**The ‘Bandon Valley Massacre’ as a Historical Problem**

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**Abstract**

Over three nights in late April 1922, eighteen people were killed in west county Cork, in Ireland. All save one of the dead were Protestants. This article re-examines one of the most iconic and contested pieces of Irish historical writing to appear in recent decades: Peter Hart’s chapter ‘Taking it out on the Protestants’, published in his award winning monograph, *The IRA and its Enemies* (1998). It has long been acknowledged that there were problems in Hart’s use of sources supporting his thesis, that the massacre was a sectarian-inspired event. But the extent of these problems only becomes apparent when the primary sources are examined in detail. Doing this allows us to deconstruct Hart’s methodology and narrative, thereby identifying the criteria for his selection of evidence, alongside examining how he addressed anomalies in the evidence, which questioned whether what motivated the killings was indeed sectarian hatred. We cannot know what precisely happened in West Cork during the massacre. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify an ahistorical methodology at work in Hart’s chapter, which props up an unambiguous, and for that, an equally ahistorical narrative of random sectarian murder.

Recognition of this sends a stark warning to the wider community about the necessity of verifying sources when reviewing historical writing, in order to check interpretative problems and academic fraud.

In a review of Peter Hart’s classic study of Irish revolutionary violence and community in county Cork during the years 1916–23, *The IRA and its Enemies* (1998), Brian P. Murphy, queried Hart’s use of sources.1 Among the problems Murphy believed he identified, was the use of evidence relating to the killing of thirteen Protestant loyalists in West

Peter Hart died on 22 July 2010 aged 46, before we had any opportunity to discuss this article. He was among the very brightest of our generation of Irish historians and perhaps its most talented writer. We disagreed on most things, oftentimes fundamentally so. But in our exchanges, at conferences and in journals, I greatly appreciated the keenness of his intellect, and sharpness of his responses. Among his peers, he was the historian I most enjoyed debating history with. I would like to thank Sean Kane, Deirdre McMahon, Brendan O’Leary, Jim Tomlinson, Richard McMahon and the journal’s editors and referees for their critical comments on earlier drafts of this article. The ‘Protestant Identities Workshop’, organized by Linda Connolly at University College Cork on 26 May 2011, provided an appropriate testing ground for some arguments advanced in what follows.

1 Brian P. Murphy, ‘The IRA and its Enemies’, *The Month* (Sept.–Oct. 1998), pp. 381–3 [hereafter Murphy, ‘The IRA’].

Cork at the end of April 1922. This horrific affair, sometimes known as the ‘Bandon Valley massacre’, is an exceptional event in modern British and Irish history, because of the high number of a single religious minority killed in one local incident. In the war between the IRA and the British administration (1919–21), and in the Irish civil war which followed (1922–3), no incident outside Ulster compared to what happened to the Protestant community in West Cork, between 27 and 29

April 1922. Even Belfast, the epicentre of sectarian violence between 1920 and 1922, produced only a few events of comparable scale among the more than 450 deaths occurring there.2 After the acceptance of the Anglo-Irish ‘treaty’ by the Sinn Fein *Dail* in January 1922, the British army and police constabularies began to withdraw or disband in the twenty-six counties of Southern Ireland (after December 1922, the Irish Free State).3 The treaty agreed to establish a dominion Irish Free State inside the British Commonwealth, and made provision for the establishment of a new Irish government and constitution. Northern Ireland could, and quickly did, opt out of this arrangement, preferring to continue with home rule inside the Union. In between the British withdrawal in the south and the much later establishment of the new Dublin government’s authority, Southern Ireland fell into a kind of administrative limbo. And in the absence of any alternative in early 1922, the only effective institution for ensuring order became the IRA. However, like the rest of the revolutionary movement, the rebel army fractured over the treaty into ‘treatyites’ accepting the Free State,

‘anti-treatyites’ who still demanded an Irish republic, and ‘neutrals’.

During the first half of 1922, rival factions of the IRA threatened a civil war, which eventually erupted in June. The Bandon Valley massacre of

late April followed closely the withdrawal of the crown forces from West

Cork, during a period of increasing lawlessness and instability. It also

happened during a truce between British and IRA forces, which had been

somewhat unevenly observed since the July of the previous year. There

can be no doubt that the Protestant victims were all murdered, but what

has always been disputed is the reason why and by whom.

Refuting allegations that the victims had been killed because they had

previously informed on the IRA to the British authorities, Hart vehemently

argued that the massacre was borne of sectarian hatred directed

against the religious minority by Roman Catholics in the IRA. This

interpretation was central to Hart’s challenge to the hitherto more celebratory

accounts of the republican struggle in county Cork and elsewhere,

which he suggested denied sectarianism was an important

motivation for IRA violence. Hart brought a fresh, not to say radical,

perspective to the study of the revolutionary period, and helped change

perceptions of both the IRA and its victims. The Canadian-born historian

came to Trinity College Dublin in the late 1980s, after studying at

2 Robert Lynch, *The IRA and the Early Years of Partition* (Dublin, 2006), p. 227; see below, nn. 42, 43.

3 John M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-revolution 1921–36* (Dublin, 1999).

Memorial University in St John’s Newfoundland, and Queen’s University, Ontario, and as a postgraduate at Yale in the United States. He quickly established a reputation as an exceptional graduate student with

provocative seminar papers and scholarly articles.4 At Trinity he was

supervised by David Fitzpatrick, who in 1977 authored an acclaimed

study of county Clare, *Politics and Irish life 1913–21*.5 This became a

model for Hart’s doctoral work on the IRA in county Cork.

By contrast English-born Brian P. Murphy is an independent scholar

who belongs to the Roman Catholic Benedictine community, at Glenstal

Abbey, county Limerick. A graduate of Oxford and Trinity College

Dublin, he completed his doctorate at University College Dublin, publishing

part of it in 1991, as *Patrick Pearse and the Lost Republican Ideal*.6

Murphy has written extensively on Irish republicanism, British propaganda

in Ireland during the 1920s, and on historiography.7 In particular,

Murphy has been critical of what he calls ‘modern revisionism’, which he

has identified in the work of four influential historians, Patrick O’Farrell,

F. S. L. Lyons, Oliver MacDonagh, and, most pointedly, Roy Foster.8

Typically, this revisionism, Murphy claims, was ideologically led and

sometimes exaggerated the Catholic sectarian component of separatist

nationalism, attributing anti-Protestant and Anglophobic values to cultural

nationalist institutions such as the Gaelic League. In an article

published in the journal *Studies* in 1993, he claimed the supposed bias

manifesting in Lyons’s, MacDonagh’s and Foster’s work could be traced

to O’Farrell’s 1971 book, *Ireland’s English Question*.9 And further, that

some of O’Farrell’s conclusions rested on faulty readings of primary

evidence and its context. In a self-consciously ‘cranky’ response,

O’Farrell took issue with what he took to be a personal attack on

his reputation, and those of other historians.10 He counter-challenged

4 See Peter Hart, ‘Youth Culture and the Cork IRA’, in *Revolution? Ireland 1917–23*, ed. David Fitzpatrick (Dublin, 1990), pp. 10–24.

5 David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life 1913–21: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution*

(1st edn., Dublin 1977; 2nd edn., Cork, 1998) [hereafter Fitzpatrick, *Politics*].

6 Brian P. Murphy, *Patrick Pearse and the Lost Republican Ideal* (Dublin, 1991).

7 Brian P. Murphy, *The Origins and Organisation of British Propaganda in Ireland in 1920* (Aubane,

2006): ‘“The wind that shakes the barley”: Reflections on the Writing of Irish History in the Period of the Easter Rising and the Irish War of Independence’, in *The Impact of the 1916 Rising among the Nations*, ed. Ruán O’Donnell (Dublin, 2008), pp. 200–20.

8 For surveys of what ‘revisionism’ might mean in Irish historiography see: Ciaran Brady (ed.),

*Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism 1938–1994* (Dublin, 1994); D. G. Boyce and Alan O’Day (eds.), *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy* (1996); Evi Gkotzaridis, *Trials of Irish History: Genesis and Evolution of a Reappraisal,*

*1938–2000* (2006); Giorgos Antoniou, ‘The Lost Atlantis of Objectivity: The Revisionist Struggles

between the Academic and Public Spheres’, *History and Theory*, Theme Issue xlvi (2007), pp. 92–112;

John M. Regan, ‘Southern Irish Nationalism as a Historical Problem’, *Historical Journal*, i (2007),

197–223 [hereafter Regan, ‘Southern Irish Nationalism’].

9 Patrick O’Farrell, *Ireland’s English Question* (1971); Brian P. Murphy, ‘The Canon of Irish Cultural

History: Some Questions concerning Roy Foster’s *Modern Ireland*’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly*

*Review*, lxxxii (1993), 171–84.

10 Patrick O’Farrell, ‘The Canon of Irish Cultural History: A Reply to Brian Murphy’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, lxxxii (1993), 487–98.

Murphy’s reading of sources, notably identifying that Foster had cited

another book of his as an important influence, and not *Ireland’s English*

*Question*, the focus of Murphy’s criticism. O’Farrell went on to praise the

rolling advance of professional revisionist historical scholarship was

making in Ireland against ‘myths, intransigence and conviction of rectitude’.

He further noted, ‘the price of continuance is that of vigilantly

(and, apparently, eternally) opposing the revival of reactionary mythologies

– something that polite, tolerant and bored Irish academic historians

may be in danger of forgetting’.11 This was a call to defend academic

ramparts against the likes of Murphy, and in 1993, as later, it was one

many professionals were willing to answer.12

Amid the broadly positive reception of Hart’s book within the academic

community, what made Murphy’s intervention notable was his

familiarity with some of the sources Hart used. And immediately Murphy

identified what he believed to be discrepancies in Hart’s methodology. In

particular he questioned Hart’s interpretation of the massacre happening

around Bandon as being inspired by naked sectarianism, and supporting

this, Murphy cited a document, also used by Hart, the *Record of the*

*Rebellion in Ireland in 1920-1, and the part played by the army in dealing*

*with it (Intelligence)*.13

Produced by the British army as a critical evaluation of its military

intelligence’s performance in the Irish war, the *Record* is generally

regarded as a reliable account. Written as a closed document for authorized

access only, its importance is enhanced because the author or

authors were privy to secret information. Murphy wrote: ‘moreover, by

maintaining that Protestants did not have sufficient knowledge to act as

informers, Hart heightens the suspicion that they were killed for religious

motives’. And Murphy drew attention to Hart’s use of the *Record*, where

Hart wrote: ‘the truth was that, as British intelligence officers recognised,

“in the south [of Ireland] the Protestants and those who supported the

Government rarely gave much information because, except by chance,

they had not got it to give”’.14 This was probably a reliable statement of

fact, and it galvanized Hart’s thesis that anti-republican espionage was

uncommon among the Protestant population in county Cork. Instead of

being killed for informing, as the IRA often claimed, Hart developed a

fascinating thesis arguing that the IRA commonly targeted victims on

grounds of social status, deviance from society’s norms, and importantly

for his treatment of what became known as the Bandon Valley massacre,

11 Ibid., p. 491.

12 See Murphy’s ‘Poisoning the Well or Telling the Truth? From Peter Hart’s IRA and its Enemies

to RTE’s Hidden Histories Film on Coolacrease’, in Brian P. Murphy, Niall Meehan with

introduction by Ruan O’Donnell, *Troubled History: A 10th Anniversary Critique of Peter Hart’s ‘The*

*IRA and its Enemies’* (Aubane, 2008) [hereafter Murphy et al., *Troubled History*], pp. 30–44.

