



CNI

BOOK BRIEF

Buried Lives: The Protestants of Southern Ireland by Robin Bury

A new book about Protestants south of the Border dwells too much on the negative and exaggerates their isolation, writes Kim Bielenberg in The Irish Independent

After Independence, Protestants living in the 26 counties lost their self-confidence. They were cowed and quiescent, and at times even persecuted in the country that emerged after the War of Independence. They led quiet lives, separated from their Catholic neighbours, meeting up with fellow Protestants at Sunday church, and socialising in parish halls with tea, cakes, badminton and whist drives.

That is the clear view of Robin Bury in his account of the lives of Southern Protestants since the War of Independence. Bury, who himself comes from a Church of Ireland

background in Co Cork, makes no pretence to writing a dispassionate history. To him, during the Irish Revolution "the country descended into a bloodbath, finally emerging as a theocracy masquerading as a democracy" - and Protestants were victims.

According to Bury's account, they became an isolated, silenced minority, and have remained largely marginalised until modern times.

There is no doubt that Protestants retreated from public life after Independence with a few notable exceptions, such as Douglas Hyde, the first President.

In the early decades of the State, Protestants could have been forgiven for thinking that Home Rule really was Rome Rule, with the special position of the Catholic Church written into the Constitution, and strict limits on personal freedom imposed from the pulpit.

But Bury underestimates the extent to which members of the Protestant community were prepared to reassert themselves from the 1960s onwards.

Until 1970, Catholics were famously banned from the Protestant university, Trinity College, without dispensation from their own church,

leading to the comical verse: "Young men may loot, perjure and shoot / And even have carnal knowledge / But however depraved, their souls will be saved / If they don't go to Trinity College."

But once the ban was lifted, the college flourished, and maintains a highly influential place in Irish society.

Protestant schools have also thrived in many areas, partly because of the snob value attached to them, but also because many Catholic middle-class parents found their less dogmatic ethos more congenial.

Bury portrays the Protestants as a silent minority, afraid of rocking the boat, but nobody could accuse figures such as Ivan Yates and David Norris of being shrinking violets.

Senator Norris has been an influential figure over many decades, playing a role in the decriminalisation of homosexuality.

It would also take a lot to silence U2, who surprisingly do not get a mention in the book. Two band members, Adam Clayton and the Edge, are from a Church of Ireland background, while Bono's mother was also Protestant.

It could also be argued that Protestant values of thrift and "make-do and mend" have reasserted themselves in the recycling ethos of the Green Party, led for six years until 2007 by Church of Ireland member Trevor Sargent.

Bury dwells heavily on the negative aspects of the Protestant experience since the foundation of the State, and it is certainly a story worth telling.

The birth of the Free State was traumatic, with Protestants in some areas burned out of their homes and attacked, both before and after the Treaty of 1921.

The killing of Protestants in the revolutionary period is one of the most hotly debated issues among historians. They have argued over whether the killings had sectarian motives, or whether they were prompted by collusion with Crown forces. Many Protestants believed afterwards that some of the intimidation was opportunist, and motivated by a desire for land.

In the 1920s, there was a mini refugee crisis in London, as many Protestants fled there. The Southern Irish Loyalists Relief Association was set up to assist more than 9,000 refugees, helping many with accommodation and loans.

Bury estimates that around one quarter of all the mansions in the 26 counties were burned, abandoned or damaged beyond repair during the 20th Century. Most of the damage was caused just before the Treaty, or in its immediate aftermath.

The book details some of the killings that are hardly included in accounts of the heroic fight for Irish freedom.

In June 1921, to take one example, the 80-year-old retired Church of Ireland Dean of Leighlin Cathedral, John Finlay, was seized at his home in Bawnboy, Co Cavan. The IRA shot him in the head on his lawn, and then battered his head to a pulp.

The Church of Ireland Gazette warned in June 1922: "In certain districts in southern Ireland inoffensive Protestants of all classes are being driven from their homes and shops and farms in such numbers that many of our little communities are in danger of being wiped out."

It was not just the gentry in the big houses who decided it was time to leave. In Dublin, the Protestant population plummeted by 31pc between 1911 and 1926, in Cork city by 50pc, and Limerick by the same amount. The

Protestant working-class community of Dublin all but vanished.

After the end of the Civil War, life gradually settled down for Protestants on this side of the Border. As the cliché has it, they kept their heads down and got on with business.

Numbers were affected hugely by the Catholic *Ne Temere* decree, which dictated that children of mixed marriages had to be brought up in the Catholic faith.

In one of the most disgraceful episodes in the State's history, in 1957, the Catholic Church urged its flock to boycott Protestants in Fethard-on-Sea, Co Wexford. The boycott came after Sheila Cloney, a Protestant in a mixed marriage, refused to comply with the parish priest's insistence that she raise her children as Catholics and left the country for a time with her three daughters.

Bury is perhaps exaggerating when he suggests a form of apartheid existed across the State, but Protestants did lead parallel lives. They had their own schools, their own hospitals, and sports and social clubs.

Bury acknowledges that Protestants maintained their influence in business through companies

such as Guinness, Jacob's and the Bank of Ireland.

But this book could do more to accentuate the positive. Apart from suffering a few flurries of intolerance and bigotry, such as the Fethard-on-Sea boycott, Protestants have lived side-by-side with Catholics in relative harmony.

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Buried Lives: The Protestants of Southern Ireland, Robin Bury, The History Press, pbk, 256 pages, €20

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