

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

THE PETER HART AFFAIR IN PERSPECTIVE: HISTORY, IDEOLOGY, AND THE IRISH REVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT. *Peter Hart's monograph, The IRA and its enemies: violence and community in Cork, 1916–1923, has been the subject of a rancorous debate in Ireland since its publication in 1998. In academic journals, in the press, and in the electronic media, Hart has been accused repeatedly of deliberately distorting evidence. The controversy turns on Hart's depiction of Irish revolutionary violence, and in particular upon a chapter entitled 'Taking it out on the Protestants', in which the IRA was portrayed as fundamentally sectarian. This article seeks to address a question that must occasionally trouble all of us: what are historical disagreements really about? To achieve a wider perspective on the Peter Hart affair it considers the famous row over historical 'fabrication' ignited by David Abraham's The collapse of the Weimar Republic (1981) and Keith Windschuttle's assault on Lyndall Ryan's book The Aboriginal Tasmanians (1981; 2nd edition 1996). The comparison suggests that when historians fall out over footnotes there is more involved than scholarly propriety.*

For more than a decade now, accusations of academic fraud have been levelled at *The IRA and its enemies: violence and community in Cork, 1916–1923* (1998), a brilliant, prize-winning monograph written by the Canadian scholar Peter Hart. The controversy turns on Hart's depiction of Irish revolutionary violence, and in particular upon a chapter entitled 'Taking it out on the Protestants', which is in many respects the climax of the book. The Irish war of independence, as portrayed in Hart's enviably vivid prose, was an essentially dirty war. Central to his account of the general conflict is a patient reconstruction of a series of killings that took place in April 1922, previously neglected by scholars, but now widely known as the Dunmanway or Bandon Valley massacre. The victims were ten Protestant men, killed in unauthorized IRA attacks; an eleventh man, the Rev. Ralph Harbord, was also wounded. Hart's provocative conclusion that the massacre was driven by 'sectarian antagonism...interwoven with

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political hysteria and local vendettas' calls into question the moral superiority of republican insurgents as against the British crown forces, long taken for granted in nationalist Ireland and not least in West Cork itself.¹

The ferocious reaction to *The IRA and its enemies* shows little sign of abating, even though Hart himself died, aged just forty-six, in July 2010. The polemic against him has been carried on in pamphlets, academic journals, in the columns of the magazine *History Ireland* and in public debates such as a 'hedge school' held at the National Library of Ireland in January 2012 and entitled 'The war of independence: "four glorious years" or squalid sectarian conflict?'² The Peter Hart affair has become one of those rare academic squabbles to attract the interest of the mainstream press.³ That the Dunmanway killings have now been the subject of a thorough, scrupulously fair, even-handed book by Barry Keane has done nothing to dampen the sense of outrage animating Hart's critics.⁴

The Hart affair has generated more acrimony than any other Irish historical controversy. Both 'sides' view the squabble as damaging to the reputation of the profession. Each accuses its opponents of breaching the ethical code that purportedly governs academic debate. For John Regan, the most persistent of Hart's critics within the academy, *The IRA and its enemies* demonstrates that 'there is something intrinsically wrong with the empirical method employed by some Irish historians':

This identifies a problem for the Irish historical community, and it may yet initiate a crisis for the credibility of contemporary Irish historical scholarship. One effect of this will likely be – I cannot say with certainty – that American, Canadian, British, and university history departments in other countries will hesitate when considering an Irish historian for an appointment lest they risk hiring a ticking time-bomb.⁵

Repeated allegations that Hart's use of source material was inaccurate or misleading have created a cloud of suspicion not dispelled by the limited responses the author made before his untimely death. On the other hand, the attempts of Hart's detractors to demonstrate bad faith in his deployment of various archival documents and interview material have been inconclusive. Tracking back and

¹ Peter Hart, *The IRA and its enemies: violence and community in Cork, 1916–1923* (Oxford, 1998), p. 288.

² www.historyireland.com/hedge-schools/.

³ See, for example, 'Historians clash over Protestant massacre', *Sunday Times* (Irish edition), 13 May 2012.

⁴ Barry Keane, *Massacre in West Cork: the Dunmanway and Ballygroman killings* (Cork, 2014). The emergence of a more balanced view is clear in two other recent accounts: Stephen Howe, 'Killing in Cork and the historians', *History Workshop Journal*, 77 (2014), pp. 160–86; Andy Bielenberg, John Boronovo, and James S. Donnelly Jr, "'Something of the nature of a massacre": the Bandon Valley killings revisited', *Éire-Ireland*, 49 (2014), pp. 7–59.

⁵ I am grateful to John Regan for permission to quote this passage from an unpublished paper presented at Trinity College Dublin on 28 September 2011. The comment quoted is aimed at Prof. David Fitzpatrick (Hart's supervisor) and Prof. Charles Townshend (who examined Hart's Ph.D. thesis).

forwards between the monograph, the Ph.D. thesis on which it was based, and the original primary sources, his critics have themselves made some embarrassing errors. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they too seem to have stretched the sources into the shapes required by predetermined arguments. Thankfully, few of us are likely to have our research exposed to the same degree of scrutiny as Peter Hart.

The errors and elisions attributed to Hart are legion. Many are trivial. A particularly futile subset of allegations relates to revisions made by Hart to his thesis before publication; these have become the subject of conspiratorial speculation. But some of the charges levelled at *The IRA and its enemies* are serious, and it is worth looking briefly at perhaps the most damaging of these. In the South of Ireland, Hart explained, government attempts to recruit informers from local Protestant communities had been disappointing. Informers came instead from the ranks of the IRA itself. In support of this view, he quoted from the *Record of the rebellion in Ireland in 1920–1921*, an official British account of the war, which noted that ‘the Protestants and those who supported the Government rarely gave much information because, except by chance, they had not got it to give’. But Hart failed to reproduce the full passage in question, which seems to conflict directly with his interpretation of the April massacre:

An exception to this rule was in the Bandon area where there were many Protestant farmers who gave information. Although the Intelligence Officer of the area was exceptionally experienced and although the troops were most active it proved almost impossible to protect those brave men, many of whom were murdered while almost all the remainder suffered grave material loss.

Returning to this source several years later, Hart restated the position adopted in *The IRA and its enemies*, adding simply that the *Record* did not demonstrate that Protestants had assisted the British campaign ‘*en masse*’.⁶ It is not only Hart’s tireless adversaries who have found this gloss inadequate.

Alternative interpretations of the Bandon Valley episode have been proffered by some of Hart’s opponents, centring on the possibility that the victims were targeted because they were informers rather than because of their religious or political identity.⁷ One rare piece of relevant evidence, unavailable to Hart

⁶ Peter Hart, ed., *British intelligence in Ireland, 1920–1921: the final reports* (Cork, 2002), pp. 49 and 102 (footnote).

