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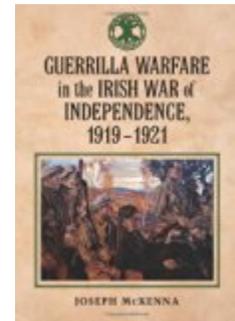
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joseph McKenna. *Guerrilla Warfare in the Irish War of Independence, 1919-1921*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2010. 300 pp. \$65.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-5947-6.

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A Troubled Account of Irish Independence

Among the many irregular conflicts of the twentieth century, the Irish War of Independence is one of the most historically significant. Decades before Indian independence set off a wave of decolonization, the Irish sundered the United Kingdom and fought a guerrilla war that inspired generations of irregulars around the globe. Joseph McKenna provides a general history of the Irish War of Independence, from the Easter Rising in 1916, through the war itself, and ending with the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the outbreak of the Irish Civil War in 1922. A solid general history of the conflict, with special emphasis on irregular warfare, would be well received in many quarters. Unfortunately, McKenna's work lacks the context or analysis that would make it accessible to nonspecialist readers, while his catalog of small actions between rebels and Crown forces—a format described by the late historian Peter Hart as “ambushology”[1]—lacks the detailed citations that might make it a useful resource for specialists.

The first three chapters of *Guerrilla Warfare in the Irish War of Independence* concern the failed Easter Rising and its aftermath. The revolt, carried out in Dublin by the Irish Volunteers (also known as the Irish Republican Army or IRA) and other affiliated rebels, was intended to be the first engagement of an insurrection fought along conventional lines. Instead, the Rising was crushed and the leadership of the Volunteers executed by the British. In the wake of the Rising, the Volunteers were forced to rebuild their organization and reconsider their strategy, a process McKenna considers at length, providing

some real gems. He compares the Easter Rising with the 1905 Moscow Uprising, which James Connolly, one of the rebel leaders, had studied, and convincingly argues that Connolly drew the wrong lessons from the earlier conflict, failing to heed Vladimir Lenin's call for small mobile units rather than static defense. In contrast, John McBride, another rebel leader, who had previously fought with the Boers in southern Africa, learned the lessons of Christiaan de Wet's guerrilla warfare and won future rebel leader Michael Collins over to their use. Ultimately, however, McKenna contends that the Volunteers' inability to purchase weapons in large numbers following the Easter Rising played a significant role in forcing them to shed a strategy of conventional insurrection in favor of guerrilla ambushes.

In 1919, fighting between the rebels and Crown forces again broke out, ending in a truce in July 1921 and the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December, a treaty that partitioned Ireland into a largely Protestant North and an overwhelmingly Catholic South, the latter of which became the Irish Free State. McKenna begins his discussion of this main phase of the conflict with five thematic chapters, covering passive resistance, intelligence, urban warfare, guerrilla warfare, and the role of women. These chapters are primarily anecdotal rather than analytic, though interesting details continue to emerge. Because the Irish Volunteers tapped most of the telegraph lines, the Royal Air Force (RAF) was used for transporting the most sensitive messages. In 1918, we are told, a study was conducted to examine the feasibility of using “En-

trenched Air Camps,” from which the RAF could police the countryside. (The results were unfavorable and the scheme was not attempted.) Likewise, we learn that the British Army’s columns sometimes tried to pass themselves off as Irish Volunteers from a neighboring district, so as to gain the element of surprise. In spite of such intriguing details, these chapters represent a lost opportunity to put forward a clearly explained framework that would help readers make sense of the conflict.

The final five chapters are strictly narrative, covering events from 1919 to 1922. The Volunteers gradually increased their stockpiles of weapons by raiding the British Army and the local police, the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), and then undertook a gradual process of pushing Crown forces out of the towns, so that by 1921 they controlled only the major cities and could only venture out with great effort. Here McKenna continues to limit himself to narration of events—drawn primarily from participants’ accounts—and does not incorporate the fruits of recent scholarship, such as Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon’s work on the role of intelligence (*Turning Points of the Irish Revolution: The British Government, Intelligence, and the Cost of Indifference, 1912-1921* [2007]) or W. H. Kautt’s on ambushes (*Ambushes and Armour: The Irish Rebellion, 1919-1921* [2010]).

Historians have the two-fold task of describing what happened and explaining what it means. McKenna excels at the former, describing many engagements of the war in intimate detail; on the latter count, however, this work is lacking. Historians have a duty to pull from the mass of historical data those elements that are most essential to understanding events and their consequences. Such interpretive analysis is particularly important with regard to a war such as this, in which there was no single crucial battle, no self-evidently important moment that defined the whole conflict. Indeed, the very language of war can be misleading. Although the Irish Volunteers and Crown forces both waged “campaigns,” these looked quite different from the campaigns fought by Napoleon Bonaparte, Ulysses S. Grant, or Erwin Rommel; a point that could have been more strongly underscored. While the Volunteers organized themselves into companies, brigades, and divisions, most of these units were far under the strength those terms usually denote. Although RIC members were stationed in barracks, these were more often glorified houses rather than fully martial buildings. By McKenna’s own account, the war resulted in 1,300 deaths among combatants and civilians on both sides, a tragic number, but less than half the figure lost by Britain in the ten hours of Waterloo alone (p. 116). The attentive reader

