**THE DUNMANWAY KILLINGS-MASSACRE, MYSTERY AND MOTIVE**

*New light and new views about 1922 mystery*

The Dunmanway Killings, sometimes called the Bandon Valley Murders or the Dunmanway Massacre, are one of the most notorious events in the modern Irish revolutionary period. The killings occurred at Dunmanway, Co. Cork, not during the War of Independence, but in late April 1922, before the Civil War. Over a few days some 10 victims were killed by the IRA. All were protestant civilians.

In recent years the reasons for these deaths have been hotly debated by academic and non-academic historians alike. The late Peter Hart, who began the debate with his book, *The IRA* *and its enemies*, has been followed by David Fitzpatrick, Charles Townshend, John Regan, Niall Meehan and Gerard Murphy, as well as by journalists like Eoghan Harris and Kevin Myers.

The bone of contention is whether these murders were a sectarian attack on West Cork protestants, or simply revenge for the shooting of a local IRA commander or the result of some other factor.

Recently, Cork local historian, Barry Keane, has written *Massacre in West Cork: the Dunmanway and Ballygroman killings* (Mercier). He has conducted extensive research into these happenings, including valuable use of statements recorded by the Bureau of Military History. In addition he critically examines the arguments which have emerged recently about the ‘Dunmanway Massacre’.

This is an impressive piece of research which casts new light on the event. At the same time, however, my own research raises serious questions about his conclusions. My chief concern is that he almost entirely ignores another motive which was widely believed at the time to be the cause of these deaths.

Keane begins the story on Wednesday 26 April, 1922, when a four man party of anti-Treaty IRA volunteers, reportedly on ‘ special duty’ (unspecified), arrived at 1.30 in the morning at Ballygroman House, Ovens, and demanded to speak to the owner, Thomas Hornibrook. These were not local IRA volunteers but from Bandon, 21 km away. In fact, as Keane points out, the local IRA commandant at Ovens, Lt Michael O’Regan, had given Thomas Hornibrook a gun to protect himself from agrarian agitators. That morning, unfortunately for the Hornibrooks, O’Regan, who might have intervened, was asleep at his home 3 km away.

When Hornibrook refused to open the door, they broke into the house. In the ensuing struggle, IRA Commandant Michael O’Neill was killed on the stairs by a shot fired allegedly by Captain Herbert Woods, an ex British army officer and family relation. Later that morning another IRA party returned to Ballygroman House and seized not only Woods but also Thomas Hornibrook and his son Samuel. All three were summarily executed and buried secretly. To this day they remain among the ‘disappeared’ of the revolutionary period.

That night and over the next three nights armed men went into Dunmanway and neighbourhood and murdered ten people, ranging from a 16 year old to a 82 year old. All were members of the Church of Ireland. In addition another 20, including some catholics, were attacked. There was widespread condemnation of these events but the perpetrators were never identified or charged, although there must have been many witnesses.

The horror of these days was soon subsumed in the violence of the Civil War. Later their memory was pushed into the background, among both republicans and members of the Church of Ireland. In the last quarter century, however, there has been considerable focus on and controversy about events at Dunmanway, especially due to Peter Hart’s work.

Most have agreed that the O’Neill death acted as a sort of spark which led to the events at Dunmanway. But they have been reluctant to see it as the main cause, because his death had already been revenged by the seizure of Woods and the Hornibrooks, and the number of deaths at Dunmanway was excessive. Absence of the local IRA leadership in Dublin, and consequent indiscipline among IRA ranks, have been viewed as contributing factors.

Various theories have emerged to explain events at Dunmanway and these are examined extensively by Keane. Some of the more fanciful, such as the idea that British agents were responsible in order to prompt a re-invasion, are easily dismissed. Greater attention, however, is paid to the work of several authors who claim that the victims at Dunmanway were killed because they had been or were informers.

Keane reveals serious weaknesses in these claims, some based on documents seen only by the particular authors. He believes that there may have been several informers in Dunmanway but he is not able to link this belief to any of the deceased. In the end he can find no significant evidence to substantiate such allegations against the victims.

He also insists that even if these claims are true, this would not justify their murder at this late stage, after the Truce and the Treaty. The author investigates the capture and execution by the IRA at Macroom in late April of 4 British army officers, alleged to be spies, but he can find no connection between Dunmanway and Macroom.

Keane does produce one piece of evidence which he believes explains why there was such violence after O’Neill’s death. He reprints a statement made by local IRA volunteer Michael O’Donoghue in 1952 to the Bureau of Military History that those killed at Dunmanway were loyalists who were identified as part of an anti-Sinn Fein Society in West Cork, and killed for this reason, not a sectarian one, in reprisal for O’Neill’s death. Keane is unable to corroborate this statement with evidence to implicate any of the Dunmanway victims in such a society.

Nonetheless, the author believes that this statement shows that those involved had ‘perceived’ their victims to be guilty on this score. He argues that at this much later stage O’Donoghue had no reason to make up such a story. This argument must surely be challenged. Given that the event was so notorious, there was still very good reason for O’Donoghue to try to excuse for such an atrocity.

Both these theories of ‘informers’ or membership of an anti-Sinn Fein organization are also undermined by other contemporary evidence, or lack of evidence. Nowhere in his book does Keane record a single report or speech from April/May 1922 to suggest that any of the victims were or were perceived to be members of such an organization or informers. For some at the time such a suggestion would have explained or excused the murders.