13 *Record of the Rebellion in Ireland in 1920–1, and the part played by the army in dealing with it*

*(Intelligence)*, 2 vols. [hereafter *Record*], ii (1922), Jeudwine papers 72/82/1, Imperial War Museum

[hereafter IWM].

14 Murphy, ‘The IRA’, p. 383.

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their Protestant religious identity.15 But Murphy noted the sentences

from the *Record* immediately following those Hart quoted, which were

not cited:

An exception to this rule was in the Bandon area where there were many

Protestant farmers who gave information. Although the Intelligence

Officer of the area was exceptionally experienced and although the troops

were most active it proved almost impossible to protect those brave men,

many of whom were murdered while almost all the remainder suffered

grave material loss.

These omitted sentences raised problems for Hart where he wrote: ‘The

Protestant community in Bandon and elsewhere in Cork had, with very

few exceptions, been notably reticent during the Tan War [1919-21] and

provided far more frustration than support to the Crown Forces’.16

The Record did not prove that the loyalists killed in April 1922 were

informers. It did, however, query Hart’s assertion that Bandon loyalists

behaved like loyalists elsewhere, and the primary motive behind the April

massacre was necessarily sectarian hatred.

This article is concerned with historical method, and the use of evidence

in what has become an iconic and controversial piece of recent

historical writing, namely, Peter Hart’s chapter on the April 1922 West

Cork massacre: ‘Taking it out on the Protestants’.17 What follows

attempts to explore the tensions between narrativity and historicity, or to

put it differently, between Hart’s narrative of sectarian massacre and

accepted norms of historical method. Important to this is a discussion

of the acceptability of historians using unverifiable sources, where this

invites fundamental problems, notably because verification becomes

impossible. The implications of this practice extend beyond Irish history

and the Irish historical community, to the whole historical profession.

And Hart’s chapter points to the undesirability of tolerating any such

methodology, where it is established there are problems in the selection of

verifiable evidence. This article cannot offer an authoritative account of

what happened during the massacre because there is insufficient evidence,

and vital information is missing. We do not know, for example, the

identity of the individuals who perpetrated some of the crimes and this

presents enormous, arguably insurmountable, problems when attempting

to apportion responsibility or trying to attribute motives for the

slaying. And this observation begins to identify some important tensions

15 Peter Hart, *The I.R.A. and its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork 1916–1923* (Oxford,

1998) [hereafter Hart, *Enemies*], chs. 12–13, passim.

16 Hart, *Enemies*, p. 285. The same sentence appears in the PhD thesis; Peter Hart, ‘Irish Republican

Army and its enemies’ (PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 1992) [hereafter Hart, ‘Enemies’ (thesis)],

p. 382. I am indebted to Trinity College Dublin’s librarians for providing me with a digitized copy

of the thesis. Cf. Fitzpatrick, *Politics* (1st edn.), p. 31; and (2nd edn.), p. 27.

17 Hart’s general thesis of sectarian conflict, the centrepiece of which is the West Cork massacre, is

well represented in the comparative literature on ethnic violence: see Charles Tilly, *Trust and Rule*

(Cambridge, 2005), pp. 129–30; Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge,

2006), pp. 189, 336, 357, passim; Randal Law, *Terrorism: A History* (2009), ch. 9.

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between the available evidence and more emphatic conclusions about the killings. The controversy surrounding the Bandon valley massacre,

alongside other issues, is rehearsed briefly in the next section. In section

II, historical information which complicated or contradicted the narrative

of sectarian massacre is considered. And recognizing that Hart overlooked

important evidence, this prompts in section III a consideration

of alternative interpretations explaining the massacre. The pressures a

sectarian narrative and, equally, an opposing ‘informer narrative’ placed

on the use of evidence are considered in the penultimate section. The

article concludes with an attempt to place the massacre in its broader

historiographical context.

**I**

In living memory few books on modern Irish history excited more critical

attention, or drew closer scrutiny, than Hart’s study of the IRA in

county Cork during the revolutionary years 1916-23. Omission of the

*Record*’s reference to the murder of loyalist informers around Bandon

was one among many anomalies some scholars alleged they had discovered

in Hart’s work. These became the subject of protracted debates

over his conclusions, and the evidence on which they rested. Some of

these exchanges over, for example, Hart’s use of anonymous oral evidence

have been convoluted to the point where even diligent observers

may find the detail baffling. Among the most serious accusations levelled

at Hart was that he had claimed to have interviewed two IRA

veterans of the Kilmichael ambush in West Cork (28 November 1920),

when none were available in 1989.18 By the standards of the Great War

the military engagement at Kilmichael was small, involving about fiftyfour

combatants (eighteen Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) Auxiliaries,

and thirty-six armed IRA volunteers). But it had a powerfully symbolic

significance for Irish republicans, and for those in West Cork in particular.

In 1920 Kilmichael established remarkable precedents for both

the British government and the IRA, because it was a set-piece battle in

which the British force, mostly ex-officers with war service, was all but

annihilated. For both sides Kilmichael demonstrated the true potential

of Irish republican violence. In his defence, Hart repeatedly claimed

that any confusion about whom he had interviewed arose from his citation

of sound recordings made by other researchers.19 Implicitly, this

suggested the mistaken dates were attributable to other interviewers.

While all this still raised valid questions about the possibility of some

of Hart’s interviews taking place with aged and infirm veterans, the

18 Meda Ryan, letter to *History Ireland*, xiii (2005), 13–14.

19 Peter Hart, ‘Peter Hart and his Enemies . . .’, *History Ireland*, xiii (2005), 16–19, at p. 19; Meda Ryan, ‘The Kilmichael Ambush, 1920: Exploring the “Provocative Chapters” ’, *History*, xcii (2007), 235–49 [hereafter Ryan, ‘Kilmichael’].

matter appeared irresolvable while the interviewees’ identities remained anonymous.

Hart’s revision of the ambush at Kilmichael in part rested on anonymous oral testimonies. He provoked his republican critics by concluding that some of the Auxiliaries were murdered in cold blood and their bodies mutilated.20 At the centre of the controversy was whether or not the

Auxiliaries had offered a ‘false surrender’ before being killed. It was

alleged by the IRA commander, Tom Barry, that the Auxiliaries offered

to surrender, but immediately resumed shooting when two IRA volunteers

showed themselves. Both volunteers were fatally wounded. For

Barry, the Auxiliaries’ treachery justified a fight to the end, with no

quarter given, although Hart was shown to be mistaken in his claim that

Barry invented the ‘false surrender’ story many years later in his autobiographical

*Guerrilla Days in Ireland* (1949).21 It is also true that the

testimony of five republican participants in the ambush recorded in the

1950s also failed to mention it explicitly.22 Neither did the same witnesses,

perhaps less surprisingly, verify Hart’s claims that prisoners had been

murdered and mutilated.23

Joined to this controversy, a long debate ensued over the authenticity

of a report of the action supposedly captured by the British, and allegedly

authored by Barry.24 This too omitted any reference to any ‘false surrender’.

For Hart this was conclusive evidence of Barry’s ‘lies and evasions’

in his later accounts.25 For Barry’s biographer, Meda Ryan, the report

contained too many inaccuracies to be attributed to Barry.26 The document’s

provenance was further queried when Ryan discovered that it

interrupted the pagination of the official document in which it is bound.27

Appearing on page sixty-four, there were two pages numbered sixty-four,

and Ryan reasoned it was a later insertion placed there to secure insurance

claims filed on behalf of the lone Auxiliary survivor, and the families

of the British dead.28 Though few military engagements in modern

history have been scrutinized more forensically than the Kilmichael

20 Hart, *Enemies*, ch. 6.

21 Dublin. Meda Ryan, *Tom Barry: IRA Freedom Fighter* (Cork, 2003) [hereafter Ryan, *Barry*], pp.49–67.

22 Sponsored by the Irish government, the interviews were recorded by the bureau of military

history. On this and other aspects of the Kilmichael controversy see Seamus Fox’s conclusions;

Seamus Fox, ‘The Kilmichael Ambush – A Review of Background, Controversies, and Effects’ (Sept. 2005 edn.), http://www.dcu.ie/~foxs/irhist/Kilmichael%20(seamus)%20Ver%204%20-

%20Sept%2005.pdf[hereafter Fox]. Ryan has since contended that one of these interviews (Jack Hennessey’s), contrary to Fox, does describe a false surrender, although he does not use the phrase. Ryan, ‘Kilmichael’, p. 242, n. 21.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Hart, *Enemies*, p. 36.

26 Ryan, *Barry*, pp. 57–60.

27 Hart, *Enemies*, p. 36; Ryan, *Barry*, pp. 65–6.

28 Meda Ryan, ‘Peter Hart and Tom Barry’, *History Ireland*, xiii (2005), p. 13.

ambush, it has to be conceded that none of these arguments proved conclusive.29

On the tenth anniversary of the publication of *The IRA and its Enemies*, Murphy and Niall Meehan, a persistent critic of Hart, and Ruan O’Donnell, a historian at Limerick University, authored a pamphlet summarizing criticisms of Hart’s work.30 Meehan claimed that by

cross-referencing the anonymized oral testimony in Hart’s book with the

same testimony in Hart’s 1992 doctoral thesis, and through known biographical

information about participants in the events described, he

could identify Hart’s two anonymous Kilmichael ambush interviewees.

