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Revising Irish history: The Northern Ireland conflict and the war of ideas

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Abstract
Power-sharing government resumed in Northern Ireland on 8 May 2007 after a historic agreement was reached between the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein. Unionist Ian Paisley became First Minister and Sinn Fein’s Martin McGuinness, former Chief of Staff of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), became Deputy First Minister. The Provisional Republican movement has signed up to the decommissioning of weapons and policing in Northern Ireland; and hard-line Unionism has signed up to power-sharing and cross-border bodies. For the vast majority in Northern Ireland the conflict is over after almost a century of political turmoil and more than a generation of violent conflict.

It is fitting, therefore, to examine the ‘war of ideas’ in the revisionist controversy that dominated Irish historiography throughout the period of this conflict. The purpose of this article is to offer an overview of this controversy. The writing on the Easter Rising of 1916 serves to illuminate the discussion and will aid in answering the issue of what the revisionist controversy is all about.

In this article revisionism is defined as a re-examination of the ideological roots of current orthodoxy in response to the contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland. The article looks at how a variety of historians have reacted to this violent crisis, and how they concluded that revisionism was necessary: that is, how the deconstruction and re-evaluation of ideology and a new interpretation of history are crucial in understanding such crises of violence (and perhaps thereby defusing the tension). The article examines the nature and extent of this revisionist intellectual response. It recognizes that even though intellectuals are influenced by political conflicts, they do not necessarily follow political agendas.

Keywords
armed struggle, commemoration, controversy, historiography, memory, peace process, revisionism

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Introduction

For Southern Ireland the 1960s represented a time of affluence and of economic and social transformation. It was an era of optimism, hope and high expectations for the future. Then came the conflict in the North of Ireland. Seemingly this conflict had come dramatically and violently out of the blue. The 1950s meant economic recession and heavy emigration combined with extensive literary and film censorship, but the 1960s witnessed a transformation in Irish life: the state was to put behind it the stagnation, poverty and high emigration which characterized the previous decade. The 1960s meant prosperity and the ‘material and psychological basis for national recovery’ (Tobin, 1996: 6). Tariff walls came down and resulted in an influx of foreign capital – the old Sinn Fein policy of economic nationalism was discredited.1 Along with this new-found affluence ‘ran optimism and a burst of creativity’ (Tobin, 1996: 6).

Then came the conflict and violence in the North. For Southerners the Republic of Ireland was marching towards the future while the North was stuck in a violent sectarian past. The inevitable reaction was an attempt to stop the conflict from spilling over the border and into the South. In the South there was the view that nationalism should not and must not contribute to the situation in Northern Ireland. Thus ideology and history were to be revised: revisionism was therefore a motivation, a policy and a tool to be used.

A way had to be found that would de-mythologize the past, if such a thing were possible. In Ireland that meant reinterpreting events and periods in Irish history such as the Rising of 1916. It can be argued that revisionism would not have happened in the same way if there had not been a conflict and a view that nationalism was to blame for it. At the early stage of revisionism, at the start of the troubles in Northern Ireland, the blame was entirely put on Irish nationalism.2

Southern intellectual and political revisionism on the North depicted an irredentist nationalism waging a violent campaign. The point here is that the violence in the North had led to a backlash. What was termed and recognized as revisionism was to follow and a period of post-revisionism was to follow that.

Of the many different stances adopted towards Irish nationalism, perhaps three categories stand out within Irish scholarship. The first strand is anti-nationalist, and questions the traditional nationalist interpretation of Irish history: a 700-year chronology of English ‘oppression’ and domination of Ireland, and ‘heroic resistance’ to that oppression and domination. This strand wishes to revise Irish nationalist orthodoxy and theories of independence, revolution, nationality and history. These anti-nationalist historians seek to differentiate between historiography and the hagiography, as they see it, of the old traditional nationalist approach.

The second strand, the traditional nationalist approach, detects in the first strand a neo-unionist,3 anti-Irish nationalist slant: a concern to deny the existence of British imperialism in the past and an attempt to rehabilitate the role of Britain in Irish history and politics. For members of this second strand, revisionism involves the re-telling of Irish history, stating that British rule in Ireland was not a ‘bad’ thing and Irish resistance to it was not a ‘good’ thing. Anti-nationalist revisionism, this strand argues, can be seen as an attempt to prepare the way for the acceptance of and a justification for living with partition.
The third strand represents a third way between the traditional nationalist school and its anti-nationalist counterpart. This post-revisionist strand is critical of anti-nationalist historians for not submitting the political cultures of unionism or successive British governments to the same sustained dissection that they reserve for Irish nationalism. It is also critical of the old nationalist historiography, which it regards as being too dogmatic and rigid in its approach. The third strand sees itself as more realistic, empirical, flexible and self-critical. Historians within this strand reject all the mythologies, new or old, revisionist or traditionalist, that obscure the search for clearer historical understanding. An example of the first strand is Conor Cruise O’Brien; an example of the second is Peter Beresford Ellis; and an example of the third is Desmond Fennell (see below).

This article identifies with this third strand and sees it as a positive and constructive form of revisionism, as opposed to what I consider to be the negative and corrosive revisionism of the anti-nationalist interpretation. The revision of Irish nationalist orthodoxy is not necessarily objectionable. And it should not be seen as a heresy to be critical of nationalist philosophy and politics. In modern Irish scholarship revisionism is a wide-ranging term, which can be defined as involving a rethinking of Irish politics, accepting the legitimacy of partition, the validity of unionist politics and the rejection of political violence. It can include one or all of these three.

What revisionism in Ireland signified was that there existed a gap in understanding between historians and the general public. And I believe that historians should be concerned about this. However, I recognize that after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, and the recent setting up of a power-sharing administration in Northern Ireland involving Sinn Fein and the DUP in 2007, the political and intellectual landscape has to a large extent been transformed, and that the gap in understanding between historians and the general public is not as wide as it was.

### Historical context

In order to provide a context for some of the key events about which historiographical discussion rages, it is useful to outline briefly the key developments in Irish history during the past century.

The Easter Rising of 1916 was an attempt by militant Irish republicans to win independence from Britain. The Rising was suppressed after six days of fighting, and its leaders were executed, but it succeeded in bringing physical force republicanism back to the forefront of Irish politics. In the 1918 general election, the last all-island election to the British parliament held in Ireland, Republicans won 73 seats out of 105, on a policy of abstentionism from Westminster and Irish independence. The British government refused to accept the legitimacy of the newly declared Irish Republic. This led to the Irish War of Independence which lasted from 1919 to 1921. It was a guerrilla war waged against the British government in Ireland by the Irish Republican Army. The British responded with the Government of Ireland Act of 1920, which provided for two separate Home Rule regions in Ireland and thereby partitioned Ireland into Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland. The Irish Civil War of 1922–3 accompanied the establishment of the Irish Free State as independent from the United Kingdom. The conflict was waged
between two opposing groups of Irish nationalists: the forces of the new Free State, who supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty under which the state was established, and the anti-Treaty Republicans, for whom the state’s continuing ties with the British Empire were unacceptable on principle. The war was won by the Free State forces. The terms ‘Six Counties’ and ‘Twenty-Six Counties’ are used to describe Northern and Southern Ireland. These politically loaded terms have been used by Irish republicans to deny the legitimacy of both states. Since 1923 the IRA has argued that the rebellion of 1916 established an independent Irish Republic and that the pro-Treaty faction betrayed this Republic, both by signing the Treaty in 1921 and by their actions in the Civil War of 1922–3. In the minds of Irish Republicans, both the Government of Ireland Act (1920) and the Anglo-Irish Treaty were seen as illegal; both Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State were seen as illegitimate usurper states; and the IRA’s own Army Council was seen as the only legitimate government of the whole island of Ireland.

