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**Disappearance in Dunmanway**

“The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there,” wrote L.P. Hartley at the beginning of his novel ‘The Go-Between,’ set just before the 1st World War.

Well they didn’t in the 1920s, in relation to people disappearing. However as Billy McKee, OC in the IRA’s Belfast Brigade in the early 1970s, so brutally and frankly stated in the recent TV documentary, when he ordered people to be executed they were not disappeared. Their bodies were left in the open, often along border crossings, so that relatives and others were left in no doubt as to their fate.

In the years 1920-22, disappearing was a common practice, especially in Cork. The reasons varied. The most infamous sectarian killings were in the Dunmanway massacre in April 1922 (after the Truce) when thirteen Protestant men and boys were put to death over two days. The initial targets, three members of the Hornibrooks, a farming family in Ballygroman, were never seen again. The fate of the men was variously said to have been hanging, dismembering or shooting. Either way they disappeared for ever and had to be declared dead by the courts.

The past just doesn’t go away, as the consequent Bandon Valley killings of a further ten Protestants by an out-of-control IRA unit, bent on revenge and sectarian hatred have become controversial once again.

Tim Pat Coogan quoted a local woman writing at the time, “For two weeks there wasn't standing room on any of the boats or mail trains leaving Cork for England…refugees who were either fleeing in terror or had been ordered out of the country...none of the people who did these things, though they were reported as the rebel IRA faction, were ever brought to book by the Provisional Government.” These dead were parked and thought forgotten, not least by southern Protestants who reckoned it better not to dwell on their fate.

Former Senator Eoghan Harris in this week’s *Sunday Independent* reminded us how, “These victims’ disappearance was compounded by the vicious malevolent rumour mill that attempted to cast aspersions on their characters.” This even continues with false stories about them being ‘informers’ appearing as fact on Wikipedia. Of course they were mostly anti-IRA but so are, and were, most of the country.

It is a remarkable fact that Sinn Fein must now recognise. No matter how much they try to appear modern and reconciling, the reality of a 40-year war which, if nothing else, was needlessly prolonged will haunt them for a century, especially in the south. If the campaign wasn’t simply sectarian, it was a war crime, ethnic cleansing, a crime against humanity, and genocidal. All those phases of the public discussion are yet to come.

Truth is a moving target liable to bite back. It is best left to historians not political campaigning.