Meehan argued that the original letters Hart used to identify interviewees

in the thesis were the interviewees’ actual name initials (sometimes

reversed). ‘EY’, Meehan reasoned, was ‘Edward (“Ned”) Young’, reputedly

and generally acknowledged to be the sole surviving ambush veteran

after 1986. Despite this, Hart dated an interview with another anonymous

veteran ‘AF’ (otherwise ‘HJ’), six days after Young died on 13

November 1989.31 Hart again responded that not all the interviews were

his own work.32 But this was less convincing where Hart had explicitly

identified himself as the interviewer of ‘AF’ in his book.33 The pamphlet

was distributed at a conference Hart attended at Queen’s University

Belfast, in June 2008. It was published by a ‘local history group’ based in

North Cork, the Aubane Historical Society. This is a spin-off from the

British and Irish Communist Organization, which now professes a united

Ireland nationalist agenda, whereas it was once the best known Marxist

exponent of the ‘two nations’ approach to Irish history.34 Arguably, it is

the purest institutional advocate of the kind of ‘reactionary mythologies’

O’Farrell railed against in 1993. The society interests itself in opposing

what it calls the ‘revisionist movement in Irish history’. And associated

with the publisher Athol Books, it promotes authors like Brian P.

Murphy and Brendan Clifford, who are critical of Irish academic historians.

35 But in Hart’s work their local, national and historiographical

interests combined, and his corpus has remained the focus of sustained

and, it has to be conceded, increasingly damaging counter-arguments.

Some claims advanced by Meehan were reported in the *Times Higher*

*Education*, alongside Hart’s rebuttals. Hart never shied away from his

critics, and their exchanges extended across academic journals and the

media. Though repeatedly invited to do so, Hart said little about the most

29 See Fox.

30 Murphy et al., *Troubled History*.

31 Niall Meehan, ‘Troubles in Irish History’ [hereafter Meehan, ‘Troubles in Irish History’],

in Murphy et al., *Troubled History*, p. 22.

32 John Gill, ‘Troubles and Strife as IRA Historian Draws Peers’ Fire’, *Times Higher Education*,

3 July 2008.

33 Meehan, ‘Troubles in Irish History’, pp. 22–3; Hart, *Enemies*, p. 33, n. 56.

34 See John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images* (Oxford,

1995) [hereafter McGarry and O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland*], ch. 4.

35 Brendan Clifford, *Aubane versus Oxford: A Response to Professor Roy Foster and Bernard O’Donoghue* (Aubane, 2002).

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contested Kilmichael interviewees, until, that is, shortly before his tragically

early death in July 2010. Asked in a television documentary recently

broadcast in Ireland about his interview with the alleged scout ‘AF’, Hart

replied:

I can tell you how I came to interview him [AF], and that is that, someone

I contacted and asked for help introduced me. And then they drove me to

the ambush site and he just showed me where things happened. So I

suppose it is possible, that this is some kind of hoax, and that he was a

fantasist, but that seems extremely unlikely.36

Of the revolutionary period Hart wrote: ‘Almost any actor can be identified,

profiled, and tracked through time’.37 The true identity of this

‘interviewee’ should have been verifiable for Hart, if for no one else.

About ignoring sentences in the *Record* querying a sectarian massacre,

Hart said nothing. And it is to this silence that we now return.

**II**

Hart’s narration of the massacre is a compelling piece of writing. This is

both a virtue of an impressive style, and also a vice, where the drama he

enacts in mesmerizing detail detracts from wider perspectives. Drawing

on contemporary newspaper reports, oral testimony and submissions to

the Irish Grants Committee (established by the British government to

reimburse loyalists who incurred losses during the Irish ‘Troubles’),

Hart’s treatment concentrates more on the atrocity than on its context.

The narrative of the massacre begins at one o’clock in the morning on the

night of 26–27 April, with an attack by unknown raiders on the home of

James and Clarina Buttimer at Main Street, Dunmanway, in West Cork.

James, a retired draper in advanced years, was shot in the face as he stood

in his doorway. ‘He died at once’, Hart tells us, ‘his brains and teeth

blown out’.38 Close by an elderly solicitor, Francis Fitzmaurice, and

David Gray, a chemist, were also shot on their doorsteps.

A second night of killing began late on 27 April, near Kinneigh, eight

miles East of Dunmanway along the Bandon valley, where two men,

Robert Howe and John Chinnery, were shot dead by raiders. In the early

hours of the 28th, sixteen-year-old Alexander Kinley was shot dead two

miles further away at Ballineen, while he lay in his bed. On the same

night, John Buttimer, Jim Greenfield and Robert Nagle were also murdered,

and the Reverend Ralph Harbord shot and severely wounded.

John Bradfield was murdered late on the 29th. All these men were Protestants;

their assailants went unidentified.

What are contentious are the motives which underlay this appalling

bloodshed. Broadly, three causal explanations have been advanced in the

36 Jerry O’Callaghan (dir.), *Scéal Tom Barry*, Teilifís na Gaeilge 4, broadcast 19 Jan. 2011.

37 Cf. Peter Hart, *The IRA at War* (Oxford, 2003), p. 6.

38 Hart, *Enemies*, p. 273.

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years since 1922. Hart squarely endorsed a sectarian massacre: ‘These

men were shot because they were Protestants’,39 though he conceded that

land-hunger and other economic grievances played their part.40 An alternative

interpretation argues that while there can be no denying the religion

of those murdered, they were killed not because of their faith, but

because they were informers or belonged to some clandestine anti-IRA

organization. For convenience, I have called this the ‘informer narrative’.

Thirdly, conspiracy theories surmising the murders were the work of

some or other Unionist *agents provocateurs* persist.41

Atrocities carried out against Catholics in Northern Ireland in early

1922 provided, Hart tells us, ‘emotional impetus’ for the West Cork

massacre. The first months of 1922 witnessed particularly barbarous

murders in Belfast. On 24 March five male members of prominent

Belfast Catholic family, the McMahons, were murdered in their home

by, it was alleged, police constables.42 On 1 April, six Catholics were

murdered around Arnon Street, again, allegedly by reserve or full-time

police officers, after another policeman had been shot dead there.43

While these incidents were remarkable for their savagery, sectarian violence

was a daily occurrence in Belfast and Northern Ireland at this

time. However, most agree that the spark igniting West Cork was the

shooting dead of the acting IRA commandant, Michael O’Neill, at Ballygroman

House near Farran, on the road from Cork to Macroom.

This happened the night before (25–26 April) the killing started at

Dunmanway (26–27 April). Details are sketchy, but O’Neill did forcibly

enter the house of Protestant loyalist Thomas Hornibrook, whereupon O’Neill was shot dead by Hornibrook’s son-in-law, ex-captain Herbert Woods. Thomas, his son Samuel, and Woods were abducted by the IRA in the early morning of the 26th, and then disappeared forever.

The massacre of the other Protestants, Hart reasoned, came as revenge for O’Neill’s death.

No one has disputed that O’Neill’s death was the critical event precipitating the murders west of Bandon. But responding to Hart, Ryan has advanced the argument that most of those killed, if not nearly all, had informed on the IRA. This brings us into murky territory, where historical interpretation mingles with local memory and belief. Ryan is a native of West Cork, and like Murphy, an independent scholar. Part of the rationale of Ryan’s argument is that inter-communal relations were not as aggravated as Hart describes, and, more importantly, the IRA were not involved in any ethno-sectarian conflict with Cork’s Protestants. Ryan also claims documentary evidence supports her contentions.

39 Ibid., p. 288.

40 Ibid., pp. 287–8.

41 See Owen Sheridan, *Propaganda as Anti-history: Peter Hart’s ‘The IRA and its Enemies’ Examined* (Aubane, 2008), pp. 44–9.

42 Alan F. Parkinson, *Belfast’s Unholy War* (Dublin, 2004), pp. 230–4.

43 Lynch, *Early Years of Partition*, pp. 120–3.

Originally endorsed by die-hard Cork republicans like Mary McSwiney, the *agent provocateur* conspiracy theories have always hovered over the massacre.44 In the absence of hard evidence, some republicans read into the events the hidden hand of British intelligence,

and an attempt to provoke a religious civil war, which would force the British to reconquer Ireland, thus saving the Union. More recently Jack Lane, of the Aubane Historical Society, claimed that a Dunmanway-born IRA volunteer, Sam Maguire, believed Ulster unionist extremists were responsible.45 Such theories originate in the utter disbelief among some republicans that the IRA could perpetrate a sectarian massacre.

And this conviction was further encouraged by the mystery enveloping

the identities of the killers. ‘There could be no hiding of those who

did such a thing in a local rural community’, Lane has reasoned not

unfairly.46 Other local republicans have long believed themselves to know

who the perpetrators were: ‘a maverick IRA group in south west Cork’.47

But none has provided verifiable proof of who these phantoms were.

In the course of a lively discussion Hart lays waste the informer narrative

and conspiracy theories. ‘There is no evidence whatsoever that any

such conspiracy existed’, Hart emphasizes. And he adds in a footnote:

‘That is to say, no evidence in British army, RIC, or IRA records or

memoirs, or in local memories, republican or Protestant’.48 But this

appears overly prescriptive where the evidence of the *Record* is noticed.

The *Record* does not prove that there was any organized ‘conspiracy’ as

such, but it does identify a network of informers, presumably coordinated

by British military intelligence, and exceptional, we are told, in

its context. The *Record* also indicates that the killings of some loyalist

informers were connected to a British intelligence officer’s inability,

alongside the army’s, to prevent these from happening. The precise

meaning of the sentence is unclear, and the identity of the ‘exceptionally

experienced Intelligence Officer’ is not revealed.

In a version of the *Record* edited for publication by Hart in 2002, the

sentences to which Murphy drew attention are included, and augmented

by an intriguing footnote:

In *The IRA and its Enemies* (pp 293–315) I argue that the great majority of

those shot as informers in Cork were not British agents, and that many

actual informers were spared because they were protected by their social

position and connections. Some condemned West Cork Protestants did

give, or try to give, information but there is no evidence that they acted *en*

*masse* despite this statement. It is worth quoting Major Percival, the

44 *Freeman’s Journal*, 3 May 1922.

45 Jack Lane, ‘Brian Hanley, Coolacrease and Related Matters’, *Irish Political Review*, xiii (2008)

[hereafter Lane, ‘Hanley’], 11–13; Lane’s sources for his claims have been challenged, see Niall

Meehan, ‘After the War of Independence: Some Further Questions about West Cork, April 27–9

1922’, *Irish Political Review*, xxiii (2008) [hereafter Meehan, ‘After’], 1–3, at p. 1.

