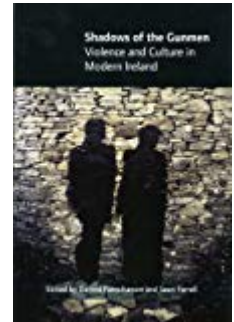


Danine Farquharson, Sean Farrell, eds. *Shadows of the Gunmen: Violence and Culture in Modern Ireland*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2008. vii + 232 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-85918-424-0.



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“Violence is something that does not speak,” Giles DeLuzé told us in 1989. DeLuzé considered violent action to be so indefinite and incomprehensible that it was, in short, dumb. *Shadows of the Gunmen* seeks to challenge this silence through analyzing how violence generates multiple narratives that legitimize or challenge contentious events. Building on the already substantial literature on violence in Ireland, this edited collection brings a cultural approach to the party. The editors' intention is to bring together writings that emphasize the “complex interplay between acts of violence and their representation” (p. 6). Storytelling is a well-regarded Irish tradition, but when violent actions are recalled, the intentions of the original agents, and the specifics of what happened, are often lost in the ex post facto competition between groups to assign fixed meanings and legitimize singular narratives. Actions speak louder than words, or so the old saying goes, but they are also more open to distortions and multiple representations. In order to fully understand violent acts and their consequences, attention must

be paid to how “narratives are forged to give meaning to them” (p. 7).

It seems fitting then that the collection opens with a piece by Peter Hart, whose own attempts to revisit the Kilmichael ambush in Cork (1920) stirred a heated debate where competing narratives were defended and damned. Hart's essay, though, sidesteps the cultural paradigm outlined in the book's introduction and proceeds with an interesting exercise in counterfactual history. He questions the necessity of violence for the achievement of political and social change in Ireland from 1916-23, and argues that alternatives to military means were available to the physical-force men and women in the form of boycotts and blockades, strikes, and sabotage. The effectiveness of these less violent tools of civil disobedience, Hart argues, was illustrated during the Land War and the Plan of Campaign. The essay convincingly challenges the inevitability of violence during the revolutionary period but would benefit from a closer look at what models of revolution were available to Irish revolutionaries at the time. Ex-

amples of successful national revolution by means of civil disobedience were thin on the ground in the early decades of the twentieth century and the repertoire of Irish nationalism took shape in this context.

Bernice Schrank's "Sean O'Casey and the Dialectics of Violence" examines how representations of violence in his work often provoked violent reactions, most famously in the riots that followed *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). The essay continues with a close reading of O'Casey's later works and Schrank highlights how violence lurks in his plays as something that essentializes identities. However, when Schrank speaks of the neglect and censorship that faced *Within the Gates* (1934) in terms of "subtle violence" (p. 56), the essay runs the danger of making the concept of violence so elastic as to hollow out its analytic value. Danine Farquharson's "Sexing the Rising" deals with representations of 1916 in Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* (1999) and Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001). Farquharson analyzes how Doyle and O'Neill use the setting of the Easter Rising to explore themes of "sex, violence, nation-building and masculinity" and criticize "notions of Irish heroism" (pp. 64-65). Throughout the essay, though, the author's own refreshing perspective is often crowded out by references to existing criticism of the two novels, while the essay's sixteen pages do not appear spacious enough for adequate treatments of both Doyle and O'Neill. The next essay turns to journalism. Timothy G. MacMahon looks at how colonial violence in China, Egypt, and Sudan was reported on in Ireland in particular unionist and nationalist newspapers. MacMahon finds that ideas of civilization and race were "equally pronounced" (p. 86) in the uneven selection of newspapers he consulted. Interestingly, criticism of imperial violence in the *Freeman's Journal* paradoxically praised the courage and judgement of Irish troops in the British regiments.

The well-known clash between Orangemen and local Catholics at Dolly's Brae, in south County Down, on the 12 July 1849 is the starting point for Sean Farrell's engaging analysis of the "relationship between violence, the writing of violence and the construction of communal identities" (p. 91). Competition to narrate what happened began immediately after the Dolly's Brae clash. Triumphant sectarian narratives emerged that retained a stubborn longevity, continuing to appear in Orange histories during the Home Rule crisis. Borrowing analytical tools from recent literature on the relationship between violence and cultural production (Gyanendra Pandley, Kathleen Wilson), Farrell blends a mix of official and cultural sources to assess how communal public memories were formed and then hardened. Following from Kevin Kenny's *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires* (1998), Farrell examines the paradoxical portrayals of women in the Orange narratives as Protestant victims and Catholic aggressors. Depicting Catholic women as the instigators of the violence implied an uncivil, wild element that contrasted with the steadfast and respectable Orangemen. Overall, Farrell argues, the Dolly's Brae stories helped to strengthen "the binary model by crowding out alternative readings of northern society, preventing competing discourses from emerging" (p.105).

Cinematic depictions of violence in Northern Ireland is explored in two essays by Brian McIlroy and Keith Hopper. In many films about the Troubles, McIlroy argues, attempts to explain violence by highlighting its causes and circumstances regularly fail, resulting in a "stunted ritualism." One reason for this failure is the cursory representation of the Protestant community by directors from Neil Jordan to Terry George to Marc Evans. McIlroy's persuasively illustrates that, more often than not, the loyalist paramilitary is a figure on the margins, with no moral purpose and reading a script that offers few clues to explain his militancy. Hopper's essay takes a narrower focus, concentrating on images of violence Jordan's *Angel*

(1982). He contends that past criticism of *Angel* has been impaired by a tendency to overlook the film's semiotics and view violent acts as the expression of fixed ideological positions. Instead, Jordan does not try to evoke political meanings but shows us violence as it is performed. The film goes to the site of the brutal act itself and strips it of sentimentality and romanticism. In this way, it is the "very ambivalence and open-endedness of *Angel* which make its muted but multiple messages all the more compelling" (p. 141).

In similar way, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews demonstrates how the poetry of Ciaran Carson uses the urban landscape of Belfast to challenge pre-conceived and narrow interpretations of violence, ideology, and individual agency. Competing narratives of violence, like the categories in Carson's poetry, "leak and spill; they cast shadows over one another; they interpenetrate each other" (p. 164). In the final essay, Richard Kearney discusses the Famine Hunger Memorial in Battery Park, New York and how commemorative sites respond to painful events through a form of ethical remembering. Memorials "face the challenge of resisting the reification of an historical event into a fixed dogma by showing how each event may be told in different ways by different generations and by different narrators" (p. 173). Through the adoption of plurality, flexibility, and forgiveness when remembering traumatic events, healing exchanges are possible.

Violence, to paraphrase Ciaran Carson, is difficult to pick up without the whole thing coming apart in your hands (p. 156). Despite the slipperiness of violence as category of analysis, this eclectic bunch of essays is welcome as it comes to grips with some understudied aspects of violence and Irish culture. *Shadows of the Gunmen* underlines the need for resistance to closed readings, and an awareness of overlaps and entanglements, before any critical appraisal of political violence can be reached. The volume gives us a watermark for how wider theoretical debates on violence and

culture have influenced work on Ireland, even if the central themes raised in the introduction are not always picked up by the individual essays.

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