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Review article: New work on the Irish Revolution*

The centenaries of events around the Irish Revolution are inevitably bringing forth a spate of new publications. What is remarkable about the existing historiography on this period is that detailed studies of various aspects, particularly regional studies,[1] are plentiful but that there are very few synthetic works.[2] The two books under review here are therefore very welcome additions written by two eminently qualified historians. The works indeed do not disappoint: both go much further than simply putting together the fruits of existing works but rely on a substantial amount of original research. The relatively recent opening up of the archives of the Bureau of Military History, which inevitably means the bringing to light of new facts and insights, made this easier for Charles Townshend, who deals with the Irish side, than for Ronan Fanning, who analyses the British government's attitude to the Irish revolution.

Despite their opposite perspectives there are inevitably larger issues they share, such as the impact of the use of violence on politics. This can be an uncomfortable question as few people like to conclude that the use of political violence can reap rewards. Fanning is nevertheless most outspoken in arguing for its benefits. To him the events of 1912–1923 irrefutably changed government policy. Although he has argued before that the British government would never have granted the measure of independence enshrined in the Treaty without the actions of the I.R.A., he somewhat surprisingly argues here that it was the violence or threat of violence by the unionists which has most influenced policy, forcing the government into a preoccupation with solving unionist opposition to home rule. Townshend is vaguer on the exact impact of I.R.A. violence on the shape of the constitutional settlement but is unambiguous on how it copper-fastened partitionist attitudes. A major area where the authors agree is the lack of

*Fatal path: British government and Irish revolution 1910–1922. By Ronan Fanning. Pp xxi, 423. London: Faber and Faber. 2013. £16.99; The republic: the fight for Irish independence, 1918–1923. By Charles Townshend. Pp xx, 537. London: Allen Lane. 2013. £25.

[1] For example: Joost Augusteijn, *From public defiance to guerrilla warfare: the experience of ordinary Volunteers in the Irish War of Independence, 1916–1921* (Dublin, 1996); Marie Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish Revolution, 1910–1923* (Dublin, 2003); David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish life 1913–1921: provincial experience of war and revolution* (Dublin, 1977); Peter Hart, *The I.R.A. and its enemies: violence and community in Cork, 1916–1923* (Oxford, 1998); John O'Callaghan, *Revolutionary Limerick: the Republican campaign for independence in Limerick, 1913–1921* (Dublin, 2010).

[2] An exception would be two works by Michael Hopkinson: *The Irish War of Independence* (Dublin, 2002) and *Green against green: the Irish Civil War* (Dublin, 1988).

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understanding of the Irish situation in British government circles which has, they argue, aggravated and prolonged the struggle.

Fanning's book had a long genesis, with parts of it going back to his dissertation. In a way this can therefore be seen as the fruit of a lifetime of work. The downside of this is that there is relatively little new about what is put forward, apart from the presentation of more detail and the plentiful use of novel quotations which very starkly illuminate attitudes or developments. On the upside one might expect this to be the definitive work on the British government's attitude to the Irish question in the revolutionary period. It achieves that in its comprehensive presentation of developments and attitudes. However, the book suffers slightly under Fanning's hesitance to speak out and a tendency to rely on what others have said. The book is peppered with short expressions such as 'in Mansergh's words', 'as Jackson has argued' or 'for what Townshend has called'. I would like to have seen more clearly spelled out what Fanning says, argues or terms.

Sometimes the analysis could indeed be pushed further. Although Fanning spells out a number of the inconsistencies in the provisions in the Treaty relating to the Boundary Commission, particularly the tension between the wishes of the inhabitants and economic and geographical conditions, he does not mention the fatal absence of a definition of the unit in which these wishes were to be measured which allowed for the interpretation that this should be the whole of Northern Ireland instead of a county, district or parish. Neither does he mention the crucial role of the British, usually pro-unionist, representative on the commission which had the deciding vote between the Irish and Northern Irish representative.

The book is strongest on the period before the outbreak of the First World War when Fanning shows convincingly how British government policy effectively paralysed Ireland. The lack of commitment in the Liberal party to home rule for Ireland meant no effective policy was pursued; instead the Liberals 'stuck to the fatal path of procrastination'. The lack of political will, largely inspired by a fear of unionist violence, Fanning argues, only stimulated the opposition of unionists when they realised the government was not going to push through home rule for Ulster. Calling this threat of violence the Unionist Revolution provides a challenging new perspective which I would like to have seen dealt with somewhat more thoroughly. Consequently the Liberals and even most Conservatives were looking for exclusion of Ulster right from the beginning. If agreement on how and when Ulster should be excluded could have been found then the Irish question could have been solved in 1912 without resort to violence. A second opportunity, Fanning argues, was squandered during the Irish Convention of 1917–1918 when home rule for the whole island could have been pushed through with the co-operation of Southern unionists. A lack of political will prevented this because, as Fanning puts it eloquently, the Irish Convention was 'no more than a token genuflection by the Liberals within its ranks to battered Gladstonian deities'.[3]

Crucial in the government's attitude was the outbreak of the First World War. The antagonism between the British parties over Ireland was replaced by a willingness to compromise and a sense that Ireland must not be allowed to hinder

[3] Fanning, *Fatal path*, p.162.

