

An examination of conscience?

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Review of Liam Kennedy (2020), *Who was responsible for the Troubles? The Northern Ireland Conflict*, McGill-Queen's University Press.

'*Conscientisation*' is the rather convoluted word that Liam Kennedy (Emeritus Professor in History at Queen's University Belfast) conjures up to describe the kind of reflective conscience making needed in Northern Ireland in the aftermath of the thirty years of conflict there. Catechized Catholics may be more familiar with the pre-confessional practice of examining one's conscience that serves a similar purpose. Older Catholics will be familiar however with the punishment of eternal damnation that awaits those that would lie before God by concealing a known sin. This book is in some respects this examination of conscience writ large for Irish Nationalism, but in others it does not reflect a true confession as it lacks a reflexive honesty at times. Still, it has and will in future, provoke the righteous indignation of its Irish nationalist readers – especially if they've ever had the audacity to have voted for *Sinn Féin*.

The central argument is that the Provisional IRA were the group primarily responsible for the Northern Ireland Troubles and that by both their tacit acceptance and active support, the wider Irish nationalist community (barring those that only ever voted SDLP or Alliance) bear a significant portion of that blame too. This wider blame is levelled at both the PIRA and the communities that supported them because the official conflict lasted so long, and that the aftermath contained so much additional *intra*-communal violence (ie 'punishment' beatings). The argument that there is something dangerously authoritarian and suspiciously guilty about areas of Northern Ireland that vote *Sinn Féin* means that through choice, or necessity; knowingly or unwittingly, those that share PIRA's social space or culture share some of the blame.

With a prosecutorial intent then, one might be inclined to declare this a political argument rather than a history – and there is nothing wrong with a Paine or a Burke – but that gaps in the selection of sources, the conflation of argument, and the confused perception of the conflict as it has now come to be seen since it largely ended, misrepresents aspects of what we knew in the 1990s with what we know today, amplifying and diminishing with a rhetorical purpose of gently clobbering its readers into submission – or passivity.

In terms of its argument, chapter 1 wisely represents the work's *sine qua non*. All but one of the potentially guilty parties are lined up, interrogated, and then summarily released. The British state and their security forces get a have dozen pages of consideration where they occasionally make mistakes but learn to avoid these over time. Big House unionism, the Orange Order, anti-Catholic sectarianism, all are lined up but are judged not to be obvious motivators or extenders of the conflict; hands are shaken and pleasantries exchanged. For example, the early work of Ian Paisley, 'it could be argued, actually aided the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s' (p27) Kennedy argues, though I always thought he stood in solid defence of the *status quo* at that time. The four widely acknowledged occasions that *Paisleyism* was seen to radicalise loyalist paramilitaries are identified but seen as unimportant to the conflict as a whole and their purpose (to threaten the state into

coalescence lest they get a war on two fronts) is absent from this book. Because of course the DUP did not need violence to defend their interests, they only had to threaten it – democracy too – to shake apples from the tree. And while yes, the DUP can indeed look in the mirror and with honesty see no resemblance to the ways *Sinn Féin* or the PIRA handled themselves, the subtexts of their activities are worth further scrutiny than that which is given here. The argument that loyalism is reactive violence is not radical thinking, but the resultant excoriation from wider blame of the whole unionist working class (because they didn't vote for paramilitaries) needed more careful thinking too. Curiously, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) with the entryism of student radicals in the later 1960s is described as, 'not a movement instructed in the philosophy of non-violence as espoused by Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King' (p.40) because its civil disobedience goaded the state into violent reaction – passive resistance then, but a re-reading of Dr King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* would, I think, be beneficial.

There is an emphasis on deaths caused rather than lives impacted or otherwise harmed and the statistics used absolutely justify the argument that the PIRA pushed murderous violence harder and with a determination unequalled by any other actor for the majority of the conflict. But the scale Kennedy uses - comparing Northern Ireland to the London Blitz (p64) ignores the far shorter time period involved there and alternative scales available (almost twice the total number of people died annually in Northern Ireland from road accidents during the conflict<sup>1</sup>; and a remarkable 1,000 more people have died from COVID 19 there from March 2020 to 20 May 2022.<sup>2</sup>) might have both measured this argument and highlighted the long term social and psychological harm caused by both the threat and reality of violence from numerous parties to this exposed nationalist community which Kennedy would like to blame. It might also have shown that even for the PIRA this was rarely an *all-out* war (even when they had the arms, they hadn't the volunteers to carry them) and that there were various low (and high) points of violence – there was *reactivity* here too. The Northern Ireland Troubles were both central and peripheral to those that experienced them – there was so much 'keeping calm and carrying on' over three decades that attitudes and behaviours adopted then (and some readopted from previous communal threats, shootings, burnings, etc years earlier) possessed a logic that has proven difficult to shift. A greater understanding of the fear that self-segregates, suspects authority, and eventually seeks justice from organised thugs marks the failure of the state to win the trust of its people, rather than that people's failure to win the trust of the state.

