**Jumping the Shark on the Bandon River**

***Massacre in West Cork***

***The Dunmanway and Ballygroman Killings***

**by**

**Barry Keane**

**Reviewed by Gerard Murphy (unedited version)**

Much that has been written on the Dunmanway Massacre of some 13 Protestants by the IRA in 1922 over the past 15 years, especially on the internet, has been little more than a Goebbels-style attempt to put the genie back in the bottle. The current Wikipedia page on the subject, for instance, states categorically that eight of those murdered were ‘suspected informers’ and two more were relatives of same. Yet when you check the sources you find that there is no real evidence for this, other than some rather loose speculation. For this reason, I approached Barry Keane’s new book on the subject with some trepidation. Keane, you feel, is a brave man to take on this contentious topic, which of course is only contentious because some people have decided to make it so, largely for political reasons. The good news, however, is that *Massacre in West Cork* is better than I had feared it might be, and does not add to the growing mountain of bad-tempered material on the subject.

First the facts: On the night of 25/26 April 1922 an IRA party broke into the house of Thomas Hornibrook at Ballygroman, Ovens, about seven miles west of Cork city. Hornibrook, a Protestant, had been the object of persistent intimidation over the previous few years on account of being a loyalist. In the house that night were Thomas Hornibrook, his son, Samuel and his son-in-law’s nephew Herbert Woods. Woods was an ex-British Army captain with the reputation for recklessness. As the IRA men climbed the stairs Woods, who was armed, fired on them, fatally wounding Michael O’Neill, the leader of the IRA party.

The following morning Woods and the Hornibrooks were arrested by the IRA, charged with the shooting of O’Neill, taken to ‘an unknown destination’ and executed. Over the following few nights ten more Protestants were murdered, mostly in the Dunmanway area and several others were lucky to escape with their lives. Evidence now emerging suggests that the killers were the comrades of the dead Michael O’Neill stationed in the area, suggesting that that the motivation was mostly revenge.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Bandon Valley killings, sometimes referred to as the Dunmanway massacre, have attracted a lot of attention since they were first written about by the Canadian historian Peter Hart over fifteen years ago. Much of the debate, if it could be called that, has been nasty and personalized, with Hart himself being subject to sustained personal attack almost to the exclusion of the actual events themselves. Hart’s main crime was to describe what happened and to suggest that there was a sectarian element to the killings, though it is quite clear from his account that he regarded revenge as the prime motivation.

Barry Keane tells us at the outset that his aim is to ‘tell the story of what happened over the course of these events honestly and fairly’. The book adopts a conciliatory tone and Keane tries to see the tragic events of that week from both the IRA angle and that of its victims. There is none of the spiteful bigotry associated with much recent historiography on the subject. Keane tries to be fair to all. He also tracks down some interesting material that sheds new light on the topic.

The strength of the book is that he brings back the humanity of those involved. This is particularly the case with his handling of the Hornibrook family where he managed to find descendants living in England and details the suffering of the family both before and after the dreadful events the events of April 1922. But he is equally fair on the background of the O’Neills whose son Michael was shot that night. What he could not have done, since the evidence is only now beginning to emerge, is declare who the killers of the other ten Protestants were, though he does not shy away from naming names of those believed to be associated with the massacre.

Characters emerge from the detail. Herbert Woods, whose shot set the whole thing in motion is portrayed as a flawed though reckless figure. Keane does not shy away either from some of the ‘Wild West desperado’ tendencies of some of the IRA men alleged to have been involved: Con Crowley, for instance, is described as being notorious for quarrelling and brawling in the post-Truce period. ‘Conneen was a tough little gunman, always in trouble, always fighting. When in drink he was dangerous, merciless and irresponsible. He was a holy terror when he got going on his mad escapades, and Brigadier Hales was at his wits end to restrain him.’ Nor does he shy away from the lurid rumours that still circulate in Cork about the fate of Woods and the Hornibrooks, some of which are almost certainly true.