⁷ For reasons of space, I will not consider here John Regan’s speculative attempt to connect Dunmanway to the abduction of three British intelligence officers in Macroom on the afternoon of 26 April 1922, just twelve hours before the massacre began. Regan suggests that Dunmanway Protestants might have been named as informers during the two-day interrogation of the British officers. It should be noted, however, that his case rests partly on the identification of the Dunmanway victims as the same ‘brave men, many of whom were murdered’ recorded in the *Record of the rebellion* as cited above: see his ‘The “Bandon Valley massacre” as a historical problem’, *History*, 95 (2012), p. 88. But as Eve Morrison, David Fitzpatrick, and others have pointed out, Regan has misdated the *Record of the rebellion*. This document was in fact written before April 1922 and explicitly covers the events of January 1920 to July 1921.

when he conducted his research in the 1990s, sheds further light on the killings. This is the witness statement of Michael O'Donoghue contained in the Bureau of Military History files and released in 2003. O'Donoghue first describes the capture of three Protestants at Ballygroman House, subsequently 'executed' for the shooting of Michael O'Neill, acting battalion commander of the Bandon IRA:

Poor Mick O'Neill! A grand chivalrous warrior of the I.R.A. Less than two months later, he called at the house of a British loyalist, named Hornibrook, to get help for a broken-down motor. As he knocked on the door, he was treacherously shot dead without the slightest warning by a hidden hand from inside the house. The I.R.A. in Bandon were alerted. The house was surrounded. Under threat of bombing and burning, the inmates surrendered. Three men, Hornibrook, his son and son-in-law, a Captain Woods. The latter, a British Secret Service agent, confessed to firing the fatal shot. Why? God alone knows. None of the three knew O'Neill or he them. Probably Woods got scared at seeing the strange young man in I.R.A. attire knocking, thought he was cornered and fired at him in a panic. The sequel was tragic. Several prominent loyalists – all active members of the anti-Sinn Fein society in West Cork, and blacklisted as such in I.R.A. Intelligence Records – in Bandon, Clonakilty, Ballineen and Dunmanway, were seized at night by armed men, taken out and killed. Some were hung, most were shot. All were Protestants. This gave the slaughter a sectarian appearance. Religious animosity had nothing whatever to do with it. These people were done to death as a savage, wholesale, murderous reprisal for the murder of Mick O'Neill.⁸

How reliable is this second-hand account, recorded three decades after the events it describes? O'Donoghue's statement certainly contains one significant inaccuracy. Michael O'Neill was not shot at the door of Ballygroman House, but had entered through an open window with two volunteers and was hit in the stomach as he climbed the stairs. Thomas Hornibrook's house had been the target of both agrarian protest and an IRA siege during the last few years so he certainly had reason to fear intruders in his house at 1:30 a.m. Woods had been wounded at Passchendaele, was awarded the Military Cross, had suffered a mental breakdown, and been court-martialled for drunkenness, but had returned to active service in France in July 1918; it is not clear why he was staying with his relatives at Ballygroman. So far, however, no evidence has been found that the Hornibrooks were active informers. In local folklore, the three killings are recalled as frenzied acts of revenge for the shooting of O'Neill; and it is important to add that the local republican leadership, with the exception of O'Neill himself, was in Dublin at the time, discussing the Treaty. An official Free State investigation produced a similar conclusion, adding 'Motive Obscure!'⁹

⁸ Witness statement by Michael V. O'Donoghue, p. 227, Bureau of Military History, 1913–21, www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/.

⁹ This paragraph is based on Keane, *Massacre in West Cork*, chs. 4–6, quotation on p. 137.

There is one further evidential nugget that deserves to be considered before I attempt to place the Peter Hart affair in perspective. In the 1950s, Ernie O'Malley interviewed Frank Busteed, the ruthless IRA officer who claimed responsibility for the deaths of the three British officers seized at Macroom on 26 April and who has been suspected of involvement in the Bandon Valley killings too. The possibility that Busteed was involved in both attacks has encouraged speculation that the ten Protestants killed between 27 and 29 April had been identified as British agents. Sadly, Busteed's tantalizingly vague reference to this period – 'We shot 5 to 6 loyalists Protestant farmers as reprisals' – is spectacularly unhelpful.¹⁰ If Busteed's statement does indeed refer to Dunmanway, however, it is worth noting that it echoes O'Donoghue's description of the episode as 'a savage, wholesale, murderous reprisal', a point to which we shall return.

Contemporaries tended to assume that the Dunmanway massacre was a spasm of killing rage, a reprisal either for O'Neill's death or for the victims of the sectarian violence then taking place in Belfast. Most republicans seem to have shared the verdict registered by Dorothy Macardle in 1937, that the massacre was 'violently in conflict with the traditions and principles' of the IRA and caused 'shame and anger throughout Ireland'.¹¹ Broadly speaking, they were right to do so. It is a curious aspect of this entire controversy that Hart's opponents have generally ignored the obvious and easily substantiated fact that the Bandon Valley killings were not typical of the IRA campaign as a whole, and have instead directed an extraordinary amount of forensic energy to controverting in every detail Hart's narrative of a series of IRA operations which – everyone acknowledges – were unsanctioned.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the whole debate, however, and the one I want to highlight in this article, is its parochialism. As so often in Irish history, rival commentators have discussed the Peter Hart affair as an insular problem, as if there was something specifically Irish about the various attributes – dishonesty, manipulation, perfidy, conspiracy, intolerance – the protagonists claim to detect in each other's work. But this is not the first time that accusations of academic fraud have disturbed the dull routines of the professional historian. Perhaps the most celebrated case was Hugh Trevor-Roper's vicious assault on 'The anatomy of the Elizabethan aristocracy' (1948), the sensational article in which Lawrence Stone argued that the slow bankruptcy of the Tudor landed elite was the key to explaining the rebellions of late sixteenth-

¹⁰ The original is in University College Dublin: Ernie O'Malley notebooks, P17b/112, pp. 74–83. It should also be noted that Busteed is, by general consensus, an unreliable source: see Niall Meehan, 'Examining Peter Hart', *Field Day Review*, 10 (2014), pp. 126–33. There is no reference to the April killings in Busteed's application for a military service pension: see the Military Service Pensions Collection (www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/military-service-pensions-collection), file reference MSP34REF4903.

¹¹ Dorothy Macardle, *The Irish republic: a documented chronicle of the Anglo-Irish conflict and the partitioning of Ireland, with a detailed account of the period 1916–1923* (London, 1937), pp. 733–4.

century England. Trevor-Roper was a connoisseur of ruthless polemic, executed with a vulpine prose style that is still a pleasure to read and fuelled by the kind of malice best perfected at high table, with its petty rivalries and ancient entitlements. Students at Christ Church recall Trevor-Roper assembling a terrifying catalogue of technical misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and mis-transcriptions in a folder labelled ‘Death of Stone’. Trevor-Roper decided that the errors he listed could not be explained by haste or inexperience but only by ‘deliberate falsification on a shocking scale’. To the eminent medievalist V. H. Galbraith, the affair proved that ‘Stone is no scholar and Trevor-Roper is no gentleman’; but it did not prevent Stone from going on to write two of the most influential history books of his generation, *The causes of the English revolution, 1529–1642* (1972) and *The family, sex, and marriage in England, 1500–1800* (1977).¹²

The aim of this article is not to clear up the mysteries of April 1922 – probably an impossible task – but rather to explore a particular kind of historical controversy. It seeks to address a question that must occasionally trouble all of us, and one that has been posed explicitly by a number of works on historical theory: what do historians argue about?¹³ How far, to put the question another way, does the rigorous application of rules of evidence really allow us to discriminate between contradictory interpretations of the past? To enlarge our perspective on the Peter Hart affair, two other examples of *furor historicus* are explored below, one from the United States and one from Australia. In the first place, however, it may be instructive to reconsider previous attempts to discredit the mainstream tradition of historical research in Ireland, beginning around the time of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Easter Rising in 1991.

I

One key index of the shift that has taken place in Ireland’s intellectual climate since the 1980s is the extent to which it is now revisionist historians rather than their nationalist predecessors who are held responsible for bringing politics into the study of the past. Anti-Hart campaigners such as John Regan and Niall Meehan have consequently found it possible to link the political agenda allegedly concealed in *The IRA and its enemies* with the more general malaise they detect among professional historians.