46 Lane, ‘Hanley’, 12.

47 Criostóir de Baróid, letter to *Irish Times*, 3 Nov. 1994.

48 Hart, *Enemies*, p. 285, n. 79.

‘exceptionally experienced’ officer mentioned, on the Protestant element: ‘a few, but not many, were brave enough to assist the Crown forces with

information’.49

Frustrating his critics, Hart did not explain why the relevant sentences were omitted from his earlier treatment. Nor did Major Arthur Percival’s

comment dismiss the *Record*’s claim about the exceptional activities

of Bandon loyalists. From March 1920, Percival (later general) was

company commander and intelligence officer of the Essex Regiment’s

detachment at Bandon. It is likely that the high level of cooperation

between the army and local loyalists owed much to his industry and the

area’s demographic (Bandon was the most Protestant town in county

Cork). It is then easy to see why Hart assumed Percival was the officer

referred to in the *Record*. But it is not at all certain that the reference is

to Percival. More than one British army intelligence officer held responsibilities

for West Cork. Headquartered in Cork City’s Victoria barracks,

the 6th Division’s senior intelligence officer with responsibility

for county Cork was Captain James Kelly. Percival left Cork with his

regiment in February 1922. Withdrawal of these soldiers, alongside the

police Auxiliaries and other special constables (‘Black and Tans’), from

Bandon was the critical event making the April massacre possible. Then

the brigade officer responsible for West Cork was temporary captain

Robert Alexander Hendy of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. Hendy

became the 17th Infantry Brigade’s Intelligence Officer under Brigade-

Major Bernard Montgomery (later field marshal), on 28 January 1922.

The son of F. J. R. Hendy, a fellow of New College Oxford, Captain

Hendy was known as a particularly energetic and efficient officer.50 He

was first posted as an intelligence officer to Cork, in December 1920.

About twelve or so hours before the killing began at Dunmanway on

26–27 April, Hendy was kidnapped by the IRA ten miles away in the

town of Macroom.51

**III**

Hendy travelled to Macroom that day with two other British intelligence

officers, temporary captains George Alexander Dove and Kenneth

Henderson, along with their driver, Private J. R. Brooks. Dove was

attached to the divisional headquarters at Cork as an intelligence officer

from June 1920.52 Stationed at Ballincollig outside Cork City, Henderson

was a battalion intelligence officer with the Yorkshire Regiment (Green

Howards). Respectively, Hendy, Dove and Henderson were the sons

of an Oxford don, a surgeon and a bank manager. The officers, not

49 Peter Hart (ed.), *British Intelligence in Ireland, 1920–1: The Final Reports* (Cork, 2002), p. 102,

n. 28.

50 R. A. Hendy, service record, National Archives at Kew [hereafter NAK], WO 339/71140.

51 Meehan, ‘After’, pp. 1–3.

52 G. R. A. Dove, service record NAK, WO 339/78211.

81

unusually, were ex-public schoolboys: Fettes, Malvern, Charterhouse.

And though they travelled to Macroom in plainclothes it was unlikely their presence, if not their demeanour, would have long gone unnoticed.

The officers and Brooks were ‘arrested’ by the IRA soon after they arrived, and their murder two days later marks an unprecedented truce time event. Recognition of any of this invites special consideration of the wider context, alongside other unprecedented happenings in

West Cork.

In his chapter Hart relegates the intelligence officers’ disappearance to an inconsequential sub narrative: conspiracy theories were flourishing in southern Ireland at this time, fed by political uncertainty, paranoia, and continuing fear of renewed war with Britain. On the same day that O’Neill was shot, for example, another republican was killed in a raid in Wexford after receiving ‘information that certain Orangemen possessed firearms’ and three British intelligence officers and their driver were kidnapped – and later shot as ‘spies’ – in

Macroom.53

This is the only explicit reference to the intelligence officers in Hart’s chapter, while elsewhere in the book they go unnamed. It might be assumed that these men were also murdered in reprisal for O’Neill’s death or even because of their religion: all were Protestant. But in the accounting of the West Cork massacre these murdered soldiers seldom figure in anyone’s reckoning.54

The lack of attention paid to the intelligence officers by Hart becomes

more noticeable when we read the footnote referencing their murder:

‘Three British officers were also released on 30 April, having been kidnapped

a week before on their way from Cork to Bantry. See *Irish Times*

1 May 1922’. By making the abductions appear commonplace this footnote

moderates what is still an extraordinary occurrence. According to

Hart then, seven British soldiers, two of them senior intelligence officers,

were held captive by the IRA during the West Cork massacre. That none

of this deserves further inquiry is remarkable. More so when we realize

that the three released British officers referenced in the footnote are

probably the same kidnapped and murdered intelligence officers mentioned

in the main text. Contrary to Hart, it has been impossible to locate

any report of released officers in the *Irish Times* on 1 May or any other

day. According to the *Cork Examiner* on 1 May, a rumour was reported

circulating in Cork about the release of three missing officers, but this

was immediately corrected by a British army source, and was reported

by the newspaper. On the same day the *Irish Times* did correctly report

the search for the missing soldiers in Cork, as did other newspapers.55

Compounding Hart’s error of overlooking the significance of these

53 Hart, *Enemies*, p. 280.

54 A notable exception is Meehan, ‘After’, 2.

55 *Irish Independent*, 1 May 1922, also drew attention to false rumours of the soldiers’ release.

kidnappings, what was apparent from these reports was that the events in West Cork were of importance to the Anglo-Irish settlement.

In apparent violation of the July 1921 truce and delicate negotiations

over the implementation of the Anglo-Irish treaty, the kidnapping of the

soldiers presented a crisis to the British and Irish governments. From

January 1922, the British army was withdrawing from the countryside

into Dublin, Cork and the military base at the Curragh. It was critical, if

the evacuation was to succeed, that the British army should not be drawn

into a second war with the IRA. The kidnappings at Macroom, and the

murder of loyalists, endangered this strategic objective.56

Hart’s footnote containing the misreport of the three freed British

officers provides no clear reference to any source for the abduction or

murder of Hendy, Dove, Henderson and Private Brooks. An obvious source, cited by Hart in earlier chapters, is Sean O’Callaghan’s *Execution* (1974).57 This concludes with a lurid description of the intelligence officers’ execution. ‘Despite its bad reputation among Cork IRA veterans’, Hart tells us, ‘much of this book appears to be substantially accurate, although marred by the egotism of O’Callaghan’s chief informant, Frank Busteed’.58 Busteed was exceptional among Cork’s guerrillas. ‘From January 1920 on’, Hart explains, ‘Busteed took part in nearly every ambush or barracks attack between Cork and Macroom, as well as numerous operations and executions with the city gun men’.59 It was Busteed who executed the elderly loyalist Mary Lindsay, and her blameless manservant James Clarke, in reprisal for the execution of IRA volunteers in Cork in March 1921, on whom she had informed. Busteed was among the most important, and the most ruthless, of the IRA in Cork City and County. And the presence of this flying-column commander in Macroom, sometime after midday on 26 April, again is surely too much of a coincidence to ignore completely. This is heavily underlined when we realize that Ernie O’Malley, veteran and historian of the IRA, recorded Busteed saying in an interview sometime in the 1950s: ‘We shot 5 to 6 loyalists, Protestant Farmers as reprisals’.60 This reference invites speculation that Busteed and the anti-treaty IRA were party to the West Cork killings.61 And in his doctoral thesis Hart responded to this invitation with an extended footnote: 56

The discipline of British troops in county Cork, in the weeks following the abduction of the

intelligence officers and Brooks, and the absence of reprisals is noteworthy when compared toincidents in 1919-21. See James S. Donnelly Jr., ‘“Unofficial” British Reprisals and IRA Provocations,1919–20: The Cases of Three Cork Towns’, *Éire-Ireland*, xlv (2010), 152–97. Macready to Lord Cavan, 6 May 1922, NAK, WO 32/9530.

57 Sean O’Callaghan, *Execution* (1974) [hereafter O’Callaghan, *Execution*], pp. 189–92. In this

account Hendy is given the name of ‘Viney’, Dove is correctly identified and Henderson is not

mentioned by name.

58 Hart, *Enemies*, p. 15, n. 55.

59 Ibid., p. 248.

60 Frank Busteed interview, Ernie O’Malley notebooks, University College Dublin Archives Department

[hereafter UCDA], P17b/112.

61 See Meehan, ‘After’, 1–3.

83

Frank Busteed, the Blarney IRA leader who killed Din Din O’Riordan . . . and, notoriously, Mrs Lindsay, was quoted by Ernie O’Malley as saying ‘We shot four or five locals, then we could move anywhere’ in the Civil War. He also said that ‘we shot five to six loyalists,

Protestant farmers, as reprisals’ in the same period (O’Malley Papers,

P17b/112). As these killings certainly did not take place after July 1922, the

only events which fit this description are those of April (his memory has

already been shown to be fallible in Chapter 1). Nevertheless, these remain

cryptic remarks. Does the ‘we’ in the second statement refer to his unit,

which was part of the 1st Cork Brigade, or to the IRA in general? Does the

‘locals’ in the first statement mean the Hornibrooks or other of the April

victims? Ballygroman lay very close to Busteed’s usual territory.62

There is good reason for doubting everything Busteed recalled. Nevertheless,

there could be no denying that ‘we’ probably referred to the Cork

IRA, and Hart’s original conclusion that Busteed referred to the April

killings remains plausible. In Hart’s 1998 book speculation that Busteed

participated in the Bandon killings, and all references linking the massacre

to the killing of the British intelligence officers were excised from the

original text of his 1992 PhD thesis. Consequently, in the book the last

clause of the following sentence (appearing in the PhD thesis), is deleted:

‘Besides the shooting of Din-Din O’Riordan, he [Busteed] was involved

in that of Mrs Lindsay and her chauffeur in Coachford, the twelve

off-duty soldiers mentioned above, three British officers in Macroom *and*

*a massacre of Protestants in the early months of 1922*’ (my emphasis).63

This excision gives Hart liberty to say of the massacre in the book: ‘No

faction or member of the IRA ever claimed responsibility’.64 But this

statement can be interpreted as inaccurate where Busteed’s testimony is

taken to refer to the West Cork killings. Hart’s solution to the problem of

Busteed’s ambiguous statement is to remove any reference to it in the

book. And this treatment of evidence linking, however tangentially,

events in the Bandon valley with those at Macroom is problematic. It also

irrevocably severs the parallel narratives of sectarian massacre, and the

British soldiers’ abduction and murder.

