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Following last issue's unprecedented response in our letters pages to his interview in the previous issue (March/April 2005), Peter Hart responds to his critics.

PETER HART AND HIS ENEMIES...

'You speak treason!' — Marion
'Fluently!' — Robin Hood

—*The Adventures of Robin Hood*

If I may begin at the end of Niall Meehan's letter, he refers to his 'promotion' of—and my non-participation in—'this important debate' on the Kilmichael ambush. In fact, I have been debating the ambush and other aspects of the revolution in Cork since my first book, *The IRA and its enemies*, came out in 1998. I have exchanged letters in newspapers, appeared on television and radio programmes with critics, and given numerous public lectures in Cork, Galway, Dublin, Belfast and Maynooth, all of which were followed by questions. I have actually debated Kilmichael with Brian Murphy on three separate occasions over the years.

Sexism and rationality

Another 'issue' that has entered the 'debate' is my supposed sexism in saying of Meda Ryan's book that 'she isn't interested in dealing with the substance of this evidence in a rational way'. Not to worry: I don't think any of the letter-writing critics—male or female—deal with the evidence in a rational way. I have complimented Ryan's original biography of Barry several times in print and used another of her books several times as a source without adverse comment.

What would it mean to deal with evidence in a rational (logical, systematic) way? Well, for starters, approach it with an open mind and mould your explanations around it—don't just dismiss it if it doesn't fit your preconceptions. In Meda Ryan's case, these are summed up

in the subtitle of her book, 'IRA freedom fighter', as well as her answer to her own question: 'what were the volunteers fighting for? . . . they fought for Irish freedom'. I devoted a great deal of *The IRA and its enemies* to exploring who joined the Cork Volunteers and why, and why some men became guerrillas while others did not. My last book, *The IRA at war*, asked many of the same questions about the organisation as a whole. I assembled a great deal of statistical information. I mapped out family and neighbourhood networks. I traced individual careers. I looked at change over time and the differences between officers and men. For Meda Ryan, however, the question answers itself in ideological terms and in the terms used by the organisation at issue, so there's no need to actually think about it. At the very least, she is confusing evidence—the political rationale used at the time—with explanation.

Nor is she alone. In my opinion, when it comes to explanation, she and most of the other Kilmichael critics practice a kind of faith-based or creationist history: faith in the purity of the IRA; creationism with regard to their politics. Before, there was nothing—a political void—and then, thanks to the miracle of the Easter Rising (a terminology much used at the time, incidentally), came the freedom fighters. If they killed someone, it had to have been justified, even if the victims were unarmed, sick and elderly; even if they were wounded or had surrendered. Those brave boys couldn't possibly do wrong.

Patriotism, idealism and bravery

Well, most of them were patriots and idealists, as I point out in my books. And they did accomplish things: they made history. But would Ryan and others be willing to apply the same justifications to other events? Take the American invasion and occupation of Iraq, for example. The official apologists justify it in terms of future results: we're shooting and bombing and torturing now, but this will pave the way for the freedom that will make it all worthwhile.

And speaking of Iraq, who remembers the battle of Fallujah in 2004, in which a US marine was famously filmed shooting a wounded, unarmed Iraqi prisoner (one of many so treated)? The killer could be heard saying that the prisoner was 'faking' death and then shot him in the head. Another marine then said: 'Well, he's dead now'. American Republicans often defend their troops as decent and brave, and therefore either justified in, or incapable of, doing the things they're accused of. It all sounds rather familiar, doesn't it?

Many US soldiers probably are brave, decent people, as were IRA guerrillas—and Irish policemen and British and Irish soldiers, for that matter. But that often turns out to be little impediment to violence once fear, hatred and rage are factored into the equation. Violence has a dynamic of its own and, once it gets going, good people can do very bad things. Decent, idealistic men start a war for freedom fully intending to fight a clean fight and build a brave new world, but once they're into it they lose control: the killing goes on and on, ethnic or religious hatreds and fears are aroused and new, civil, wars break out. The freedom fighters always end up wading through someone else's blood.

Bravery, idealism and self-sacrifice are far from unique, and foolishly overrated anyway. These words can also be applied to many unionists, loyalists, home rulers, conscientious objectors, fascists, Nazis, communists, imperialists, terrorists, religious fanatics, soldiers of innumerable armies doing no end of horrifying things. People who kill or get killed don't have a monopoly on patriotism—or history.

Hence my belief that people who take it upon themselves to kill others

(the IRA was a self-selected volunteer force after all) should be scrutinised very carefully indeed, and hence my amazement that people would object to this. How is this different from a policeman or soldier who kills someone 'in the line of duty' in present-day Ireland, north or south? Don't they always have some excuse that boils down to: 'I had to, I thought I was in danger'? Even when it turns out that the victim was unarmed, mentally ill—or peacefully marching in a civil rights parade? How is Tom Barry's excuse any different, and why is Meda Ryan defending him without question?



Tom Barry—no more than a minor character in the revolution.

