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**We may not like the facts but we must still strive for them**

**Justine McCarthy**

A macabre photograph hung in my childhood home. It was of three corpses lying in open coffins, side-by-side. The men had been killed by British armed forces during the War of Independence. The photograph showed the extensive injuries inflicted on them before their deaths. Ours was not the only house in and around Bandon where that photograph was still to be seen 40 years and more after Ireland became independent. Some people would decry the display of such iconography as wallowing in the blood sacrifice. To others, it was a gruesome reminder, lest we forget.

As a teenager, I couldn't wait to escape Bandon, though my itch had nothing to do with past atrocities. I craved the bright lights. After arriving in Dublin more than 30 years ago, I detected strangers' interest in the place I came from. It surprised me so many were familiar with the old response, "where the pigs are Protestant"; a saying not meant to be pejorative but to acknowledge Bandon's large Protestant population. From the distance of the capital, I felt proud of how my town, in the aftermath of violent revolution and civil war, settled into relative companionability between Catholic and Protestant neighbours.

Last month, John Regan, an historian at the University of Dundee specialising in 20th century British and Irish history, delivered an incendiary lecture at Trinity College Dublin. Bandon's name was frequently mentioned.

Regan, the author of The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936, and Ireland: The Politics of Independence 1922-1949, chose the topic of academic research methodology for his lecture. He talked about the methods employed by Peter Hart, a Canadian historian, whose book, The IRA and its Enemies 1917-23, is a bible for propagators of the doctrine that sectarianism was the IRA's modus operandi in west Cork at the time.

In the chapter, Taking it out on the Protestants, Hart, who was a professor of Irish Studies at Memorial University of Newfoundland, recounted the killing of 13 Protestant people, including a 16-year-old boy, in the Bandon valley in April 1922. The first victims were James and Clarina Buttimer in Dunmanway. Hart graphically described how James, an elderly draper, was shot in the face in his doorway. "He died at once, his brains and teeth blown out," he wrote. Hart was a powerful writer but, according to Regan, his work was a sophisticated fraud based on anonymous and questionable sources and strategic elisions from referenced material.

There is no doubt that the 13 victims were murdered, but Regan's analysis has raised troubling questions about Hart's motivation theory that the IRA targeted them simply because they were Protestants. "If you tried running this as a newspaper story, you wouldn't get it past your editor," Regan told me after his Trinity lecture. "This is a catastrophe for Irish historians."

Regan's peers have expressed scant interest in his conclusions since he first delivered his paper in Cork last May. This may be out of sensitivity to Hart's loved ones as the acclaimed historian died last year at the age of 46. By all accounts, he was a likeable man and a generous academic.

No matter how awkward though, Hart's fans have an obligation to respond to Regan's damning verdict. Columnists such as Eoghan Harris of the Sunday Independent and Kevin Myers of the Irish Independent have repeatedly invoked Hart's work to support their polemic that republican insurgency in west Cork was unadulterated anti-Protestantism.

Certainly, some Protestants died because of religious bigotry, just as some died because of class envy, because they were regarded as part of the occupying establishment or because they were passing information to British intelligence. The dominant version from historians, however, and one significantly bolstered by Hart's work, is that sectarian attrition was policy. The effect of that smear on west Cork is that the descendants of many true freedom fighters are shamed into stifling their family histories. For many years, a prominent commentator (whom I personally like) consistently answered my work-related phone calls with diatribes that I was a crypto-Provo and that Bandon had been a hot-bed of sectarian murder. I found his harangues intimidating. It was not relevant anyway, but I never dared tell him my grandfather was interned and his wife shot at by drunken Black and Tans.

People are entitled to take possession of their history. They should not be forced by pseudo-intellectual demonisation into disowning it. Regan is not the first historian to expose flaws in Hart's work. Others met a fierce gnashing of teeth by his admirers.

Pillorying those who voice dissenting opinions is an established tactic in Ireland's public debate. Mary Robinson was subjected to it by Conor Cruise O'Brien, the journalist and politician, when, in the 1970s, she criticised Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act, which banned IRA/Sinn Fein from the airwaves. In the 1980s, Mary McAleese ran crying from RTE after being accused of siding with the Provos because she argued for balance in the station's current affairs coverage of Northern Ireland. Those two women went on to become our model presidents. John Hume, whom revisionists now uphold as a peace-maker saint, was vilified by the Sunday Independent for talking to Gerry Adams.

This greens-under-the-bed witch-hunt has been renewed with the arrival of Martin McGuinness, a former IRA chief of staff, in the contest for the presidency. Anyone daring to suggest that his personal history be assessed in the context of 1960s Derry or his eventual emergence as a peacemaker is labelled an IRA fellow-traveller, in the pigeon-holing patois of the Troubles. Striving for the truth in this climate is denounced as equivocation and equivocation equals Provo-sympathiser.

Such extremism gags healthy debate, suffocates the truth, and dupes society into dangerous complacency. Sinn Fein and McGuinness, who is patently lying about his IRA membership, are as much to blame. They have masterfully promoted a dishonest, extremist version of history to advance their dream of a 32-county socialist republic. When those who are expected to be society's informed consciences descend to the same level, however, we are all in trouble.

Besides, it is an injustice to the vast populace who fall in between the two. And if we have learnt anything from our history, it is that injustice ends in trouble.

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