Yet there are aspects of the book which seem rather odd. For instance, he slides over the fact that Herbert Woods was employed by the military during 1920-21. He also changes the fact that Edward Woods, Herbert’s uncle, received a warning from the IRA to clear out of Cork ‘for having spies under your roof’ in June 1921. Keane suggests that Woods Snr was mistaken in his recollection of this and that it happened a year later. But this is not the kind of thing one would forget in a hurry – particularly when it would have been in Woods’s interest to say that it happened a year later for the benefit of claiming compensation. (The Irish Grants Commission only offered compensation for events that happened after the Truce of July 1921.) It is almost as if Keane is deliberately trying to avoid looking for ‘spies’ in the place you are more likely to find them – the military – in favour of a conspiracy among Protestant families. Maybe this is not his intention, but that is how it reads.

The Resurrection of the Anti-Sinn Fein League

The major problem with Keane’s analysis is that he uses the killing of the Hornibrooks to resurrect the Anti-Sinn Fein League as a cover name for the existence of some sort of cabal of Protestant civilians gathering information on IRA activities. The term the ‘Anti-Sinn Fein League’ was certainly used at the time, but by a secret cabal within the security forces – mostly RIC, but it probably also included army – to strike terror into the population. Notices from the ASFL were placed in newspapers, on hoardings and other public places. The ASFL was simply a cover for night-time British death squads. Labels were placed on the bodies of victims of these shadowy operatives, designed to show that the ASFL was as good at assassinations as the IRA was. Many of the Anti-Sinn Fein threats were first published in the *Weekly Survey*, the newspaper of the RIC. In fact, to judge by their own utterances, the first victim of ASFL ‘justice’ was Lord Mayor Tomás MacCurtain. ‘The theory is gradually gaining ground … that Mr MacCurtain, the Lord Mayor, fell victim to a new secret Anti-Sinn Fein Society, modelled and run upon the exact same lines as the famous Ku-Klux-Klan’[[2]](#footnote-2) I don’t think that anybody seriously believes MacCurtain was murdered by civilians; his killers, who styled themselves as ‘a private band of avengers’ were policemen in disguise. These ‘murder squads’ both police and military were part of life in Cork during those years. British agents of various stripes, dressed as civilians were responsible for many of the killings of IRA men in Cork city, especially in 1921.

The evidence for this is overwhelming,[[3]](#footnote-3) yet Keane chooses to ignore it all, opting instead to take District Inspector Holmes of the RIC at his word when he claimed that the ASFL was real and that it was not a cover for secret RIC death squads – when in reality he was trying to exonerate his own men from culpability for the burning of Cork city. The Coffey brothers of Enniskeane, who were murdered by one of these squads and had an Anti-Sinn Fein label (using Latin, not the most common language among West Cork Protestants) pinned to them, are a good example of this. But while Keane mentions this, he overlooks its most obvious implication, suggesting instead that it all points to Protestant civilians rather to one of the undercover hit squads that operated out of Bandon RIC barracks and who most likely carried out the killing. He also quotes a police weekly report from March 1921 where the Bandon RIC Divisional Commissioner reported that a ‘shed used by Sinn Fein was burnt by the Anti-Sinn Fein Society’. But to quote Mandy Rice-Davies, the DC would say that, wouldn’t he? Yet to Keane, ‘this is conclusive proof of its existence, but not of its membership’. Such British dissimulations, like self-serving witness statements on the IRA side, are accepted without question.

He also takes at face value the claims made by the IRA men who killed city Protestants when they claimed their victims were members of the ASFL. Almost every Protestant who was shot in Cork was claimed by the IRA men who did the deed as belonging to some version or other of the ASFL. Often in these accounts the two Protestant groups actually targeted in the city, the Freemasons from early 1921 and the YMCA from the spring of 1922, were lumped together into some sort of a super spy agency. But this was merely a euphemism used to cover all Protestants who were shot. Labels are useful when you want to send out young men to kill people. You shot someone because the intelligence department ordered you to do so. You did not question these orders.

