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REVIEW ARTICLE

Commemorating revolutionary Ireland from above and below

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ARMAGH. THE IRISH REVOLUTION, 1912–23. By Donal Hall and Eoin Magennis. Pp 176, illus. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2024. €24.95 paperback.

SPIRIT OF REVOLUTION. IRELAND FROM BELOW, 1917–23. Edited by John Cunningham and Terry Dunne. Pp 278, illus. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2024. €24.95 paperback.

The historiography of the Irish revolutionary period has developed significantly in recent years.[1] Scholars lately have emphasised the revolution's social dimensions, including class, gender and regional variation, much of this through the funding streams provided by the Irish State to commemorate the centenary period. This led to local authority-led historian-in-residence programmes in many counties, public lectures, exhibitions, publications, artistic responses and much more.[2] As a result, the historiography today reflects a more nuanced and pluralistic understanding of the revolution's causes, course and consequences, which the volumes reviewed here build upon.

Of the two books under review, one investigates the local experience of the revolutionary period in County Armagh, while the other approaches the period from the perspective of 'mass movements from below' throughout Ireland. *Armagh: the Irish revolution, 1912–23* is the fifteenth entry in 'The Irish Revolution, 1912–23' series, which is edited by Daithí Ó Corráin and Mary Ann Lyons. In a series which has already provided many highlights, this is certainly one of the best offerings thus far – well-researched and

[1] See, for example, the volumes already published by the Four Courts Press in its 'The Irish Revolution 1912–23' series, https://www.fourcourtspress.ie/books/browse/history/the-irish-revolution-series (accessed 19 Sept. 2025). Other important studies which cover various elements of the Irish revolutionary period include: Eunan O'Halpin and Daithí Ó Corráin, *The dead of the Irish Revolution* (New Haven & London, 2020); Charles Townshend, *The Irish republic: the fight for Irish independence, 1918–23* (London, 2014); Terence Dooley, *Burning the big house: the story of the Irish country house in a time of war and revolution* (New Haven & London, 2022); Miriam Moffit, 'The Protestant experience of revolution in County Leitrim, 1911-1928', *Leitrim: history and society*, ed. Liam Kelly and Brendan Scott (Dublin, 2019), 629–52; Diarmuid Ferriter, *Between two hells: the Irish Civil War* (London, 2021).

[2] For just some examples of historical, online and artistic responses to the decade of centenaries, see Brendan Scott, *Four lives lost: some of Cavan's revolutionary dead, 1920–22* (Cavan, 2022); 'The Irish Civil War fatalities project', University College, Cork, https://www.ucc.ie/en/theirishrevolution/irish-civil-war-fatalities-project/ (accessed 19 Sept. 2025); '"The 'Circle of Courage" sculpture unveiled at the site of the Clonfin Ambush, County Longford', https://www.longfordcoco.ie/your-council/news/the-circle-of-courage-sculpture-unveiled-at-site-of-clonfin-ambush.html (accessed 19 Sept. 2025); 'Roller skates and ruins exhibition', National Gallery of Ireland, https://www.nationalgallery.ie/what-we-do/press-room/press-releases/new-exhibition-explores-decade-centenaries-through-lives-six (accessed 19 Sept. 2025).

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written, concise, scholarly and accessible. One of the strengths of 'The Irish Revolution, 1912—23' series is the adherence to roughly the same layout and word count, which, when the series is complete, will make it easier for historians to draw wider conclusions and study general trends. But this series also highlights events and themes which are peculiar to the county under study. For example, the authors situate Armagh within the wider social and economic transformations taking place in that county, documenting how fragmented nationalism, unionist consolidation and an agrarian land revolution shaped the local landscape and political scene. Over 215 landed estates were sold to more than 12,000 tenants during this period, pointing to a deeply-rooted land hunger in the county. This is the first major study dedicated entirely to County Armagh during the revolutionary decade and, as such, is an especially important addition to the historiography of the period.

As the authors point out, Armagh did not witness the levels of violence and bloodshed which were experienced in Belfast or Cork, but rather were in the 'middle ranks' of fatalities, along with counties which it bordered, such as Monaghan, Louth and Down. Similarly, those who died were a mixture of combatants and civilians, like much of the rest of Ulster, excluding Belfast.

