

Zitierhinweis

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Among the features of life that we expect to encounter in historical analyses of the first five or six decades of the 19th century in Ireland is a violent society. This was something that we assume arose from the collective and individual encounters between a discontented rural peasantry, landed elite drawn from the ruling classes and a London-based government that was not always well-disposed towards the majority Catholic population. In summary, when we think generally, though perhaps not specifically, about violence in the first half of 19th-century Ireland it is upon these intersections that we first fix our gaze. Richard McMahon's *Homicide in pre-Famine and Famine Ireland* leaves no room for doubt that when examining patterns of lethal violence during these decades we must look far beyond the 'usual suspect' (my term) causes and effects.

The central arguments and analysis of this book are laid out across five core chapters. In an introductory chapter entitled 'A violent society', McMahon makes clear that his study of homicide does not claim to provide an exhaustive account of violent activity. With the parameters of his book laid out he addresses the issue of statistics in chapter one. After correctly identifying the many difficulties in making international comparisons of crime statistics the author concludes that the most reliable in terms of Ireland is with England and Wales, while acknowledging that this is still problematic. Following a complex analysis of different ways of combining statistics he lays out an early conclusion that 1840s Ireland was probably not exceptionally violent by the standards of the day. One factor that likely distorted the homicide statistics was the lower standard of medical care that almost certainly led to higher mortality rates. Despite the difficulties, McMahon supports comparisons across different societies because they allow historians to better understand how they may produce different or indeed similar patterns of violence. In thoroughly addressing the complexity and sometimes impenetrability of statistical methods, including those he himself employs in this book, he successfully disarms those who may challenge his arguments in later chapters and distract from his analysis. While critics may not necessarily agree with his statistical analysis they will be forced to concede that he has given the methodology a thorough airing.

Chapter two of the book takes on the broad theme of 'homicide and personal relations'. If the reader is not already convinced of the complexity of the issues around lethal violence their depth quickly becomes apparent. It is refreshing that the author strongly makes the point that it is problematic that disputes arising from rural issues, coupled with religious divisions and Roman Catholic disaffection with the political and legal order, have often been at the centre of discussions involving violence in Ireland. His analysis points out that by focussing too heavily on these traditional themes historians to some extent overlook the more personal in favour of economic, political and religious disputes. It is at this juncture that a quantitative analysis comes into play as McMahon argues that this is the most effective methodology by which a more complete understanding of personal disputes can be achieved. It is because human relations are so complex that a historical analysis is difficult. In three of the four counties used as the research sample for this book, 70 per cent of the incidences of lethal violence took place in a public sphere. Among the potential causes were alcohol, insult or acting in an insulting or threatening manner, questioning reputation, extra-marital affairs and the paternity of children. The majority of homicides that arose from personal disputes did not even have a minimum level of pre-meditation while some cases saw 'an extraordinary degree of pre-meditation' (pp. 44–5). The chapter further argues that the high proportion of homicides that arose from beatings indicates that these acts were the result of specific situations rather than being pre-planned. A backdrop to all of this was the greater level of government intervention in a range of areas of social life including public health, education, welfare, the courts and the police.

One of the most engaging aspects of McMahon's book is the use of the case study and nowhere is this more important than in chapter three, dealing with homicide and the family. As he indicates early in the chapter, the private nature of family life makes it difficult to quantify acts of violence with certainty. This is of course, quite true. Even if a well-resourced

team of academic historians was to trawl through a century of court cases, both petty sessions and assizes, to identify family-related violence we would still only have an insight into those instances that were detected and prosecuted by the authorities. Difficulties in spousal relations gave rise to the highest number of homicides under the sample used in this study and alcohol did of course play a role as both a cause and effect of marital violence. Not all acts of homicide between a husband and his wife were pre-meditated because some were the result of prolonged tension and abuse. In the case of Patrick and Judith Costello in Kilkenny in 1850 the reader is presented with a scenario that adheres to this trend. Patrick was sometimes kind to his wife but tended to have little or no tolerance for her 'drinking habits'. This intolerance manifested itself in instances of violence from the husband and ultimately led to him beating Judith to death. In recent years studies by Farrell (1) and Rattigan (2) have focussed in great depth on the phenomenon of infanticide in 19th- and 20th-century Ireland respectively. McMahon addresses the less well-documented practice of filicide which is the practice of the killing of a (typically older than infant) child by one or both of their parents. Many of the victims of this crime were young children and the author provides examples of cases where parents only intended to discipline their offspring but ended up killing them. Chapter four explores what one might have expected to be a dominant theme in the study of homicide in pre-Famine and Famine Ireland, that of land. In all of the samples examined for this study homicides arising directly from conflict over land disputes made up a minority of reported cases. In fact, the author argues that the extent of land-related homicide in counties including Tipperary, which was particularly violent, has distorted the actual figure and he claims that land disputes were a relatively minor cause of lethal violence. So who were the victims of land-related violence? McMahon states that one in five victims were either the gentry, their servants or their officials. Between 1843 and 1845 this figure was under one in four nationally and fell to less than one in three during the Famine itself. This part of the chapter is greatly assisted by the use of several interesting case studies that give life to raw statistics. One of the stark difference between the violence outlined in previous chapters and land-related activity explored here is that the latter was the result of a much higher degree of premeditation. The killing of those gentry and their employees was often the end result of a sustained campaign of intimidation and violence. The author's conclusion that 'violence in pursuit of individual, familial, class or communal interests, played a limited and, indeed, marginal role in the regulation of the use and occupation of land in pre-Famine and Famine Ireland' is well supported both by statistics and case studies. He correctly points out, however, that further work in this area of land-related violence is required. Two other interesting areas for future research he notes are on patterns of conflict and dispute resolution as well as a study of non-lethal violence emerging from disagreements over land. In the final core chapter of the book McMahon opens with by providing a useful contextual background to type of politics and society that arose out of the Act of Union. This is another field where he acknowledges that further work is required on the causes and dynamics of sectarian violence. The historical narrative can be greatly assisted, he points out, by more localised and in-depth studies. McMahon is correct in this assessment because such occurrences were often guided by a particularly regional or parochial set of circumstances and better local studies would feed into a wider national history of this aspect of lethal violence. In the two years immediately preceding the Famine there were just seven reported cases of sectarian homicide. By comparison there were three times more cases of homicide arising from sporting events than sectarianism. This serves well the author's contention that this was another category of homicide that was lower than one might think given the socio-economic and political state of the country during the period. Although the data suggests that sectarian animosity was not a major cause of lethal violence he does point out that there was plenty of regional variation. Even within the wider sample of Armagh, Fermanagh, Kilkenny and Queen's County that he uses for the book as a whole, there are spectacular variations between 1835 and 1850. Armagh registered nine sectarian homicides while none were

