**Eoghan Harris: The continuity of the IRA and bodies buried in bogs**



**Eoghan Harris** – 10 November 2013

Sunday Independent

**LAST Tuesday, at 5.50pm,** [**Brendan Smith**](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Brendan_Smith)**,** [**Fianna Fail**](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Fianna_Fail) **TD for Cavan-Monaghan, rose in** [**Dail Eireann**](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Dail_Eireann) **to make by far the best speech on the moral and political issues raised by the RTE/BBC programme The Disappeared. Let me take four quotes from his speech as a stimulus to my own few thoughts.**

"RTE and BBC did a valuable public service in producing this documentary, which dealt in great detail with those awful murders and devastated families."

So they did. It was all the better because reporter Darragh MacIntyre did not adopt a morally neutral stance. The programme's ethical hinterland was extended by the experience of RTE's executive producer Steve Carson, who had previously made a poignant film on Frank Aiken's involvement in the reprisal massacre of eight Protestant civilians in June 1922 at Altnaveigh, Co Armagh.

What a pity then that RTE News and Current Affairs failed to fully follow up the fallout from the programme the next day. Even more extraordinary was how easily RTE – admittedly not alone in the media – fell for the transparent [Sinn Fein](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Sinn_Fein) stratagem of trying to distract the public from the Disappeared with a smoke-and-mirrors story about Anglo Tapes.

"Sons, brothers, husbands, fathers and mothers were ruthlessly taken from their families in the dark of night on the orders of self-appointed local war lords. Some were barely old enough to shave before they disappeared into the depths of an IRA conspiracy."

All true. But it needs an addendum. Perhaps the only weakness in The Disappeared was that it got confused about the historical continuity in the IRA's policy of secret burials. This allowed a former IRA commander, the ostentatiously pious Billy McKee, to indignantly deny that the 1950s IRA disappeared victims.

The real culprits were the Old IRA of the War of Independence, whom we still like to put on a pedestal. In fact, the First Cork Brigade of the Old IRA were far ahead of the Provisional IRA's [Belfast](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Belfast) Brigade in the grisly league table of secret grave-digging. In the course of its campaign against alleged spies it killed 80 civilians, of whom 48 were disappeared. Only two bodies were recovered: the rest are rumoured to be buried in Rylane, Knockraha or beneath the city dump at the Blackash.

The Third West Cork Brigade could teach the Provos lessons too. On April 26, 1922, intruders who did not identify themselves as IRA members broke into Ballygroman House near Bandon, home of three Protestant loyalists: Thomas Hornibrook, his son Samuel, and his son-in-law Captain Herbert Woods, who panicked and fired in the darkness, killing a local IRA leader, [Michael O'Neill](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Michael_O%27Neill_%28footballer%29).

The IRA raiders sent for reinforcements and the three Protestants surrendered at dawn. Woods immediately owned up to the shooting, was beaten unconscious and the three men were then driven south to boggy land, forced to dig their own graves, shot and buried without trace. Ballygroman House was burned to the ground and the lands taken by locals for grazing.

[Peter Hart](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Peter_Hart_%28footballer%29), the historian, wrote: "No Irish newspaper reported these events. To the outside world, the Hornibrooks and Woods had disappeared without a trace." But the shooting of Michael O'Neill triggered an orgy of IRA revenge killing over three nights in April 1922, which left 10 innocent Protestant civilians dead. As in South Armagh, the IRA lulled local unease by peddling lies which are told to this day.

"These victims' disappearance was compounded by the vicious malevolent rumour mill that attempted to cast aspersions on their characters and/or give false hope to bereft families."

Following a reference I made a few weeks ago to the April killings, a friendly local republican told me that there was "a lynch mob waiting for you in Dunmanway". My offences included "inflaming sectarian feeling". Translated, this means a few hard-core nationalists around Dunmanway demand that I accept false local nationalist folklore as the last word on the affair.

As in Belfast and South Armagh, the Old IRA's supporters in West Cork still deploy rumour to retrospectively destroy the reputations of innocent Protestant victims by smearing them as spies. But none of the murdered Protestants were members of the IRA. Accordingly, they had no inside information and could not have been spies.

"There are people who know where they are buried. Some of these people are now in prominent public positions in Irish life."

This brings us to the big problem. How do you handle TDs who may have been responsible for ordering the abduction of a mother of 10 from her home, her torture and the leaving of her bones to bleach on a beach while her family was broken up?

Last week, watching the Dail trying to deal with [Gerry Adams](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Gerry_Adams) – who was off to America to meet wealthy admirers – I was again reminded of my favourite Chinese proverb: "We can't stop the blackbirds of evil flying overhead, but we can stop them making a nest in our hair."

But we didn't stop them making a nest in our hair. When the Provo IRA killers were flying across the Border after an atrocity in the confidence they would not be extradited, we let them fly by. We did not shoot them down, or cage them en masse, or clip their wings as WT Cosgrave and De Valera did.

We didn't just invite the evil blackbirds to make a nest in our hair. We pretended they were peace doves. So we are caught in a bind when they turn out to be vultures who feasted on their victims' fears before burying their bodies in bogs and beaches and spreading lying rumours about them.

The Dail's dilemma is pointed up by a piece Niall O'Dowd wrote in 2010 after RTE ran a competition for greatest Irish person.

"I believe that the award went to the wrong person. No, not [Michael Collins](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Michael_Collins_%28politician%29) or [James Connolly](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/James_Connolly) or [Mary Robinson](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Mary_Robinson) or Bono, who were also in the frame, but someone who was not considered. Gerry Adams did more to bring peace to Ireland than [John Hume](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/John_Hume) did, in my opinion."

"The weight of history is a heavy burden in this country. Shallow graves in desolate bogs, on lonely beaches and down distant country lanes are a testament to that burden. The victims' families are left with that dark legacy."

That dark legacy is likely to return as long as we fail to strip the false glitter from 1916 and the "four glorious years" of the War of Independence. Many units of the Old IRA, just like the Provisional IRA, were nothing more than mobile murder gangs who persecuted Protestants, [First World War](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/World_War_I) veterans and anyone who opposed their local tyrannies.

In 2016 we plan to celebrate those who seized the GPO and began the long cycle of violence which still claims victims. We will continue to pretend there is no connection between the Old IRA and the Provisional IRA. But, of course, the bloody continuity includes everything from arrogating the right to conduct armed struggle, to abduction, torture and secret burials, followed by false rumour, deception and denial.

Here is a hard truth: as long as we continue to celebrate the men of violence, from Michael Collins to Gerry Adams, and fail to make heroes of men of peace, like Daniel O'Connell and John Redmond, we will always have evil blackbirds sitting on our skulls.

Sunday Independent

<http://www.independent.ie/opinion/columnists/eoghan-harris/eoghan-harris-the-continuity-of-the-ira-and-bodies-buried-in-bogs-29741175.html>