**Bandon Valley killings**

Sir,—A ‘bemused’ Barry Keane (*HI* 26.2, March/April ’18, letters) rejects a sectarian interpretation to the contested Bandon Valley killings of late April 1922. We would like to point readers to our 2014 article, ‘“Something in the Nature of a Massacre”: The Bandon Valley Killings Revisited (É*ire-Ireland*: Fall/Winter 2014, pp.7-59, assisted by James Donnelly Jr), where we explain why a sectarian interpretation is called for. We based our judgement on an extensive range of sources, old and new, including almost all the material cited by Keane in his letter. While it is true that the individual IRA killers have not been identified, their victims have, thus enabling the analysis to proceed on the basis of outcomes. All thirteen Bandon Valley fatalities were Protestant, which leaves little room for doubt about the sectarian nature of the attacks. This compares to the War of Independence when the majority of suspected spies killed by the IRA in County Cork were Catholic (70%). If this was simply a matter of killing suspected spies, why was there not a single Catholic among the fatalities?

Beyond those killed, we also looked at those targeted (or who claimed to have been targeted) unsuccessfully by IRA gunmen in the Bandon Valley during the nights in question. Taken together we identified a total of 24 West Cork residents. Of those 24, 22 were Protestants (92%). The IRA gunmen largely visited **loyalist** households perceived to be hostile to republicans. But we note that the gunmen shot dead at least three men who do not appear to have been republican suspects but were killed in lieu of or in addition to their intended target. This kind of ‘collateral damage’ (as Keane describes it), is virtually unique among the scores of Cork IRA civilian assassinations that occurred during the 1920-23 period. Rather than a clinical purge of informers, it suggests the gunmen carried out a reprisal specifically against hostile Protestant **loyalist** households in the area, following the death of a senior IRA commander in an **encounter** with Protestant **loyalists** in nearby Ballygroman. Since Peter Hart’s exploration of the Bandon Valley killings in his 1998 book, *The IRA and Its Enemies*, a more nuanced interpretation has emerged in three respects: the quite exceptional and highly localised nature of the episode; the extent of the opposition to the killings by public officials, including anti-Treaty republicans; and the identities of the visited households as ‘suspect’ to local republicans (rightly or wrongly), without the occupants being considered sufficiently so as to **justify** their execution in the War of Independence.

The scale of the killings was unprecedented in County Cork. The IRA perpetrators did not accuse the Bandon Valley victims of espionage at the time, or publically take responsibility for the killings. Evidence strongly suggests they were not sanctioned by the IRA brigade leadership. Cork No. 3 brigade commander, Tom Hales, quickly issued a public statement standing down his units and promising to protect ‘all citizens in this area, regardless of creed or class’. Republican officials denounced the killings, including Erskine Childers who wrote in the anti-Treaty newspaper *Poblacht na h-Eireann*, ‘Sectarian crime is the foulest crime, and it is regarded as such in the tradition of our people, for it violates not only every Christian principle but the very basis of nationality as well’. Moreover, the anti-Treaty political and military leadership, both national and local, recognised the sectarian nature of these attacks. The major flaw in Barry Keane’s assessment of the Bandon Valley killings is that it fails to do likewise.—Yours etc,

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