attributed to Kilkenny. He provides evidence that political rivalries were also not a significant contributor to lethal violence. Citing evidence from McCabe he points out that just 0.5 per cent of homicides in Co. Mayo between 1823 and 1845 could be attributed to political tensions.

The author's engagement with the many layers of secondary sources is impressive. His ability to skilfully disentangle the differing and often contrasting interpretations of fellow historians without attempting to undermine those with whom he does not necessarily agree is refreshing. What may be tantalising for penal historians is the absence of analysis of the punishment of the homicidal acts that have been so expertly analysed throughout the five core chapters. In the author's defence, however, this was not the purpose of his book but is a line of enquiry that can and should be vigorously pursued by him or others.

The analysis and arguments of this book are supported by an exhaustive collection of primary sources, many of which help to fill the inevitable gaps that emerge in crime history research across this period. Among the hierarchy of these sources is the selection of almost 30 different parliamentary papers or findings of select committees from which McMahon draws evidence. As with any historian utilising annual reports and other such material, the author maintains a healthy scepticism throughout and as we shall see, lays bare the difficulties with criminal statistics. From the outset he admits that his chosen sample of the four counties mentioned above is very much based upon the availability of the strongest sets of sources and this is a sensible approach that speaks to the author's persistent efforts to achieve the maximum possible accuracy. To this end he has selected grand jury records from Armagh, Fermanagh, Queen's County and Tyrone as well as Crown books for the assizes at Kilkenny. Unless these particular records were blatantly falsified or manipulated by those who generated them then we can be assured that the aspects of this book on which they rely, must be largely accurate. A range of regional and national newspapers give McMahon a good opportunity to build on his case studies and bring some life to the reams of statistics that are necessary but often daunting for both the writer and reader of any book. As historians of 19th- and 20th-century criminality will be aware, court reporting in the newspaper provides one of the strongest and most exciting sources of knowledge, detail and reality. This particular source has been well used here.

McMahon has done something of a service to crime historians and indeed those who teach the subject, with the inclusion of a discussion chapter on the quality of his primary sources as an appendix item. He opens his discussion with an examination of previous debates on the use of qualitative versus quantitative approaches by such esteemed researchers as Gatrell, Sindall and Ditton. He reveals how Gatrell supports the use of criminal statistics to the extent that despite their highly problematic nature they can offer some insights into criminality. Sindall on the other hand, according to McMahon, disapproves of the use of statistics on the basis that those who use them tend to acknowledge their flaws before proceeding to analyse them anyway. McMahon dismisses the Sindall critique as underestimating the use of statistics on the basis that a more complex approach is possible despite their flaws. He advocates confronting problematic statistics and addressing them and the extent to which any difficulties may influence their use as a guide to broader social behaviour. If such problems cannot be overcome only then should the source be abandoned. By going on to describe the strengths and weakness of his sources the author is effectively putting his own methodological approach to the test as well as declaring his vested interest in the debate. This is a significant aspect of the book, not only as it clarifies the nature of the methodology employed therein but also serves as a useful intervention in an important debate for historians.

The author set himself an ambitious task with this book. It is intended 'to challenge the view of 19th-century Ireland as a violent society and to offer a more complex and nuanced assessment of the part played by violence in Irish life'. Indeed the book does challenge some existing perceptions on the many and complex dimensions of Irish social life in the years

prior to and during the Famine. More importantly this discussion on homicidal violence has encompassed those other aspects of 19th-century Irish life, namely the family and the individual, who are too often excluded from such histories in favour of agrarian and sectarian opponents. In straddling the family, the personal, the agrarian *and* the sectarian, he has successfully activated a much-needed and more inclusive discussion in a clear and confident manner. As I have indicated earlier, more than once, the author suggests further possible avenues of investigation. This book provides those who may wish to explore those avenues with an excellent starting point.

Notes

1. Elaine Farrell, *A Most Diabolical Deed: Infanticide and Irish society, 1850–1900* (Manchester, 2013).
2. Cliona Rattigan, *What Else Could I Do? Single Mothers and Infanticide in Ireland, 1900–1950* (Dublin, 2012).