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the imperial war effort. The lack of importance of Ireland is reflected in the book as there is very little on Ireland policy during the war. The major legislative initiatives after the war, the 1920 Government of Ireland Act and the Treaty, of course get plenty of attention. It is useful to reiterate how the 1920 act was an attempt to settle the Ulster, not the Irish, question and that the choice for including just six counties in Northern Ireland was simply because Ulster Unionist leaders were afraid of having too many Catholics under their control. Other elements are largely missing: a discussion of the genesis of British policy towards the I.R.A., the disastrous procrastination of Lloyd George and the impact of the personnel changes in Dublin Castle in 1920, all discussed previously by Michael Hopkinson. None of these omissions are explained, not even by arguing, as Fanning does in relation to the deliberations of the Boundary Commission, that they 'need not detain us'.

Townshend has also worked on this period from his doctoral thesis onwards, but takes a fresh angle.[4] Substantial fresh research is here fruitfully combined with existing works. Apart from adding illuminating new detail, he provides a balanced and judicious analysis of almost every issue, including more contentious ones, like the difficult relationship between the political and military side of the republican movement. He also raises some interesting new ones such as whether Irish republicans were really republican, generally not, and explores often forgotten issues such as the messages contained in the use of the tricolour, which not everybody accepted. The often ignored developments during the Truce period and the lead-up to the Civil War finally receive the attention they deserve. For insiders this is the most interesting part of the book. In general Townshend provides an excellent analysis of the mind-set of the various groups involved in the struggle, makes their actions understandable and gives the reader a good sense of what it was like to be involved.

All this put together makes this without a doubt the best book available on the republican movement between 1918 and 1923. That does of course not mean there is nothing to quibble about. There are the inevitable minor mistakes, such as misdating the launch of the Irish Volunteers. It is also hard to understand why outdated numbers on the deaths in the Civil War are used while there are much more accurate, lower, ones available. Other, what one could call mistakes, are partly a result of an over-reliance on documents generated by the Dáil government and I.R.A. headquarters. Local research has for instance shown that brigade boundaries were never sacrosanct, that the election of officers declined sharply during the conflict, and that the I.R.B. was not as influential a force before the Truce as Townshend claims. One can also quibble occasionally with certain interpretations. Both Peter Hart and myself have argued that the general order to attack barracks and R.I.C. patrols per 1 January 1920 heralded essentially the start of the War of Independence as it was the first time G.H.Q. took responsibility for the use of force. Townshend does not mention this order, and is unclear about the exact dating of the start of the conflict. The supposed spread of a militarist ethos among I.R.A. men seems to be based primarily on the writings of Ernie O'Malley, while most I.R.A. men simply desired a free Ireland and wanted to leave the running of the country to elected politicians.

[4] Subsequently published as Charles Townshend, *The British campaign in Ireland 1919–1921: the development of political and military policies* (Oxford, 1975).

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Townshend rarely engages directly with historiographical controversies. The main exception to this is the often emotionally charged discussion over the alleged sectarianism of the I.R.A. epitomised by the killing of thirteen Protestants in April 1922 in the Bandon valley. His treatment of this is fair and balanced and takes on board evidence and arguments put forward by all sides. The fact that no definitive conclusions are drawn here (as indeed he rarely does) is somewhat unsatisfactory but may be simply a sign of a healthy academic approach. Two elements in the discussion nevertheless remain untouched. If sectarianism was at the heart of these killings, why were particular men targeted and not simply all Protestants in the area? In the attempt to establish whether the victims actually were spies it seems to be forgotten that in uncovering the motive for the killings it is more important to ask whether someone was perceived to be a spy than whether they actually were. In this context it is remarkable that the conduct of the Free State government in the Civil War exposed in this book, including illegal executions and several atrocities, has not lead to similar public discussions.

The lack of a clear structure to the book is another problem. It is organised in four very long chapters subdivided by sections that are in no self-evident chronological or thematic order, with titles that often do not give any idea what they are about. Each section tackles a well defined subject but the sequencing seems a little haphazard. This concentration on aspects of the struggle uncovers a lot of new detail but inevitably there are subjects missing, and there is no systematic treatment of the development of the actual fighting. Adding to this is a referencing system that leaves a lot to be desired. It is generally difficult to reproduce the analysis as a great many statements and particular quotations can not be traced through the footnotes, while some footnotes, particularly those in the conclusion, are jumbled up.

Although neither book can thus claim to be definitive, for any student of this period they will no doubt be the starting point for future research bringing together practically all of the available knowledge. On the British government side more work is still possible on the personal attitudes of the main protagonists and on the inner workings of the actual creation of government policy and legislation. On the Irish side the witness statements of the Bureau of Military History in particular provide avenues for further research. Here Townshend has understandably not been able to cover everything. More awareness of local events would for instance have proven that German U-boats did trade arms in Mayo, or explain why the West Mayo Brigade was extremely successful in obtaining rifles from G.H.Q. My own students have shown that the actual working of the Dáil courts, the I.R.A. intelligence system, and the treatment of opposition among the people are open for fruitful exploration, while there is also still a lot of room for detailed studies on the Truce and Civil War period.

JOOST AUGUSTEIJN
Leiden University

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