But why in a book not noticeably biased toward the IRA does Hart, as it were, let Busteed off the hook? One answer is that Hart simply changed his mind about Busteed’s cryptic comments having anything to do with the massacre. But there is no obvious reason why this might be, or any hint of an explanation. **Alternatively, by removing Busteed from his revised interpretation, Hart enhances his narrative of sectarian massacre.**

62 Hart, ‘Enemies’ (thesis), p. 377, n. 47.

63 Ibid., p. 118; cf. Hart, *Enemies*, p. 100. (In his doctoral thesis Hart identified Busteed as being involved in the abduction and murder of the soldiers in Macroom and the ‘massacre of Protestants’ (‘the only events which fit this description are those of April’), but in the doctoral thesis’s massacre chapter any connection between the two incidents is ignored, although Hart states in that chapter that the events occurred simultaneously: ‘On the same day as O’Neill was shot . . . four British soldiers were kidnapped – and shot as ‘spies’ – in Macroom’ (Hart, ‘enemies’ (thesis), p. 375).).

64 Hart, *Enemies*, p. 282.

To acknowledge Busteed’s involvement greatly complicates that simplified story. For Busteed’s involvement suggests that the murders, rather than being random, copycat killings, carried out by unknown bands of IRA men, acting independently, as Hart insists, were instead linked to the IRA’s leadership in West Cork, normally a disciplined and highly effective military unit. Removing Busteed from events around Bandon also eliminates the possibility, no matter how remote, that one of the leading perpetrators of the massacre was an atheist, from a mixed Catholic and Protestant family background.

**IV**

Hart’s approach to the evidence is guided by the desire to follow the

narrowing lines of his narrative. ‘It was undoubtedly O’Neill’s death’,

Hart tells us, ‘that sparked the following three nights of raids and murders’.

65 It is this causal explanation of sectarian retribution which obviates

the need to look more widely at events. But other volunteers had

been killed in action, or judicially executed, or murdered in British

custody, without sectarian massacres following in Cork or anywhere

else. And this alone queries the importance attributed to O’Neill’s

death. Alternatively, once recognized, the kidnapping of three intelligence

officers might also have had some bearing on events along the

Bandon valley.

At about 1 p.m. on 26 April, the 7th Battalion of the Cork Number

One Brigade took the three British intelligence officers and their driver

into its custody at Macroom Castle. All that is known of the soldiers’

fate is that they were kept by the IRA garrison for two days before

being taken to a farm five miles west of the town, shot and buried in a

shallow grave. Taking the decisions, first to arrest, and then to execute

the soldiers, those responsible risked provoking British reprisals and

even a full-scale resumption of hostilities. What could justify such

actions?

In the massacre chapter Hart implies that the officers were wrongly

suspected of being ‘spies’, but accounts differ. Busteed later claimed that

the reason for murdering the officers was revenge. The three officers,

Busteed related to O’Callaghan, had raided his mother’s house at Blarney

in March 1921.66 Dove and another officer allegedly tossed Busteed’s

mother down her stairs in reprisal for the abduction and execution of Mrs

Lindsay. According to Busteed, his mother identified one of the officers

to a relative before she died soon afterwards. To avenge his mother’s

death Busteed’s brother Bill, an ex-serviceman, rejoined the British army

at Ballincollig Barracks. And on 26 April 1922, Bill, having discovered that three intelligence officers were travelling to Macroom, alerted the IRA. Frank Busteed claimed that he, joined by other IRA volunteers,

65 Ibid.

66 O’Callaghan, *Execution*, pp. 189–91.

captured the intelligence officers in a hostelry on the road to Macroom. The three officers were then driven to a quiet place and executed by him. No one disputes that Frank Busteed murdered the British officers. But it is difficult to find corroborative evidence to support his story about his mother even though he told it fairly consistently.67

The official British version of what the missing officers were doing in Macroom initially was muddled.68 Their identity, and status as intelligence officers, was concealed by the army to protect them while it was believed they might still be captives. These precautions lapsed as it

became gradually accepted that the four missing men had been murdered.

In May General Sir Nevil Macready, the commander-in-chief of British forces in Ireland, provided F. J. R. Hendy with a remarkably detailed account of the abduction and execution of his son.69 Macready confidently stated that in all eight shots were fired during the executions. But confused accounts later emerged from the British government. The leader of the House of Commons, Austen Chamberlain, appeared to mislead parliament when in July he stated that the officers were escaping the monotony of barracks life when taken at Macroom.70 This was an army story initially floated to counter accusations that the officers were spying. The families of the missing officers became distressed, because this implied the officers had taken an army car to go ‘joyriding’. Chamberlain was forced to retract, explaining that the officers, while not on ‘secret service’ or ‘special duties’, had been on ‘active service’ because, as intelligence officers, they were always on active service.71 They were not, he claimed, ordered to Macroom.

Countering this, F. J. R. Hendy stated that the families had documents found among the missing officers’ papers indicating that ‘they were acting under imperative orders which left them no discretion’.72 But Mr Hendy, presumably to protect whoever donated them, refused to release the documents. It was alleged in parliament that a battalion commander, probably Henderson’s at Ballincollig, had objected to the visit to

Macroom on grounds of excessive danger.73 In early April intelligence

officers were ordered to resume gathering information on the enemy, and

the visit to Macroom may have been an execution of that instruction.74

Alternatively, something immediate and important prompted three intelligence officers to make the risky journey. The abduction of the Hornibrooks and Captain Woods was the most likely reason. The officers stopped at Farran, a mile or so from Ballygroman House, and

67 See Frank Busteed, Ernie O’Malley notebooks, UCDA, P17b/112.

68 *Hansard, House of Commons Debates*, 12 July 1922, vol. 153, cols. 1776–7.

69 F. J. R. Hendy to W. S. Churchill, 30 May 1922, NAK, CO 739/15.

70 *The Times*, 20 July 1922.

71 *Hansard, House of Commons Debates*, 19 July 1922, vol. 156, cols. 2081–4.

72 B. B. Cubitt to the Cabinet Committee on Irish Affairs, 28 Sept. 1922, NAK, WO 35/180C.

73 *Hansard, House of Commons Debates*, 4 July 1922, vol. 156, col. 344.

74 Instructions on intelligence duties issues by GHQ Ireland to divisions, 8 April 1922, NAK, WO 106/6156.

interviewed another ex-British officer before leaving at noon. Eyewitnesses later said that the garrison at Macroom Castle was ‘standing by’ all that morning, but it was unknown why.75

According to Charlie Browne, adjutant of the Macroom IRA, and like Busteed also from a mixed Catholic and Protestant background, townspeople noticed a car parked opposite Macroom Castle that had no number plate.76 They enquired why this was, and Brooks told them to ‘fuck off’. The IRA garrison was then alerted to the presence of car, driver and passengers. A version of the story circulated in Macroom soon after.77

There is no doubt that the intelligence officers were ‘plying their trade’ in Macroom. General Strickland, Commander of the 6th Division at Cork, recorded in his private-diary that evening: ‘Hendy, Dove, another out on I[ntelligence] work not back’.78 From the vantage of Williams’ Hotel, the officers were probably (they could hardly do otherwise) observing the castle opposite when discovered. Strictly, this was in breach of the truce. Florence O’Donoghue, the IRA’s senior intelligence officer in Cork, later said of some of those involved in British intelligence operations that they ‘disclosed a boy scout mentality, and a complete absence of any sense of reality of the situation’.79 Even taking into consideration

the truce, this could be applied to Hendy, Henderson and Dove (who brought his pet terrier with him to Macroom). In an earlier chapter, Hart did indeed accept that the officers were in effect spying.80

But this observation did not vitiate his assumption in the massacre chapter that they became the victims of widespread paranoia about ‘spies’, as opposed to the IRA’s counter-intelligence. And this is significant, because in the massacre chapter, having decided the intelligence officers are irrelevant to the narrative of sectarian massacre, they are given no further consideration.

A reliable ‘informant’ told the British army soon after their murder that the officers’ true identities were quickly discovered: ‘One was identified as an Intelligence Officer and another was identified as being concerned in the arrest and ill-treatment of prisoners’.81 It was likely, then, that the IRA would have been not a little interested in what the officers had to say about British intelligence in Cork, City and County.

The key sentences in the *Record* to which Murphy drew attention obliquely reference an intelligence disaster. Somehow, nowhere are we 75 ‘Information concerning the kidnapping of three officers and one RASC driver’ [hereafter ‘Information’], National Archives Dublin, D/T S 3827 Annex.

76 Charlie Browne interview, O’Malley notebooks, UCDA, P17b/112.

77 ‘Information’, S’3827 Annex.

78 Strickland’s pocket diary 26 April 1922, IWM, Strickland papers.

79 O’Donoghue offered the earlier example of ‘a lieutenant Vincent’, who, he relates, ‘was captured near Watergrasshill while engaged in this [kind of intelligence] duty. He was dressed as a tramp. In his possession was found a note-book containing a list of names of persons known to be loyal to the British connection’ (Florence O’Donoghue, *No Other Law* (Dublin, 1949), pp. 118–19).

80 Hart, *Enemies*, p. 114, p. 115, n. 32.

81 ‘Information’, S’3827 Annex.

87

told, the identity of ‘many’ informers became known to their enemies.

This led to reprisals, including murders, while most survivors suffered

‘grave material loss’, which probably refers to boycotting, a common

practice enforced by the IRA against ‘collaborators’. Quite apart from

absolving the intelligence officer responsible for the Bandon area for this

debacle, the *Record* attempted to excuse the army for failing to protect

those informers. As with Busteed’s admission to Ernie O’Malley, it is

difficult to identify any event other than the April massacre for which the

*Record*’s description applies, and deciding not to ignore this possibility

invites two conjectures. First, the IRA carried out reprisal killings along

the Bandon valley, targeting victims identified by the intelligence officers.

It is also plausible that the killings had some bearing on the intelligence

officers’ continued detention; and this prompts the second conjecture.