Unfortunately, few fields of Irish historical studies have been as poorly served as historiography. Recent books on the topic have been conceptually unsophisticated, obscure, or clumsy in style, and reluctant to situate Irish scholarship within broader theoretical or comparative frameworks. All history students

¹² Adam Sisman, *Hugh Trevor-Roper: the biography* (London, 2010), pp. 191, 194. For an assessment of Stone’s significance, see David Cannadine, ‘Historians in “the liberal hour”’: Lawrence Stone and J. H. Plumb revisited’, *Historical Research*, 75 (2002), pp. 316–54.

¹³ C. Behan McCullagh, ‘What do historians argue about?’, *History and Theory*, 43 (2004), pp. 18–38.

are exposed to a kind of everyday historiography, to the extent that they are familiarized with labels such as ‘revisionist’ and ‘post-revisionist’. Some will notice the tendency for each generation of historians to portray its predecessors as outmoded, myopic, and, above all, blindly subservient to the political and social prejudices of their era. But the systematic study of how historians conduct research and construct their arguments has attracted few Irish advocates. The exceptions tend to be outsiders of one kind or other, with Stephen Howe’s *Ireland and empire: colonial legacies in Irish history and culture* (2000), providing one notable example.¹⁴

Consider John Regan’s contention that ‘there is something wrong with the empirical method employed by some historians writing on twentieth century Ireland’.¹⁵ Regan believes that the writing of Irish history has been distorted by the unconscious desire to protect the southern state from the challenge of revolutionary republicanism in the shape of the Provisional IRA and Sinn Féin. More specifically, he argues that existing accounts of the birth of the Irish Free State are invalidated by their crude portrayal of the treatyites as democrats and their opponents as dictators. A wide range of culprits are identified, including J. J. Lee, Eunan O’Halpin, Tom Garvin, and David Fitzpatrick. Regan’s first assault on this formidable consensus was an article entitled ‘Michael Collins, general commanding-in-chief, as a historiographical problem’, published in *History* in 2007. On its own, the argument of this piece – that Michael Collins, in the days before his death, was establishing himself as a military dictator – appeared to have few general implications. In the same year, however, Regan’s ‘Southern Irish nationalism as a historiographical problem’ appeared in the *Historical Journal*, setting his detailed discussion of Collins in an expanded context, and in 2010 he returned to his critique with an article entitled ‘Irish public histories as an historiographical problem’, in *Irish Historical Studies*. These pieces, together with his later contributions to the Peter Hart controversy, have been collected together in his *Myth and the Irish state: historical problems and other essays* (2013).

Despite their titles, these essays show a limited interest in broader historiographical questions. Introducing *Myth and the Irish state*, Regan declares his allegiance to ‘historical science’ or ‘scientific history’. His commitment to ‘the search for abstract historical truths’ is no less ambitious.¹⁶ Only on two occasions, however, does he elaborate on his understanding of ‘historical science’, and then briefly. On the first, he quotes approvingly Michael Oakshott’s

¹⁴ Stephen Howe, *Ireland and empire: colonial legacies in Irish history and culture* (Oxford, 2000). But see also the exemplary introduction to Ciaran Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish history: the debate on historical revisionism, 1938–1994* (Dublin, 1994), pp. 3–31.

¹⁵ John M. Regan, *Myth and the Irish state: historical problems and other essays* (Sallins, 2013), p. 2. To avoid confusion, it is worth clarifying that Regan’s objection is not to the empirical method itself but rather to the undeclared political animus he detects in the academy.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. viii, 5, 6.

dictum that history is ‘what the evidence obliges us to believe’.¹⁷ This bracing definition of scholarly rectitude runs counter to the currently fashionable insistence that in the process of selecting, describing, and ordering evidence we are in fact deeply obliged to our prior beliefs. Eighty years have passed since Oakeshott made this comment in *Experience and its modes* (1933), a book usually encountered nowadays as a period piece, as an object of historical inquiry rather than a philosophical analysis of it.¹⁸ Anyone turning to the most authoritative surveys of historiography will discover that dark epistemological shadows hang over the last forty years: belief in the scientific status of history has all but vanished; recent accounts of the discipline emphasize the centrality of frameworks of meaning – of Kuhn’s paradigms, or Foucault’s regimes of truth, or Hayden White’s ‘emplotment’.¹⁹ Leaving aside these theoretical issues, it is notoriously the case that the most absorbing historical controversies are precisely those where the evidence does not oblige us all to take one side or the other.

The second authority cited by Regan is Alun Munslow, whose ‘bedrock belief’ is that only ‘a critical attitude toward the evidence’ enables us to construct accurate historical narratives, as opposed to propaganda.²⁰ By now, some readers will be scratching their heads, because Munslow is perhaps the best-known living popularizer of postmodernism among British historians. He is the *bête noire* of the sort of traditional, empirically minded scholar admired by Regan, and a radical opponent of the view that the historian’s enterprise is that of discovering the truth about the past. This mysterious alliance becomes even more perplexing if we turn to Regan’s source: *The new history* (2003) is another rehearsal of Munslow’s radical anti-foundationalism – another assault, that is, on the customary assumption that the status of historical knowledge can be guaranteed by an appeal to rational or scientific principles. When Munslow announces his position that history is ‘not simply an observational and reconstructive activity, the function of which is to locate empirical (sometimes called synthetic) and/or analytical truth’, he is rejecting the kind of pure scholarly ideal Regan claims to defend.²¹

Anyone who perseveres as far as page 64 of *The new history* will discover that Regan has inadvertently presented Munslow as the advocate of the position he has set out to discredit. The ‘bedrock belief’ upon which Regan bases his

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1. Hugh Kearney recalls that this was a favourite dictum of his colleague and supervisor, Robin Dudley Edwards, in the 1950s: ‘Preface: on being a historian in four countries’, *Ireland: contested ideas of nationalism and history* (Cork, 2007), p. 15.

¹⁸ Contrast Oakeshott’s legacy with the continuing interest in his contemporary, R. G. Collingwood, most obviously in Quentin Skinner’s work: see n. 29 below.

¹⁹ Three of the best studies are Peter Novick, *That noble dream: the ‘objectivity question’ and the American historical profession* (Cambridge, 1988), esp. ch. 15; Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the twentieth century: from scientific objectivity to the postmodern challenge* (Middleton, CT, 1997), chs. 8–10; Mary Fulbrook, *Historical theory* (London, 2002).

²⁰ Regan, *Myth and the Irish state*, p. 6.

²¹ Alun Munslow, *The new history* (Harlow, 2003), p. 2.

distinction between ‘historical’ and ‘ahistorical’ writing is introduced by Munslow as an example of the conventional historical wisdom against which he has now written six books and numerous articles. One gets the impression that Regan has hurriedly rummaged through *The new history*, without digesting its arguments, in search of a sentence that might lend authority to his intuitions. The point here is not to insinuate that there is something wrong, as it were, with Regan’s empirical method. His apparent misreading of Munslow’s text surely illustrates a more general shortcoming. Not only have Irish historians ignored the issues of narrative and linguistic form which have preoccupied meta-historians such as Munslow; but they show little awareness that historiography and historical theory are subfields with their own specialized literatures, and their own particular conceptual demands, requiring the same prolonged immersion and patient engagement expected in any other historical subfield.