In the late 1960s the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) campaigned mainly for the civil rights of the Catholic minority. Since the inception of Northern Ireland, Catholics had suffered widespread discrimination under the Protestant Unionist government. NICRA modelled itself on the civil rights movement in the United States and civil rights activists launched a campaign of civil disobedience. There was widespread opposition from Protestant extremists (or Loyalists, who traditionally saw their role as defenders of majoritarian unionist rule, and defenders of political Protestantism in Northern Ireland), who were aided by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), Northern Ireland’s police force. In 1969 there was an outbreak of serious violence in Northern Ireland; the Provisional Irish Republican Army was formed and launched a military campaign to end British rule in Ireland.4

On 31 August 1994 the Provisional IRA declared an indefinite ceasefire. Although this ceasefire temporarily broke down in 1996–7, it essentially marked the end of the full-scale IRA campaign. Sinn Fein was to accept the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (which was overwhelmingly endorsed in referenda in both Northern and Southern Ireland) and took its seats in the new Northern Ireland Assembly. Gerry Adams, the president of Sinn Fein, was to declare: ‘Sinn Fein believe the violence we have seen must be for all of us now a thing of the past, over, done with and gone’ (Irish Times, 2 September, 1998: 7). On 28 July 2005 the IRA Army Council announced an end to its armed campaign, stating that it would work to achieve its aims using ‘purely political and democratic programmes through exclusively peaceful means’ (Irish Times, 28 July 2005: 1). The IRA was to decommission all of its arms between July and September 2005.

**Origin of a controversy**

In recent years ‘revision’ in Irish historiography has stimulated much debate and controversy. By its very nature the study of history involves continual reflection on the past, based on systematic investigation of the widest possible array of sources. However, critics of ‘revision’ do not regard it as the act of correcting, improving, updating or reinterpreting from newly available material in an unbiased or objective fashion. Critics of ‘revision’ such as Brendan Bradshaw, Kevin Whelan, Desmond Fennell and Peter
Berresford Ellis (see below) detect a neo-unionist, anti-nationalist slant and a concern to deny the existence of British imperialism in the past and an attempt to rehabilitate the role of Britain in Irish history and politics.

As outlined below, the origins of revisionist historiography are to be found in a number of different circumstances: the defeat of the republican forces in the 1922–3 Irish Civil War and the setting up of a state with a political establishment keen to protect its power and offering only a theoretical and rhetorical challenge to unionism; the impact of the reality of partition on politics, culture and intellectual discourse; the putting ward of a liberal agenda around such social issues as contraception, divorce, abortion and a greater secularization of Southern Irish society; the development of North Atlantic consumer capitalism (as a consequence of the policies of the late 1960s and 1970s), which had tended to erode Irish nationalist cultural values; the end of protectionism in the South, involving the free trade agreement with Britain in 1965 and membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1972; the European ideal which was to challenge and transform past conceptions of nationalism, sovereignty and independence; the death of protectionism indicating that for many the Irish national project with its mission in the world seemed irrelevant; the rapprochement with Northern unionism, beginning in 1965 with the Lemass–O’Neill meeting and leading to an all-party Oireachtas committee voting in 1967 to replace Article 3 of the Irish Constitution; the unionists no longer considered to be ‘the rock on the road’ as de Valera had put it (Power, 1990: 20); the expanding size of the Catholic middle class in Northern Ireland since 1971, who either voted for the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) or the Alliance Party, and who are prepared to question the nationalist project (the unification of Ireland); the founding of the journal *Irish Historical Studies* in 1938, a journal which (as one influential writer had stated) ‘took history out of politics’ (Whyte, 1990: 122), and the opening up of the archives in the 1970s in both parts of Ireland and in Britain; and, finally, the growing economic prosperity in the Irish Republic during the 1990s, when it became known as the ‘Celtic Tiger’.

In summary, all of these points have contributed to the creation of an overall intellectual climate in Ireland involving the gradual erosion or undermining of traditional nationalist assumptions, goals and ideals. But this process has been fundamentally heightened and accelerated as a consequence of the Northern conflict which represented a profound political crisis for the Republic of Ireland. There was revulsion in the South at the conflict in the North and the fear and expectation that the violence and instability would spill over the border, and there was a desire to contain the strife in the North to Northern Ireland. In *Spotlight* – a current affairs television programme for BBC1 Northern Ireland (broadcast 2 June 1994), reporting on Southern attitudes following a loyalist attack on a Dublin pub, which killed one man – a Dublin man was to sum up the mood: ‘there are two lots of bigots up there ... We just do not want to know about them … One is as bad as the other.’

**Literature**

Two books, one by Garret FitzGerald entitled *Towards a New Ireland* (1972), and the other by Conor Cruise O’Brien entitled *States of Ireland* (1972), put revisionist concerns
on the political agenda. However, I believe it is important to differentiate between the two: whereas O’Brien wishes to see the current status remaining in relation to Northern Ireland, FitzGerald does not. O’Brien’s attitude towards the Northern state and Anglo-Irish relations was further expounded by FSL Lyons in his book *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890–1939* (1979), in which he described the contemporary struggle as ‘the battle of two civilizations, one Anglo-Irish, pluralist, essentially non-sectarian, which is progressive and liberal’ (quoted in Ellis, 1989: 3), and the other as the heady resurgence of Gaelic separatist values. Brian Murphy, author of *Patrick Pearse and the Lost Republican Ideal* (1991) would add two further titles to this anti-nationalist revisionism: Patrick O’Farrell’s *Ireland’s English Question: Anglo-Irish Relations 1534–1970* (1971) and Oliver MacDonagh’s *States of Mind: A Study of Anglo-Irish Conflict 1780–1980* (1983). Murphy, writing in the *Irish Times* (24 September, 1992: 8), believes that these two books, added to Lyons’ work, have ‘in large part’ shaped the character of Roy Foster’s *Modern Ireland 1600–1972* (1988). Murphy attacks Foster for branding the native Irish as racialist and sectarian revolutionaries. He believes Foster has made separation and partition more reasonable and respectable and has conferred an unmerited legitimacy on the two-nations theory. Combining Foster’s analysis with the writings of FitzGerald and O’Brien, Murphy states: ‘we have an historical approach that is shaping current political attitudes in a very precise manner’ (Murphy, 1994: 92).

The 1937 Irish constitution in Southern Ireland contained Article 2: ‘The national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland, its islands and territorial seas’. Article 3 proclaimed: ‘Pending the reintegration the national territory, and without prejudice to the right the parliament and government established by this constitution to exercise jurisdiction over the whole of that territory, the laws enacted by that parliament shall have the like area and extent of application as the laws of Saorstat Eireann [the Irish Free State].’ The creation of a climate in favour of rejecting Articles 2 and 3 of the 1937 constitution allows the British government and unionist politicians to attack them as acts of aggression.

In Clare O’Halloran’s book *Partition and the Limits of Irish Nationalism: An Ideology Under Stress* (1987) the theme, subject, and indeed the title, are focused on partition. Irish nationalism in general and Articles 2 and 3 of the 1937 constitution in particular are lambasted rigorously. For O’Halloran, Southern nationalists who were of the opinion that Ireland did not stop at the border, and who longed for the unification of the country, were accused of shrouding Ulster in Celtic mythology and of ‘sustaining this deception’ by the use of reactionary unionist stereotypes to explain unionist obstinacy. The blame for unionist threats and the use of violence to get and to maintain partition was laid at the feet of nationalist opinion in the country. O’Halloran’s quarrel is with Southern nationalist political opinion that associates Irish nationalism with a 32-county entity and that seeks to defend and promote this sentiment via Articles 2 and 3.