Barry's report on Kilmichael

This raises another basic element of historical investigation: apply the same standards to all the evidence. Ryan and others have gone to great lengths to discredit Barry's original report of the ambush that I unearthed. It conflicts with Barry's later accounts so it must be a forgery! But do they scrutinise or test Barry's accounts in any serious way? Quite the opposite: his word is accepted without question. In Ryan's book, Barry's is automatically assumed to be the authoritative account of any event.

Which leads me to a third principle: always ask in whose interest a statement is made. Was it in Barry's own interest to claim that he was perfectly justified in ordering the killing of surrendered and wounded men? In the ambush that made him a

hero? On the other hand, was it in their own interests for the IRA witnesses I quote to describe the ambush they were part of as degenerating into murder?

Similarly, why would someone involved in British propaganda or intelligence forge an IRA report? In whose interest would it be? The obvious answer is that they would have done it to smear the guerrillas in some way, to use it as proof of British claims about IRA barbarity. Remember, the Kilmichael controversy began when the British government claimed that the ambushers had fooled the Auxiliary patrol with a false uniform and used axes on both living men and corpses. But does this document suggest such things? Not at all: it suggests a clean fight. And if they forged it, why wasn't it released to the public? I found it in unpublished military reports, used as an example of IRA methods, and even criticised by British commentators as inaccurate! Why would the forger(s) bother?

Rather than face this problem squarely, Ryan has come up with a rather unlikely story about compensation claims after the July 1921 truce, which she repeats in her letter. Not only is this implausible on a number of counts but also the chronology doesn't fit, as the first time the report appeared in a British document was in June 1921, well before the truce.

This is an example of what I meant when I said that Ryan had produced no new evidence on the ambush. She offered no new witness statements and no new documents on the events of that day. The purported compensation claim, Barry's later struggles with editors (well, we can all sympathise with that), even British propaganda: none of this tells us anything new about what actually happened. Incidentally, there is new evidence available on the ambush itself but Ryan doesn't make use of it in any way. Why not? Presumably because it doesn't support her—and Barry's—claims.

Ryan also asserts—as has often been argued in attacking my books—that such after-action reports were not even written during the war and so the very existence of such a report is unlikely. This reveals a sad ignorance of the IRA and of the archives. Such



Above: An IRA flying column, County Tipperary—Barry did not invent nor perfect the flying column. (George Morrison)

reports were written in abundance, in West Cork and elsewhere, before and after the ambush. I refer to and quote from many of these in my books.

The fourth principle of explanation is to look for precedents and patterns. In the case of the 1920 ambush report, we could ask whether there are other such reports known to be forgeries. Was this a general practice at the time? As far as I know, the answer is no. British propagandists and report-writers lied copiously and badly, but they did not, to my knowledge, forge IRA reports. So why even suspect it's a forgery?

According to Ryan (and others before her), it is *de facto* suspicious because the facts reported—the number of men, the times, the sequence of events—don't match Barry's later account. Now we're back to faith again. Fortunately, we can apply the fourth principle, along with the fifth: look at *all* the evidence before coming to your conclusion. In fact, once we compare them, *none* of Barry's extant column and ambush reports (and there are a lot of them, contrary to Ryan's belief) match his later accounts. Nor do they match the accounts provided by Liam Deasy and other participants who have left memoirs of their guerrilla days. Of course Ryan is right to be sceptical as a rule, but scepticism combined with

ignorance and prejudice is a poor form of analysis.

So precedent and pattern, and a systematic examination of the evidence, suggest no good reason to believe that the report is a forgery. By elimination, that leaves us with the conclusion that it is genuine; in which case, if there was a false surrender causing the deaths of his men (as he later insisted), why would Barry not say so at once? Why, one might almost come to the conclusion that there was no false surrender...

Witnesses

As it happens, I did not base my reconstruction of the events of 28 November 1920 on Barry's report. Instead, I relied on IRA witnesses interviewed by myself and others. The quotations I use are, in fact, largely drawn from other people's work, which illustrates principle six: the strongest case is one that relies on multiple independent sources. Why did I conceal the names of my informants? Because I said I would, and because this allowed them to speak more freely. This should hardly surprise most readers: informant

anonymity is a standard research technique used by other historians, sociologists, criminologists, psychologists, anthropologists, folklorists and journalists. If a subject is touchy, delicate, sensitive, if what the informant says might get them into trouble in some way, it is often the only way to get the full story. Even more importantly, it is ethically necessary to protect informants from harm—a requirement for doing research at Canadian universities. Am I unusual in providing anonymity? Hardly. All the other taped interviews I refer to in my account of the ambush were provided to me *on the condition that I did not reveal the names of those speaking*.

Never mind, sniffs Ryan in her letter, these other witnesses don't support my argument anyway. In her book she does not deal with them at all, except to suggest that the witnesses must have been ill, old or confused. That's what I meant when I said that Ryan 'isn't interested in dealing with the substance of this evidence in a rational way'. Most of her work is based on interviews she herself carried out but, while they are assumed to be reliable, anyone else's are suspect.