Regan’s complaint that professional historians have functioned as the propagandist adjunct of the Dublin political establishment is not new. It was first made during the 1980s by political commentators such as Desmond Fennell. The historian’s hidden agenda, so the argument runs, has been to furnish a narrative capable of legitimizing the southern state’s deviation from its nationalist foundations, and in particular its increasing co-operation with the British government in countering republican insurgency in the North. That the revisionist trend was ‘the historiography of the counter-revolution’, Fennell asserted confidently, was an ‘objective fact’.²² Strictures of this kind became harder to ignore with the appearance in 1989 of Brendan Bradshaw’s counter-revisionist salvo, ‘Nationalism and historical scholarship in modern Ireland’, in *Irish Historical Studies*.²³ Since its foundation in the 1930s by T. W. Moody and Robin Dudley Edwards, *Irish Historical Studies* had been the driving force behind the ‘scientific’ investigation of the past. Its editors prided themselves on having taken the political sting out of Irish historical writing. Their confidence in ‘detachment and objectivity’ was apparently as unquestioned as their contempt for the old ‘faith and fatherland’ interpretation; the possibility that there might be a contradiction between these two commitments had not occurred to them.²⁴ The high professional standards advocated by Moody and Edwards also demanded a prose style characterized by austerity and self-effacement. One colleague observed that Moody’s first monograph, after the opening

²² Desmond Fennell, ‘Against revisionism’, in Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish history*, pp. 183–90.

²³ See Brendan Bradshaw, ‘Nationalism and historical scholarship in modern Ireland’, *Irish Historical Studies (IHS)*, 26 (1989), pp. 329–51, reprinted in Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish history*, pp. 191–216.

²⁴ These quotations are taken from reflections composed fifty years later: R. W. Dudley Edwards and Mary O’Dowd, eds., *Sources for early modern Irish history, 1534–1641* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 208. Incidentally, this chapter (‘Historiography’) seems to have been framed as a deliberate counter-narrative to Moody’s stock-taking exercises on the same subject, not least in stressing the achievements of historical studies *before* 1938.

chapter, ‘revealed few signs of human origin’.²⁵ For Bradshaw, however, the aspiration to this spurious kind of ‘value-free’ scholarship was depriving scholars of ‘the kind of moral and emotional register’ required for a sensitive account of the Irish experience, with its inherently traumatic and tragic character.²⁶

Much of Bradshaw’s critique was in fact applicable to revisionist movements in quite different fields of history. That revisionists had rejected the central dynamic of national liberation in favour of an emphasis on complexity, ambiguity, and discontinuity; that the rejection of long-term causes had robbed the historical narrative of its coherence; that revisionist scholars highlighted the traditional, the local, and the irrational as against the modern features of the people and processes they analysed; that the historians of each period tended to postpone the achievement of national consciousness to some later era; that revisionism was an essentially negative enterprise which irresistibly produced inverted images of the nationalist paradigm: all of these observations have been made, *mutatis mutandis*, about the historiography of the English Civil War between the 1960s and 1990s.²⁷ But the most sophisticated revisionist movement was surely the radical overhaul of the history of political ideas carried out by what became known as ‘the Cambridge School’ – centred in Bradshaw’s own university and largely devoted to the early modern era in which he himself specialized. Because of their amphibious existence between departments of history on the one hand and political science or philosophy on the other, the pioneers of the ‘contextualist’ approach to political thought – J. G. A. Pocock, John Dunn, and above all Quentin Skinner – felt keenly the need to articulate the methodological principles upon which their historiographical revolution was based.²⁸ Their most influential statement was Skinner’s manifesto, ‘Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas’ (1969) which attacked a number of ‘mythologies’ resulting from anachronistic readings of canonical texts, drawing on contemporary analytic philosophy and in particular on the ‘speech-act’ theory of J. L. Austin.²⁹

²⁵ Aidan Clarke, ‘Robert Dudley Edwards (1909–1988)’, *IHS*, 26 (1988), p. 126. In Edwards’s case there was, by all accounts, a lot of self to be effaced.

²⁶ Bradshaw, ‘Nationalism and historical scholarship’, p. 341.

²⁷ Peter Lake, ‘Retrospective: Wentworth’s political world in revisionist and post-revisionist perspective’, in J. F. Merritt, ed., *The political world of Thomas Wentworth, earl of Strafford, 1621–1641* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 252–83.

²⁸ There is now a daunting literature on the Cambridge School including Iain Hampsher-Monk, ‘The history of political thought and the political history of thought’, in Dario Castiglione, ed., *The history of political thought in national context* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 159–74; and Mark Bevir, ‘The contextual approach’, in George Klosko, ed., *The Oxford handbook of the history of political philosophy* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 11–23. The key texts are reprinted in Quentin Skinner, *Visions of politics, 1: Regarding method* (Cambridge, 2002); and J. G. A. Pocock, *Political thought and history: essays on theory and method* (Cambridge, 2009).

²⁹ Quentin Skinner, ‘Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas’, *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), pp. 3–53. A revised version appears in Skinner, *Visions of politics, 1*, pp. 57–89.

It was not only traditionalists such as Bradshaw who felt that the faith-and-fatherland approach to the past being undermined by revisionism was fundamentally sound. The pretensions of ‘scientific’ history simultaneously became a theme of several prominent literary critics, among whom Seamus Deane stands out for both for his theoretical sophistication and his elegant, epigrammatic style. Deane too was concerned that revisionist accounts of vital subjects such as the penal laws or the Famine had emphasized contingency and complexity to the point that the structural realities of British power had vanished from view. What distinguished Deane’s analysis, however, was the argument that scientific history was itself a form of mythology, merely reproducing the tendency of British imperialism to explain Irish resistance as irrational and pre-modern. The main target of his hostility was T. W. Moody’s well-known essay ‘Irish history and Irish mythology’ (1978). All writing in Ireland under the union, Deane believed, expressed the determination of the British state to domesticate its unruly inhabitants. The assumed direction of Irish history was towards normalization – that is, assimilation to English norms – a view that necessarily minimized the catastrophic experiences central to nationalist narratives; and professional historians perpetuated these impulses in their tendency to portray independent Ireland as the logical outcome of British state-building rather than principled armed resistance to it. In Deane’s view, the revisionist ‘downplays the oppression the [Easter] Rising sought to overthrow and upgrades the oppression the Rising itself inaugurated in the name of freedom’, and does so because he or she remains locked within the discursive categories generated by nineteenth-century imperialism.³⁰

Deane – and other post-colonial critics such as Luke Gibbons and David Lloyd – have concentrated on history-writing and have considered the historian’s work as the construction of a series of rhetorical strategies.³¹ Deane was particularly offended by descriptions of 1916 as ‘irrational’ and ‘atavistic’.³² But the ideological substance of his critique could be traced back to his 1973 essay on ‘The position of the Irish intellectual’ long before Hayden White’s views on historical narratives had made any impact. Deane believed then that the apparently complex range of attitudes on Northern Ireland could be resolved into two distinct standpoints:

One is to say, with Cruise O’Brien, that the root of the trouble is Irish nationalism and the tradition of violence; the other is to say that the root cause is British imperialism and its more complex tradition of violence (more complex since it involves both internecine war and war between different states). Most publicity is given to the former view; and unsurprisingly the British media sponsor it as often as possible;

³⁰ Seamus Deane, ‘Wherever green is read’, in Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha and Theo Dorgan, eds., *Revising the rising* (Derry, 1991), p. 100.

³¹ Seamus Deane, *Strange country: modernity and nationhood in Irish writing since 1790* (Oxford, 1997), p. 193.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 194–7; Deane, ‘Wherever green is read’, pp. 94–5.

but it has been for some time a tendency implicit in the revision of Irish history which has been going on in the universities for about thirty years – although more notably in the last ten.