Peter Gibbon, in *The Origins of Ulster Unionism: The Formation of Popular Protestant Politics and Ideology in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (1975) attempted to encourage the view that partition was not a violent imposition but rather a natural or even an inevitable evolution: uneven capitalist development in North and South, different modes of production and the cultural characteristics associated with such production

The controversy

While not claiming it to be ‘state policy’, it can be argued that revision provided for a worried 26-county political establishment a historical methodology that would remove the national liberation struggle from Irish history. *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (the newspaper of the Provisional Republican Movement) stated in 1991 that:

> Southern political reaction to the Troubles was one of surprise at the extent of Northern nationalist disaffection from the Northern state, and of fear that the cosy stability of the 26-County state and its economic regeneration would be threatened by the upheaval across the border. (Anon., 1991: 8)

One writer was firmly of the view that the ‘de-bunking’ of nationalism, revolution and native cultural resurgence suits conservatism, both in its ‘backward glance and current circumspection’ (O’Ceallaigh, 1994: 8). O’Ceallaigh felt that the past was being de-radicalized to help prevent the radicalization of the present. Another commentator suggested that when contemporary writers engage in revision, they replicate, at an intellectual level, Michael Collins’ use of British guns to help the Free State army to defeat the republican insurgents in the Four Courts (Kiberd, 1994: 94). The quotation from *An Phoblacht/Republican News* above signifies that historical revision was perceived as a real threat to the Republican movement. Ellis believed that, in its mildest form, this ‘revisionist’ school ‘apologizes for British imperialism’ and, in its strongest form, ‘supports’ that imperialism; he labels historians from Southern Ireland who are engaged in such writing ‘unionist fellow-travellers’ (Ellis, 1989). Kevin Whelan, in *The Irish Reporter*, argued that in ‘retrospect’ revision will be seen as an ideological response of the Southern state to what was seen to represent a ‘major political crisis’ (Whelan, 1991: 26).

Desmond Fennell brands the work of anti-nationalist revision as ‘the historiography of the Irish counter revolution’ (Fennell, 1988: 20). Fennell agrees with the view that those in power seek to control the presentation of the past and try to present it in such a way that would legitimize and thus buttress their own authority. The popular image of historical revision, Fennell believes, is a retelling of history stating that British rule in Ireland was not a ‘bad’ thing and Irish resistance to it is not a ‘good’ thing.

Fennell quoted a 1971 broadcast by FSL Lyons, author of *Ireland Since the Famine* (1973):

> In the present situation, with the dire past still overhanging the dire present, we need to go back to fundamentals, and consider once more the meaning of independence ... The theories of
revolution, the theories of nationality, the theories of history, which have brought Ireland to its present pass, cry out for re-examination, and the time is ripe to break with the great enchantment which for too long had made mythology much more congenial than reality. (Fennell, 1988: 20)

Brendan Bradshaw is of the opinion that the form of revision discussed above adopted a ‘corrosive cynicism’ in order to minimize or trivialize the significance of events and interpretation of evidence – a sneer factor of sorts. It is important to note that he did not go so far as to suggest that there is a revisionist conspiracy, involving political and academic spheres. But he believed a consensus theory had legitimacy, i.e. where it is the fashionable thing to think in a particular way rather than an active conspiracy with a political agenda. Bradshaw forcefully denounces the revisionist approach to ‘professionalism’:

An obvious instance of this revisionist approach is provided by the iconoclastic assault upon the so-called apostolic succession of national heroes. The procedure in this instance in effect has been to place these figures in the dock and to conduct the case for the prosecution – in the name, of course, of professional objectivity. Invariably they emerge discredited as the torch bearers of the national cause across the centuries, representing instead a motley collection of war lords, defenders of narrow class interest, or … as politically inept and intellectually confused ideologues. (Bradshaw, 1989: 343)

Thus moments of revolutionary change or potency are translated or transformed into an implicitly negative representation. The year 1916 did not represent an act of incredible heroism but a calculated attempt to frustrate constitutional nationalism in its quest for home rule (Foster, 1993a: 29). The year 1918 did not see a political landslide and mandate for independence, but a success for widespread intimidation at the polls (Foster, 1988: 490). The year 1798 saw a savage sectarian outburst on behalf of the Catholic peasantry (Whyte, 1990: 123). Kerby A Miller’s ‘Revising revision: comments and reflections’ (1993: 53) is critical of Roy Foster for not submitting the political cultures of unionism or successive British governments to the same sustained dissection that he reserves for Irish nationalism.

Bradshaw was to argue further, on the themes in modern Irish history of conquest, dispossession, colonization (of Ireland by England) and cataclysmic famine (a period of mass starvation and emigration in Ireland between 1845 and 1852 during which Ireland’s population dropped by 20 to 25 per cent, approximately one million people died, and a million more emigrated from Ireland) that revisionist historians ‘filter out’ the trauma and violence (Bradshaw, 1989: 338).

However, John Regan argued that the ‘anti-revisionist’ case scored an own goal with the publication of Bradshaw’s essay ‘Nationalism and historical scholarship in modern Ireland’ (1989). Thereafter the case against ‘revisionism’ became associated with advocating a political nationalism that was contemptuous of aspirations towards historical objectivity (Regan, 2007: 198). Ciaran Brady, however, thinks that Bradshaw’s article represents a qualitative development from a growing but hitherto ‘inchoate’ sense of dissatisfaction voiced in various quarters with the new public role that had been assumed by historians (Brady, 1994: 11).
Counterblast

‘Conor Cruise O’Brien does not talk for Roy Foster, for Ronan Fanning or Michael Laffan and none of them talk for me.’ To begin with, it would be wrong to assume that the revisionists all speak with one voice. There are revisionist writers addressing a diverse range of subjects who have expertise or interests in an extensive field of research. There is, in other words, no common denominator. There may be revisionists, but there is no ‘school’ of revision that they rigidly and dogmatically adhere to. They seek to differentiate the historiography, as they see it, from the hagiography of the old traditional nationalist approach that preceded them; they prefer iconoclasm to the praise of patriots. It is also important to add that controversial historical revision is not solely or exclusively an Irish phenomenon and obsession (see below).

Foster defends this controversial band of writers from their detractors. ‘We are all revisionists now’, he says, and he goes on:

To blame every unwelcome development in Irish history on British malevolence, disallowing economic, social and political forces within Ireland, is an attractively easy option. It also implies an Irish moral superiority which leads too easily to self-righteous whinging. (Foster, 1986: 2)

It thus became necessary to break out of what he termed ‘the straitjacket’ of historiographical piety in the South. Those republican classics to which Foster and others refer are Frank Gallagher, The Indivisible Island (1957) and Dorothy MacArdle, The Irish Republic (1965). These books were updated in the 1970s by Kevin Boland, We Won’t Stand By (1972) and in the 1980s by Tom Collins, The Center Cannot Hold (1983), Des Wilson, An End to Silence (1985), Sean MacBride, A Message to the Irish People (1986) and two books by Gerry Adams, The Politics of Irish Freedom (1986) and A Pathway to Peace (1988). Foster believed this sort of nationalism associated with the previous approach had an ‘obsessive anglophobia’ and the mentality of the ‘conspiracy theory’ attached to it. He regrets that Irish cultural self-confidence had not reached the stage when questions, at least if not answered, should be accepted. In conclusion, Roy Foster declares: ‘In a country that had come of age history need no longer be a matter of quoting sacred mysteries. And to say “revisionist” should just be another way of saying historian’ (Foster, 1986: 5).

