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**Historian disputes sectarian motive for murder of 13 Protestants in Cork**

BARRY ROCHE, Southern Correspondent

A CONTROVERSIAL study that claimed the murder of 13 Protestants in Bandon in April 1922 was sectarian was challenged at a meeting in Cork attended by more than 500 people at the weekend.

Historian Dr John M Regan of the University of Dundee said the late Dr Peter Hart had omitted significant evidence when concluding the killings of Protestants in the Bandon valley at the end of April 1922 was sectarian in motivation.

In his book The IRA and Its Enemies – Violence and Community in Cork 1916-1923, Dr Hart concluded in a chapter entitled “Taking it out on the Protestants” that the primary motivation behind the killings of the 13 men, aged from 16 to 82 years, was sectarian.

“Behind the shootings lay a jumble of individual histories and possible motives. In the end however, the fact of the victim’s religion is inescapable. These men were shot because they were Protestant,” wrote Dr Hart, who died in 2010.

“No Catholic Free Staters, landlords or ‘spies’ were shot or even shot at. The sectarian antagonism which drove the massacre was interwoven with political hysteria and local vendettas, but it was sectarian nonetheless,” he wrote.

However, Dr Regan challenged this interpretation, echoing historian Brian P Murphy’s assertion that Dr Hart relied on a selective interpretation of a British army document The Record of the Rebellion in Ireland 1920-21, which reported on loyalists providing intelligence to the British.

Brian Murphy had noted, Dr Regan pointed out, that while the British army document states that generally loyalists had little information to give on IRA activities, it does add that the exception was in “the Bandon area, where there were many Protestant farmers who gave information”.

And Dr Regan accused the late Dr Hart of ignoring this evidence in order to support his thesis that the killings were sectarian. “Hart’s narration of the massacre is a compelling piece of writing . . . [however] Hart’s treatment concentrates more on the atrocity than its context.”

Dr Andy Bielenberg of UCC, who is carrying out research on the killings, pointed out there was much agreement among historians that one of the triggers for the murders may have been the killing of an IRA commandant, Michael O’Neill at Ballygroman in Farran the day before.

Three Protestant men, including Capt Herbert Woods, who shot O’Neill, were abducted by the IRA and killed, while three British army intelligence officers and a driver captured by the IRA in Macroom the same day were also killed two days later.

He suggested the IRA were aware from the abduction of the three British army intelligence officers that the British were attempting to reactivate intelligence gathering in Cork and may have seen unionists as potential allies.

**At least some of those killed by the IRA in the Bandon Valley were on old IRA blacklists of suspected informers from 1921, said Dr Bielenberg** who pointed out the killings were roundly condemned by both pro- and anti-treaty IRA units in west Cork and by Sinn Féin leaders in Dublin.

Emeritus professor of history at UCC, John A Murphy, said it was impossible to know the motivation of those behind the killings when their identities were not known, but it was impossible to say they were not at least partly sectarian.

Critics of Dr Hart had argued he had exaggerated tensions between Catholics and Protestants in west Cork, but it should be recognised that, throughout the 19th century, Protestants were seen by Catholics as oppressors and it would be “astonishing” if there wasn’t an intense Catholic reaction to such oppression, said Prof Murphy.

**John-Paul McCarthy: Silent witness to West Cork's grim and bloody history**

**Americans acknowledge the violence of their civil war but denial of our past is based on fear, writes John-Paul McCarthy**

Sunday April 22 2012

I thought TG4's programme on Tom Crean, Ciarraioch san Oighear, was going to be the most moving Irish language programme of the month. But RTE's profile of Corkman Canon George Salter, An Tost Fada, (The Long Silence) knocked me for six.

Listening to Salter explain the melancholy fate of his family in lyrical Irish, I thought of a couple of things.

Firstly, I thought about the way Irish-speaking patriotic Cork Protestants like Salter make far superior cultural role models for children than old racists like Sean O Riordain and Daniel Corkery.

Here's hoping George Salter's programme will be given to Leaving Cert students all over the country, and not just in Bandon Grammar where he was filmed.

Secondly, I was left asking myself again why on earth it has taken almost a hundred years for his story of intimidation and IRA-enforced exile to be told. That was probably the worst indignity of all inflicted on his family.

IRA men calling at 3am to force a terrified Protestant housewife to cook for them was squalid enough.