The ‘disastrous and dishonest’ focus on republican violence now dominated the universities, the churches, and the media. Its attractions for the Republic of Ireland were easily explained, ‘since it gives the appearance of intellectual dignity to its own selfish desire to wish the northern problem away’.³³ Deane’s later work, and particularly the three volumes of the *The Field Day anthology of Irish writing* (1991) that appeared under his editorship, has been regarded by some as an attempt to re-revise Ireland’s cultural history from an explicitly northern nationalist angle; and Deane, in turn, has been rebuked for wishing away the social and cultural transformations of the South, in which there were forces at work even more formidable than Conor Cruise O’Brien.³⁴

The originators of professional history in Ireland were T. W. Moody and Robin Dudley Edwards, who became comrades at the Institute of Historical Research during the early 1930s and returned to Belfast and Dublin determined to replicate the celebrated research seminars established by Albert Pollard and the other institutional apparatus of the new historical science.³⁵ It is seldom noted that Edwards was a student at King’s College London, as was David Beers Quinn, pioneer of the Atlantic approach to early modern Ireland.³⁶ Both Moody and Quinn attended the seminars of Arthur Percival Newton, the first incumbent of the Rhodes Chair of Imperial History established at King’s in 1919. Newton espoused the largely benign view of the British empire then dominant – in Britain, at any rate. The expansion of England had been effected by ‘wholly peaceful means’, he later wrote, in sharp contrast to the other European powers, who extended their dominion by brute force.³⁷ Happily, neither Moody nor Quinn seems to have internalized this complacent view. Quinn was later a founder of the left-leaning *Past and Present* and a member of the British Labour and Communist parties, while the Moody of the 1930s was attracted to R. H. Tawney at the LSE, author of *Religion and the rise of capitalism* (1926) and perhaps the most important intellectual associated with the British Labour movement.³⁸ The political positions of

³³ Seamus Deane, ‘The position of the Irish intellectual’, *Cambridge Review*, 94 (1973), pp. 134–5.

³⁴ Joe Cleary offers an assessment of Deane’s career in ‘Dark fields of the Republic: Seamus Deane’s sundered provinces’, *Boundary 2*, 37 (2010), pp. 1–68.

³⁵ I am grateful to David Hayton for permitting me to read his forthcoming article, ‘The laboratory for “scientific history”: T.W. Moody and R.D. Edwards at the Institute of Historical Research’, the first systematic examination of this subject.

³⁶ Nicholas Canny and Karen Ordahl Kupperman, ‘The scholarship and legacy of David Beers Quinn, 1909–2002’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 60 (2003), pp. 843–60.

³⁷ Richard Drayton, ‘Imperial history and the human future’, *History Workshop Journal*, 74 (2012), pp. 156–72.

³⁸ Edwards and O’Dowd, eds., *Sources for early modern Irish history*, p. 209.

these scholars, hardly detectable in their monographs and articles between the 1930s and 1970s, have never been investigated, largely because we have been content to take Moody's 'Irish history and Irish mythology' as representative of four decades of research.

The most characteristic claim made by the Moody/Edwards circle was not that they produced 'value-free' research, but that the scientific method embodied values of its own, and that the more objective scholarship it enabled would promote reconciliation on the island of Ireland.³⁹ It is certainly true that Moody in particular was an admirer of constitutional nationalism.⁴⁰ His political inclinations must have been powerfully reinforced by the dominance of constitutional history at the Institute of Historical Research: the unspoken assumption of English historiography was that the evolution of parliamentary institutions held the key to national character. But the persistent emphasis in Moody's work was on the technical expertise of the historian; his views conform to the 'austere verification principle' advocated by English contemporaries and role models like Pollard, the key to the 'modernist method' recently reconstructed by Michael Bentley with a neat blend of affection and critical scrutiny.⁴¹

By the 1980s, a new generation of Irish historians had appeared who were more likely to discuss modern Irish politics in tones of ironic disenchantment and disdain. There can be no doubt that expressions of overt hostility to earlier manifestations of nationalism and republicanism were deeply coloured by the continuing campaign of the Provisional IRA and perhaps even more by the electoral successes of Sinn Féin after the Hunger Strikes of 1981. Equally if not more important was the quiet generational shift and the modest secularization that had occurred in the South.⁴² Once again, it is possible to identify parallels elsewhere. More engaged forms of history appeared in England at the same time, with the Falklands War as one key precipitant.⁴³ Even in France, where prominent historians – many of them members of the Parti Communiste Français – had long been public intellectuals, the 1980s

³⁹ For this argument, see Ian McBride, 'The shadow of the gunman: the IRA and its historians', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46 (2011), pp. 686–710. A comprehensive account of the origins of revisionism would include the training in Cambridge of a later generation of scholars such as Ronan Fanning and Michael Laffan (see *ibid.*, p. 692).

⁴⁰ See T. W. Moody, 'A general survey', in T. W. Moody and J. C. Beckett, eds., *Ulster since 1800* (London, 1954), p. 133: 'Both Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State thus owed their origin not to the force of argument, on which the nationalist movement from O'Connell to Redmond had relied, but to the argument of force, and their history bears the marks of that tragic but inescapable fact.'

⁴¹ Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England's past: English historiography in the age of modernism, 1870–1970* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 221.

⁴² See Tom Garvin, 'The strange death of clerical politics in University College Dublin', *Irish University Review*, 28 (1998), pp. 308–14.

⁴³ Peter Mandler, *History and national life* (London, 2002), pp. 124–30.

saw a new emphasis on political reflection and the birth of a new genre – *ego-histoire* – as scholars turned to autobiography not to justify their youthful radicalism but to explain how they had adopted right-wing positions in middle age.⁴⁴

Crude generalizations about the politics of Irish historiography have nevertheless flourished – in part because so little attention has been paid to Irish history-writing as an intellectual activity with a rich, multi-faceted history of its own shaped by factors internal as well as external to the discipline. That the dominant liberal mode of Irish historiography is ‘constitutively antipathetic... to revolutionary republicanism’ – as one literary critic puts it – is at best a half-truth.⁴⁵ Revisionist movements inevitably bear the negative impress of the orthodoxies that first provided a common foil for their diverse findings. But a convincing account of Irish historiography would have to examine the intellectual milieu of the scholar, the institutional and sociological development of the profession, and the importation of literary conventions and historiographical models from Britain and Europe; it would also relate specific revisions to the deployment of new primary sources or the reassessment of old ones. In the case of 1916, for example, it would surely emphasize the pivotal discovery of Eoin MacNeill’s February memorandum, with its devastating attack on those of his comrades who obeyed their ‘feelings’, ‘instincts’, and ‘interior voices’ rather than reason, and consequently believed ‘lives must be sacrificed, in order to produce an ultimate effect on the national mind’.⁴⁶

In the absence of more theoretical and comparative studies of Irish historiography, the assumption still flourishes that revisionism was a uniquely Irish phenomenon, with uniquely Irish causes. What *is* perhaps remarkable about Irish revisionism is that it has been assailed, in methodological terms, from both left and right. While Deane’s work builds upon the Frankfurt School’s critique of enlightenment thought and French post-structuralism, Regan represents a ‘return to essentials’ in the style of Geoffrey Elton. Confusingly, we find that F. S. L. Lyons is praised as a model of impartiality by Regan and upbraided by Deane as a colonial apologist. This bifurcation in turn reflects the anomalous features of the Irish revolution itself, an example of regime-change which consolidated the authority of the Catholic church, the principal target of so many European revolutions, and which involved a rebellion not only against British imperial rule but against Irish constitutional nationalism.⁴⁷ It was perhaps

⁴⁴ Richard Vinen, ‘The poisoned madeleine: the autobiographical turn in historical writing’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46 (2011), pp. 531–54.

⁴⁵ Cleary, ‘Seamus Deane’s sundered provinces’, p. 2. Incidentally, the most striking thing about Peter Hart’s stance on the Irish revolution is its nuances: see Peter Hart, ‘On the necessity of violence in the Irish revolution’, in Danine Farquarson and Sean Farrell, eds., *Shadows of the gunmen: violence and culture in modern Ireland* (Cork, 2008), esp. his identification with the advanced nationalist Eoin MacNeill on pp. 23, 27.

