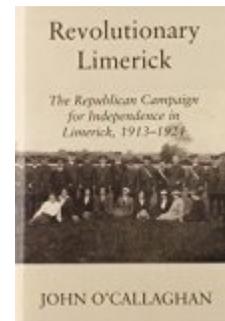


John O'Callaghan. *Revolutionary Limerick: The Republican Campaign for Independence in Limerick, 1913-1921*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010. xvi + 255 pp. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7165-3057-2.

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## The "Republic of Limerick"

This excellent monograph on Limerick's role in the republican military and political campaign for independence fits squarely within the scholarly tradition of county and local studies of Ireland's revolutionary period. Since David Fitzpatrick's 1977 study of County Clare our understanding of the varied regional experience of republican insurgency in Ireland has been augmented by, among others, the late Peter Hart's provocative study of "rebel" Cork, Marie Coleman's focus on Longford, Michael Farry's examination of Sligo, and Joost Augusteijn's comparative analysis of Counties Derry, Dublin, Mayo, Tipperary, and Wexford.[1] O'Callaghan's analysis of the republican movement in Limerick is in direct conversation with this body of literature on such key issues as the geography, scale, and nature of revolutionary (and counterrevolutionary) violence; the social composition and motivations of Irish Volunteers; and the relationship between republican soldiers, administrators, and the general public, to name a few. Following the precedent established in early participant accounts, he confines his narrative and analysis to the years 1913-21, leaving the post-Truce slide to civil war for a future, separate volume. Additionally, while acknowledging the "amorphous ... and cumbersome" nature of the concept of an Irish "revolution" (p. 4), O'Callaghan employs it rather narrowly to mean the republican movement's campaign for political independence from Britain. Thus, labor militancy, agrarianism, and other radical or potentially radical developments are largely elided here, though the author does give some at-

ention to class tensions among nationalists, trade unionism in Limerick City, and the sporadic phenomenon of workplace "soviets." But within this rather traditional nationalist periodization and conceptualization of Ireland's revolution, he offers a critical and nuanced analysis that contributes much to our understanding of the regional dimensions of this seminal period of Irish history.

The choice of County Limerick for an in-depth and richly sourced revolutionary study is to be heartily welcomed. An average-sized and relatively prosperous rural county with a bustling regional capital, Limerick had a rich local history of nationalist and agrarian activism before the twentieth century. In the period under consideration, Limerick distinguished itself as "consistently one of the most prominent of the regional theatres of radical political activity and republican military operations" (pp. 5-6). Illuminating the "advent, course and conduct" of the republican campaign in Limerick City and County is the author's stated goal (p. 3) and one that he fulfills admirably. The sources for this deeply researched study reflect both the abundant historical archives on the period, and the author's commitment to exploiting them fully. Along with the extensive holdings of Ireland's Military Archives, National Library, National Archives, and University College Dublin Archives, O'Callaghan draws on a variety of local sources, including newspapers, county council minutes, police reports, private papers, and even the preachers' books of Saint Mary's Cathedral. Additionally, he takes full advantage of the Bureau of Mili-

tary History witness statements which have only been formally accessible to researchers since 2003.

The book's structure is chronological, but later chapters have a thematic emphasis on military operations and violence. Chapter 1, "Divergent Nationalisms," assesses the relative support and changing fortunes of various pre-revolutionary nationalist factions (e.g., the Irish Parliamentary Party and its grassroots agrarian wing, the United Irish League; the Ancient Order of Hibernians; and the All for Ireland League) before the "slow rise" of militant republicanism. While Sinn Féin's eclipse of the formerly dominant Redmondite party in 1917-18 is well established, O'Callaghan's emphasis on deeper weaknesses in the IPP's electoral appeal helps tame the popular narrative of an Irish political landscape "changed utterly" by the Rising. The Third Home Rule crisis led to the formation of an especially vigorous Irish Volunteers movement in Limerick, though the Redmondite-MacNeillite split in the organization was equally pronounced, resulting in an arms raid and some shooting. As discussed in chapter 2, the 1916 Rising proved a debacle in Limerick, but recriminations over the confused response to the fighting in Dublin created deep fissures among Limerick republicans that influenced rivalries and factions within the local IRA in the ensuing years. Limerick Volunteer leader Michael Colivet's rather unheroic arrangement of a surrender of arms to the authorities pre-empted a more serious crackdown in 1916, and thus, ironically, allowed the local organization to remain intact and quickly remobilize in 1917-18. Throughout his discussion here O'Callaghan develops two critical themes: one is the post-Rising sea change in mainstream nationalist attitudes, reflected by a number of prominent church leaders coming out in support of Sinn Féin; and the other is the deep-seated factional rivalries and hostilities that plagued the republican movement in Limerick. This theme of splits runs through his analysis and the author does an excellent job of tracing the complex ideological differences, personal politics, organizational rivalries (e.g., the presence of absence of Irish Republican Brotherhood elements), class tensions, regional and rural-urban divides, and other factors that shaped and fed the fissures and fractures within Limerick's IRA.