As was the fact that the local IRA believed that frequent trips to England could be a capital crime, especially if you were a Protestant farmer like George's father. Richard Draper's description of the day his father was 'advised' by a neighbour in Skibbereen that the Drapers better convert to Catholicism also shocked the conscience.

But the force of these threats and expulsions was made a million times worse by the fact that the Salters felt the need to keep quiet for so long.

This programme was really about the psychology of denial, a psychology I got an unpleasant taste of last year in Cork City Hall when speaking about Tomas MacCurtain and Traolach MacSuibhne.

Six hundred people came to listen, drawn no doubt by Pat Cox, Ruth Dudley Edwards, John A Murphy and Tim Pat Coogan rather than your humble correspondent. I tried to make room for voices like Salter's and spoke about the sectarian atrocities that have come to light over the last decade.

About three people out of the 600 seemed privately receptive to what I was saying, but not one single questioner from the large audience was interested in pursuing the murder of Protestant civilians in Dunmanway, Coolacrease or Cork city during 1919-23.

I had an unpleasant evening all things considered, but nothing that three swift pints didn't cure after chairman Cox called time, and nothing compared to what befell the Drapers and Salters.

An Tost Fada put a deep gash in the hide of that City Hall audience after the fact because it showed in the grimmest possible detail how working-class Protestants were targeted by certain IRA groups.

It's still a mystery to me why there's even an academic "debate" about the sectarian dimension of the violence during 1919-23 and about the deliberate focus on soft Protestant targets in Cork city and county.

Even Bishop Daniel Coholan of Cork city spoke about these sectarian attacks; and the killings at Dunmanway, Coolacrease and elsewhere had such a shattering cumulative effect that a delegation of Protestants asked Michael Collins to his face if they should just clear out altogether.

Confronted with a sizable drop in Protestant numbers in the 26 counties between 1911 and 1926, most normal people would give a fairly heavy accent to sectarian intimidation and murder when trying to explain the bulk of the drop.

Though it may be impolite to say this to people who have made a career crunching these numbers, you really don't need a PhD to explain the bulk of this large drop in Protestant numbers, a drop estimated by Professor Brian Walker to be 106,456.

Start with Ireland's long history of sectarianism from Raftery to Corkery, add a couple of hundred young men with guns, stir in some pre-prepared atrocities like the ones in Dunmanway and some of Bishop Coholan's sermons, leave to simmer for 100 years and you end up with many stories like George Salter's.

Now, Salter's testimony also asks the audience to consider the rationale of those who have denied him a hearing for so long. And here, we have to confront three distinct strands in the psychology of denial.

One strand in this tradition never met an historical corpse that couldn't be convicted of something. This strand is beyond help.

A second strand seems willing to stretch the definition of "legitimate target" so far beyond what seems reasonable that local sectarian hatreds are transmuted into IRA "retaliation" or "self-defence".

A third strand then just wishes this whole thing would go away because it casts a heavy pall, or so they think, over the entire independence project and the basic legitimacy of the new state.

Salter helps us see through this confusion as well because he showed us that we can recognise the profound sectarian dimension in Irish life without in any way cutting out our own hearts.

Americans know that their society came from the mass murder of the civil war, a war that saw pitiless and protracted attacks on civilians, especially in Georgia.

Recognising that doesn't mean their country ceases to have any moral worth at all. If anything, recognising human failure makes us more interesting. And here Salter helped again when he told the story of the deathbed confession by a local IRA man who admitted to sectarian killings in the presence of the once-exiled Salter senior.

Salter's father didn't crow or exult, merely accepted the man's remorse and encouraged him to think about a brighter future than the one the IRA gave his family.

Recognising moral deformity, in other words, need not terminate in internal exile.

There's lessons in this for every citizen, and it may even extend beyond the historical realm. An Tost Fada showed that denial is ultimately based on fear, fear of the unknown and fear of the uncontrollable.

The Fine Gael members of the Cabinet cannot quite figure out what happens next if they break with the Taoiseach over Denis O'Brien and if Mr O'Brien wins control over Independent News & Media.

Hence the silence and denial by the failed but promoted FG plotters about Justice Moriarty's findings, a denial that facilitates the Taoiseach's own tost fada on Esat.

FG's ministerial meekness does little even to guarantee future preferment because it is based on fear rather than insight.