

Reply to RTE response to complaint, *An Tost Fada*

An Tost Fada (The Long Silence), Written and narrated by Eoghan Harris, produced and directed by Gerry Gregg, Praxis Films, RTE One, 16 April 2012, 7.30pm

From: Tom Cooper, 23 Delaford lawn, Knocklyon, Dublin 16
Telephone: 085 7065200,
Email: tomcooper22@yahoo.co.uk
To: Kevin Cummins, Léirtheoir Feidhmiúcháin na gCláracha Gaeilge,
Executive Producer, Radio Telefís Éireann, Donnybrook Dublin 4.
Copy: Head of Broadcast Compliance, Radio Telefís Éireann
22 June 2012 (Please reply by email if possible)

Dear Kevin Cummins,

Thank you for your undated letter (PDF, attached to an email to me dated 18 June 2012), in response to my 14 May 2012 complaint about *An Tost Fada*, broadcast by RTE on 16 April 2012. According to your code of practice, you are supposed to reply 'within 20 working days'.

Your admission that RTE broadcast two significant errors, while welcome, is an insufficient response to my complaint. I will explain why and request that it be reviewed on the basis following.

First, however, I am surprised that you appear to place responsibility for the errors broadcast on the shoulders of the Reverend George Salters, an 87-year-old clergyman, who was the subject of the programme. RTE is entirely responsible for the errors, particularly as one of those admitted seems the result of deliberate suppression, and the other stems (at the very least) from incompetence.

Rather than respond to basic factual errors or omissions broadcast by the programme, you have chosen primarily to focus on whether or not Rev Salter was a willing participant, which was not directly implied by the complaint. I would be grateful if you could please respond to the factual points raised by the complaint, rather than the points you wish to respond to.

Historical Adviser

Your response ignores my suggestion that RTE reinstitute its former practice of allocating a historical adviser to such programmes, with overall responsibility for the broadcasting of matters of historical fact. Had the programme used the services of such a person, the basic errors to which you admit would have been unthinkable.

Mathew Connell, William Sweetman

You admit that the killing of two farmers, Matthew Connell and William Sweetman, took place in February 1921, during the War of Independence. Available scholarship indicates that the killings had nothing to do with sectarianism. Jasper Ungoed Thomas corroborates this in his biography of the former Crown Solicitor of Cork, *Jasper Wolfe of Skibbereen*.

The programme broadcast that the killings took place in late April 1922, after the Anglo Irish Treaty split in January 1922, before the civil war, as a result of sectarian strife. You broadcast that these killings were the direct cause of the Salter family fleeing from West Cork. Your effective response is that, since the family fled anyway, so what.

You place responsibility for this error on Canon Salter who “made a mistake of memory”. RTE made the mistake and it appears to have been deliberately covered up. The programme showed part of William Sweetman’s headstone that contained his date of death, but RTE omitted this date from the headstone image broadcast. As noted in my complaint the scriptwriter/narrator, Eoghan Harris, had correctly dated these killings while reviewing *Jasper Wolfe of Skibbereen* in 2008. He has written extensively, over the course of many years, alleging that the IRA killed Protestants in West Cork for sectarian reasons. If there is a case to be made as to why this was not a deliberate omission, I would be interested to hear it.

Perhaps, Mr Harris’s recent memory is not good on such matters. That being possibly so, why base a whole programme entirely on the ‘memory’ of an 87-year-old man about events that took place before he was born?

Cannon Salter made an innocent mistake. The programme makers, Eoghan Harris and Gerry Gregg (at a minimum), in their rush to judgement, did not do the minimum and check the factual basis of the Rev Salter’s memories. As stated, the compensation file relating to the Salter case is easily accessible in the Public Records Office in London. Failure to consult the compensation claim is shocking on journalistic and historical grounds.

Is RTE in the habit of broadcasting uncorroborated information without checking it and then blaming the source when they get it wrong? Surely the Prime Time *Mission to Prey* debacle demonstrated the folly of that approach. The producer and the scriptwriter/narrator of *An Tost Fada*, Gerry Gregg and Eoghan Harris, criticised RTE incessantly in the *Sunday Independent* and in the *Evening Herald* over the Fr Reynolds case. It is ironic that they have now committed the same type of error themselves.

Compensation

With regard to the amount of money granted by the British government in compensation to William Salter, you reduce your accountancy of error to whether it was £1,700 (the mistaken figure broadcast), or £1,200, the actual figure. However, you write of the £1,700, “if this sum was not the correct amount”. I find it surprising that you still have not confirmed how much it was.

Please do so, and write and confirm when you have found out.

Again, you blame Rev Salter. RTE is to blame for broadcasting a ‘memory’ of events that happened in 1922, before Rev Salter was born in 1925. A historical adviser would have pointed RTE toward the relevant compensation file in the British Public Records Office. A competent producer would have asked if there was documentary evidence of this figure before broadcasting it. Instead RTE rushed to judgement without checking very simple facts.