While necessarily preoccupied with the IRA's role in the independence struggle, O'Callaghan demonstrates an equally deft touch with the somewhat less "sexy" administrative side of the revolution. Chapter 3 on the republican counter-state is brimming with insights into the legal, administrative, and financial aspects of Sinn Féin's de facto republican government. Indeed, this chapter alone

makes a significant contribution to the field. He first addresses the emergence of Dáil Éireann's underground arbitration courts which arose in Connacht to deal with agrarian disputes and served a similar function in West Limerick. After the 1920 local government elections, the republican government expanded its regional administrative apparatus via Sinn Féin's takeover of urban, county, rural and district councils, town corporations, Poor Law Boards, and other local bodies. O'Callaghan demonstrates the high level of popular acceptance that all aspects of republican administration received in Limerick. At first tolerating the Dáil courts (apparently on the assumption that they would fail and discredit the republican movement), the British authorities decisively moved against them in late 1920. A similar offensive against the republican administrators themselves led to the violent deaths of a number of prominent Sinn Féin-cum-IRA activists. O'Callaghan's detailed analysis of republican local control is an empirical tour de force, though the litany of facts and figures regarding local government grants, property rates, malicious injuries claims, public wages, lodgements, decrees, account balances, overdrafts, credits, debts, and so on makes for tedious reading at times. Perhaps the mass of financial data presented here could have been more thoroughly synthesized. After reading about Sinn Féin's "programme of managerial rationalisation" (p. 102), it is easy to see why the "boys of the column" are celebrated in story and song while their administrative counterparts in the movement have failed to fire the popular imagination. And yet, O'Callaghan gives the latter their due as important "agents, if not instigators, of revolution" (p. 107) whose tireless behind-the-scenes work to realize the de facto Irish Republic was, in its own way, as important as the IRA's military efforts. Two broader insights deserve mention. First, echoing the scholarly consensus on the highly localized, decentralized nature of the IRA's campaign, O'Callaghan's work on Limerick suggests that the republican counter-state was no less a "regionally, rather than centrally, driven enterprise" (p. 107). Secondly, pointing to the case of West Limerick, he rightly stresses that in assessing which areas of the country were active or inactive in the revolutionary campaign, scholars must consider administrative criteria as well as military ones.

The last half of the study (chapters 4 through 6) is devoted to a detailed examination of the military contest between the IRA and Crown Forces. Chapter 4 on "military confrontation" comes the closest to traditional military history. It traces the evolution of the Limerick Volunteers' campaign from the low-intensity operations

of 1917-19; to larger scale attacks and the emergence of “flying columns” in 1920-21; to a resumption of smaller-scale operations before the Truce in the face of an improved British military counter-response. While Limerick was one of the more active areas of IRA operations up to the 1921 Truce, O’Callaghan demonstrates significant internal variations in IRA activity, with the East Limerick Brigade so much to the fore that its members regarded their comrades in Mid and West Limerick as being more or less “redundant.” While there was some inter-brigade cooperation (a fact that challenges other scholars’ insistence on the rigid territoriality of the IRA), feuds and splits between and within brigades were commonplace and appear to have appreciably hampered the Limerick IRA’s fighting record. The author offers a fascinating reconstruction of several “cycle[s] of violence” (p. 136) between local Volunteers and a number of notorious “Tans.” But, challenging Hart’s argument for a vengeful “tit-for-tat” dynamic to revolutionary violence, O’Callaghan discerns that most IRA attacks in Limerick were based on “tactical military deliberations” (p. 161). The behavior of local Crown Forces, on the other hand, suggests tactically questionable reprisal motives in many instances. That being said, O’Callaghan is sensitive to the victims of violence on all sides, and points to the stress and strain that ambushes, raids, and reprisals had on everyone from innocent bystanders, to local shopkeepers, to veteran members of the Royal Irish Constabulary whose unenviable position in the conflict is poignantly illustrated by their difficulty in obtaining coffins and Catholic services for their fallen comrades. His reconstruction of the highly successful Dromkeen ambush in February, 1921 highlights many interesting parallels with the more famous and oft-debated Kilmichael ambush in Cork, including similar (false) reports of corpses having been mutilated and the controversial actions of Volunteer Maurice Meade, a Tom Barry-esque ex-soldier who may have killed seven of the eleven Crown dead that day, including two by roadside execution.