And why can't Irish nationalists trust the state? Irish recruits made up 150,000 or so of Britain's army that saw off Napoleon. Over 200,000 volunteered (no conscription in Ireland) in the First World War – the majority of both these were Catholics. In the Second World War, Irish nationalists like Paddy Finucane the Spitfire ace joined in significant numbers to embarrass De Valera's neutral Ireland. But this is not a question Kennedy asks. Its answer would complicate a prosecution satisfied that the beating to death of Samuel Devenney was a 'chance occurrence' or that the murders committed on Bloody Sunday ('a dreadful

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<sup>1</sup> 1969-1998 (6,831 deaths) Road Traffic Fatalities on Northern Ireland Roads since 1931, <https://www.psni.police.uk/inside-psni/Statistics/road-traffic-collision-statistics/>

<sup>2</sup> 4,618 COVID deaths in Northern Ireland recorded on 20 May 2022. <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/STATISTICS-PRESS-NOTICE-WEEKLY-DEATH-STATISTICS-Week-ending-20-May-2022.pdf>

mistake') were the only crimes committed against the community that day, a community he now largely accuses and the attacks against which were covered by an *omerta* of their own.

There is conflation of argument here too. Paramilitary 'punishments' – effectively, organised vigilante violence – is equated to child abuse when it happens to minors and the organised cover up of sexual abuse by the Catholic Church is the parallel Kennedy then uses to accuse the wider community of being an 'oppressive minority' (p92). In the opposite direction, one could of course draw the parallel of radical preacher Anjem Choudry with Rev Ian Paisley but again, that would not serve the prosecution's case.

This book was written over an extended period of time as a clearly troubling side project. In the twenty years between its first consideration and publication however Northern Ireland has evolved in several remarkable ways though often much slower than was likely hoped for at the beginning of the century. What has grown exponentially is the amount of material available about the conflict that was previously silenced by both legislation and editorial choice in the mainstream media. The differences between acceptable ways of perceiving the Northern Ireland conflict in 1992 and 2022 are like night and day as the power and interest of the state (and the middle classes) to control the narrative has substantially diminished in Northern Ireland. It is now acceptable to hold broader and more critical views of army shootings, police interrogations, the use of casual informants, collusion, etc. and to connect these to both official and unofficial state activities. Issues that were once dismissed as conspiracy theories, like the Glenanne Gang<sup>3</sup> that contained numerous RUC and UDR personnel, are accused of killing more than died in the whole of Co Fermanagh (p188) and are now quite widely accepted. The work of Freddie Scappaticci who potentially murdered over a dozen people for the IRA whilst a British intelligence asset represents a very serious and very real example (and one currently under investigation by Bedfordshire Police's Operation Kenova)<sup>4</sup> of where blame might easily have been extended by Kennedy because of new evidence.

Some would argue that aspects of this book amount to a necessary cathartic release from the author after a career teaching history in Belfast. This is particularly true of the harrowing chapters on punishment beatings that are successful in bringing the reader into the particular frame of mind that might accept Kennedy's denouement that:

'a section of the Catholic and nationalist population have waged a deliberate and prolonged 'war' not only against the British state but against their Protestant neighbours' (p204)

And that a collective apology was called for (also p204). But returning to the start of the book where the author and his party are told to be quiet in the Belfast vernacular (p10) for talking aloud in a short-run, never again staged community play in West Belfast, my own mind is drawn back to the date, August 1999 – almost a year since the dissident republican Real IRA killed 29 people in Omagh and the communal revulsion of paramilitarism this caused – and I can remember feeling that way too. The frustration of Northern Ireland's peace process to those that were probably already 'there' years earlier is that it relies always upon the working out of problems in a sense of mutual respect and recognition that

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<sup>3</sup> Unquiet Graves

<sup>4</sup> [Operation Kenova | \(opkenova.co.uk\)](https://www.opkenova.co.uk)

frustrates the centre to the extreme. But without damaging egos, the centre continues to widen and a new Northern Ireland is emerging with or without a 'protocol'. If, in Seamus Mallon's words, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement was 'Sunningdale [1974's agreement] for slow learners' we may simply be finding out how truly damaged we really were.

So it remains to be seen if this thoughtful book marks perhaps the last work that situates its opening perception in the (often too trusting) Irish revisionism popular at the beginning of the Peace Process; or the first in a new form of metropolitan *Northern Irish* history – and to that I attach no judgement – though I remain convinced that very critical thinking can uncover some very hard truths and that this is a book that, with an open mind, will push you into thinking very hard indeed.

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