However, my point was not simply about the actual sum. It was that the programme broadcast that the money was granted to the family to help them 'get settled' in England in 1922. In fact £1,200 was granted through the auspices of the Southern Irish Loyalist Relief Association by the British government's Irish Grants Committee six years later in 1928.

You have not admitted this error? Why?

These compensation amounts were granted in the late 1920s to those who claimed they lost out financially because of collaboration with the British war effort during the War of Independence and its aftermath. The former Crown Solicitor, Jasper Wolfe, noted in support of the claim that William Salter's 'persecution' was due to his loyalty, not his religion. The file also notes that Salter had failed to pay an IRA tax in 1920-1921. This and his noted loyalty resulted in his forced departure. However, the programme incorrectly implies that the family was religiously persecuted. The premise of the programme was that the Roman Catholic community attacked Protestants, including the Salter family, because of their religion. Simple fact checking would have qualified that sensational conclusion.

The British compensation file reveals that the Salter farm was sold in May 1922 to auctioneer Henry Smith for £1,900 and that William Salter left for England in June. RTE may have broadcast that the farm was sold but you had no idea when, to whom it was sold, or what the circumstances were. You broadcast that the family fled more or less immediately in late April 1922, the morning after the shooting of Connell and Sweetman (in February 1921!). The programme left a definite impression that the farm was sold for next to nothing, and a false impression that that is why the family was in receipt of £1,700 in 1922 from the British government, to help finance their departure.

You failed to respond to the programme's omission of details relating to the sale of the farm. Had those been included, it would have shown the Salter's flight from Cork was much more deliberate and less hurried than the programme leads viewers to believe. The financial loss suffered was also not as severe as the programme suggests. Again, the absence of these qualifiers hinders the programme's underlying narrative of religious rather than political persecution. As I pointed out, the programme failed to note that a civil war intervened during 1922-23 before William Salter returned and bought a farm in Castletownshend in 1924.

Again, on this, you rely on Rev Salter's 'personal understanding'. RTE is holding Rev. Salter responsible for the programme contents rather than the programme makers.

The compensation file provides key documentary evidence that sometimes supports Rev Salter's narrative and sometimes questions it. These compensation files are not secret and are well known to any serious student of the War of Independence. Eoghan Harris himself has mentioned this compensation in his many discussions of this subject. Can you explain why the producers failed to check for corroborating evidence in the compensation file? The file contained information showing Salter's memory was, unsurprisingly, not just faulty but false? History is what the evidence, not mere memories, forces us to believe. RTE should not be in the business of broadcast journalism, much less broadcast history, if it does not understand that fundamental tenet.

It is commendable that RTE would allow Canon Salter to tell his story. It is unbelievable that the station would neglect to take the fundamental precaution of viewing his family's compensation file in London. Instead of explaining itself, it seems that instead RTE has hidden behind the memory of an elderly man, which is unfair to both your viewers and to Canon Salter.

Photograph

The programme dated a Salter family photograph as taken in 1915. This was accompanied by a claim that those depicted cleared out of Ireland because, "a sense of fear and a series of threats forced them to leave".

That could not be because members of the family are shown who emigrated (like many others) before the First World War. I have provided you with evidence suggesting that not all those pictured did in fact flee Ireland and that the photograph was possibly taken in 1905 at a family wedding. You respond by stating that Canon Salter believes 1915 is the correct date. It seems, here again, you defer your editorial responsibilities to the memories of an elderly man. The photograph incident itself is an example of the almost casual throwing out of allegations about sectarian strife that the programme did not bother to prove.

Rev Salter's memory, like anyone's, is faulty. Memory is possibly the wrong word, as the events happened before Rev Salter was born. 'Family lore' might be a better term. Even then, did you check with other members of his family? Even now, you might do that. Will you?

Conclusion

On a self admittedly frivolous basis RTE broadcast serious allegations about sectarian strife in southern Ireland during the War of Independence and its aftermath. Since such allegations are bound to stir up sectarian feeling, broadcasters have a duty to be fully diligent. Eoghan Harris's feelings on this subject are consistently expressed in the *Sunday Independent*. *An Tost Fada* was used in this manner also. I suggest the errors and omissions indicated here and in my original complaint were made to further Mr Harris's agenda. He was given public money for that purpose. If Harris was an RTE employee, he would not be permitted to broadcast his point of view and to use RTE as a vehicle for transmitting it. He would also not be permitted to use the programme to further his political agenda in a weekly newspaper column. Eoghan Harris was not subject to proper editorial control.

Is there one set of regulations for the recently resigned Aoife Kavanagh from Prime Time and another for Eoghan Harris and Gerry Gregg?

I would be grateful if you would please provide information on the broadcasting errors submitted to you but ignored, the historical advisor point, and on the need for a balancing programme.

Please also have the decency to take it on the chin and stop blaming an 87-year-old man.

Yours sincerely,

Tom Cooper