

Peter Hart the Issue of Sources

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When Peter Hart's book *The IRA and its Enemies, Violence and Community in Cork, 1916-1923* was first published in 1998, I reviewed it in *The Month, a Review of Christian Thought and World Affairs* (September-October 1998).

That particular issue of *The Month* was devoted to Ireland and contained many excellent articles, including one by Brendan Bradshaw on *Irish Nationalism: an Historical Perspective*. At that time I was of the opinion that, as well as the question of oral sources, there were three written sources, in particular, that merited detailed attention in relation to the ambush at Kilmichael and the IRA's treatment of Protestants. These may be listed as follows:

Firstly, the 'official' account of the Kilmichael ambush that was released to the press by Dublin Castle at the time;

Secondly, the account of the ambush which is recorded in a captured IRA document that is contained in *The Irish Rebellion in the 6th Division Area* (Strickland Papers, P 362, Imperial War Museum); and,

Thirdly, the official report into Army Intelligence in Ireland which is recorded in *A Record of the Rebellion In Ireland In 1920-1921* (Jeudwine Papers, 72/82/2, Imperial War Museum).

New Information

All of these three sources, and, indeed, the oral sources, have been debated extensively and minutely in the years since the publication of Peter Hart's book. Meda Ryan in her recent book, *Tom Barry, IRA Freedom Fighter* (2003), has summarised much of the discussion and added important new information of her own. Here I wish simply to say a few words about the third written source, the official report of Army Intelligence, and Peter Hart's response to the comments that I made in the review article.

In that article I 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. Citing the official **Record of the Rebellion in Ireland**, Hart writes "the truth was that, as British intelligence officers recognised "in the south the Protestants and those who supported the Government rarely gave much information because, except by chance, they had not got it to give."" (Hart, pp305, 306).

Missing Sentences

Hart does not give the next two sentences from the official Record which read: "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."

I concluded by observing that, "in short, evidence from this British source confirms that the IRA killings in the Bandon area were motivated by political and not sectarian considerations". Possibly, military considerations, rather than political, would have been a more fitting way to describe the reason for the IRA response to those who informed. At that time Peter Hart gave no reason for the omission of these two significant sentences. When I heard, in 2002, that he had edited *A Record of the Rebellion in Ireland*, I awaited his treatment of the two missing sentences with great interest (see Peter Hart, ed., *British Intelligence in Ireland, 1920-1921. The Final Reports*).

Footnote

The missing sentences were included in the text of the *Record* but attached to them was a footnote, footnote 28. It read: "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."

Nowhere does Peter Hart give an explanation for, or an acknowledgment of, the fact that in *The IRA And Its Enemies* the two sentences had been omitted. The evidence from the *Record*, a source which Hart

accepts as "the most trustworthy" that we have, on this particular issue is deemed not to be reliable (Hart, *British Intelligence*, p6). By suppressing, and then dismissing, this important source evidence, Hart was encouraged to republish in 2003, without any qualification, his essay on *The Protestant Experience of Revolution in Southern Ireland* (see Peter Hart, *The IRA at War 1916-1923*, 2003).

The essay concluded that "all of the nightmare images of ethnic conflict in the twentieth century are here.... sectarianism was embedded in the vocabulary and the syntax of the Irish revolution, north and south" (Hart, *IRA at War*, p240).

Extreme Conclusions

One might have hoped that mature reflection on the evidence from the *Record of the Rebellion*, let alone other contrary evidence adduced by myself and others, might have led Hart to temper his extreme conclusions on the sectarian nature of the Irish war. It was not to be and one can draw one's own conclusion. In forming that conclusion it may be important to note that in Hart's edition of the *Record of the Rebellion* there are other significant omissions.

An "editorial note", presumably by Peter Hart, but possibly by David Fitzpatrick, the Series Editor, states that "for reasons of space and relevance I have omitted the introduction dealing with events prior to 1920, portions of chapter 2 dealing with censorship, publicity and the structure of the IRA, part of chapter 3 on topography and the 1921 Truce, and an appendix dealing with the Irish Republican Brotherhood" (Hart, ed., *British Intelligence*, p16).

More Omissions

At first glance, leaving aside for the moment any caveats one may have about not publishing a document in full, everything seems openly transparent. There are omissions; and we have been told about them. However, we have not been informed of all the omissions! In Chapter Three, prior to the omitted section on *Topography*, there is a section on *The People*. This section tells us what the British Army thought of Sinn Fein, the IRA and the Irish people in general.

There one reads that: "practically all commanders and intelligence officers considered that 90% of the people were Sinn Feiners or sympathisers with Sinn Fein, and that all Sinn Feiners were murderers or sympathised with murder. Judged by English standards the Irish are a difficult and unsatisfactory people. Their civilisation is different and in many ways lower than that of the English. They are entirely lacking in the Englishman's distinctive respect for the truth and their answers are usually coloured by a desire to say what their questioner wishes. This often leads well-meaning people to act on their answers.

Many were of a degenerate type and their methods of waging war were in most cases barbarous, influenced by hatred and devoid of courage. It is, however, notorious that guerrilla war is almost invariably barbarous and that had the IRA fought on more regular lines and in formed bodies they would have suffered far heavier casualties and achieved far less success than they did"

(*Record of the Rebellion*, pp 31, 32 from original copy).

Inferior Race

Much more on the same lines is contained in this survey of the people. Underlying the presumption that the Irish were an inferior race, there was the assumption that they should be content to live under a British Government and British law.

For anyone wishing to gain knowledge about the enemies of the IRA, one of the principal aims of Hart's original study, this section on *The People* is of compelling interest and relevance. It tells us, in no uncertain terms, that the British Army, especially that branch of it engaged in Intelligence, viewed the Irish in racist terms. However, while damning the Catholic Irish at every opportunity, and being fully aware of the killings of informers by the IRA, the *Record* does not accuse them of sectarianism. Questions, therefore, remain:

why, it has to be asked, has Peter Hart omitted this section of the *Record* from the published version?

why did he fail to notify his readers that it had been omitted? and

what of the two missing sentences in relation to informers?

In the meantime it seems safe to conclude, from the evidence of "the most trustworthy source" that we have, that the British Army was inspired by racist sentiments and that the IRA, while attacking loyalists, did not engage in sectarian activities.

Brian Murphy osb June 21 2005