Again, as with the other volumes in this series, *Armagh*'s nine chapters (plus appendix) cover the period 1912 to 1923, tracing Armagh's trajectory from the home rule crisis through the War of Independence and civil war, concluding with the aftermath of the 1925 Boundary Commission. In this volume, the authors uncover just how the deep-rooted sectarian divisions, political ferment and social change in Armagh shaped and sometimes destroyed the lives of the people living there in the early twentieth century, culminating in partition: despised by nationalists and rejoiced by unionists.

What 'The Irish Revolution, 1912–23' series in general does very well, and which for *Armagh* is certainly no exception, is to highlight the smaller IRA and UVF operations which took place in that county and place them into the wider national context. Other volumes in the series which also utilise this approach to good effect include those that cover Counties Monaghan, Fermanagh, Louth and Donegal. The authors of *Armagh* cover the various sectarian clashes and paramilitary skirmishes in Armagh, which became more prevalent as the War of Independence continued, as well as key events such as the derailment of a train containing British troops at Adavoyle in 1921 and the Lisdrumliska and Altnaveigh killings in mid 1922; the last event triggered by the murder of nationalists carried out by the 'Specials'. The authors also clearly explain how the 4th Northern Division, led by Frank Aiken, was drawn into the civil war in the Free State.

Hall and Magennis effectively highlight intracommunity divisions: unionists in the county gradually converging around the idea of a Northern Ireland state by 1921, while nationalist groups remained fractured into three distinct strands: Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) loyalists, Sinn Féin supporters and Treaty-era republicans. The Hibernian movement was strong in Armagh, with John Dillon of the IPP beliving that South Armagh was a safe seat for his party. The end of the civil war had eroded the membership of the 4th Northern Division, with only twelve operational men remaining, and 200 more in prison (around eighty of those from Armagh) in the Irish Free State. They were not capable of operating effectively within Northern Ireland, with their last hope being the possible absorption of at least part of the county into the Free State once the Boundary Commission carried out its duties. Their hope was in vain.

This fragmented nationalist movement, unlike the situation in other Ulster counties such as Monaghan and Cavan, contrasted sharply with the more unified unionism movement and contributed to the eventual political failure of nationalists in the area. In addition to political and military aspects at play in Armagh at the time, Hall and Magennis also give attention to labour, gender and social and economic histories, for example, highlighting the lack of support shown to members of Cumann na mBan following the end of the war. Frank Aiken noted in the Dáil in 1934 how difficult it was for women to prove

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their military service, but that they were deserving nonetheless. However, as Hall and Magennis demonstrate, standards were not applied evenly across the board, leading to some 'galling' decisions which deprived women of military pensions (123). *Armagh* is very well researched and written — Hall and Magennis, for example, make good use of archival sources not often used, such as the Padraig Quinn papers, which are held at Kilmainham Gaol Museum — and will surely be the last major work on this period in Armagh required for years to come. In a series which still has much to give, *Armagh* sets a high standard going forward.

Edited by John Cunningham and Terry Dunne, *Spirit of revolution. Ireland from below 1917–23* is a very different beast to the Armagh volume, even if it does focus on roughly the same time period. A collection of essays which originated in a conference at the University of Galway, it contains a mixture of national and local case studies which leads our attention away from the high-politics narrative of the Irish revolutionary era to a more focused view of the revolutionary years 'from below'. The usual characters who people histories of this period are set aside in favour of others who are less known to a general readership. Arthur Griffith, for example, is mentioned twice in the book and Michael Collins seven times, one of those in a footnote, although as would be expected in a volume such as this, James Connolly's name appears on twenty-six pages and James Larkin seventeen times. Instead, the activities of lesser-known actors from the period, people such as Jack McGrath, an organiser of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), and Henry Prior-Wandesforde, the owner of Castlecomer coalfield who was hostile to workers' rights, are highlighted here. The book's introduction by Cunningham and Dunne reflects upon the famous 1919 quote from Prime Minister Lloyd George — that 'the whole of Europe is filled with the spirit of revolution' (7) — which sets the tone for the entire collection: a focus on the grassroots activism of ordinary Irish people instead of the traditional spotlight on military events and 'high' politics.