The IRA was interested in all British intelligence activities, but particularly

in the identification of British agents who had infiltrated the IRA. It

seems plausible to suggest that during the intelligence officers’ detention

the IRA threatened to shoot identified informers if the officers did not

surrender information the IRA wanted. And when the information was

not forthcoming, the IRA carried out their threat. What is not conjecture

is that during the forty-eight hours following the intelligence officers’

abduction, sections of the Cork IRA abandoned the truce. And coinciding

abruptly with the execution of the intelligence officers, the massacre

ended too. Militating against this, it has to be acknowledged, the evidence

linking events in Macroom to those west of Bandon is both

ambiguous and circumstantial. But recognizing any of this, properly,

should have tempered the unambiguous sectarian narrative Hart reinvested

in.

**V**

The debate over the West Cork killings has turned on arguments over whether or not the victims were informers. Hart claimed, ‘if the victims had been active in opposing the IRA they or their relatives would almost certainly have mentioned it in their applications to the Irish Grants Committee or to the Southern Irish Loyalist Relief Fund’.82 But notwithstanding

the *Record*, there are objections to this. Providing such sensitive information jeopardized any informer’s life, and it is far from certain that spying activities would be divulged to anyone save the informer’s ‘handler’: agent, soldier or policeman. Even among informers who survived the conflict, it remained undesirable to disclose to anyone that they had been spies. The Cork IRA proved particularly vengeful, pursuing spies to far-flung-places; in one case to New York City.83

82 Hart, *Enemies*, p. 285, n. 79.

83 See John Borgonovo, *Spies, Informers and the Anti-Sinn Fein Society* (Dublin, 2007) [hereafter Borgonovo, *Spies*], pp. 89–90.

88

Richard Helen was a Clonakilty Protestant, Hart tells us, who effected a successful escape after being taken by the raiders on 27 April.84 He fled to England, and was awarded £200 by the Irish Grants Committee for his financial losses. Belatedly, in 1929, Helen contested this sum and appealed the award. He had originally claimed an improbable £3,000 for loss of earnings in his cartage and grocery business, and to boost his appeal Helen sought the support of the former RIC District Inspector, D. B. Higmaw. Helen, Higmaw submitted to the Committee, had on many occasions given him ‘the most valuable assistance and information’.85 **Higmaw explained how in February 1922, following the killing of District Inspector Kenny by the IRA,** **[CAN’T FIND DETAILS OF THIS KILLING]** and the wounding of Kenny’s son, Edward, Helen informed on a planned IRA ambush near Clonakilty. Believing Edward Kenny to have recognized his father’s assailants, the IRA intended a second attack on the ambulance and police escort conveying him to hospital. Helen’s information, according to Higmaw, foiled this attack.

Among the sensible reasons applicants to the Irish Grants Committee did not document any spying activity they may have undertaken is that the committee, unsurprisingly, was briefed *in camera* about this. An internal memorandum declining to revise Helen’s award noted the original decision had been made after the committee consulted with Helen’s solicitor, ‘who was conversant with all of the facts’.86 Representing Helen, and many other West Cork applicants, was the former Crown Solicitor for Cork’s West-Riding, Jasper Travers Wolfe. Wolfe was a special witness to April 1922, not only because he became privy to his clients’

confidential information, but also because, along with another Protestant neighbour, he claimed he had been targeted by raiders twenty miles from Bandon, at Skibbereen, on 27 April 1922. Wolfe fled to Wales unharmed.

According to his biographer and grandson, Wolfe never subscribed to the sectarian explanation of the April killings, and this, I think, has to be significant.87

Although Helen was an informer, it cannot be inferred that all the April victims were likewise. But Higmaw’s testimony (duplicated in Helen’s claim file, but overlooked by Hart 88), alongside the *Record*, further challenges Hart’s speculative thesis that the West Cork killings were sectarian-inspired murders. Hart emphasizes the randomness of the

attacks, ‘at least two, and *possibly* as many as five, separate groups [were] involved . . . a series of copy-cat killings carried out by a dozen or so gunmen, *probably* motivated by similar fears’ (my emphasis).89 He again speculatively identifies as responsible many anti-treaty IRA companies in West Cork, with the now noticeable exception of those around

84 Hart, *Enemies*, p. 276; Richard Helen to Sir Alex Wood Renton, 22 Jan. 1930, NAK, CO 762/33.

**85 B. D. Higmaw submission, 14 March 1929, CO 762/33.**

86 G. G. Whiskard to E. Marsh, March 1929, CO 762/33.

87 Jasper Ungoed-Thomas, *Jasper Wolfe of Skibbereen* (Cork, 2008), pp. 141–3.

88 Cf. Hart, *Enemies*, p. 276, n. 19.

89 Ibid., pp. 282–3.

89

Macroom.90 All of this can only be speculative because Hart does not identify any raider, or groups of raiders, by name or place of origin or military attachment, other, that is, than stating that they were from anti-treaty IRA companies acting, he tells us, independently of one

another. But the pattern of violence inflicted during the raids, the identification of the victims by name, the decision to raid while they were at their home address, and the uniform style of the executions, has the hallmark of a coordinated military operation. If the idea was to kill

Protestants in an avenging pogrom, there would have been no necessity to travel to seek out named victims. And if the motive was religion, we might also have expected to see some ancillary evidence of sectarian hate-crimes proportionate to the massacre: desecrations and church-burnings; the vocal abuse of the victim’s faith; set in an established language and history of violent inter-communal antagonism. But either side of those murderous nights of late April 1922, we see little of this in West Cork.91 And it is the uniqueness of the horror which prompts further investigation into the motives behind the massacre.

**VI**

The explanation for the massacre favoured among some West Cork republicans has always been that the April victims were killed because of actions they had taken against the IRA. **Endorsing this view Meda Ryan claims that in the 1980s she consulted a British intelligence document allegedly held by the IRA since 1922 and naming ‘helpful citizens’ in the Bandon area.92 Among those identified, Ryan claims, were some of those killed in the April massacre.93 Ryan also identified that the raiders shot two relatives of people in this list.94 Held in a private collection along with other alleged British intelligence material, this document has only infrequently been made available to researchers.95 Consequently, because the source is unverifiable, some historians will agree that it cannot inform any truly historical interpretation. But such a judgement opens Pandora’s Box.**

**If we discount Ryan’s interpretation of evidence unavailable to other scholars, equally we are obliged to discount other unverifiable sources, including the anonymous oral testimony on which Hart’s study so effectively draws. Hart’s interviews were closed, he stated, to protect the identity of interviewees and their families. The intelligence documents Ryan consulted have remained hidden by their custodians for, we can only assume, similar reasons.**

90 Ibid., p. 282.

91 See Jasper Ungoed-Thomas, ‘I.R.A. Sectarianism in Skibbereen?’, *Journal of Skibereen and District Historical Society*, vi (2010), 97–115.

92 Ryan, *Barry*, pp. 156–70.

93 Meda Ryan, ‘Tom Barry and the Kilmichael Ambush’, *History Ireland*, xiii (2005), 15–18, at p. 18.

94 Ryan, *Barry*, p. 159.

**95 One item, the misnamed ‘Black and Tan diary’ implausibly left behind by ‘K’ Company of the police Auxiliaries in Dunmanway Workhouse, was reproduced without the names of four informers in a series of articles published in the *Southern Star* newspaper in 1971. This pocketbook lists detailed and apparently accurate profiles of local IRA volunteers. Without seeing the original, Hart accepted its authenticity, but the provenance of this and other alleged British intelligence documents found in the same collection remains uncertain. *Southern Star*, 23, 30 Oct., 6, 13, 20, 27 Nov. 1971; Hart, *Enemies*, p. 129, n. 6; see Meehan, ‘After’, 1–3; Ryan, *Barry*, pp. 158–9.**

And this identifies a stark problem, reaching far beyond the Irish historical community. It is impossible to make any informed evaluation of the historicity of an interpretation relying on sources barred to other scholars. It is also true that tolerance of unverifiable evidence has grown in history writing in recent years among contemporary historians who, for example, use the otherwise closed archives of the intelligence services.96 In these and similar cases there is a trade-off between using unverifiable sources and writing history, against proscribing these sources and writing nothing. That may be. But where unverifiable sources are used, the resulting treatment cannot be truly ‘historical ’in the more scientific sense of that word, where verification is essential for testing the analysis. (Where ‘historical’ is used in the more literary sense this may be less of a problem, but, arguably, the safest description for unverifiable history is nearly always ‘fiction’.) It is only by evaluating the selection and interpretation of evidence, if only by sampling, that we can evaluate the worth of historians. And identifying problems in Hart’s selection of verifiable sources, inevitably we are forced to consider possible problems in his use of unverifiable sources including his quantitative data.97 There can be no authoritative answer to this, but it has to be recognized that Hart’s thesis and book set new benchmarks for the use of evidence among professional Irish historians. And this invites our final question: to what purpose?

**VII**

In 1989 David Fitzpatrick wrote that despite provocation, ‘few attacks upon Southern Protestants were reported during the “Troubles” [*c*.1916-23] though many vacant houses were burned’.98 In an essay published in 1996, Hart, Fitzpatrick’s most prolific student, followed this with, ‘campaigns of what might be termed “ethnic cleansing” were waged in parts of King’s and Queen’s Counties, South Tipperary, Leitrim, Mayo, Limerick, Westmeath, Louth and Cork’. And he continued: ‘Worst of all was the massacre of 14 men [sic] in West Cork in April, after an IRA officer had been killed breaking into a house’.99 Hart’s work

96 The most celebrated recent example being Christopher Andrew’s *Defence of the Realm: The Authorised History of MI5* (2009); see also Keith Jeffrey, *MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service 1909–1949* (2010).

97 Borgonovo, *Spies*, pp. 83–5.

98 David Fitzpatrick, ‘Ireland since 1870’, in *Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, ed. R. F. Foster (Oxford, 1989), p. 246.

