number and this goes some way to explaining the sudden abandonment of areas of the city by Protestants. Just because we cannot now name these individuals does not mean these events did not take place. To argue that this is just ‘hypotheses-turned-into-assumptions and presented as factual evidence’ is just an attempt to create a fog of denial. As recently as yesterday’s *Irish Times* (IT, 19/02/2011), Dr Biagini’s colleague, Caoimhe Nic Dháibéid, wrote that the Ernie O’Malley notebooks, in which most of these claims were made by his

interviewees, are 'detailed and frank' and 'form an important and unique part of the growing corpus of source material on the Irish revolution.' I could not agree more. I think they're marvellous and are a great credit to O'Malley's honesty and his capacity to accept a warts-and-all view of the conflict. But you cannot go around saying these are detailed and frank and important statements and then ignore what they are saying.

The obvious thing I would take issue with is Dr. Biagini's suggestion that 'parts of [my] book are actually meticulously researched' because this implies that other parts are poorly researched or not researched at all. I would hope that all parts of the book are equally researched. However, more evidence is available in some areas than in others. The difference lies in what is available not the meticulousness, or otherwise, of the research.

As for the suggestion that one of the main reasons why people are reading the book is that it's 'engagingly presented' with a 'rhetorical strategy' this is another way of saying that the book is a triumph of form over content. In fact, I could be drooling down my bib and people, particularly in Ireland, would still want to read this book, solely for its content. These peripheral criticisms are cheap jibes aimed at damaging the book: 'The author is not a professional historian and it shows.' Indeed it does. Professional historians in Ireland, with one or two notable exceptions, have either proven incapable of, or are reluctant to, dig up the material that I have uncovered, even though it's been sitting under their noses for two generations.

My aim, as I have written elsewhere, is to put out all the evidence I could find on the various strands of the conflict that I dealt with. Some of the evidence is incomplete, especially in relation to events in 1922 but I would hope, as your reviewer put it, that it asks new questions and may stimulate further study in this area. If you've spent ten years researching and writing this material and are then faced with blank dismissal and frankly silly reviews I think you are entitled to defend your work. Obviously, I'd accept some of the criticisms made, but they're largely of a semantic nature. The perfect book has yet to be written.