

Joseph McKenna. *The IRA Bombing Campaign against Britain, 1939-1940.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2016. 216 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-4766-6258-9.

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The bombing campaign of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) against the British mainland from January to August 1939 might initially appear unconnected to the Irish Decade of Centenaries, covering events well outside of the decade culminating with the 1922 Anglo-Irish Treaty. Joseph McKenna's *The IRA Bombing Campaign against Britain, 1939-1940* seeks to bridge the period that the Anglo-Irish Treaty ended with the Troubles of the 1960s. A local historian, McKenna provides the first serious account of the IRA's bombing campaign by drawing on the memoirs of IRA participants and British police officers as well as the voluminous files in the British National Archives.

McKenna begins with an excellent portrait of an IRA unreconciled to the 1922 treaty and the Irish Free State's de facto acceptance of Irish partition. The 1932 election of Eamon Devalera, which had seen the law that declared the IRA an unlawful organization repealed, had done nothing to address the IRA's desire for a united Ireland and led to the 1939 bombing campaign. The decision to launch the bombing and the subsequent campaign represented a generational change within the IRA, and McKenna's account of the bombing and the British reaction makes it clear that these had great effect on the generation that would come to prominence and leadership positions in the Troubles.

Unfortunately, there is no explanation as to why the IRA membership decided it needed generational change of leadership. Even more frustratingly it is unclear why the new leadership decided now was the time to launch a bombing campaign against the British mainland when there were, by their own admission, "enough British soldiers in the Six Counties to bomb, rather than civilians in England" (p. 17). This lack of analysis precludes fully understanding the logic of the IRA's campaign or the British response.

The IRA's "S" Plan, which is helpfully reprinted in the appendix, laid out a professional and well-thought-out urban terrorism campaign. Rather than analyze the plan and the ideology behind it, McKenna focuses on the implementation of the plan, which was haphazard and often bordered on the incompetent. It is indeed questionable how bombing a public toilet in Birmingham would further the IRA's goal of a united Ireland. Had McKenna consulted the Irish archives in Dublin he might have gained greater insight into what the IRA thought.

Once he begins his discussion of the campaign, which is the main subject of the book, McKenna becomes obsessed with the minutia of every bombing, attempted bombing, and police response. The massive amount of information has the unintended effect of making the bombing

campaign seem relatively trivial. There is no explanation as to why the IRA deviated from the “S” Plan and there is maddeningly no account of how the Nationalist and Unionist communities in Northern Ireland reacted to the bombing campaign. Indeed one is struck by almost no mention of Belfast or Ulster throughout the book. The lack of analysis is made more problematic by numerous block quotes that are often inadequately explained.

The conclusion of the book detailing the arrest and execution or imprisonment of bombers could easily be a prelude to the British experience with internment in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. IRA prisoners launched hunger strikes throughout their imprisonment and refused to wear prison-issue clothes, wearing blankets instead. The failure of the British to effectively deal with IRA prisoners resulting from the 1939-40 bombing campaign was an unheeded warning as what the IRA could do in a longer campaign. McKenna, however, does not reveal what British officials thought of these tactics or analyze why they failed to develop an appropriate response to tactics they would encounter again in the Troubles.

The IRA Bombing Campaign against Britain describes in great detail the IRA's bombing campaign against the British mainland. Those interested in British police procedure and the day-to-day operations of the IRA in the late 1930s and early 1940s will be richly rewarded. Those seeking a deep analysis of IRA thinking and British or Irish policy toward Northern Ireland or even the IRA will be disappointed. The lack of real footnotes precludes this monograph being even a good general introduction to the various topics discussed in the book. It is hoped that a young historian reading *The IRA Bombing Campaign against Britain* will be inspired to delve deeper into this often overlooked period in IRA history and Anglo-Irish relations.

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