

In defence of Cork's political culture

Cork's year as European Capital of Culture 2005 was given a historical slant with a meeting on 15 April addressed by Brian Murphy, 'In defence of Cork's political culture in the revolutionary years, c. 1914–1922'.

Dr Murphy placed his theme in its historical context by quoting an eyewitness account of Cork as seen by a representative of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, from her room in the Imperial Hotel (coincidentally the venue for the talk) on 11 October 1920. Miss Ellen C. Wilkinson from Manchester was on a fact-finding tour of Ireland with ten colleagues. Having described the actions of British troops in Cork, Wilkinson, a Methodist whose brother was a minister, observed that the many Methodist ministers whom she had met in Ireland 'ridiculed the idea that the Southern Unionists were in any danger from the southern population . . . generally speaking, they were much more fearful of what the Crown forces would do to them than what the Sinn Féin forces would do'. Other members of the Women's International League made similar observations, and these were incorporated into a formal report that was presented to the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland.

Dr Murphy explained that the word 'defence' in his talk's title arose from the recent publications of Peter Hart that had rejected, or neglected, evidence such as this with regard to the religious situation in Ireland at that time. To illustrate the point, he quoted an extract from Hart's 2003 collection of essays, *The IRA at war 1916–1923* (p. 240):

'all of the nightmare images of ethnic conflict in the twentieth century are here: the massacres and anonymous death squads, the burning homes and churches, the mass expulsions and trains filled with refugees, the transformation of lifelong neighbours into enemies, the conspiracy theories and the terminology of hatred.'

After a critical appraisal of Hart's findings on youth culture and their relevance to the ideals of Sinn Féin and the IRA, the speaker focused on the issue of religious toleration. Many examples were given that substantiated the evidence of the International Women's League. Attention was drawn to the significance of a British cabinet meeting of 4 August 1920 at which Lloyd George met a delegation of businessmen from Cork. Richard Beamish, a director of Beamish and Crawford, prefaced his remarks about Dominion Home Rule with the assertion that 'the Protestants of the South had no fear on grounds of creed'.

Dr Murphy elaborated on that theme by adverting to one of the last actions undertaken by Michael Collins on 21 August 1922, the day before he was assassinated. While staying in the Imperial Hotel, he met the manager of the Cork branch of the National Land Bank. The composition of the board of the Land Bank, registered on 2 December 1919, Murphy argued, gave the lie to Hart's contention that republicans were engaged in 'ethnic conflict' and committed to the expulsion of Protestants from the land. Robert

Barton, Dáil Éireann minister for agriculture, Protestant landowner and officer in the British army in 1916, played a part in setting up the Land Bank. Among the first directors were Erskine Childers, Edward Millington Synge and Lionel Smith Gordon—all Protestants. Although their endeavours were supported by all classes and creeds, they were opposed by Dublin Castle, while the arrest and deportation without trial of Robert Barton in January 1920 might suggest that it was the British administration, rather than Dáil Éireann, that was waging war against Irish republican efforts to create a tolerant and harmonious society.

Dr Murphy maintained that the credibility of Hart's argument is further impaired by his use of the source material contained in the *Record of the rebellion in Ireland, 1920–21* (Jeudwine Papers, Imperial War Museum), a source used by Hart to argue that 'men were shot because they were Protestants' and not because they supported the British side. The excerpt chosen by Hart reads:

'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'.

If that were the case, Hart's position would be strengthened. The next two sentences (not published by Hart), however, tell a completely different story:

'an exception to this rule was in the Bandon area where there were many Protestant farmers who gave information. Although the intelligence officer of this 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 all the remainder suffered grave material loss.'

Left: 'In defence of Cork's political culture'—Brian Murphy addressing the meeting in the Imperial Hotel, Cork, 15 April 2005.

(Seamus Lantry)

No explanation or acknowledgement of this omission was provided by Peter Hart, Dr Murphy added, when he edited the published version of *Record of the rebellion* (2002). Instead, by the use of a footnote, Hart persisted in his efforts to justify his claim of sectarianism on the part of the IRA. However, the evidence from this British source—Hart refers to it as 'the most trustworthy'—confirms that the IRA killings in the Bandon area were directed against those who were providing intelligence and were not influenced by sectarian considerations.

Dr Murphy noted with concern that Peter Hart's edition of the *Record of the rebellion* had not seen fit to publish the concluding pages of the document (pp

30–6). By omitting these pages Hart had concealed the fact that the British army viewed the Irish people in racist terms:

'Practically all commanders and intelligence officers considered that 90 per cent of the people were Sinn Féiners or sympathisers with Sinn Féin, and that all Sinn Féiners were murderers or sympathisers 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 . . . many were of a

degenerate type and their methods of waging war were in most cases barbarous, influenced by hatred and devoid of courage' (p. 31 of the original).

Reflecting on these findings in regard to Hart's use of source material, and on the evidence and actions of many Protestants in such organisations as the International Women's League, the National Land Bank and the Irish White Cross Society, Dr Murphy concluded that Cork's political culture during the revolutionary years deserved to be rescued from the damaging charges levelled against it by the selective and restricted research of Peter Hart. ❏