will notice that many of the engagements described involved small numbers of men, often ten or less to a side. Men on one or both sides were sometimes out of uniform, and casualties were inflicted in homes as well as in the field. While the moral connotation is misplaced, the British description of a fight against “bandits” or criminal gangs is an apt description of the mechanics of much of the conflict. Further consideration of how this form of warfare worked, how it differed from conventional warfare, and what that meant for both sides would go a long way to helping readers make sense of the events described.

Likewise, while ambushes are described in frequently lavish detail, the significance of these attacks could be clearer. The overall positions of the rebels and Crown forces are often lost, without any clear center of gravity giving context to the various engagements. This lack of context is mirrored in the maps, or lack thereof. While a map of Dublin is provided alongside the discussion of the Easter Rising, the general map of Ireland comes almost at the very end of the work. These are the only maps in a book filled with dizzying levels of geographic detail which are rendered meaningless to all but those with the most intimate knowledge of Irish geography.

McKenna’s use of sources is curiously uneven. At times, he generously utilizes both published and archival materials from several locations; at other times, he does not cite claims of fact and even quotations. Two chapters are without any citation at all. This is not only sloppy scholarship, but also a disappointment for those who would like to pursue further such intriguing leads as Major A. E. Percival’s recommendations for improving British counterinsurgency efforts or General F. P. Crozier’s admission that he was blackmailed into covering up murders by the Auxiliary Division of the RIC.

Historians are entitled to their opinions and are certainly entitled to put forth an argument regarding competing claims. McKenna’s favoritism toward the Irish rebels’ cause is itself a very reasonable position; however, he allows this view to detract from the overall quality of his work. A heavy-handed moral tone is frequently seen: Crown forces, for example, are often “assassinated,” while Irish Volunteers are “murdered.” McKenna’s bias also colors his use of historical data, dismissing Crown forces’ accounts, such as the RIC description of the ambush at Rineen on September 22, 1920, as “black propaganda,” without demonstrating why one account should be believed over another (p. 178). Moreover, McKenna ignores some events that do not fit into his worldview,

such as the Catholic riots in Derry in April 1920, which he glosses over with the simple phrase “tensions simmered,” while he describes subsequent Protestant riots in that city in July as “an orgy of destruction and mayhem” (p. 182). Later chapters appear to have been written exclusively from Irish sources, nor is reference anywhere made to the available memoirs of leading British participants, including Generals Crozier, Nevil McCreedy, and Ormonde Winter.

Although McKenna’s work is overwhelmingly narrative, not analytic, and not historiographical, he strongly denounces the work of Hart, a denunciation that struck this reviewer as bordering on unprofessional. McKenna affixes the moniker of “revisionist” to Hart’s name with clear disapproval; his mention of Hart’s Canadian nationality smacks of an unnecessary suggestion that a foreigner could not understand Ireland. At the heart of McKenna’s complaint are two claims that Hart made in *The I.R.A. and Its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916-1923* (1998). First, Hart argued that rebel leader Tom Barry massacred a group of RIC Auxiliaries who had surrendered after they were ambushed near Kilmichael. The debate regarding Kilmichael is long and extremely complex, but in the end it may hinge on the testimony of anonymous interviews conducted by Hart, a man who died the year before *Guerrilla Warfare* was published. This extremely contentious debate may never be resolved, an ambiguity McKenna fails to capture. Second, Hart claimed that in April 1922, Republicans in Cork engaged in a campaign of terror against local Protestants, as much on the basis of their religion as anything they had or had not done during the war. Again, the debate

is extensive and complex, all the more so because religion, culture, and political loyalty were so intertwined in Ireland. McKenna argues that Hart’s “hypothesis does not stand up to examination,” and contends that a single uncited Volunteer document “flies in the face of some modern-day revisionist historians, who have erroneously claimed that the IRA embarked on a process of ethnic cleansing of Protestant men and women” (pp. 281-282n6, 187). Once again, McKenna’s conclusion is not, of itself, unreasonable, but his bald assertion on such a contentious question is misplaced, particularly in light of his own blithe acceptance of the claim that Loyalists engaged in “ethnic cleansing” along sectarian lines in Ulster (p. 183).

Last of all, this work would have benefited from more careful editing. Terminology is not always consistent, material is sometimes repeated almost verbatim, typographical errors are too common, and a chapter and a half of endnotes are simply missing. The author has clearly invested considerable effort into his research; it is a shame that these efforts were not brought to better fruition.

Editor’s Note: Dr. Linderman is a civilian employee of the U.S. Army. The views expressed here are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the army or the Department of Defense.

Note

[1]. Peter Hart, *The I.R.A. at War, 1916-1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 82.

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