Indeed, to the contrary, Keane reports the chairman’s statement at a meeting of Bandon District Council on 8 May, that many protestants in the past had harboured IRA volunteers, although he omits a claim by another council member that some of the actual victims had ‘sheltered men from the fury of the British forces’.

Of course, Dunmanway was the home town of London based Sam Maguire, a member of the Church of Ireland and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, in whose honour the GAA’s Sam Maguire Cup is named. He is buried in the graveyard of St Mary’s Church,Dunmanway, as are some of the dead of 1922.We can speculate that if Sam Maguire, who had sworn Michael Collins into the IRB, had been home at the family farm near Dunmanway on the night of 26 April 1922 there might be no Sam Maguire Cup today.

A more important reason, however, to reject such theories is that there is another good explanation given at the time to explain the murders, supported by my own research, but which Keane only mentions in passing and to which he gives no serious consideration. There was a widespread contemporary view that these murders and violence were a reaction to and reprisals for murders in the north.

Reprisals against innocent members of a community because of the actions of others were a nasty feature of the violence of these years. For example, in Dec. 1921 Auxiliaries burnt a large part of Cork (including the business premises of the uncle of Capt. Herbert Woods) in response to actions of the IRA. At the same time, the IRA burnt homes of ‘loyalists’ in Co. Cork in response to British army actions: Tom Barry later described how: ‘our only fear was that…. there would be no more loyalist homes to destroy’.

The first six months of 1922 witnessed a rise in sectarian and political violence in the north, which included the expulsion of many catholics from their homes in Belfast. On 22 Mar. the *Cork Examiner* talked of ‘the wild orgy of murder that is disgracing the name of Belfast’. There were some very ugly events such as the murder in March of 6 members of the catholic McMahon family by a gang apparently led by RUC District Inspector J.W. Nixon. In June 6 presbyterian farmers at Altnaveigh near Newry were murdered by an IRA gang apparently under the orders of Louth republican Frank Aiken.

Many of the statements issued at the time in strong condemnation of the Dunmanway murders (but not quoted in this book) saw the matter in this context. On Sunday 30 April a local priest, Canon Hayes, stated: ‘If a mad Orangeman murdered a catholic in Belfast, he saw no reason why an innocent protestant should be shot in the south as a reprisal’. The catholic bishop of Cork, Dr Daniel Colohan, asked: ‘Where would they find themselves if in the north protestants continued murdering members of the catholic community and in the south catholics took reprisals on the protestant community’.

That same day in Longford, Eamon de Valera warned against the danger of reprisals on the minority in the south for what was happening to catholics in Belfast, although he did not rule out violence. He urged people: ‘Let them if necessary carry on a crusade in the north in defence of their brothers, who were being ruthlessly murdered, but not carry out reprisals here’.

Michael Collins, a West Cork TD, and other government ministers, met a Church of Ireland deputation on 12 May in Dublin and sought to give reassurance. Collins remarked that ‘it was obvious that the revolting murders in Belfast had an effect on the current situation: but the Belfast massacres could not be considered any justification for the outrages to which the deputation had alluded’. Keane’s report of the meeting omits Collins’s reference to northern events, although he records this view of Collins at a later meeting with Lloyd George and Churchill on 30 May 1922.

Given the strength and range of these views, it seems reasonable to argue that this attack in Dunmanway was a sectarian reprisal by elements of the IRA for sectarian attacks in the north, probably sparked off by the shooting of O’Neill. Through no fault of their own, Dunmanway protestants were targeted because of their perceived links with northern protestants and events in Northern Ireland. The stark, unquestionable reality was that all the murder victims were protestant.

Over the following 70 years, there have been other examples of such targeting, although not so extreme. In 1935, at another time of northern tension, Kilmallock Church of Ireland Church in Limerick diocese was maliciously destroyed. On this occasion, Eamon de Valera not only denounced the attack but, when the church was rebuilt in 1938, he paid for the installation of a stained glass window from the redundant Bruree church, in honour of a former rector who had taught him Irish.

The immediate consequence of the Dunmanway murders was the flight from West Cork of considerable numbers of the male protestant population. Such an extreme act of violence, however, was not repeated and can be counted as the worst of such incidents affecting the protestant minority.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that this event occurred during a period when many members of the protestant community experienced extreme pressures, for a variety of political, economic and religious reasons. By 1926 their numbers in the 26 counties were 32 per cent less than they had been in 1911. Every county experienced a serious decline. It seems that the worst period was not 1919-21 but 1922-3, as reports from Church of Ireland local diocesan synods indicate.

Various political and religious leaders strongly condemned the treatment of the protestant minority at this time. In February 1923 the catholic bishop of Cork, Dr Daniel Cohalan, acknowledged how ‘protestants have suffered severely during the period of the civil war in the south’ and urged that ‘charity knows no exclusion of creed’. In May 1923, the catholic bishop of Killaloe, Dr Michael Fogarty, appealed to a higher sense of patriotism, noting that ‘their protestant fellow countrymen-he regretted to have to say it-were persecuted and dealt with in a cruel and coarse manner’.

The ‘Dunmanway Massacre’ remains a subject of mystery and controversy. Some questions are still unanswered. Why did a unit of Bandon IRA turned up at 1.30 am at the home of the Hornibrooks who appear to have had local IRA protection, where did they bury the bodies of the Hornibrooks and Herbert Woods, and who were the people who carried out those dark and shameful acts at Dunmanway? Nonetheless, new light has been cast on these events by Barry Keane’s recent book. At the same time, we need to be aware of other dimensions, in particular what many people at the time, with good reason, understood to have happened.

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