
PRESS WATCH - Facing up the the dark side of the 'Four Glorious Years'

Eoghan Harris in the Irish Independent yesterday.

Leo Varadkar's recent skilful speech in Queen's University Belfast came just too late for me to praise the sure touch of his new speechwriter, Professor Patrick Geoghegan of TCD,.

Feedback suggests it was a success with the kind of liberal UUP unionist I call Henry, in honour of the Presbyterian United Irishman, Henry Joy McCracken.

But it will prove harder to reach William, as I call the petit-bourgeoisie Protestants of the DUP, because William prefers deeds to words.

The same rough division between the urban Bryans and the rural Alans is found in the Republic in the matter of historical memory.

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Most Bryans don't know that small pockets of rural Alans are worried by what the next five years of Bloody Sunday Every Bloody Sunday means for them.

Rural Protestants worry when the Republican temperature rises. They remember how, during the H-Blocks, bigots broke church windows, scrawled slogans, even sent bullets through the post.

The object of this tribal thuggery is to teach Protestants to keep their heads down - and only remember local history on nationalist terms.

At the recent West Cork History Festival, I noted that while relations had never been so good between Protestants and Catholics there was one shadow.

Local Protestants strongly agreed that they must be free to publicly remember their past, including their experience of sectarianism.

Peter Hart, in his classic *The IRA And Its Enemies*, was the first historian to show the sectarian dimension of the Bandon Valley massacre of 1922.

Republican bigots responded with a campaign of denial, even smearing the victims as spies.

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Shamefully, some fellow academics, having failed to do his pioneering work, also joined the anti-Hart campaign.

No wonder Protestants of the Bandon Valley have never requested a memorial service for the innocent 10 men and boys murdered by the IRA in April 1922.

That is also why Gerry Gregg and myself made an RTE film *An Tost Fada* (The Long Silence) featuring the personal testimony of Canon George Salter.

Doing so would establish the right of West Cork Protestants to remember their past on their own terms, not those laid down by nationalist commissars protecting the pristine local image of the Old IRA.

Our approach was also affected by the film *Bogdan's Journey* in which the Polish protagonist, Bogdan Bialek, explains why he wants the town of Kielce to face up to the murder of 40 Jews who had survived the Shoah in 1946.

"Today's Kielce is not responsible for the deed. It is responsible for what it does with the memory of the pogrom."

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We believe the same spirit animates An Tost Fada in which the Irish-speaking Church of Ireland clergyman Canon George Salter tells how, after IRA threats, his father had to sell his Dunmanway farm in April 1922 and move to the UK before bravely returning to a farm in Castletownshend.

This redemptive film was widely welcomed, particularly in Cork civic circles. Canon Salter received 150 letters of congratulations, including one from the RC Bishop of Cork, John Buckley, a man with strong Republican pride in his Uibh Laoire ancestry.

Because the film allowed young Protestants to speak freely about their past for the first time, An Tost Fada was the target of a tantrum of tribal green trolls.

But what bothered us more was the approach of a group of UCC academic historians who claimed the IRA campaign was not sectarian because it was aimed at "spies" rather than Protestants.

Although I had crossed swords before with Dr Andy Bielenberg of UCC about the use of the term "spies" in UCC's Cork Spy Project, I was still taken aback by his recent sweeping statement that there was "no sectarian" aspect

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to the Cork IRA campaign as reported by the reliable Barry Roche in The Irish Times.

"Dr Andy Bielenberg of the School of History at University College Cork told the inaugural West Cork History Festival that his research with Prof James Donnelly of the University of Wisconsin on the IRA killing of suspected spies and informers in Cork did not suggest sectarianism was a factor."

As all the victims of the Bandon Valley massacre were Protestant men and boys, I was again taken aback by Dr Bielenberg's ingenious explanation (my italics):

"There is simply no basis for the sectarian argument here (Cork city) or indeed in North Cork (No 2 Brigade area) so taking the county as a whole, the sectarian thesis is simply a non-runner," said Dr Bielenberg, adding there was a "general overemphasis on the role of West Cork in the conflict".

The key escape clause in the last paragraph is "taking the county as a whole".

Dr Bielenberg is saying that if you subtract (a) the period after the Truce of July 1921 to the end of the Civil War and (b) subtract West Cork

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entirely, then there is no serious statistical proof of a sectarian campaign in Cork.

That's like subtracting Kilkenny, Cork and Tipperary from All-Ireland hurling statistics and concluding that Wexford, Offaly and Clare were the dominant hurling giants.

Let's suppose the UCD History Department conducted a study of anti-semitic prejudice in Limerick but also hoped - with the best of motives - that the city would come out of the study looking as good as possible.

The big barrier to such a benign conclusion would be the Jewish pogrom in Limerick in 1904.

Let's further suppose UCD got over that hurdle by simply leaving out the Limerick pogrom and including statistics from Kerry and Tipperary with no anti-Jewish incidents.

This would allow UCD to sweepingly claim there was no evidence of anti-semitic prejudice in Limerick.

Would Irish Jews be happy with that suppression of their history to suit a nationalist agenda?

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Even if their leaders went along, think of the damage such a lie would do to the psyche of young Irish Jews who knew the truth.

I believe Dr Bielenberg's conclusions do no favours to Irish Protestants.

I believe his findings conflict both with local Protestant memory and the historical record.

Erskine Childers, a Protestant republican, described the Bandon Valley murders as "foul sectarianism".

If German historians can face up to mass murder in their past, why can't we accept there was a relatively minor sectarian aspect to the IRA campaign in Cork?

Last December, Cal Hyland, who with his wife, Joan, has worked on the raw data at Kew for the UCC project, wrote to the Sunday Independent as follows: "I feel one of the most poignant and relevant statements was in Eoghan Harris's RTE film An Tost Fada when Canon George Salter told the story of an old IRA man who called George's father to his deathbed to seek forgiveness for the murder of people of his 'flock' - surely an admission of sectarianism?"

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Cal concluded: "We hope our work will ensure that future generations will not lack for historical evidence of sectarian and tribal agendas on the IRA side."



Cartoon by Jim Cogan in Irish Independent

CNI