Many critical reviewers of Foster’s books and articles give as good as they get in terms of ‘hostility’. Astonishingly, knowing the relationship between Irish history and Irish politics, as Foster certainly does, in an interview given several years later he was to express surprise that the whole thing subsequently developed into a debate (Foster, 1993b: 12).

Ronan Fanning, Professor of History at University College Dublin, in a debate with critic Desmond Fennell, quotes Yeats, ‘The Leaders of the Crowd’, to defend the new school: ‘truth flourishes where the student’s lamp had shone’ (Fanning, 1988: 19). The term ‘revision’, Fanning argued, had become for people other than professional historians (politicians, propagandists, publicists and polemists) a term of abuse. Revision is merely, Fanning stresses, the reviewing of our knowledge and understanding of the
meaning of the past based on the unearthing of new evidence. This involves refuting myths and legends which, after all, are the myths and legends of the people at large. He went on: ‘In the cases of those who know legends but no history the effect can be traumatic. The impact upon simple and unsophisticated minds may be likened to the reaction of a child who learns there is no Santa Claus’ (Fanning: 1988: 17).

Fanning believed that there is an ideological motivation behind the revisionist scare, because such a process, involving the critical eye of the professional historian, not only questions the facts but ‘faith’ also. Those resisting revision are desperately determined to preserve ‘their ideology’ intact. History, concluded Fanning, is much too important to be left to those who would ‘prostitute’ it for ideological or political purposes.

TW Moody is firmly of the view that it is absolutely crucial to confront and to de-mythologize the Provisional IRA’s interpretation of the past, which allows them to justify an ‘irredentist war’ to end partition. Moody describes the Provisionals as latter-day Fenians who have no doubt of their moral right to wage a war on behalf of the Irish people against Britain – a war that they have no popular mandate for, regardless of the resultant misery, mayhem and destruction which derives from their ‘infallible interpretation of Ireland’s past’ (Moody, 1994: 85).

Tom Dunne sees the difference between Revision (big R) which concerns itself with Irish nationalism and the Irish question, and revision (small r) which is the history of previously undervalued areas such as women’s history, local history, the experiences of common life, etc. This type of history, Dunne stresses, involves ‘rewriting Irish history more profoundly than the most ideological committed ‘revisionists’ could dream of doing’ (Dunne, 1992: 11).

Michael Laffan agrees with Foster’s assertion that ‘we are all revisionist now’. He also feels that he is in good company when he receives, like Foster, condemnation and criticism from the nationalist school. Laffan believed that ‘to say kind words about the British or Ulster’s unionists is not a crime’. Laffan locates or includes the work he is involved in as part of an international trend which confronts the old certainties of the past. Laffan argued that ‘in a way’ revision stopped a long time ago because there was nothing left to revise, in that the old nationalist interpretation was so poorly grounded in sources ‘that it could be easily knocked over and was knocked over’. For Joseph Lee revision is essentially the reaction of a group of scholars, and to a lesser extent journalists, to what they see as a nationalist interpretation of Irish history. It had influenced perspectives in Southern Ireland on Irish nationalism. Those journalists who have taken up ‘the running’ on revision have been far less careful, Lee stresses, in drawing conclusions from revision and they are, for him, running a ‘political project’ which is essentially the demolition of inherited ‘traditional’ values in the South, including the ‘tradition of Irish nationalism’. Lee does not see a ‘conspiracy, involving academia, the media and politicians’, but rather thinks that revisionists ‘feed’ off one another in terms of responding to sympathetic parallels and approaches; ‘I think that one may talk about a mind-set emerging’.

For Evi Gkotzaridis, at the heart of Irish revisionism is a determination to reintroduce the ‘other’ in the pages of history, i.e. the Ulster Unionist or Southern Protestant or dissenting voices within nationalism. She further believes that if in the Irish situation
revolution is understood philosophically ‘as a never-ending process’ of interrogation, then revisionists are undoubtedly the ‘true revolutionaries’. ‘Since they are the ones who have unveiled the ideological abuse behind the dream of the revolution’ (Gkotzaridis, 2006: 210).

In offering a comparative analysis with other revisionist debates in other countries, Gkotzaridis makes a useful contribution to the discussion. Here she notes that in France revisionists have destroyed the Gaullist myth of France’s universal resistance to Germany and disclosed the extent of collaboration with the enemy; in Germany there is debate over how to make sense of the Holocaust; in Greece there is historical revision on the Civil War, questioning the assumption of the left that it was the main victim of violence; in Spain there is the scholarly opinion that the Civil War began not with the rising of the Nationalist Generals in July 1936, but with the armed revolt of the left in October 1934; in Israel there is historical revision relating to the Zionist version of the birth of the state of Israel in 1948. Gkotzaridis goes on to comment: ‘a truth overlooked amidst the intensity of exchanges was that Irish history was undergoing the same paradigmatic shift as European historiography and philosophy’ (Gkotzaridis, 2006: 20).

Fitzpatrick (2007) gives an account of the ‘revisionism’ movement of the 1970s and 1980s in Soviet history, and analyses its challenge to the totalitarian model. She states that those proponents of the totalitarian model were critical of the revisionists’ willingness to use ‘Western social-science concepts like social mobility and political participation in analyzing the Soviet Union [which] amounted to a claim that there were no essential differences between Soviet and Western political systems’. In particular, the totalitarians interpreted the revisionists’ interest in the idea of social support, and their wish to ‘switch the focus of scholarly attention’ away from terror, as attempts to ‘justify and give legitimacy to the Soviet system’ (Fitzpatrick, 2007: 81).

Judt (2007) states that some measure of neglect and even forgetting is a necessary condition for ‘civic health’ and to say this is not to ‘advocate amnesia’. Judt argues that a nation has first to remember something before it can begin to forget it:

Until the French understood Vichy as it was – and not as they had chosen to misremember it – they could not put it aside and move on. The same is true of Poles in their convoluted recollection of the Jews who once lived in their midst. The same will be true of Spain, too, which for twenty years following its transition to democracy drew a tacit veil across the painful memory of the civil war. Public discussion of that war and its outcome is only now getting under way. Only after Germans had appreciated and digested the enormity of their Nazi past – a sixty-year cycle of denial, education, debate and consensus – could they begin to live with it: i.e. put it behind them. (Judt, 2007: 829–30)

Therefore, Judt believes history needs to be ‘learned’ and ‘periodically re-learned’.

**Case Study: 1916**

During 1991, on the 75th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising, there was considerable controversy in the Republic of Ireland as to what would be the appropriate manner to
celebrate this event, if at all. The reason behind the controversy was the implication for
the ongoing violent conflict in Northern Ireland if commemorations were to take place.

One of the earliest critics of the men of Easter 1916, FX Martin (1961), questioned
their assumptions, objectives, methods and legacy. In his article, based on the papers of
Eoin MacNeill, the leader of the Irish Volunteers, he quoted MacNeill as being certain
that the only basis for successful revolutionary action was deep and widespread popular
discontent, and that a look around the streets would show that no such conditions exist
in Ireland. The article by Martin was widely regarded as a major turning point in the
historiography of the 1916 Rising.