⁴⁶ F. X. Martin, ‘Eoin MacNeill on the 1916 rising’, *IHS*, 12 (1961), pp. 234–6.

⁴⁷ Nobody did more to reconceptualize the Irish revolution than Peter Hart himself. See, for example, ‘A new revolutionary history’, *The IRA at war, 1916–1923* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 3–29.

inevitable, therefore, that a liberal, humanist historiography would combine both establishment and anti-establishment elements, even without the intense pressures created by the collapse of order in the North after 1969. Of the various counter-revisionist positions delineated above, Regan's is certainly the least developed theoretically, but it nevertheless presents a challenge that historians find disturbing. After all, both Bradshaw and Deane assumed that revisionists, whatever their deficiencies might be, got their footnotes right. The Peter Hart affair has generated so much excitement in part because it suggested that revisionists might be vulnerable on their own home ground – detailed, apparently dispassionate archival research. The remainder of this article turns to two other cases of 'history wars', both involving disputed footnotes, with the aim of understanding better the questions the Peter Hart controversy has raised.

II

The most famous row over historical 'fabrication' was that ignited by David Abraham's *The collapse of the Weimar Republic* (1981). Initially the book – a revised version of his Ph.D. thesis, submitted at the University of Chicago in 1977 – was extensively and positively reviewed, even by those who disliked its *Marxist* theoretical framework. But there was one particularly unimpressed reader, the Yale historian Henry Turner, who was then completing his own related study entitled *German big business and the rise of Hitler*. Infuriated by the widespread praise bestowed upon this debut monograph, Turner shifted from criticisms of Abraham's 'warmed over' Marxism to publicizing errors in his footnotes. He fired off letters to historians in both Germany and the United States. The consistent tendency of Abraham's various misattributions and mistranslations, it was alleged, was to reinforce the impression of a close relationship between the Nazis and big business. Abraham quickly conceded that he had made numerous minor errors – 'inexcusable' errors, as he himself put it. Yet some of the most flagrant mistakes singled out by Turner were quite easily explained. Returning to Germany to check his notes against the original documents, Abraham realized, for example, that he had misdated an important letter, conflating it with the item following immediately after it in the relevant file. He also discovered that he had misattributed a second letter by confusing two men, both named 'Dr Scholz'.⁴⁸

Turner's angry claims that Abraham had invented non-existent documents were now amplified by George Feldman of Berkeley, who began dispatching

⁴⁸ The best general accounts are Jon Wiener, *Historians in trouble* (New York, NY, 2005); Novick, *That noble dream*, pp. 612–21; Richard J. Evans, *In defence of history* (London, 1997), pp. 116–23. See also Mark Kishlansky, 'Historian's yardstick', *History Today*, 35 (1985), pp. 4–5. For a harsher treatment of Abraham than the one offered here, see Peter Hayes, 'History in an off key: David Abraham's second collapse', *Business History Review*, 61 (1987), pp. 452–72.

circular letters denouncing David Abraham as a menace to the profession. Embarrassingly, Feldman had earlier read the manuscript for Princeton University Press and recommended its publication; now he found it littered with ‘egregious errors, tendentious misconstruals, and outright inventions’.⁴⁹ Soon Feldman was congratulating himself on having blocked Abraham’s appointment to no fewer than four history departments. Three of these were at American universities – the University of Texas at Austin, the University of California at Santa Cruz, and the Catholic University of America. The fourth appointment, at Tel Aviv, would have given Abraham oversight of a major research library which, Feldman scoffed, was like ‘putting Dracula in charge of a blood bank’.⁵⁰

Feldman’s intemperate interventions appalled many scholars, leading to faculty protests at Santa Cruz and Catholic University. There was resistance too when demands were subsequently made to have Abraham’s Ph.D. rescinded by the University of Chicago. The Abraham affair made the front page of *The New York Times*. Some of America’s most respected scholars were less appalled by Abraham’s original errors, distressing though these undoubtedly were, than by the vendetta now pursued against him. Among them was the Princeton polymath Anthony Grafton, who recalled the Abraham case when he wrote his entertaining book, *The footnote: a curious history* (1997). Grafton’s sympathies lay with Abraham (who had been his colleague for several years at Princeton). Since it transpired that *German big business and the rise of Hitler* had also ignored evidence that conflicted with the author’s thesis, Grafton concluded philosophically that Turner, like Abraham, exemplified the fallibility of all scholarship. More profoundly, perhaps, he observed that ‘a historical work and its notes can never, in the nature of things, reproduce or cite the full range of evidence they rest on’.⁵¹

Grafton was not alone. The senior German historian Charles Maier insisted that the core thesis of Abraham’s book was not, in any case, dependent on the disputed footnotes.⁵² Similar objections were raised by Geoff Eley, who protested that Turner and Feldman had misrepresented the central arguments of Abraham’s book. By focusing narrowly on the actions of individual businessmen, critics of *The collapse of the Weimer Republic* were able to ignore its structuralist analysis of the German economy, which aimed to show how a fragmented bourgeoisie was unable find an alternative to Nazism.⁵³ Perhaps Peter Novick

⁴⁹ Gerald D. Feldman, ‘A collapse in Weimar scholarship’, *Central European History*, 17 (1984), p. 159.

⁵⁰ Novick, *That noble dream*, p. 617.

⁵¹ Anthony Grafton, *The footnote: a curious history* (London, 1997), pp. 17–18.

⁵² Charles S. Maier, ‘The vulnerabilities of interwar Germany’, *Journal of Modern History*, 56 (1984), pp. 89–99. By German historian, I mean historian of Germany. Maier is based at Harvard and is the author of *The unmasterable past: history, Holocaust and German national identity* (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

⁵³ For Eley and others, see ‘The David Abraham case: ten comments from historians’, *Radical History Review*, 32 (1985), pp. 75–96.

makes the best sense of this affair in his magisterial study *That noble dream: the 'objectivity question' and the American historical profession* (1988). Novick argues persuasively that the quarrel is best understood as part of a backlash led by empirically minded scholars, who had seen their discipline expand and fragment at a bewildering rate. Historians who had prided themselves in taking *no* interest in philosophical or theoretical questions now found themselves confronted by interdisciplinarity, relativism, Foucauldians, French post-structuralism, and the inevitable Hayden White.⁵⁴

The battle over David Abraham is surely the most bitterly divisive quarrel to have taken place among American historians during the last forty years. A less-well-known controversy, but one which exists in closer proximity to Hart's *The IRA and its enemies*, turns on the assault on the politicization of Australian history by 'Black Armband' historians. Anyone who thinks that an inability to keep politics out of history is a particularly Irish affliction will find Australian historiography a revelation. Indeed, attitudes to the Australian past have been partisan in the most straightforward sense. When John Howard was elected prime minister in 1996, he rejoiced in bringing to an end a decade of Labour government which had seen 'the attempt to rewrite Australian history in the service of a partisan political cause'.⁵⁵ The triumph of his Liberal–National coalition was hailed as a protest against multi-culturalism, now repudiated as divisive; against the guilt complex and grievance culture which had apparently led to the denigration of Australia's national achievements; and against the 'tenured radicals' who had come to dominate the country's university departments since the 1960s.⁵⁶

Howard's political persona was shaped in response to the 'big picture' of the incumbent Labour government led by Paul Keating. The defining moment of Keating's administration had been his Redfern Park speech in December 1992, the first public acknowledgement of the dispossession of Aboriginal people and the destruction of their way of life by British settlers. There were other reasons, too, for the greater prominence of history and historians in Australian public life at this time. Six months earlier, the High Court had overturned the doctrine of *terra nullius* in the Mabo Judgement, a dramatic decision drawing heavily on Henry Reynolds's book, *Law of the land* (1992). This was the kind of 'impact' that British universities dream of, but it was not the only example. Investigations into the practice of removing Aboriginal children from their parents had begun with *The stolen generations* report (1982), based

⁵⁴ Novick, *That noble dream*, pp. 612–21. My discussion is no doubt biased towards defenders of Abraham, not for political reasons but because Charles Maier, Geoff Eley, Natalie Zemon Davies, and Arno Meyer are all innovative historians known very widely outside their own fields.