Errors, Elision and Insinuation

Another problem with the book is that it is so bedevilled with minor errors that it will find it hard to be taken seriously. Some of these errors are Keane’s own but many others should have been picked up at the proofing stage. For instance, Jim Greenfield, one of the victims, is referred to as James in one page and John ‘Greenwood’ elsewhere, James Blemens is described as working for Woodford Bourne when he was in fact a horticultural instructor, many family relations and addresses in West Cork are plain wrong, BMH statements which are known to be economical with the truth are repeated without question. He makes a big play of how the 6th Division Weekly Intelligence report of mid-May 1921 suggests that there were a wide range of loyalist informers scattered around the countryside and that it indicates how accurate British intelligence was. In fact, in the view of Florrie O’Donoghue, one who should know better than anyone else, the information in the report was rather poor. ‘Bad, very bad’ was how O’Donoghue described it. As for the informers identified in the document and shot by the IRA, these were Catholics and IRA members – and were in counties Clare and Limerick anyway.

And there are far more serious anomalies in the book. Keane refers to historian (and critic) John Regan as Peter Hart’s ‘friend’, the inference being that Regan rather reluctantly found himself having to criticize Hart almost against his own wishes. Yet anybody who had followed this debate knows that with ‘friends’ like Regan, Hart hardly required enemies. That Regan’s arguments – and by extension the arguments of those he borrowed his ‘evidence’ from – have been completely demolished is not referred to at all.[[4]](#footnote-4) But this does not stop Keane from raising some of the same red herrings again.

There are quite a few sly insinuations used. For instance, Keane claims that in June 1921 GHQ asked for ‘the very discreet collection of the names and current addresses of all resident magistrates, justices of the peace, crown solicitors and petty sessions clerks and there is no doubt that the names of some of the victims would have appeared on this list.’ Yet these lists can be found in the O’Donoghue, Mulcahy and Lankford papers and the names of the victims are not on any of them. Another is the so-called Dunmanway dossier, a notebook left behind by the Auxiliary company who were garrisoned in Dunmanway workhouse. This, it has been claimed, was the list out of which the IRA selected its victims. Yet none of the victims are named on that list either, nor are they named on the IRA’s own list of informers. Yet these lists have been used for years to insinuate that the victims were spies. There is no evidence for any of this, which does not stop Keane from dragging it into the equation.

‘Telling the unvarnished truth is one of the cornerstones of academic research’ Keane tells us. In his attempts to suggest that there was a widespread network of loyalist spies in West Cork he quotes from a lecture given subsequently by Major Percival, the snaggle-toothed and vicious British commander who was based in Bandon during the conflict: ‘Major Percival states that his main sources of information were loyalist farmers and that he kept a six-inch map which identified the individual houses of those known to him on his office wall. This seems bizarre behaviour given the probability that the wrong eyes could see it.’[[5]](#footnote-5) This suggests that such spies were more or less everywhere and that Percival had a map detailing such a network on his wall. So how does that compare with what Percival actually said?

In a section called ‘The Inhabitants of the Country’ Percival writes: ‘I found the best way to do this [establish the political sympathies of every civilian] was to keep a large six-inch map on the wall of my office. On the maps every farm and detached house is marked and as we got information, I filled in the name of the occupier of each farm or house. I also kept in a book a note of the political sympathies of these occupiers. I was therefore able, before any officer went out on a raid, to give him all the available information as to whom he was likely to find in each house.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

Clearly, this was nothing more than a way of collating intelligence information. All the houses in his area were marked on his map. Many of these were, by definition, hostile, and were liable to be raided. It is hard to see from this how anyone could turn this around to mean what Keane claims it means. Yet Keane manages it. As for Protestants, Percival divides them into two: the Ascendency class whom he terms the ‘Old Landlords’, who ‘had English sympathy but avoided active participation’, and ‘the Protestant element’ namely ‘large farmers and shopkeepers’: ‘A few, but not many, were prepared to assist Crown Forces with information.’[[7]](#footnote-7) It is perfectly clear from his account that Percival was lamenting the paucity of information and help he was getting from Protestants, rather than the other way around.