Five years later, in 1966, in an article that at the time was deemed to be unsuitable for
publication, but was published in 1972 at a time when war was raging in the North,
Francis Shaw urged that ‘sentiment is a poor substitute for intellectual honesty and sin-
cerity’ (Shaw, 1972: 119). He believed that the canon of Irish history surrounding Easter
1916 condemns as being anti-Irish all who do not adhere to the ‘extremist nationalist
doctrine’. Shaw argued that looking back over 50 years the call to arms by Pearse and
others inflicted three grave wounds on the body of the unity of Ireland. The first was
partition: the door to a peaceful solution to the issue was closed in 1916; the second was
the Civil War of 1922–3, a bitter strife which Shaw believed was a consequence of the
Rising; the third was the injustice done to the many thousands of Irishmen who had
fought and died in the First World War, but who were virtually ‘without honor’ in their
own land.

Longley (1991: 48) was to comment that ‘to desire Pearse’s second coming is to
shirk the tough problems of contemporary politics’, which would be a retreat, an escape
into commemoration. Despite the condemnation from the anti-revisionists it was no
apostasy to treat Patrick Pearse and the other leaders of the Rising as historical figures
rather than ‘saints’. Irish memory, Longley urged, had to be ‘deconsecrated’. In the
same text Michael Laffan asked (rightly in my view): ‘If Napoleon and Lenin are not
taboo, why should Pearse and Connolly remain a subject for hagiographers rather than
historians?’ (Laffan, 1991: 116). Laffan also asked whether it was all, 1916 to 1923,
worth the price.

Declan Kilberd cited a survey carried out for the Irish Independent newspaper, which
showed that 65 per cent of respondents said that they looked on the Rising with pride, as
opposed to 14 per cent who said they regretted it. Fifty-eight per cent thought the rebels
were right to take up arms, as opposed to 24 per cent who did not, and 66 per cent thought
that those involved in the Rising would oppose today’s IRA violence, as opposed to just
16 per cent who believed they would have supported it (Kiberd, 1991: 3). The survey, for
Kiberd, demonstrated that the public at large still had a high regard for the idealism and
sacrifice of those who participated in the 1916 Rising.

The general public was also keenly aware that the 1916 rebels, unlike the modern
IRA, did everything in their power to avoid civilian casualties. Kiberd rightly dismisses
the notion that a glorification of 1916 in poems or ballads leads to recruits for the IRA,
and suggests that this is insulting to the intelligence of the general public. He states that
it was not any cultural force that helped IRA recruitment, but the bleak sectarian reali-
ties of life in the ‘corrupt state of Northern Ireland’. Kiberd considers anti-nationalist
revision to be a ‘journalistic phenomenon’ of the early 1970s (Kiberd, 1991: 8), which came to prominence after the IRA bombing campaign at the time.

The seventy-fifth anniversary of the Easter Rising in 1991 prompted Austen Morgan to comment: ‘Writers of history have to unravel contradictions, but when it comes to using history in politics, as will happen this Easter, all people of intellectual integrity should refrain to indulge in sentiment, orchestrated to justify irredentism and militarism’ (Morgan, 1991: 27).

Robert Ballagh, the artist and a member of the 75th Anniversary Committee of the 1916 Rising, would contrast the positive media attention given to the 300th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Limerick with the hostile reception given the 1916 commemoration: the state was prepared to celebrate a historical betrayal and not a key moment in the birth of the state itself. Ian McBride argues that the ‘embarrassment’ surrounding the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Easter Rising suggested that the ‘historiographical revolution’ of the previous 40 years was beginning to ‘percolate into the public mind’ (McBride, 2001: 38).

Sean Cronin, author of *Irish Nationalism: A History of its Roots and Ideology* (1980) thought it ‘a national humiliation’. With this effective official disowning of Easter 1916 by the Republic of Ireland the comparison is drawn between this and the Russian state’s refusal to celebrate the October Revolution of 1917. Joseph Lee contended (1997) that the ‘official mind’ in Ireland betrays every disposition to jettison history as fast as possible.

Regan (2007) expounds further on this. When it came to challenging republican violence on the grounds of its illegitimacy, however, the problem remained concerning the state’s own origins in an unmandated revolutionary struggle. On the sixtieth anniversary of the ‘rising’ in 1976, the state held no major public commemoration. In protest, the Provisionals organized a rally in central Dublin, which was duly proscribed by the government, but which was attended by between 6000 and 10,000 people. Easter 1916 and subsequent unmandated republican violence could not be conjured from existence, and the Provisionals’ commemoration in 1976 confirmed the folly of abandoning the state’s alternative history to its enemies. As a historian and government minister, Conor Cruise O’Brien sought ‘to solve the old conundrum of the state’s democratic formation and its revolutionary violence’. O’Brien was to argue that the men with whom Lloyd George negotiated in 1921 were all elected representatives and members of a political party with a large majority on the territory on which the state which emerged from negotiations was based. That democratic and representative capacity – not the rather meagre armed force behind them (the IRA) – was the real strength of their position. Conor Cruise O’Brien, for Regan, had thus ‘synthesized components of a democratic formation thesis in teleological constructions of the state’s borders and its legitimacy’ (Regan, 2007: 220–1).

Bew (1991) argued that the displacement of the old Irish Parliamentary Party signalled the demise of the middle ground in Irish politics and this had disastrous consequences for the future of the North. Bew went on to state that the 1916 Rising bequeathed the unsavoury notion that ‘it was right, not only to die for, but to kill for Irish nationalism’, and tersely added: ‘Most citizens of the Republic do not like to contemplate the current application of this idea in the North’ (Bew, 1991: 14).
Gkotzaridis was to note that Maureen Wall was the first historian to have uncovered the fact that 1916 represented not only an attack against English rule and the Constitutional Nationalists but also more problematically a coup within militant republicanism (Gkotzaridis, 2006: 211). Martin Mansergh argues that the 1916 Rising occurred because of the failure not primarily of Ireland’s but of Britain’s constitutional traditions. Mansergh went on to elaborate on this: in the nineteenth century the repeal of the Act of Union of 1801 between Ireland and England could not be entertained by England. Constitutional agitation was thus faced down by force. ‘The idea that the Union should be based on continuing consent, especially after the original consent was largely bought from an utterly unrepresentative parliament, did not seem to enter anyone’s head’ (Mansergh, 2003: 232).

In a debate on the morality of 1916 held at University College Cork in December 2008, Martin Mansergh (who had become the Minister of State for the Arts in the Irish Republic) refuted suggestions by historian Ruth Dudley Edwards that the actions of the participants of 1916 were similar to those of ‘modern terrorists’, saying no comparison could be made between the likes of Patrick Pearse and individuals with ‘no territorial aims’. Opposing the motion that the 1916 Rising was immoral, Mansergh said: ‘I completely refute the notion that al-Qaeda or people with non-territorial aims that are not specifically related to particular countries have anything to do with 1916.’ Ruth Dudley Edwards said the men of 1916 were anything but heroes. ‘A tiny little group decided they were right and they were going to stage a revolution with no backing from the public at large because they thought it was the right thing to do, as do al-Qaeda, as do the people who blew up the tube trains in London a few years ago’ (Irish Times, 2 December 2008: 7).

Commemoration and memory

Kevin Myers (Irish Times, 16 May 1995: 13) wrote about 1916: ‘I maintain it was a deplorable thing, with deplorable consequences since. It was a triumph of antidemocracy and militarism over democracy and civicism, of evil methods over peaceful ones’. Garret FitzGerald (Irish Times, 31 August 1996: 12), the former Irish Prime Minister (Taoiseach), wrote that he had found it disturbing that there was no serious effort to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Easter Rising in 1991. He lamented that its commemoration had been left almost exclusively to the Provisional IRA and its ‘hangers on and sympathizers’.