⁵⁵ Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The history wars* (Melbourne, 2003), p. 1. An account of the Windschuttle/Ryan spat can be found in *ibid.*, pp. 160–70. See also Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is history fiction?* (Sydney, 2006), pp. 229–32.

⁵⁶ My understanding of the Australian case, such as it is, owes much to conversations with Graeme Davison of Monash University, regarded as a moderate in the history wars.

on the historical research of Peter Read. But it was Keating's big picture, shaped partly by his distinctive Irish-Australian personality and articulated by his speechwriter Don Watson, an academic historian turned political satirist, that created the sense that a general re-evaluation of Australian identity was underway.

Those dissatisfied with the 'Black Armband' view found their crusader in the retired historian Keith Windschuttle, author of *The fabrication of Aboriginal history* (2002). When Windschuttle's name appears, adjectives like 'trenchant' and 'strident' – or less polite equivalents – cannot be far behind. In 1994, he had published an attack on postmodernism, *The killing of history: how literary critics and social theorists are murdering our past*, which attracted much attention in the United States, where it was usually linked with Allan Bloom's *The closing of the American mind* (1987) and similar jeremiads. Now that the dust has settled on both postmodernism and political correctness, what stands out about *The killing of history* is the seriousness of its engagement with contemporary theory. It cannot fairly be said of Windschuttle that he is an anti-theorist who has not actually read the theories he denounces – a charge brought against Richard Evans's *In defence of history* (1997).⁵⁷ On the contrary, his book summarizes the ideas of Michel de Certeau, Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Hayden White, and – at length – Foucault.⁵⁸

Windschuttle's research on frontier violence appeared in various articles in the conservative journal *Quadrant* before the first volume of *The fabrication of Aboriginal history* (2002) was published. One key element of his case was the dramatic claim that the number of Aborigines killed by early settlers, previously put at around 20,000 by Henry Reynolds, should be adjusted to the impressively neat figure of 198. In his view, European settlement in Australia was essentially a peaceful process which met with 'senseless violence' from its indigenous inhabitants, who thereby dug their own graves:

The British colonization of this continent was the least violent of all Europe's encounters with the New World. It did not meet any organized resistance. Conflict was sporadic rather than systematic. Some mass killings were committed by both sides but they were rare and isolated events where the numbers of dead were in the tens rather than the hundreds.⁵⁹

Bound by the rule of law and by Christian teaching, the colonists found the killing of innocents abhorrent, a point obscured by the reliance of historians on liberal and evangelical commentators who exaggerated the brutality of

⁵⁷ Wulf Kansteiner, 'Mad history disease contained? Postmodern excess management advice from the UK', *History and Theory*, 39 (2000), pp. 226–7.

⁵⁸ Keith Windschuttle, *The killing of history: how literary critics and social theorists are murdering our past* (New York, NY, 1996), ch. 4, 'The deconstruction of imperial history: poststructuralism and the founding of Australia', anticipated his later work but was principally concerned with Paul Carter's *The road to Botany Bay* (1987).

⁵⁹ Keith Windschuttle, *The fabrication of Aboriginal history* (Sydney, 2002), pp. 3, 130.

imperial expansion in order to justify their reforming or missionary proposals. The ‘real tragedy’ of the indigenous people was not European rapacity but their own ‘dysfunctional’ social and cultural organization and their isolation from the rest of the planet, which left them wholly unprepared for an encounter with its most technologically advanced inhabitants. That they had survived for millennia, Windschuttle added, could be attributed ‘more to good fortune than good management’.⁶⁰

A large part of Windschuttle’s work was devoted to a forensic examination of what he regarded as the ‘orthodox’ school of thought and, in particular, to a dissection of Lyndall Ryan’s *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* (1981; 2nd edition 1996). Most attention focused on Windschuttle’s claim to have found at least seventeen cases where Ryan either invented atrocities in early decades of the nineteenth century or falsified sources or both. A phone call from a reporter on *The Sydney Morning Herald* announced the beginning of what Ryan later described as ‘a media witch-hunt’.⁶¹ Her monograph was based on a Ph.D. thesis submitted in 1975. It contained 1,351 separate references to sources arranged in almost 1,000 footnotes. In cutting this total by almost half for the book, she confessed that some had been ‘lost or scrambled’. This sort of problem, she regretted, was ‘a fact of life’.⁶² In general, Ryan was able to produce evidence for her conclusions from material cited in the book, even if the relevant passages were not always cited in the appropriate place. She acknowledged that in a few cases she had conflated references to particular newspaper items, but was able subsequently to produce the missing content. In their differences over a variety of alleged massacres – including one, incidentally, in which a ‘stockkeeper’ named Paddy Heagon is supposed to have shot nineteen Aborigines with ‘a swivel gun charged with nails’ – the real issue between Windschuttle and Ryan was often their conflicting approaches to contemporary testimony which was incomplete or unsubstantiated. Evaluating accounts of frontier violence also depends partly on wildly conflicting estimates of the size of the Aboriginal population at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

In Australia’s history wars it is hard not to conclude that different angles of interpretation are more significant than errors of fact. Ryan’s defenders felt more comfortable exposing Windschuttle’s unpleasantly right-wing views about the ‘senseless’ violence of Aborigines than considering the examples of shoddy research he itemized. As we have seen, his treatment of Aboriginal society was marked by cultural insensitivity on a spectacular scale. Inevitably, perhaps, Windschuttle’s own mastery of the primary material also came under scrutiny. His scholarship was challenged, sometimes in public, as he

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

⁶¹ Lyndall Ryan, ‘Who is the fabricator?’, in Robert Manne, ed., *Whitewash: on Keith Windschuttle’s fabrication of Aboriginal history* (Melbourne, 2003), p. 230.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 234.

now engaged in noisy debates on national radio, in bookshops or at the National Museum – itself another site of historiographical contention. The conspicuous flaw in his polemic, however, was the reductionist account he offered of his adversary's work. Ryan's main concerns were not in fact with frontier massacres, but with recovering the ways in which Tasmanian Aboriginals had survived, whether by resistance or by adaptation and co-operation.

III

All three cases considered here – Peter Hart, David Abraham, and Lyndall Ryan – raise questions about the fuzzy boundary between shoddy note-taking, the selective presentation of evidence in the rhetorical art of the historian, and the deliberate invention, falsification, or suppression of the archival record. Of course, there are many differences between them. Hart's claims were especially explosive. Not only was he reassessing a foundational narrative (as was Ryan), but the Northern Ireland peace process was unfolding as he wrote, and the inclusion of Sinn Féin in negotiations meant that the character of republican armed struggle was subjected to particularly intense scrutiny. Attitudes towards the insurgency of the Irish revolution were inevitably connected to the most divisive aspects of the Good Friday Agreement – the early release of prisoners convicted of terrorist offences, and the prolonged decommissioning of the Provisional IRA's weapons. By comparison, the David Abraham controversy was confined to academic circles, having no direct connection with American politics.