And things were worse in the city from a British point of view. As Major (later Field Marshall) B.L. Montgomery who was stationed in the city from late 1920 put it: ‘We were not brought into such close contact with loyalists as you were and the result was I think that we did not appreciate their suffering to the same extent … I think I regarded all civilians as ‘Shinners’ and I never had any dealings with any of them.’ So much for a cabal of loyalist spies in the city helping out the military.[[8]](#footnote-8) But Keane does not refer to any of this kind of ‘unvarnished truth’. He reminds me of the shopkeeper who makes mistakes in totting up his bills, but only ever makes mistakes in his own favour.

Rather he goes to extraordinary lengths to link together his conspiracy theories. For example he states that David Gray, a Protestant pharmacist and one of the victims of the first night of the murders in Dunmanway was known to Warren Peacocke and Fred Stenning, shot during the War of Independence as suspected ‘spies’, because they all had a shared interest in angling. He claims to find a connection by going back to angling reports of 1913 and 1915! Yet what these reports say is that Gray merely caught trout in 1913 and Stenning caught some more in 1915. Peacocke is mentioned in neither report and neither source says any of them knew the other two. This, like the above, is stretching plausibility beyond its normal limits, ‘jumping the shark’ as it is known in the movie business. Even if it were correct, being an angler does not make one a spy. Likewise he claims that the Bennetts, targeted in April 1922, were close to the Cotters (Alfred Cotter was shot in 1921 for supplying bread to the RIC) because they played cricket together before World War One. But one of the Bennett brothers Keane claims was targeted in April 1922 had actually died (of natural causes) in 1921.The problem with this kind of argument and the larger problem of connecting families together is that in a small community like Cork Protestantism almost everybody was related to everyone else, and in a place like the Bandon valley everybody will have come into contact with everyone else at some point.

Towards the end of the book he tries to minimize the effects the killings had on the local Protestant population, claiming that less than 10% of the population left as a result.[[9]](#footnote-9) Yet, paragraph after paragraph, the evidence he presents himself would suggest otherwise. He even raises what may be the most comically selective argument used by anti-revisionists that one statement made at the Protestant Convention, held in Dublin on 11 May 1922 at which the fall-out from the murders was discussed could outweigh the very reason why the convention was held in the first place.[[10]](#footnote-10) This is the statement of Archdeacon Daly of Galway that ‘until the recent tragedies in the County Cork, hostility to Protestants by reason of their religion has been almost, if not wholly, unknown in the twenty-six counties in which Protestants are in a minority.’ This statement has achieved almost canonical status among internet ‘historians’. However, the oft-quoted Archdeacon, who was born in Cork, had a good reason for his denial since his own relatives had been burnt out of County Cork by the IRA in 1921. Like many another Protestant, Archdeacon Daly had good reason for keeping his head down and for publicly declaring that all was well.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The accounts of the convention published in the newspapers at the time say the precise opposite. To take an example which Keane quotes, Sergeant Hanna, the well-known Dublin barrister, told the convention: ‘we are a defenceless minority in Southern Ireland, and all we ask, or have ever asked, is for liberty to live our... lives... But unless this campaign of murder, exile, kidnapping, confiscation and destruction of property comes to an end in Southern Ireland an exodus of Protestants must ensue.’[[12]](#footnote-12) Keane quotes the last sentence to make it look like he is being objective but then gives the game away by leaving out the word ‘kidnapping’. Clearly, in Keane’s view, Protestants were not being kidnapped either. For someone suggesting others are guilty of elision this is a funny way to behave.

