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INTELLIGENCE HISTORY

1920s IRA controversy re-ignites today

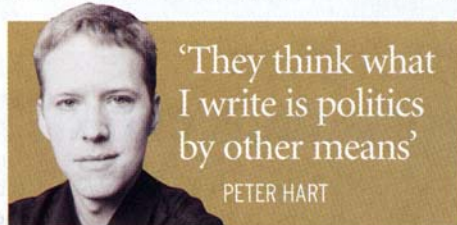
Research on Kilmichael ambush sparks war of words, reports HUGH COSTELLO

A CANADIAN HISTORIAN whose work is at the centre of heated controversy in Ireland has denounced criticism of his methods as “a red herring”. Peter Hart, formerly an academic at Queen’s University, Belfast, claims that repeated attacks on his research into IRA activities in the 1920s are politically motivated.

“For some people it has become an extension of the whole revisionist controversy,” Hart told *BBC History Magazine*. “I don’t see it that way but they perceive me as anti-Republican, even anti-nationalist. They think what I write is politics by other means, and see me as part of a clique. I deny any political or religious affiliation.”

The controversy centres on Hart’s research into an ambush at Kilmichael, County Cork, in 1920. In the incident, a flying column of IRA men led by Tom Barry killed 17 Royal Irish Constabulary Auxiliaries. Barry later claimed that some auxiliaries had faked surrender before shooting three of his men, leaving the IRA no option but to open fire.

In his 1998 book *The IRA and Its Enemies* (OUP),



Hart argued that there was no evidence to support the surrender claim, either in accounts given at the time or in Hart’s interviews, held in the 1980s, with the IRA survivors. Hart also alleged that Tom Barry, who became IRA chief of staff, was guilty of lies and evasion in his account.

Leading the backlash against Hart’s findings is historian Meda Ryan, whose biography of Tom Barry was published in 2003 (Mercier Press). Her criticisms centre on Hart’s insistence that the IRA men he interviewed in the 1980s should remain anonymous. Speaking at a commemoration of the incident in November 2004 she asked: “Why will Peter Hart not reveal the names of the two men he says he interviewed, whom he has acknowledged in his sources as having participated in the Kilmichael ambush?”

The debate has been fuelled by recent claims by another historian, Brian Murphy, that Barry’s post-ambush report to his superiors, containing no reference to the false surrender, may have been a forgery by British military intelligence.



The IRA’s Tom Barry, leader of the ambush