99 **Hart was writing under the misapprehension that the Reverend Richard Harbord, the rector of Murragh and father of Ralph who was shot and severely injured on 27 April, was one of the fatalities. The correct number of deaths is therefore thirteen, not fourteen, excluding the four British soldiers**

ushered in a radical revision of the revolutionary period, emphasizing its hidden sectarian dimensions, and the persecution of other vulnerable minorities by the IRA. It is true that, by reclaiming the history of its losers, more than any other historian Hart gave expression to some of the forgotten people of Ireland’s revolutionary years. But problems were apparent early on. Michael Farry, another of Fitzpatrick’s talented doctoral students, soon noted that: ‘Peter Hart’s statement: “At least two [Protestant churches] in Sligo were burned before the truce” lacks evidence’. Farry continued: ‘Two reports . . . [Hart] cites refer to the same incident, an unsuccessful attempt to burn Tubbercurry Protestant Church’.100 Clearly accuracy was a problem here, but ‘At least two’ indicated another: exaggeration. Meanwhile, on sectarianism in county Sligo, Farry concluded: ‘All Protestants may have been regarded as

enemies [by the IRA] but relatively few suffered seriously’.101

There was in Hart’s work a compulsion not only to exaggerate, but also to simplify. The term ‘ethnic cleansing’, appropriated from the wartorn

1990s Balkans was anachronistically applied to the Ireland of the

early 1920s. Hart later repudiated his use of the term, going so far as to

deny he ever endorsed it.102 But conceptualizations of an ethno-religious

civil war working itself out in county Cork, as elsewhere, modified perceptions

of the revolutionary period. Hart’s work clearly influenced the

2007 RTE *Hidden Histories* television documentary, ‘The killings at

Coolacrease’, which ascribed land-grabbing and sectarian motives to the

cowardly killing of two county Offaly Protestants by the IRA in 1921.103

Arguably, this kind of treatment demonstrated again a worryingly reductive

analysis, where the religion of Protestant victims automatically identified

the motives of their assailants.104 More recently Gerard Murphy

offered a further endorsement of this approach in his controversial book

*The Year of Disappearances: Political Killings in Cork 1921–1922*.105

killed near Macroom. Peter Hart, ‘The Protestant Experience of Revolution in Southern Ireland’, in *Unionism in Modern Ireland*, ed. Richard English and Graham Walker (Dublin, 1996) [hereafter Hart, ‘Protestant’], pp. 81–98, at 92; Hart, ‘Enemies’ (thesis), p. 367.

100 Michael Farry, *The Aftermath of Revolution: Sligo 1921–3* (Dublin, 2000) [hereafter Farry, *Sligo*],

p. 193; Hart, ‘Protestant’, p. 93.

101 Farry, *Sligo*, p. 200.

102 *Irish Times*, 28 June 2006; See Niall Meehan, ‘Distorting Irish History Two, the Road to

Dunmanway’ (24 May 2011). http://www.spinwatch.com(viewed 7 Sept. 2011).

103 The programme was piloted under the title *Atonement: Ethnic Cleansing in the Midlands in 1922*.

Niamh Sammon (dir.), broadcast RTE 23 Oct. 2007. For a critical response see Paddy Heaney, Pat Muldowney and Philip O’Connor, *Coolacrease* (Aubane, 2008).

104 See Paul Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity 1789–2006* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 415–16.

105 Gerard Murphy, *The Year of Disappearances: Political Killings in Cork 1921–1922* (Dublin, 2010) [hereafter Murphy, *Year*]. Murphy claims his book was inspired by Hart’s work and, as most reviewers recognize, it rests on a similarly impressive evidential base. Eunan O’Halpin has endorsed Murphy’s book as a ‘brilliant piece of historical research’. Elsewhere reviewers have challenged Murphy’s methodology. Murphy, *Year*, p. 22; O’Halpin contribution to the panel discussion following

the ‘New Perspectives: Ireland since 1966’ conference, University College Dublin, 11 Nov.

2010. See also reviews by Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, *Irish Times*, 11 Dec. 2010; Eugenio Biagini, *Reviews in History* http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1053(with Murphy’s reply); John

But what drives this kind of analysis? The disarmingly obvious answer is both historiographical as well as political developments in Ireland after

1969. Hart pioneered research into the sectarian underbelly of Ireland’s

revolutionary experience. It was true that sectarianism, among other

themes, had been under-researched by professional historians in what

was a curiously neglected period. But an impulsive shock was registered

in some observers. In a few years the historiography moved from emphasizing

the relative absence of sectarian violence outside Ulster to drawing

analogies with contemporary Bosnia. Marianne Elliott’s recent observation:

‘A number of murders of Protestants around Clonakilty and

Bandon in Cork resulted in the remainder of the Protestant community

taking flight for England’, would probably have made even Hart

blanch.106 But, as Elliott elsewhere rightly identifies, there was sometimes

a reluctance to accept any of this. ‘The suggestion that sectarianism may

have been an issue in the attacks on Protestants during Ireland’s war of

independence hits a particularly raw nerve’, Elliott has argued, ‘given

Irish nationalism ignores, indeed denies, any sectarianism in its makeup’.

107 The nerve touched is identity, more particularly republicannationalist

identities. And curiously while some did indeed balk at Hart’s

sectarian thesis, others, particularly in the media, embraced it. In part

this was because historical revisionism has the innate appeal of the new,

in part because what Hart revised, the Irish republican narrative of

struggle, had become tainted, and in some quarters it had become

despised, in reaction to the Provisional IRA’s violence. Responses then

were more diverse than Elliott suspects.108

And it is the relationship between past and present, or specifically

Hart’s IRA and the Provisional IRA, which is of particular interest.

Elsewhere I have argued that after 1969 some historians superimposed

the ideological battles of the contemporary Northern Ireland conflict on

to their conceptualization of the earlier revolutionary period, demonstrably

on to the southern civil war of 1922-3.109 This was recast as a struggle

between the democratic state and anti-democratic republicanism, mirroring

perceptions of the contemporary war in the north. And, arguably, something similar influenced Hart’s conceptualization of the old IRA.

From the onset of the recent ‘Troubles’ (*c*.1969), the nature of the conflict was contested. Some argued that its origins lay in Ireland’s colonial experience under British rule.110 Others saw the same conflict as an intractable religious war.111 These arguments gained potency where they

Borgonovo, *History Ireland* (Jan.–Feb. 2011), 56–7; David Fitzpatrick, ‘History in a Hurry’, *Dublin Review of Books*, xvii, http://www.drb.ie/more\_details/11-03-17/History\_In\_A\_Hurry.aspx.

106 Marianne Elliott, *When God Took Sides* (Oxford, 2009) [hereafter Elliott, *When*], p. 217.

107 Ibid.; cf. Dorothy Macardle, *The Irish Republic* (Dublin, 1951; 1st edn. 1937), p. 705.

108 Fergal Keane, ‘A Timely Reminder of the Irish Republic’s Brush with a Kind of Ethnic Cleansing’, *Independent*, 28 Sept. 2002.

109 Regan, ‘Southern Irish Nationalism’, 197–223.

110 Liam de Paor, *Divided Ulster* (1971; 1st edn. 1970).

111 Conor Cruise O’Brien, ‘Holy War’, *New York Review of Books*, 6 Nov. 1969, pp. 9–16.

aligned with the protagonists’ views of the conflict. Militarist-republicans cast themselves as classical anti-imperialists. While the British and Irish governments, when attempting to preserve the status quo or at least partition, increasingly came to see the conflict as a tragedy born of intractable ‘tribal’ hatreds. And these interpretations were, unsurprisingly,

also played out inside the academy.

By the 1990s the conceptualization of the contemporary conflict as an

ethno-religious war was gaining currency within the academy.112 In 1994,

sociologist Steve Bruce recorded border Protestant loyalists using the

term ‘ethnic cleansing’ to describe the Provisional IRA’s attacks on

isolated Protestant farmers and business owners.113 A pattern of violence

was described by Ulster loyalists which married local economic motives

to the Provisional IRA’s terrorist campaign. And carried by the *zeitgeist*,

similar analogies became in the 1990s voguish among some academics

describing contemporary and older Irish conflicts.114 Few noticed, or

perhaps cared to notice, that this might be a grave distortion or just a bad

fit. And this is vital to understanding Hart’s reception, because his work

articulated assumptions already manifest within the academy. And if

some applauded loudly, it was partly because they recognized in his work

something they already knew to be true: the inherently sectarian nature

of Irish republicanism. Roy Foster demonstrated why this assumption

might be problematic when writing about Sean O’Callaghan, the IRA

volunteer (not the author mentioned already), who became an informer

in the 1970s. Foster reflected in 2002: ‘the path he took, he now tells us,

led him to become enmeshed in implacable tribal hatreds, and a policy of

ethnic cleansing which led him to kill two Protestants before he was

twenty’.115 Whilst O’Callaghan writes about ‘Catholic ethnic nationalism’,

the term ‘ethnic cleansing’ is Foster’s alone. Though it is highly

unlikely that O’Callaghan would dispute Foster’s interpretation or his

diction, the fact remains that one of the two ‘Protestants’ O’Callaghan

murdered was Peter Flanagan, a Roman Catholic RUC Detective

Inspector.116

And this invites further reflection on Hart’s definition of victims and

their religion. ‘No Catholic Free Staters, landlords, or “spies” were shot

or shot at [during the Massacre]’, Hart emphatically tells us.117 But this

is difficult to reconcile with his statement that the ‘home of James

McCarthy, yet another [Dunmanway] Main Street merchant, was fired

112 Charles Townshend, *Britain’s Civil Wars: Counterinsurgency in the Twentieth Century* (1986), p. 68;

for a discussion of various definitions see McGarry and O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland*, ch. 5.

113 Steve Bruce, *The Edge of Union: The Ulster Loyalist Political Vision* (1994), pp. 47–52.

114 For a measured evaluation of the applicability of the term ‘ethnic cleansing’ to the contemporary

conflict, see Henry Patterson, ‘War of National Liberation or Ethnic Cleansing: IRA Violence in

Fermanagh during the Troubles’, in *Terror: from Tyrannicide to Terrorism*, ed. Brett Bowden and

Michael T. Davis (St Lucia, 2008), pp. 230–42, at 239.

115 R. F. Foster, ‘Leland Lyons and the Reinterpretation of Irish History’, in Foster, *The Irish Story:*

*Telling Tales and Making it up in Ireland* (2001), pp. 37–57, at 54.

116 Sean O’Callaghan, *The Informer* (1998), pp. 103–13.

117 Hart, *Enemies*, p. 288.

upon [on 26–27 April]’, where Hart identifies McCarthy as a Roman Catholic.118 McCarthy, no less than Busteed, clearly complicates the story Hart wants to tell, and so his religious faith and his victimhood are therefore marginalized. Whereas in his doctoral thesis Hart writes in the main text ‘James McCarthy, who was a Catholic’, this information is relegated to a footnote in the published chapter.119 And this is important to the refined narrative, not least because in the same footnote McCarthy becomes a non-victim where we are told, ‘his life and livelihood were never threatened’.120 But this is scarcely credible. Even if we were to accept that shooting into his home did not threaten him (or as with Hart, did not represent shooting *at* him), the supported evidence of McCarthy’s submission to the Irish Grants Committee identifies that he was subjected to a severe social boycott, which eventually forced him to sell his farm.121

Ignoring this allows Hart to say, ‘[a]ll but one of the victims were

members of the Church of Ireland’,122 but the exception (again identified

in a footnote), is James Buttimer ‘who was a Methodist’. And so

McCarthy, having become a non-victim, permits, but cannot justify,

Hart’s statement that no Catholics were attacked.123

There is no comparison between what McCarthy was subjected to and

the violence visited upon his Protestant neighbours. Nor can it be denied

this was directed almost exclusively, with the exception of McCarthy

(and possibly one other),124 at Protestants. But the substantive point is

that Hart arranges information and creates definitions to service his

unnecessarily reductive narrative. In this the unwanted complexities and

ambiguities are skilfully erased or removed to where they no longer

interrupt his narrative. The cumulative effect is dazzling, not to say blinding.

