[On Barry Keane’s book and Dunmanway]

**Eoghan Harris: From Archive to 'Amber' in the search for closure**

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**Eoghan Harris** –

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**These past two weeks we learnt a lot about memory and missing persons: the Military Service Pensions Collection released the first tranche of documents, Barry** [**Keane**](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Keane%2C_Inc.) **launched a new book on the Dunmanway killings of April 1922, Amber got healthy audiences on RTE. But there was cold comfort for those seeking closure.**

Let me start with a salute to the Military Archives project. Back in 2006, [Bertie Ahern](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Bertie_Ahern) asked for the archives to be made available to the general public. The small staff have done prodigious work and the website works perfectly. But my joy is not unconfined for two reasons.

First, oral testimonies are notoriously fallible. The same facts look different, depending whether you are an IRA man pointing a pistol, or an RIC man staring down the barrel. So it was wise to bring on board professional historians like Professor Eunan O hAlpin, Charles Townshend and Diarmaid Ferriter.

Second, [Sinn Fein](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Sinn_Fein) will try to cash in on the huge constituency of pride aroused by the archives and link it to their own armed struggle. Some 68,896 medals were awarded for the period 1916-21. Multiply their third-generation descendants by even a modest 10 and you get nearly 700,000 proud people, most of whom don't want to hear about anything bad Granduncle Dan might have done.

Luckily, most of the pride is legitimate. But all wars bring out natural- born killers like [Martin Corry](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Martin_Corry) and Dan Breen. [Stephen Collins](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Stephen_Collins) reminded us of the victims whose graves lie in the shadow of the Celtic cross in a powerful piece for The Irish Times titled simply 'A Sectarian Side to the Struggle'.

But Dan Breen is still a hero to Victor Griffin, vice president of [Fianna Fail](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Fianna_Fail), who posted the following on his [Facebook](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Facebook) page last Tuesday: "Happy Independence Day Ireland!!! On 21/1/1919 Dail Eireann met and declared a republic. At the same time in Co Tipperary Dan Breen and Sean Treacy attacked a transportation of dynamite and set in train the War of Independence. So proud that a tiny nation like ours could bring the world's biggest super power to its knees. The Irish people did it with democratic resistance, armed struggle in the face of greater force and most importantly with the courage to believe our time had come. We do not forget those in the six counties of course today. But unity is inevitable. 'And Ireland long a province be a nation once again.'"

Soloheadbeg was a piece of savagery. On January 21, 1919, two Roman Catholic members of the RIC, Constable McDonnell, a widower with four children, from Belmullet, Co Mayo, and Constable O'Connell, from Coachford, Co Cork, were gunned down without warning. The four McDonnell children were left orphans. De Valera was disgusted. Fianna Fail should follow his example.

Luckily, Barry [Keane](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Keane%2C_Inc.), an aspiring [Fine Gael](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Fine_Gael) candidate at the forthcoming local elections and author of Massacre In West Cork, seems to be aware of the atavistic forces lurking on the fringes of history. A fast reading – I only got a copy last Friday – means that what follows is a first reaction, rather than a review.

Keane has done [Trojan](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Trojan) work in digging up the details of the Dunmanway massacre of April 1922, where Captain Woods's killing of a nocturnal but unarmed IRA intruder, Captain Michael O'Neill, at Ballygroman House, resulted in the revenge killing of 10 Protestants. His book is the best and most balanced account to come out the combat zone created by the late Peter [Hart](http://searchtopics.independent.ie/topic/Peter_hart)'s pioneering study The IRA And Its Enemies.

Hart was the first historian to fully probe the sectarian dimension of the IRA's campaign in Cork. This makes him a bogeyman for ultra nationalists. On one website they denounce his work as "central to the ideology of a hardline rump of Neo-Unionist and Pro-British apologist writers and journalists in Ireland". As I am sure that includes me, it is hardly surprising that I have two reservations about Keane's criticisms of Hart's findings.

First, in his book, as well as in press interviews, Keane seems too reductionist in his depiction of Hart's views. According to Barry Roche's report in The Irish Times, Keane "believes Dr Hart was incorrect to ascribe a sectarian motive to the killings and instead believes they were revenge killings for the death of a local man".

But why the binary distinction signalled by that "instead"? Why could not revenge and sectarianism be factors? Certainly Hart believed both motives were involved and gave proper balance to each of them in his classic study.

In The IRA And Its Enemies Hart accepts that revenge was a major motive. "It was undoubtedly O'Neill's death that sparked the following three nights of raids and murders" (p282). And a few pages later: "These were revenge killings on many levels" (291).

But while accepting the revenge factor, Hart also added a sectarian factor. How could he have done otherwise? How could any professional historian rule out a sectarian dimension when 10 Protestants – and only Protestants – were singled out for shooting over three nights?

My second criticism is that in support of his case that the killings were not sectarian, Keane seems to uncritically accept the interpretation of local IRA leader Michael Donoghue, who in his witness statement said: "All were Protestants. This gave the slaughter a sectarian appearance. Religious animosity had nothing whatsoever to do with it."

But it seems to me that Donoghue's statement confirms rather than contradicts the sectarian dimension. Given that all the victims were Protestants, how could the killings have had any other "appearance" except sectarian? Certainly that was the "appearance" the slaughter would have for local Protestants and explains why hundreds left the area, even if many later returned.

For me, Hart's judgement still stands. "Behind the killings lay a jumble of individual histories and possible motives. In the end, however, the fact of the victims' religion is inescapable. These men were shot because they were Protestants. No Catholic Free Staters, landlords or 'spies' were shot or even shot at."

Hart has a firm grip on the class forces.

"The IRA, a product of local communities, couldn't get away with killing respectable farmers or shopkeepers – let alone priests – and tended to suspect outsiders anyway.

"It is surely a familiar enough pattern in human affairs: fear, anger and prejudice."

Barry Keane does not sit on the moral fence. He condemns the killings categorically as "the arrogance of unfettered military power". And reminds us that bodies of the two Hornibrooks and Captain Woods are still missing. "Uncovering this must be the next, and final chapter of the story."

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Last week, putting my trust in its producer, Paul Duane, I urged you to watch Amber. I did so myself, and was not disappointed. Although I normally hate flashbacks, I was absorbed by Rob Cawley's complex but clear screenplay.

Ryan Tubridy took up the populist complaint that Amber lacked closure with producer Paul Duane.

"If you do know the answer to what happened to Amber, tell me." To which Duane replied deadpan: "Well, Amber's dead."

Tubridy should look up LC Knights famous satirical essay, How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth? The answer is none. Because she is a fiction. Ditto Amber.