It is worth recalling that the Kilmichael controversy also flared up in 1973, when West Cork veteran Liam Deasy published *Towards Ireland free* and enraged Barry for—among other

things—not mentioning the false surrender in his account of the Kilmichael ambush. When Barry objected in his usual sane and rational way, a large number of surviving veterans lined up behind Deasy. Ryan, as always, takes Barry's side and sloughs this fact off, but a fact it remains. I only wrote what I did because members of the IRA who participated in the ambush said what they did. When Ryan and others attack me and my sources, and defend Barry against all attackers, they are not just contradicting or dismissing me, they are contradicting or dismissing a considerable portion of the West Cork IRA itself. Those men were the first to make a point I made in my book: the West Cork IRA was a lot bigger than just Tom Barry.

Barry's role in the revolution

Which brings us to my remark that Barry was no more than a 'minor character' in the revolution. The Irish Volunteers in Cork were formed in 1914 and reorganised in 1917, after many members had been on the run or jailed in 1916. Its first operations took place in 1918. By the time Barry joined in mid-1920, its structure and personnel were set, many of its activists had won a long hunger strike, and a guerrilla war was well under way. Kilmichael—at the very end of November—was Barry's first independent command and only his second time in combat (unlike the column men he belittled in his memoir). With him involved, the West Cork IRA was not any more active or successful than the other two Cork brigades, and flying column effectiveness actually fell in 1921. He wasn't involved in organisational or political work, nor did he invent or perfect the flying column. All in all, he contributed little to the development of the IRA. Again, his supporters should try looking at the facts—all the facts—before rushing to his defence.

So what did the witnesses I quote actually say? One, whom Ryan says gives 'no details and no mention of a surrender or a false one', in fact (according to my notes) said the following:

'No, there was no such thing as a [false] surrender... they [two surrendered Auxiliaries] died, to

my mind, a cruel death, because the men that were in with Mick McCarthy, where he was shot, they knew these two [IRA] men were shot, and they came out and shot 'em and I think a bayonet was used on one, or maybe two of them.'

When asked if the two Auxiliaries got up and surrendered, he replied:

'Oh they did... They put up their hands and went up the road and went back the road... They did about half the journey... the firing was stopped. I don't know who gave the signal... We knew it was all over when we saw our men getting out on the road.'

In retrospect, then, Ryan's blanket denial looks a mite careless. The Chisholm interviews confirm these details and add others, particularly about the execution of wounded men in addition to those who surrendered. This is something else Ryan and others don't want to deal with.

Rules of war?

Where does this leave Ryan's self-invented 'rules of war' and 'war code'? First off, under international law, the IRA weren't soldiers and what was happening in Ireland wasn't a war. Second, even if such a code existed informally, what does it say about killing wounded men? Nothing good, I hope. And even if we accept Ryan's case, what does that say about Barry's outright killing of two surrendered soldiers in February 1921? Or the IRA's massacre of thirteen Protestants in April 1922? Oh, but Ryan has an excuse for every death—her book is a catalogue of justifications for killing. It's the worst double standard of them all. If a policeman or soldier kills, it's murder. If a republican guerrilla kills, well, he had a good reason, and anyway he did it for his country. Has she ever reflected on the logic of what she says?

Soldiers—or policemen for that matter—are not allowed to make up their own laws, for obvious reasons, and a 'war code' is a very dangerous standard to judge actions by. It can cover an awful lot of evil and it can be used by all sides. For example, it justified many murders by policemen

and soldiers in Ireland as those responsible were outraged by the IRA's 'unsoldierly' ambushes and assassinations. It also sounds a lot like the 'shoot to kill' and 'big boy's rules' killings in the North.

Morality and explanation don't mix, so my books avoid endorsement or condemnation. I think that readers can judge these things for themselves and, anyway, that's not why I write. My reason for including a chapter on Kilmichael was to help demonstrate the key point that it is impossible to separate 'clean' or 'military' killings from the rest, and that government and rebel justifications became awfully similar once guerrilla war got under way. Crown forces used the old 'false surrender' line as well.

My view

Still, I'll give my view: if the horrors of the twentieth century have taught us anything, isn't it that killing in the name of one's country is far too easy and usually creates far worse problems than those it is intended to 'solve'? 'Freedom' is as blood-drenched a slogan as the rest: just ask Iraqis, Afghans, Croats, Bosnians and Serbs. Anyway, Irish nationalism offers a much greater tradition—that of democratic and non-violent action. This achieved great political freedoms and social progress in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and still provides an enlightened model for peaceful liberation. Irish nationalists practically invented 'people power'. Goodness knows it's not up to me, but why are these heroes forgotten while gunmen are celebrated?

I have not been able to tackle every issue the letter-writers brought up, and I have a lot more to say about those I have discussed. If readers would like to read more, I am currently writing a brief book on all this in answer to the three books (!) that have appeared so far denouncing me. There are a lot of important historical issues at play here, but I'm afraid much of the so-called 'debate' on Kilmichael is about as genuine as Errol Flynn's Irish accent in *Captain Blood*. ☞

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