In the Irish Times (12 April 2004: 12), in an article entitled: ‘Why it is becoming acceptable to speak of 1916 again’ the writer was to explain the change in attitude: whereas the fiftieth anniversary of the rebellion in 1966 was designated a national celebration, as a consequence of the Northern conflict ideology had to be revised and 1916 began to be played down:

The 60th anniversary in 1976 was best encapsulated in the slogan, ‘Who fears to speak of Easter Week?’ With death lurking in the hedgerows and back-alleys of the North, the Government in the Irish Republic was not disposed to glorify the violent deeds of a previous generation.
With the advent of the peace process, the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and the end of the conflict in Northern Ireland, it had now become officially acceptable to commemorate 1916 again.

The *Irish Times* (12 April 2004: 6) reported the Minister of Finance declaring that ‘the men and women of 1916 rather than those who took power in 1922 were the real founders of the Irish State’ and had given the Irish people the freedom they enjoy today. The Minister of Finance said the actions of those in 1916, particularly the leaders who signed the Proclamation of Independence and were executed, achieved political independence and laid the foundations for the economic prosperity and international role Ireland enjoys today. On 16 April 2006, the Republic’s government held the first military parade in Dublin for the Easter ‘rising’ commemoration since 1971. An estimated 120,000 spectators attended.

If the speech from the Minister of Finance is seen in the context of the Fianna Fail Party using republicanism in an attempt to stave off an electoral challenge from Sinn Fein in the Irish Republic, then it has to be noted that just three weeks after forming a historic coalition with Ian Paisley in Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein was to suffer a demoralizing electoral setback in the Irish Republic. Sinn Fein wanted to double its representation in Ireland’s parliament, the Dail, putting it in government on both sides of the Irish border. Some polls had predicted that the party could win up to 15 seats, but it only managed to cling on to four of the five seats it held before polling day. Consistently with around 10 per cent support in the opinion polls, the party should have done much better.

Daly and O’Callaghan (2007) argued that the eruption of the Troubles in Northern Ireland in 1969, and the consequent ‘aftershocks in the Republic’, resulted in the 1966 commemoration being retrospectively interpreted as a factor in the resurgence of IRA military activity. Daly and O’Callaghan cited Conor Cruise O’Brien’s book *States of Ireland* (1972) in which O’Brien had argued that the Lemass–O’Neill efforts at rapprochement (referring to the talks between the Prime Ministers of Southern and Northern Ireland) were undermined by the great commemorative year (1966):

> a year in which ghosts were bound to walk, both North and South ... The general calls for rededication to the ideals of 1916 were bound to suggest to some young men and women not only that these ideals were in practice being abandoned – through the Lemass–O’Neill meetings and in other ways – but that the way to return to them was through the method of 1916: violence, applied by a determined minority. (O’Brien quoted in Daly and O’Callaghan, 2007: 5)

Daly and O’Callaghan, in noting the response to the Northern conflict by the Irish government, quoted the writer Colm Tobin: ‘In less than ten years we moved from a time in which the state sponsored such emotions [state commemoration of the Easter Rising in 1966 dramatizing the executions of 1916] to a time when the songs we learned in school were banned on the state radio’ (Daly and O’Callaghan, 2007: 5–6).

Daly and O’Callaghan also cited Foster, who commented that ‘the results of simplistic historical hero-cults had become obvious in the carnage of Northern Ireland’. He later went on to contrast the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Rising in 1991, which was ‘treated by the Irish government as a sensitive issue, to be approached in the deliberately restrained

Daly and O’Callaghan contend that:

1966 shares one key feature with the 2006 commemoration: both represent a determined effort by the Irish state to reclaim the memory/commemoration of the Rising from militant republicans and to establish the commemoration as an event that could unite all citizens and consolidate the state. (Daly and O’Callaghan, 2007: 7)

Daly (2007) believed that the claim by Sinn Fein and the IRA to be the true heirs to the spirit of 1916 represented a challenge to the Irish Republic:

That the Rising was carried out by a minority, and was seen at the time as unpopular, but then went on to secure retrospective approval, was a message that was dear to the hearts of all who were engaged in waging a long, unsuccessful and unpopular war to end partition … Though this aspect of the Rising did not figure prominently in speeches by government ministers or mainstream political leaders. (Daly, 2007: 39)

Boyce (2001: 255) believes that the role of ‘politics in controlling memory’ is a reflection of the ‘ruling passions of the time’. He goes on to say that for the Irish state, or any state, to survive it is important to create a ‘master narrative’, to repeat the past consciously: ‘But for the Irish state this raised problems in 1966, because the state was moving cautiously towards a rapprochement with Northern Ireland, and must be careful not to let the “memory” of 1916 spill over into dangerous politics’ (2001: 256).

Graff-McRae (2007: 219) believes commemoration involves ‘the legitimation’ of one form of conflict over others, and ‘re-inscribes axes of division’ within the social and political arena. She goes on to elaborate:

The political dynamics of commemoration therefore present a paradox – a question rather than an answer. Above all, it is a political question: What is being commemorated, where and how? By whom is it commemorated, and by whom forgotten? Who is excluded or marginalized and whose interests does this serve? How is commemoration used in political conflicts – over sovereignty, territory, identity; equality amongst gender, class, ethnic, religious or ideological categories? (Graff-McRae, 2007: 225)

McGee (2001) was to state that commemorations of the Manchester Martyrs’ pre-1916 were of continued interest to the Dublin Metropolitan Police, which suspected that their ‘success or failure’ was a rough guide to the degree of influence that the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB, forerunner to the IRA) exercised in the city. The motivation of the IRB during these demonstrations was to convince those present that the Manchester Martyrs were ‘not only nationalists but also revolutionaries’. To this end IRB men frequently preached at the demonstrations that the truest way to honour and follow the example of the Manchester Martyrs was to ‘take up arms’ and turn away from Ireland’s constitutional nationalist leaders. Naturally this was an argument with which the Irish
Parliamentary Party could not agree. There was therefore a struggle between the Irish Parliamentary Party and the IRB as to which body could claim to be the ‘legitimate’ follower of the legacy of the Manchester Martyrs. This resonates with the battle between ‘constitutional’ republicans and ‘militant’ republicans over the commemoration of 1916.

It is also important to note that commemorating 1916 also means commemorating the Irishmen in British uniforms who fought in the First World War. One letter published in the *Irish Times* (3 September, 2008: 13) expressed the view that the Irishmen who fought in the British army during the First World War ‘have been largely airbrushed out of Irish history’. In another letter published in the *Irish Times* (11 November, 2008: 13), the writer commented: ‘As a pacifist, I am now happy to wear a poppy on Remembrance Day, if only to say that my grandfather and men like him should never have been neglected, and their stories should never be forgotten.’

It is interesting to note that the *Irish Times* (11 November 2008: 8) reported that the German Great War dead lacked any official commemoration:

> While Britain, France and now even Ireland will today remember those who fought and died in the Great War, 90 years on, the men who fought in Kaiser Wilhelm’s Imperial Army remain trapped in a memory hole. There is no central record of veterans, no German equivalent of the Cenotaph – and no poppies. There will be no official remembrance ceremony today, nor is there a plan to initiate one.

Regarding the commemoration of Irish soldiers from the First World War, each year on the Sunday closest to 11 July (the date the Truce was agreed in 1921) the Irish government holds a National Day of Commemoration ‘to honour all those Irishmen and Irishwomen who died in past wars or on Service with the United Nations’. This annual ceremony is attended by the President, An Taoiseach, government ministers, the diplomatic corps, the defence forces and ex-servicemen’s organizations including the Royal British Legion in Ireland. Representative of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths offer prayers, after which there is a simple military parade and the Last Post is sounded. There are no speeches at this event. In 2006 the government specifically commemorated the ninetieth anniversary of both the 1916 Rising and the battle of the Somme. The Irish government produced two sets of documents that made up two official commemoration brochures for the events.