118 Ibid., pp. 274, 285 n. 82.

119 Hart, ‘Enemies’ (thesis), p. 383; Hart, *Enemies*, p. 285.

120 Hart, *Enemies*, p. 285, n. 82.

121 McCarthy’s submission to the Irish Grants Committee, 27 Oct. 1926; Canon Arthur Wilson to Irish Grants Committee, 5 Nov. 1926, CO 762/13/116; cf. Hart, *Enemies*, p. 274, n. 9.

122 Hart, *Enemies*, p. 285.

123 Ibid., n. 82.

124 One of the Dunmanway victims was another Roman Catholic, Thomas Sullivan, who, until the beginning of April 1922, had been the RIC sergeant at nearby Bantry. In his application to the Irish Grants Committee, Sullivan claimed that after hearing voices in Main Street on the night of 27–28 April, his wife implored him to flee, and that he then took refuge in a nearby graveyard overnight.

He also claimed that soon after leaving his house four raiders made their way into his bedroom, where his wife remained alone. These details were disputed by one member of the Grants Committee, because in a previous statement to a RIC tribunal, Sullivan omitted any mention of the raiders or his stay in the graveyard. It is entirely possible that Sullivan lied in his testimony to the Grants Committee. Equally, it is plausible that he omitted any mention of his fleeing or the raiders’ subsequent visit to his bedroom to protect his reputation and the honour of his wife. Whatever happened in Sullivan’s home that night, the next day he left for London, spending a year there in hiding. In 1929, despite any doubt raised against his testimony, Sullivan was awarded £200 in compensation by the Irish Grants Committee. More importantly here, Sullivan’s claim suggests that with certainty we may not say that all the men targeted by raiders were non-Catholics.

Thomas Sullivan’s submission to the Irish Grants Committee *c*. 1928, NAK, CO762/175/305; cf. Hart, *Enemies*, p. 274.

Hart’s interpretation is of course valid, mostly it is factual, but what is now in doubt is whether it is historical. Viewed through the totality of evidence the sectarian narrative’s plausibility is increasingly stretched to breaking-point, and, it is now arguable, beyond even that. And this is

because the massacre chapter’s narrativity compromises its historicity.

But can we ever be sure that the historian’s selection of evidence is based

on *a priori* decisions, as opposed to unconsciously endorsing an alternative

narrative? For some Irish historians engaged in writing ‘Irish public

histories’, I have argued, elision (‘the simple expedient of ignoring the

evidence’) has proved a powerful tool.125 And further, the practise of

using elision in constructing historical narratives can now be recognized

by three general characteristics. First, ‘patterns of omission occur’ and

are repeated in the text or texts by one or multiple authors. And where

these omissions reinforce an interpretation by excluding important evidence

belonging to an alternative interpretation, the omissions cannot be

reliably explained as ‘chance’. This is important, because the selection of

evidence over alternative choices will often be justifiable in isolation, but

they can appear suspicious when multiple selections point only in one

direction. Where the omitted evidence is by any fair standards judged

both conspicuous and important, again this may be indicative of an

unbalanced approach. Secondly, the use of elision becomes doubly

apparent when we witness the gross simplification of analysis in response

to new or varied sources, which very clearly complicate the ‘story’. Third

and last, there may be evidence of concealment, if not outright falsification.

This will be identified in the misrepresentation of evidence contradicting

the favoured narrative as being wholly consistent with it, and then

either placing it in plain sight or alternatively burying it deep in the

footnotes. These are skills rarely found in an inexperienced historian. In

most test-cases we must rely on one manuscript, but in Hart’s work the

patterns of elision identified in the published book are confirmed in the

excisions made when he revised his PhD thesis. But to differing degrees

the same problems appear in both the published and the unpublished

work.

As Roman Catholics, Detective Inspector Peter Flanagan, and publican-farmer James McCarthy, remain problematic for those who would impose rigid definitions on belligerents and victims in Irish wars.

And while it may yet be said that in their respective conflicts Flanagan and McCarthy are the ethnic exceptions proving the sectarian rule, in the meantime, their experiences argue that a victim’s religion alone cannot

125 John M. Regan, ‘Irish Public Histories as an Historiographical Problem’, *Irish Historical Studies*,

xxxvii (2010), 265–92. Here I identify the use of elision in the construction of constitutional and democratic narratives of Irish state formation. Among the case studies offered is Collins’s self appointment as commander-in-chief of the ‘Free State’ army in July 1922, the precursor to a brief period of military dictatorship. Notable among the historians for overlooking important evidence of Collins’s self-appointment are Ronan Fanning, David Fitzpatrick and Peter Hart (pp. 282–89, p. 286, n. 136). See also John M. Regan, ‘Michael Collins, General Commanding-in-Chief, as a Historiographical Problem’, *History*, xcii (2007), 318–46, esp. pp. 330–3.

define the motive of an assailant; known that is, or unknown. And attractive though they may be, ahistorical projections on to West Cork in 1922 of the 1990s Balkans, alongside Northern Ireland’s recent miseries, cannot change any of this. Even if we accept Hart’s speculation, that it was unidentified elements within Cork’s overwhelmingly Roman Catholic IRA who carried out the massacre. For similar reasons, neither would this of itself identify sectarianism as the main motive.

Few professional historians have continued to endorse Hart’s sectarian narrative at its undiluted strength.126 Still fewer have – at least from inside the academy – challenged any aspect of it.127 In part, this may be because it contains more than one element of truth: religious antagonisms existed, and through denial, silence or communal embarrassment, went unarticulated, if only because they sometimes went unremembered.

But the evidence argues that sectarianism in county Cork (as elsewhere) was not as Hart described it.128 And for those doubting any of this, they must surely ponder the state of affairs when a liberal-academic community tolerates an unambiguous narrative of one community, Roman Catholics, murdering their neighbours, Protestants, because of their religious identity. That is, we must remind ourselves one last time, without ever satisfactorily identifying who the perpetrators of the violence were. That said, the fabrication of an unambiguous narrative denying so much contradictory evidence remains disconcerting, and

echoes older, more intolerant, historiographies.129

And this becomes more alarming when, finally, we recall Hart’s PhD

thesis supervisor, David Fitzpatrick’s (1977) interpretation of loyalist

cooperation with British intelligence in 1920–2, as follows: ‘Army historians

later lamented’, Fitzpatrick wrote, ‘the inability of the secret service

to penetrate the inner circles of Republicanism, and the increasing reluctance

of loyal citizens to turn informer’. And Fitzpatrick adds: ‘a number

of Protestant farmers near Bandon who did were killed by the IRA’.130

Fitzpatrick’s interpretation rested on the *Record*, more specifically the

sentences later omitted by Hart.131 Fitzpatrick revised here the work of

Charles Townshend, the external examiner of Hart’s PhD thesis who

126 Exceptions are to be found in: Richard English, *Armed Struggle* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 390, 397,

passim; R. F. Foster, ‘Something to Hate: Intimate Enmities in Irish History’, *The Irish Review*, xxx

(2003), 1–12, at p. 10; John M. Regan, review of *The IRA at War 1916–1923* (review no. 416)

http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/416, date accessed: 29 April 2011; Hugh Kearney, *Ireland: Contested Ideas of Nationalism and History* (New York, 2007), p. 43; Elliott, *When*, pp. 216–17.

127 Notable exceptions are Niall Meehan, head of the department of journalism at Griffith College, Dublin; John Borgonovo, a historian working at University College Cork; and Ruan O’Donnell, a historian at Limerick University.

128 Cf. Fitzpatrick, *Politics*; Farry, *Sligo*; Marie Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish Revolution,*

*1910-23* (Dublin, 2003); John O’Callaghan, *Revolutionary Limerick* (Dublin, 2010).

129 J. P. Kenyon, *The History Men* (1992), p. 124.

130 Fitzpatrick, *Politics*, p. 31.

131 The relevant part of Fitzpatrick’s citation is ‘Record of the Rebellion (A 11), II, 24–9’. The reference to Bandon loyalists giving information and being shot occurs on pp. 26–7; ibid., n. 47; cf. Hart, ‘Enemies’ (thesis), p. 382.

later refereed it for Oxford University Press. In 1975, Townshend had quoted Montgomery writing to Percival in 1923, ‘I think I regarded all civilians as “Shinners”, and never had any dealings with any of them’.

‘Such an approach’, wrote Townshend, ‘though understandable, offered few roads to success in internal security work’. Townshend, however, qualified this statement appearing in the main text with a footnote: ‘This is not to say that front-line units also ignored loyalists, for some certainly tried to use them as an intelligence source, but that no overall plan existed for involving them’. Among the most exceptional of front-line units was Percival’s at Bandon.132

Nowhere are the differences of interpretation between Hart, his doctoral supervisor or the external examiner of his doctoral thesis referenced or publicly explained. And this is important because familiarity with the sources on which the interpretations of Fitzpatrick and Townshend stand, ordinarily should have queried Hart’s narrative of a sectarian-inspired massacre.133 That this did not happen is a significant failure to uphold disciplinary standards. It also asks questions about how and why Hart’s methodology went so long – in the face of much criticism – unacknowledged by the professional historical community. And beyond that, why at the beginning of a career, such an approach was ever contemplated by a gifted historian like Hart. These are now historical problems demanding the urgent attention of ‘polite, tolerant, and bored Irish academic historians’, but they carry in their wake a powerful challenge to the credibility of the historical profession.

132 Fitzpatrick, *Politics*, p. 31; Charles Townshend, *The British Campaign in Ireland 1919–1921*

(Oxford, 1975) [hereafter Townshend, *British Campaign*], p. 205.

133 Cf. ‘Preface’, Fitzpatrick, *Politics* (2nd edn.), pp. ix–x.