The three case-studies nevertheless reveal a common pattern. In each dispute, the self-appointed defenders of the factual record have misrepresented their rivals' work, or at least given impoverished characterizations of their opponents, ignoring the value of insights which do not depend solely on the evidence in contention. A more detailed examination might show that the errors and unexplained absences in Peter Hart's book are more alarming than Lyndall Ryan's, but nothing like the rampant carelessness of David Abraham's archival visits. In contextualizing *The IRA and its enemies* in this manner, my intention is not to condone sloppiness. Even if we agree with Lawrence Stone's opinion, that '[a]rchival research is a special case of the general messiness of life', the appropriate response is not an attitude of amiable resignation but to redouble our vigilance.⁶³ My point is rather that, in all three controversies, it is difficult to believe that what is at stake is solely or even primarily a disinterested concern for academic integrity or methodological protocol. It seems that when historians fall out over footnotes there is more involved than scholarly propriety.

How will *The IRA and its enemies* be remembered? In the short term, it is likely that we will hear more of Dunmanway (and of the celebrated Kilmichael

⁶³ Wiener, *Historians in trouble*, p. 96.

ambush too, omitted from this discussion for reasons of space).⁶⁴ The excessive attention devoted to one chapter of a wide-ranging monograph, remarkable for its combination of quantitative as well as qualitative research, does of course reflect Peter Hart's fondness for provocation.⁶⁵ But the larger significance of the book is that it refocused our attention on violence – the close-quarter, human experience of actual fighting – rather than 'conflict' more generally. Compare Hart's work with Charles Townshend's landmark study, *Political violence in Ireland* (1983).⁶⁶ Although the latter has weathered remarkably well, its subject is the policy and strategy of Irish insurgents and their British opponents, *not* violence as we now think of it. There are analogous shifts of focus in other national histories, intersecting with the history of the body and memory studies; there are so many complementary trends in so many disciplines that it is hard not to conclude that they reflect a general reorientation in our sensibility. Images of violence are more accessible and immediate than ever, while most of us are less likely than ever to become either perpetrators or victims.⁶⁷ The outstanding analysis of violent insurgency is now Stathis Kalyvas's *The logic of violence in civil war* (2006), which focuses on the deliberate targeting of non-combatants. It is interesting to note that Kalyvas draws on Peter Hart's work to confirm points well attested by studies of other conflicts: that most informers are never suspected or discovered; that family ties are common features of insurgent groups; that insurgency creates new generational conflicts between 'newly empowered youth and the dispossessed elders'.⁶⁸

Typically, the debate over the Bandon Valley killings has so far ignored Kalyvas's influential work.⁶⁹ Kalyvas argues convincingly that investigations of civil war and insurgency should proceed with a strong presumption that violent acts are selective and instrumental rather than mindless or indiscriminate. He nevertheless finds that the desire for revenge can motivate massacre, especially towards the end of hostilities.⁷⁰ It is possible that the Bandon Valley killings saw a number of scores impulsively settled at a time when local IRA volunteers were not only free from the control of their commanders but

⁶⁴ The issues raised by Kilmichael are also less interesting. When I asked an Israeli post-graduate some years ago for her response to the Kilmichael controversy she shrugged and said, 'show me a war where nobody gets shot in the back'.

⁶⁵ David Fitzpatrick's measured verdict is surely right: Hart was not always sufficiently careful 'in his rush to be interesting, original and provocative'. David Fitzpatrick, 'Ethnic cleansing, ethical smearing and Irish historians', *History*, 98 (2013), pp. 135–44.

⁶⁶ Charles Townshend, *Political violence in Ireland: government and resistance since 1848* (Oxford, 1983), chs. 6–7.

⁶⁷ This trend can be seen in different types of literature, but one early example of what I have in mind is Christopher R. Browning's unforgettable *Ordinary men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland* (London, 1992).

⁶⁸ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 54, 79, 95n, 189–91, 343–4, 357, 375n.

⁶⁹ This is not true, however, of Gemma Clarke's *Everyday violence in the Irish civil war* (Cambridge, 2014), esp. ch. 5.

⁷⁰ Kalyvas, *Logic of violence*, pp. 60, 246, 274, 304–9.

knew there was little prospect of retaliation from crown forces. None of the elaborate disagreements over Hart's scholarship affects fundamentally his profoundly disenchanted picture of revolutionary violence as 'an intimate war', driven by tit-for-tat cycles, or as directed at unarmed individuals kidnapped or killed near their own homes.⁷¹

In this connection, it is worth pausing to reconsider the word 'reprisal', used by both Michael O'Donoghue and Frank Busted.⁷² This term had been the subject of serious debate both among British officials and in the press during 1920 – and it was British forces, of course, who were responsible for much of the reprising. It was widely accepted that spontaneous retaliation on the part of the military and the police was an inevitable feature of the conflict; but reprisals were also justified repeatedly on the grounds that their occurrence led directly to a flow of information from local people about republican ambushes. In the most affected districts, according to General Macready, the atmosphere changed from 'one of hostility to one of cringing submission'.⁷³ If there is an instrumental explanation for the Bandon Valley killings, it was surely of a similar kind to this. The cold logic of reprisals is clear from a comment in Ernie O'Malley's notes on his interview with Busted: 'In the [Civil War] we shot 4 or 5 locals – *then we could move anywhere*.'⁷⁴

Finally, there are further cultural developments, this time in the public sphere, which make it unlikely that the Peter Hart affair will be the last feud among Irish historians. These involve a kind of de-professionalization of historical knowledge – or, at least, a renegotiation of the relationship between the professional historian and the public. It is not simply that the rapid expansion of history departments, and the diverse subjects they study, has allowed ideological and methodological disagreements to flourish. The audience we write for has also changed. In 1968, Moody observed with satisfaction that the 'reading public' was following the lead of academic historians 'in breaking away from servitude to national myths and instead has taken to studying them'.⁷⁵ But the makers of this quiet revolution politely ignored the alternative representations of the Irish past which could be found in festivals, monuments, songs, plays, and text books. The appearance of more opinionated scholarship has transformed this situation; but so too has the obsessional remembrance of the last three decades: the expansion of the heritage industry and historical

⁷¹ Hart, *IRA and its enemies*, pp. 17–18, 79, 88.

⁷² Kalyvas suggests that the targeting of informers is often highly inaccurate but nonetheless effective. 'To achieve deterrence', he writes, 'political actors must convince the targeted population that they are able to monitor and sanction their behaviour with reasonable accuracy. In other words, they need to cultivate a *perception of credible selection*' (Kalyvas, *Logic of violence*, p. 190, his emphasis).

⁷³ Charles Townshend, *The republic: the fight for Irish independence* (London, 2013), p. 164. Townshend provides an excellent analysis of this whole issue on pp. 161–71.

⁷⁴ See n. 10 above (my emphasis). What is not clear is whether this remark was made by Busted or O'Malley, or to which shootings it refers.

⁷⁵ T. W. Moody, 'A new history of Ireland', *IHS*, 16 (1968–9), p. 251.

tourism, the explosion of information about the past through new electronic media, and the great state-sponsored commemorations of the 1990s – the first ‘decade of commemorations’ – which brought historians out of their university departments onto the national media and into local gatherings in an unprecedented way. The importance of local enthusiasts, the proliferation of museums and other exhibitions, the greater availability of government funding and the skill invested in the choreography of commemoration, the clashes between academic historians and the memory boom, not least over the issues of sectarianism and revolutionary violence: all these factors were already reshaping ‘public history’ in 1998, as we marked the centenary of the ’98 rebellion, in the same year that Peter Hart’s *The IRA and its enemies* was hailed, with much justice, as an instant classic.