David Fitzpatrick contended that commemoration of the Great War might have become a tool for reconciliation between Ireland’s Catholic and Protestant communities, ‘which had supplied roughly equal numbers to the wartime forces’. However:

> the rhetorical legacy of Sinn Fein made it impracticable to separate the issues of personal suffering and political conviction, all servicemen living and dead being damned by the flag under which they had served … For the revolutionary generation, war service signified betrayal of the Irish nation. (Fitzpatrick, 2001: 191)

Fitzpatrick went on to say that, when in power, governments made some attempt to reconcile disaffected groups by involving the state in non-partisan commemoration of the 1916 Rising and the Great War. However, since all political factions drew their
legitimacy from ‘competing interpretations of the Irish past’, all commemoration was ‘tainted by politics’ and was potentially counter-productive (2001: 203).

Edna Longley looks at the position today when the ‘tangible realisations of historical ecumenism’ are the Irish National Memorial at Islandbridge, opened in 1995, and the Messines Peace Park, jointly inaugurated by President McAleese and Queen Elizabeth II in November 1998. (Lieutenant-General Gerry McMahon, formerly chief of staff of the Irish army, has mentioned the significance of ‘revisionist’ history in securing this.) Yet, despite this, especially in the North, most nationalists persist in seeing the poppy as only a ‘provocative British and Protestant symbol’ (Longley, 2001: 235). Nonetheless, as a sign of the times, representatives of Sinn Fein travelled to Belgium in 2007 as part of a cross-community peace initiative marking the ninetieth anniversary of the battle of Messines.

Revisionism: the ongoing debate

Three years after the Good Friday Agreement, the Irish Times (30 April 2001: 17) printed a letter arguing that the campaign to ‘denationalise the thinking of people, by revisionist historians, sections of the media and a coalition of other vested interests, is having considerable success’. It argued that law and order is best maintained among people who are ‘proud of their country, its history, heritage and culture’. Equally importantly, it said, is the fact that a people proud of their national identity are ‘a caring considerate people’ who are caring about the welfare of others who live in their community. It went on to say that, this ‘denationalising campaign of the revisionists’ was having a demeaning impact that leads to ‘vandalism, racialism and other destructive tendencies in young people who have been mentally polluted by the anti-Irish activists’. It was time, the writer said, that the silent majority acted to curb the attack upon the core values and institutions to which the Irish nation and the Irish state owe their formation and continuity. ‘The most dangerous threat to our nation is coming from revisionists’. The Irish Times (4 May 2001: 15) printed a letter in response which noted the letter calling for ‘the silent majority’ to act against subversives who were threatening the state and claiming that apparently Ireland stands on the brink of disaster due to ‘revisionist’ journalists and historians:

In future, when my car is broken into, I will remember to fasten the blame securely on Ruth Dudley Edwards. If my African neighbours are abused, it must spring from something Eoghan Harris wrote about Pearse. Kevin Myers should be made personally to repair those broken telephone boxes.

In response to Kevin Whelan’s review of his book on the Wexford rising of 1798 (Dunne, 2004a), Tom Dunne (2004b) was to attack his critic:

Whelan’s version is part of a sustained, insidious attempt throughout his review to portray me as a bitter throwback, ‘maimed’ and ‘deformed’ by my early life into a ‘despairing revisionism’, making me one of ‘a handful of diehards’ left high and dry by the ‘rapidly maturing Ireland’, which he, of course, represents.
The most serious issue Dunne had with Whelan was not simply a matter of the interpretation of sources. ‘I charge him with going far beyond what is acceptable in professional historical writing’, by his ‘reckless endorsement of two key claims … knowing, as he did, that there was no substantial evidence for them’ – i.e. that the Wexford rebels established a republic, and that this was presided over by a senate of leading Catholics and Protestants. This, Dunne argued, related to the issue of trust, and by ‘lending them’ his authority ‘Whelan, I believe, subordinated his role and his responsibility as a historian to the political goals of the official government-sponsored commemoration [of the 1798 rebellion]’.

There was ferocious controversy over Peter Hart’s treatment of two events during the War of Independence. The dispute centres mainly on two areas: first, Hart’s attempt to overturn the long-held and widely accepted view that British Auxiliaries fired on and killed three IRA soldiers after the Auxiliaries had called a surrender during the Kilmichael ambush in November 1920; and, second, Hart’s suggestion that the post-Truce killing of Protestant males in the area surrounding Dunmanway in April 1922 was part of a sectarian war being pursued by republican forces (see Meehan, 2004).

In an interview Hart (2005a) contended that ‘a lot of the criticism was and is clearly politically driven and assumes that I am too, which simply isn’t true’. And he also claimed that he has yet to see any convincing refutation of anything he has written. Most of his critics have ‘never even been in the archives’. Responding to criticism from Meda Ryan (2003), Hart commented that Ryan’s book contains ‘almost no new evidence’ but rather attempts to dismiss the witnesses that he quotes and the report he used to query Tom Barry’s later published account of the Kilmichael ambush. ‘She isn’t interested in dealing with the substance of this evidence in a rational way’, he argued. In his interview Hart also stressed that he did not claim there was ‘ethnic cleansing’, ‘There was no ethnic cleansing in the Irish revolution (although the attacks on Catholics in Belfast came close) but there was ethnically targeted violence’, he stated. Ryan responded:

Peter Hart in his interview dismisses my work in Tom Barry: Column Commander and IRA Freedom Fighter (2003), saying that it ‘contains almost no new evidence’. The acquisition of Tom Barry’s papers plus interviews with Tom Barry and participants in events, together with other primary source material, is surely an addition to historiography. (Ryan, 2005: 13)

Murphy takes issue with Peter Hart’s use of sources and asks where the key missing sentences are from the official British record that show that some Protestants in Cork were targeted by the IRA, not for sectarian reasons but for military reasons, because they ‘gave information’ to the other side during the war of Independence. Murphy asserts that: ‘Nowhere does Peter Hart give an explanation for, or an acknowledgement of, the fact that in The IRA and its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916–1923 (1998) the two sentences had been omitted’ (Murphy, 2005: 10).

Brian Murphy was to give a public address in Cork on 15 April 2005 entitled: ‘In Defence of Cork’s Political Culture in the Revolutionary Years 1914–1922’. In the address he explained that the word ‘defence’ in the title of his talk arose from the recent publications of Peter Hart. 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’. The ‘damaging charges’ that
most offended Murphy were of ethnic conflict, sectarianism and the persecution of Protestants. Murphy quoted Peter Hart:

> All 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 terminology of hatred. (Hart, 2003: 240)

Hart claimed that repeated attacks on his research into IRA activities in the 1920s were politically motivated. ‘For some people it has become an extension of the whole revisionist controversy’. ‘I don’t see it that way but they perceive me as anti-Republican, even anti-nationalist. They see what I write as politics by other means’ (2005b: 7).

Hart was offered another chance to respond to his critics:

> What would it mean to deal with evidence in a rational (logical, systemic) way? Well for starters, approach it with an open mind and mould your explanations around it – don’t just dismiss it if it doesn’t fit your preconceptions. In Meda Ryan’s case, these are summed up in the subtitle of her book, ‘IRA freedom fighter’, as well as her answer to her own question: ‘what were the volunteers fighting for? ... they fought for Irish freedom. In my opinion, when it comes to explanation, she and most of the other Kilmichael critics practice a kind of faith-based or creationist history: faith in the purity of the IRA; creationism with regard to their politics. (2005c: 16)

This debate clearly reflects a continuing interest in Irish history. It also indicates the continuing relevance of the debate on ‘revisionism’. It was reported that between 1500 and 2000 people attended the Kilmichael commemoration on 28 November 2004 and heard Meda Ryan’s oration, so popular interest in aspects of Irish history appears intact (as reported in Meehan, 2004).