He also relates how a Protestant delegation met with Michael Collins the following day looking for reassurances for their safety. ‘They brought to his notice many cases in which their co-religionists had suffered persecution in various parts of the country. They asked for assurances that the Government was desirous of retaining them or whether in the alternative it was desirous that they should leave the country.’[[13]](#footnote-13) Collins of course did assure Protestants of their future in the new state and Protestants were quite well treated when the various wars were over. But the point is that at that stage they were contemplating upping sticks and abandoning the country altogether. They would not have reached this point without reason. But Keane does not bother to tell us that either.

Conclusions

However, having said all that, the book does have some good things going for it. While it cannot claim to be the definitive account of the massacre since such an account would need full access to the IRA pensions records, Keane is good on internet sources, particularly on genealogy and the Great War. He has unearthed some new and fascinating family connections around the Hornibrooks, though he does miss out on one significant genealogical connection, the fact that Warren Peacocke was a first cousin of Lady Carson, which may also have been a factor in his killing.[[14]](#footnote-14) And he does try to be fair-minded. His overall conclusions: that the Dunmanway murders were mainly motivated by revenge is hard to dispute, as is his summary that killings had ‘the arrogance of unfettered military power at their centre’.

With one exception, he found no real evidence other than rather loose speculation that the victims were ‘spies’.[[15]](#footnote-15) (The exception was Francis Fitzmaurice and since he was a partner of Jasper Wolfe, the Crown Solicitor for West Cork, he could hardly be expected to do anything else. He had also been intimidated since 1916 for allowing his car to be used by the RIC.)

That Keane found little evidence of a systematic sectarian plot to drive Protestants out of West Cork should not surprise us either, since this was largely a stick with which to beat Peter Hart, a trumped-up charge in the show trial that constituted much of the ‘debate’ over the past decade. However, his excavation of slender connections between individuals and his pursuit of family associations to the exclusion of military ones makes one wonder if this is perhaps just another example of blaming Protestants for their own suffering. The devil is in the detail. A sincere and honest effort or a piece of political playacting? We’ll find out if and when his more selective data appear as ‘fact’ in Wikipedia. By their fruits ye shall know them.

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1. Eunan O’Halpin, quoted in the *Irish Times*, 17/01/2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gerard Murphy, *The Year of Disappearances*, p84. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Murphy, *The Year of Disappearances*, Chapters 14 and 15; John Borgonovo*, Spies, Informers and the Anti-Sinn Fein Society*, Chapter 1. Borgonovo goes on to ignore his own evidence in his overall conclusions but he has to be credited for actually producing it and for not trying to pretend it did not exist. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://year-of-disappearances.blogspot.ie/search?updated-min=2012-01-01T00:00:00-08:00&updated-max=2013-01-01T00:00:00-08:00&max-results=2> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Keane, pp 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A.E.Percival, in William Sheehan, *British Voices from the Irish War of Independence*, (Cork 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sheehan, p98. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. B.L. Montgomery in Sheehan, p151. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The decrease in Protestant population was 32.5% in the 26 Counties, a quarter of which could be explained by the departure of people connected to the former British administration. 1926 Census. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I was accused of deliberately ignoring this ‘highly significant’ piece of evidence when my own book came out in 2010. The accusation was so risible that I did not even bother to respond to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In fact, two of their homes had been burnt out and they ended up living in the stable. Helena Daly, NA, Fin 1/707, Samuel Daly, CO 762/192, Peter Hart, *The IRA and its Enemies*, pp101-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Irish Times* 12/5/1922. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Irish Times,* 13/5/1922. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This was recently claimed by Eoghan Harris in his newspaper column. It turns out in fact to be true. *Sunday Independent* 17/11/2013; thepeerage.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. One of the near victims, R.J. Helen of Clonakilty who had given information was being taken away, presumably to be shot. But this case was quite different to the others who were all killed down on their doorstops. Helen would, in all likelihood, have disappeared had he not managed to escape. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)