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Dear Editor,

Author Barry Keane is reported (‘*Killing of Protestants in 1922 truce not sectarian, study argues’,* Irish Times, 23 January 2014) as saying of the murder of thirteen Protestants in and around Dunmanway in April 1922 that “he believes Dr Hart was incorrect to ascribe a sectarian motive to the killings and instead believe they were revenge killings for the death of a local IRA man”. This is in the context of a lengthy dispute over whether the late historian Peter Hart ever, or properly, described these attacks as ‘ethnic cleansing’.

I think it is now accepted that nothing like the ethnic cleansing that occurred recently in the former Yugoslavia matches the 1920s in Ireland, whether in Belfast or Cork. However what remains firmly resisted by Mr Keane in his new book ‘Massacre in West Cork,’ as well as by Republican writers generally, is that the murders were sectarian.

Relying on the Bureau of Military History statement by former GAA President Michael O’Donoghue, Keane avers that the killings were simply retaliatory after an IRA man Michael O’Neill was shot dead during a night-time raid on a Protestant house. He insists “Dr Hart was incorrect to ascribe a sectarian motive to the killings”. So it was neither ethnic cleaning nor sectarianism.

Retaliation may well have been the trigger motive, especially as your paper on 17 January reported Col. Michael Costello’s newly released statement that the deceased’s brother Daniel O’Neill took part in “the murder of several Protestants in West Cork” in 1922. But retaliation in the form of murdering ten entirely uninvolved Protestants (only), not to mention kidnapping, executing and disappearing the three men in the house being raided, is a step change beyond vengeance although sectarian actions are often vengeful.

But why is the accusation of sectarianism so strenuously resisted by Mr Keane, Michael O’Donoghue and most Irish nationalists in relation to these and similar events in the south? It would indeed be remarkable if an ethnic or national war like that in Ireland over the last century did not involve a high degree of sectarianism.

The disingenuous reason, I believe, is that Republicanism grew out of, maintains and certainly trades – especially internationally – on a policy and superficial reputation of bringing Irish people of all persuasions together. This could be possible with Irish Protestants, rarely of Unionists and never of pro-British populations and actual Loyalists, the majority in the north and also then (of Protestants) in Cork.

Until writers face up to that deceit and recognise sectarianism is endemic on both sides, disputes over the Past will continue to corrode the present.

Yours faithfully

Jeffrey Dudgeon