Chapter 5 on the intelligence war offers an even more direct engagement with Peter Hart’s arguments for an underlying sectarian motive behind IRA shootings of suspected spies and informers. Using the available sources to analyze the circumstances surrounding all seven of the confirmed IRA executions of “spies” in Limerick, O’Callaghan argues that these killings were neither sectarian (because all seven victims were Catholic), nor “arbitrary” (by IRA standards at least) since considerable evidence of guilt had been amassed in most cases. However, he acknowledges that in the case of poorer ex-

soldiers targeted by the IRA, low social status appears to have contributed to the public acceptability of the killings. Added to John Borgonovo’s work on Cork City, O’Callaghan’s analysis of the intelligence war reinforces the emergent scholarly consensus that efforts to revise the popularly mythologized IRA of 1919-21 as a crypto-sectarian force on par with the UVF or “B” Specials do not stand up to scrutiny.[2]

Chapter 6 adds to Hart, Tom Garvin, Farry, Fitzpatrick, et al.’s work on the social profile of Volunteers. Unfortunately, without any tables or graphs to synthesize the mass of data, it is difficult for the reader to compare or otherwise assess the significance of the relative numbers of butchers’, to bakers’, to candlestick-makers’ sons in the IRA. Yet, the author fruitfully tackles other important historiographical issues such as the motivations of republican activists, possible explanations for variations in violence levels, and the like. Whereas other scholars have tended to assume a connection between republican activism and class identities and material factors, O’Callaghan argues for the primacy of underlying ideological motivations. In line with Marie Coleman’s work on Longford, he ultimately attributes the relative strength and weakness of various IRA brigades, battalions, and companies to the presence or absence of effective local leadership. Regarding the complex issue of IRA-civilian relations he judiciously concludes that while not quite a “symbiotic connection” with what Tom Barry called the “Splendid People,” the IRA did enjoy a “remarkable level of [popular] support” (202). What of local loyalists whose claims for malicious property damage and financial hardship arising from attacks, threats, and forced exile at the hands of their political enemies are well documented in the files of the Irish Distress Committee? While the author stresses the lack of evidence of “a sectarian dimension” (p. 203) to the republican campaign in Limerick up to 1921, he candidly admits the need for a “full historical investigation of the experience of loyalists, both Catholic and Protestant ... in the aftermath of the Truce and during and after the Civil War if necessary” (p. 204).

One could argue that beyond the issue of sectarianism, many of the dynamics and developments treated in this study—from the Catholic Church’s complex and evolving relationship to militant republicanism, to class tensions among nationalists, to the labor movement’s response to republican revolution, to the IRA’s relationship to civilians, and not least, to the deep splits and fractures that shaped the Limerick IRA—also must be followed beyond the traditional though ultimately arbitrary

endpoint of the July, 1921 Truce. Fortunately, as the author indicates in a footnote, he is presently undertaking a second volume on Limerick's experience in the no less "revolutionary" Treaty Split and Civil War. Given this meticulously researched, clearly written, judiciously argued, and insightful study of the 1913-21 period, the history of Limerick in the final phase of the Irish Revolution is in eminently capable hands.

#### Notes

[1]. David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life 1913-1921: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1977); Peter Hart, *The IRA and Its En-*

*emies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916-1923* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Joost Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare: The Experience of Ordinary Volunteers in the Irish War of Independence 1916-1921* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1996); Marie Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish Revolution, 1910-1923* (Dublin and Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2003); Michael Farry, *The Aftermath of Revolution: Sligo, 1921-1923* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000).

[2]. John Borgonovo, *Spies, Informers and the 'Anti-Sinn Féin Society': The Intelligence War in Cork City, 1920-21* (Dublin and Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2007).

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