Antoniou (2007: 98–9) argues that these personal attacks have mostly to do with the society in which the revisionist debate takes place, and how this society deals with its past. ‘In other words, the debate is not about the importance of historical events as such but about their projection into current political identities and subjectivities’.

It would be useful to examine the work of Richard English whose ‘softening’ attitude towards the IRA coincided with the burgeoning peace process. Regan (2007) states:

> Compare Richard English’s interpretation of anti-treatyite democratic subversion in his 1998 biography of Ernie O’Malley with his view in 2003 that ‘there remains no simple equation possible between the 1921 Treaty and democracy on one side and anti-Treatyite politics and opposition to democracy on the other’ (Richard English, Ernie O’Malley: IRA Intellectual (Oxford, 1998), pp. 84, 88, and English, Armed Struggle: A History of the IRA (London, 2003), p. 33). Whilst there is no requirement for consistency, some acknowledgement is due when such reorientations are responses to either historiographical innovation or to current affairs. (2007: 229)

In a letter to me of 25 September 2009 Richard English explained this ‘softening’ of approach. In the letter he said: ‘It would be naïve to think that an historian studying
contemporary Irish political history – especially that involving groups such as the IRA – could write with utter immunity to changing political realities’. He went on to say that some scholars (including John Regan) have pointed to what they see as:

a shift in my position on the republican movement. It’s certainly true that my political response to the IRA is different now (since their abandonment of coercive violence) from that adopted during the period when they were killing people. But so is the political response of most people including Ian Paisley.

What has happened, English argues, involves two other dimensions. First, the ‘subject matter of study’ in English (2003) had changed as the IRA ‘shifted towards peaceful politics’. He stresses that the book is ‘unequivocal in opposing the logic of the IRA’s violence’; but it also involved ‘scrutiny of a movement’ which, for much of the latter period, ‘had shifted away from earlier, more violent certainties’. Second, his books on the republican movement/Irish nationalism ‘need to be read as parts of an overall argument’, each of which has adopted a different topic and – to some degree – a ‘different authorial voice’ in order to develop arguments. So the people who single out Armed Struggle: History of the IRA as ‘overly empathetic’ should also read the ‘less sympathetic’ Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland (English, 2006) and should take the two approaches adopted in those two books as parts of a wider approach.

I think that people who carefully read English’s three books (1994, 1998, 2006) will read a combined argument which throughout takes Irish militant republicanism seriously, which tries to respect its adherents, but which also remains unpersuaded by the central arguments of the movement.

Conclusion

Michael Laffan, in talking about Easter 1916, hoped that in the future we may face a pattern in which nationalist and republican critics devote less attention to criticizing the way in which the history of Ireland’s revolutionary years has been written, and tackle the formidable problems of writing some of that history themselves, and in so doing become the ‘new revisionists’ (Laffan, 1991: 121).

We have witnessed the creation of a power-sharing government led by political opposites in Northern Ireland – the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein. This is the first time that Northern Ireland will be run by a government in which all the main nationalist and unionist parties have agreed to serve together. Forty years of civil strife and conflict are over. It is no surprise that revisionism has generated much controversy and heated debate. In the words of Martin Mansergh, ‘in Ireland, History is Ideology’ (Mansergh, 1995: 56).

There was also the view that a specific ideology and/or a specific community were the target in all of this. While recognizing that such sentiment does indeed exist, and with some justification, there was no all-embracing revisionist school of thought. There were different types of histories; there are also different types of historians. All bring their concerns, interests and prejudice to the diverse range of subjects that go into making Irish historiography what it is. It has to be stated that there is a clear distinction between
those who are politically committed and those who plainly are not. There are also contrasts between those critics of revision in terms of scholarship.

It must also be recognized that, post-Good Friday Agreement, the political and intellectual landscape has to a large extent been transformed and that the gap in understanding between historians and the general public is not as wide as it was.

Bourke (2003) argues that with the arrival of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 the ‘bitterest of rivals’ on the Northern Ireland scene had decided to try things differently. ‘Republicans, on one side, had come to their senses, abandoning the path of war in favour of an honourable peace; and unionists, for their part, had given up on pretensions better consigned to the past’. He went on to ask:

But what is the deeper meaning behind this transformation? Old enemies, we are told, had been drawn together to embrace a common democratic faith, leaving political commentators to observe that even here the war of ideas was finally over. (2003: 1)

Bourke concluded that if political struggle succeeded the contest of arms in Northern Ireland, then civil administration would take the place of military confrontation; and that in the future one could expect a system of ‘organized political competition’ to replace the older pattern of ‘insurrection and oppression’ which had characterized the Northern Irish situation for more than a generation (2003: 296).

Speaking in 1998, David Trimble said, ‘The Cold War in this island is over’. If the conflict is over then it is likely that debates about Irish history will increasingly be seen not to have any relevance to Irish politics – this is an understandable assumption. With the removal of the conflict, then, there is likely to be a corresponding decrease in intensity, emotionalism, passion and fervour. Historical revision will lose the attention that it has had in the past. It will thus cease to be a controversial subject – in a real sense the ending of the conflict will mean an end to the controversy.

Arguments about history will be for academics to resolve – not politicians or political commentators. Articles in academic journals entering the political arena will become fewer. However, debates such as those surrounding the work of Peter Hart and Tom Dunne, and the letters section of the *Irish Times*, indicate no diminution in the intensity of historiographical combat.

Notes

1 Sinn Fein is an Irish Republican Party. The origins of Irish republicanism reside in the United Irishman Rising of 1798 which aimed to end British rule in Ireland and to create a democratic society that would unite Irishmen of all creeds. The physical force tradition seeks legitimacy by trying to trace its origin to the 1798 Rebellion and the insurrections that followed in 1803, 1848, 1867 and 1916. Constitutional republicanism, whilst sharing the republican goals of independence, unity and sovereignty, rejects the methods of the physical force tradition. For a useful reference see Whyte (1990).

2 The traditional nationalist view of Northern Ireland, and thus the national question, can be summed up in two propositions: (1) the people of Ireland form one nation and therefore should be entitled to national self-determination; and (2) the fault for keeping Ireland partitioned lies with Britain. See Whyte (1990).
The traditional unionist interpretation can be summed up in two propositions: (1) there are two distinct people in Ireland, unionist and nationalist; and (2) the core of the problem is the refusal of nationalists to recognize this fact, and to accord to unionists the same right of self-determination as they claim for themselves. In the past unionism was associated with the principle of majoritarian unionist rule in Northern Ireland. See Whyte (1990).

For a useful reference on modern Irish history see Kee (2003).

Professor Tom Garvin, interview with me, University College Dublin, 1993, when he was head of the Department of Political Science there. He is the author of The Evolution of Irish National Politics (1981).

Michael Laffan, interview with me, University College Dublin, 1993, when he was a member of the Department of History there. He is the author of The Partition of Ireland 1911–1925 (1983).


In 1867 three Irishmen were executed in Manchester, England. They had been found guilty of murdering a policeman during a successful attempt to rescue two Fenian prisoners from a police van and they subsequently became known as the Manchester Martyrs.

Address by David Trimble, then leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, to the Irish Association (an organization dedicated to reconciliation between nationalism and unionism) in Co. Wicklow, Ireland, 20 November 1998.

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