The thirteen essays range from the experiences of miners and maritime workers to women trade unionists. It is not possible to comment on every essay, but this collection contains a number of highlights which should be mentioned. In respect of Castlecomer, County Kilkenny, Anne Boran explores contested freedoms in coalfield communities, where labour interests often clashed with broader nationalist symbols, examining the issues the Castlecomer coalminers had with the aforementioned Prior-Wandesforde. In his essay, Johnny Burke documents the agrarian mobilisation in County Galway in 1920, leading to seizures, threats to landlords and a backlash that reverberated across the county like wildfire. John Cunningham's essay on Galway in May 1922 tells how housing protests escalated in the county town, rather than the countryside, with local activists occupying the town hall, dismissing elected officials, calling for Brehon Law to be reinstated and, in a move which has resonance in more recent times, pulling down a statue of the divisive figure Lord Dunkellin, located in Eyre Square. And the essays by Kieran McNulty and Theresa Moriarty examine women's activism in Kerry and within the Irish Trade Union Congress (1916–23), highlighting previously underexplored female participation in class struggle and union formation.

While it may be invidious to highlight particular chapters, the publication of the book in the year of the centenary of the establishment of the Workers' Union of Ireland (WUI) makes its chapter regarding Larkin all the more fitting, as well as an appropriate end to the collection. Gerry Watts discusses Larkin's return from the United States in 1923 and notes the difficulties which the ITGWU would have with Larkin and his supporters, despite having built the union membership from 5,000 in 1914 to 100,000 in 1923. Larkin, making a speech at Liberty Hall upon his return to Dublin on 26 April 1923, repeated the mantra 'Each for all and all for each' (250), but as Watts points out, the Larkinites 'were out for more than just nationalism. They wanted a better world for all, and working-class internationalism would be central to WUI policy' (250). Having been elected while in Russia

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to be one of the twenty-five members of the Communist International to 'rule the Earth' (259), returning to Ireland, Larkin now found himself pushed into the leadership of the WUI. Watts concludes that the agitation of the Larkinites, often in the absence of Larkin himself, pointed to one of the objectives of the WUI to bestow not only 'bread for all' but roses too (260). And Mary Forrest's paper, which highlights the United Irish Plotholders' Union (UIPU), also demonstrates the hunger for land which is noted in the Armagh volume also under consideration here. Although it was mainly an urban organisation, focusing on growing subsistence levels of vegetables, the UIPU played an important role in a time of food shortages, a situation not helped by food blockades during the First World War. Likewise, Terry Dunne's essay highlights the importance of agriculture and, by extension, the land as the central industry throughout most of Ireland in the early twentieth century. Despite this, trade unions such as the ITGWU did not seem to engage with the 'rural constituency', and as Dunne points out, 'while land division shaped some areas of Ireland profoundly, others were barely touched' (96).

While, as can be the case with edited collections, the coverage, both in terms of geography and topic, can be uneven, *Spirit of revolution* nevertheless stands as a timely corrective to long-standing historiographical omissions. Cunningham and Dunne and their contributors remind us that the Irish revolutionary period was shaped just as much by farmers, workers, and tradespeople as by politicians and IRA battalions. The essays reveal that ordinary people mobilised, contested, and envisioned a different social order, only to see those aspirations constrained or dismantled amid nation-building.

Spirit of revolution is an interesting and worthy collection which helps to further our understanding of Ireland during this most divisive period by highlighting the revolutionary spirit from below. For readers interested in labour history, social class, women's activism or regional studies of the revolution, this collection is essential reading. Even for those focused on the constitutional or military dimensions of the period, this book provides crucial context: mass mobilisation was not incidental to the Irish Revolution, according to the editors and contributors, it was at its heart.

Both books are reasonably priced which makes them accessible to the general public. This is certainly in line with the ethos underpinning the *Spirit of revolution*, which incidentally also sports an attractive cover: a watercolour by the painter Harry Kernoff, that depicts Liberty Hall. Both volumes contain visuals, although the plate section in *Armagh* is especially useful, as the inclusion of maps, images and plates help to familiarise readers with Armagh's local geography and people. Both books will be helpful to the specialist and non-specialist alike, which is also very much in keeping with the principles of the entire Decade of Centenaries programme. In conclusion, the editors, authors and the publisher of both volumes (Four Courts Press) are all to be commended for their contributions towards the creation of these two very fine offerings. *Armagh* and *Spirit of revolution* are two important additions to the historiography of the Irish revolutionary period and should find their way onto the bookshelf of anybody interested in those times, even long after the commemorative period itself has ended.

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