

# **98th CROSSBARRY/KILMICHAEL WAR OF INDEPENDENCE ADDRESS**

**Delivered on Sunday March 24th 2019**

I would like to thank the Crossbarry - Kilmichael commemorative committee for inviting me here today to deliver the annual speech. I have no doubt that my name would be one of the least known of those who preceded me in delivering the address but without question no one has felt more honour and pride at being selected.

We proudly gather here today to honour the memory of the four Irish volunteers who sacrificed their lives for our freedom. Charlie Hurley, a civil service clerk and brigade O/C was convalescing after being wounded in a raid on a train in Upton. He was shot dead while escaping a British Army raid on brigade headquarters at Denny Forde's farm in Ballymurphy. Twenty Two year old Con Daly from Ballinacarthy, Jerh O Leary of Leap and a Scottish army deserter known as Peter Monaghan who were all killed by crown forces during the Crossbarry ambush on 19th March 1921. These men were not sectarian or murderers they were patriots and heroes and remain so to this day. We should also pay homage to the mothers, wives, sons, daughters, friends and neighbours and a significant proportion of the general population, who were prepared to endure the inevitable harsh reprisals the independence struggle brought in its wake to those caught assisting the rebels. Despite insuperable difficulties and almost impossible odds the tradition of insurrection and the spirit of revolutionary resistance were too deeply etched in the history of the country and its people to be ignored. For our part we must ensure that we do not permit inventive historians to dictate the political present as we are all aware that whoever controls the present narrative controls the past narrative.

Opponents of the War of Independence suggest that freedom could have been achieved by the introduction of Home Rule. I disagree. John Redmond was a zealous admirer of the British House of Commons, and sought only limited Irish self-government, considering it undesirable that Britain and Ireland should be separated as he had no wish to see the dismemberment of the British Empire. Despite claims that Redmond was opposed to physical force he nonetheless enthusiastically encouraged young Irishmen to enlist in the British army in 1914 in return for this promise of Home Rule. These young men were told by Redmond that they were fighting a just war, undertaken in defence of small nations and oppressed peoples. Redmond was referring to Belgium who in fact was a ruthless colonial power that practised slavery and genocide in Africa. The Irish Party leader apparently found no contradiction between his support for Irishmen being part of the mass-murder of millions of people in the Great War and his trenchant opposition to Irishmen using force to rid this country of an imperial power. John Redmond's version of Home Rule was no more than being allowed to participate in your own colonisation. It was an exercise in replacing the Act of Union with an acceptable version which gave the Irish people the delusion of self-government.

In the 1918 general election, one of the key defining moments in modern Irish history, Sinn Fein were given an overwhelming mandate to establish an independent all-Ireland state. This wholly constitutional and parliamentary decision of the Irish people was rejected by the British government, a rejection which led to loss of life and bitterness of war. In contrast, the previously dominant Irish Parliamentary Party, who were still campaigning for the elusive Home Rule, were swept from power, and even its leader John Dillon failed to be re-elected. The refusal of the British government to recognise the legitimacy of the 1918 general election, the First Dáil in January 1919 and the subsequent insistence of the British to continue to impose its rule in Ireland against the democratic wishes of a majority of the people, led to the War of Independence.

The Irish people had endured for centuries the brutality of colonisation. The War of Independence, which was yet another strike for freedom, restored a sense of national pride in a people, many of whom were confused as to their identity. The colonial violence inflicted on the dispossessed peasantry included the punitive policy of transportation to the penal colonies for minor infringements of law. It also forcibly imposed the Plantation of Ireland, the penal laws, harsh evictions, harsher landlordism and chronic hunger. The violence of the Great Hunger which saw Ireland lose about two million of her poorest children to starvation, disease and emigration while exporting huge surpluses of food from her ports was in itself sufficient reason to forcibly rid this country of British rule.

Revisionists persistently attempt to denigrate the memory of our heroes at Crossbarry and Kilmichael in order to distract attention away from the cause for which they died. Some 3000 poorly armed and trained Irish volunteers took on the might of the world's only Superpower, who had 50,000 troops and 15,000 armed police at their disposal. In total 404 IRA volunteers sacrificed their lives in the War of Independence. Similar odds were faced by the 102 volunteers of the IRA's 3rd Cork Brigade at Crossbarry who inflicted about 40 fatalities on the 120 auxiliaries and 1200 British troops of the Essex and Hampshire regiments led by Major Arthur Percival. Percival would later lead the British Army into its greatest defeat, when he surrendered Singapore to the Japanese in 1942. The IRA's victories at Crossbarry and elsewhere inspired national liberation movements around the world for decades after. The guerrilla tactics used in Crossbarry in 1921 would be used in France and Yugoslavia in the 1940's, Hungary and the Baltic states in the 1950's and Vietnam and Zimbabwe in the 1960's and 1970's.

In recent years the world has become familiar with the terms "fake news" and "alternative facts". Unfortunately, we Irish republicans have been acquainted with these terms for decades, as we have been subjected to the "alternative reality" of 'revisionist history' where our freedom fighters are depicted as cold blooded murderers and our War of independence as a sordid sectarian squabble.

Charlatans like the late Canadian historian Peter Hart claim the burning of 76 Ascendancy "big houses", the killing of 13 Protestants in Dunmanaway in April 1922 along with the killing of another 24 Protestant informers in Cork during the War of Independence, amounted to a sectarian pogrom. This is simply not true. A sectarian pogrom did take place in this period, but it happened in Ulster not Munster and those

guilty wore the uniform of the crown, not the Republic. Between June and July 1922 in Belfast 257 Catholics were killed, 11,000 lost their jobs, 23,000 were forced from their homes and 500 Catholic owned businesses were destroyed.

An example of this "fake news" and "alternative facts" phenomena was columnist Eoghan Harris' scripted and narrated Irish language film *An Tost Fada* (The Long Silence) broadcast on RTÉ on 16 April 2012. *An Tost Fada* told a story of Rev'd George Salter's father, William, being forced to abandon his West Cork farm in 1922. The story was historically misleading. The subject matter of the programme concerns matters of public controversy and debate, the specific killing of 13 Protestant civilians in Ballygroman, Dunmanway, in and around Ballineen Enniskeane and Clonakilty, between 26-29 April 1922; and, generally, the treatment of the Protestant minority in Southern Ireland. The programme makers broadcast incorrect information, seemingly so as to maintain the programme's pre-selected narrative drive.

The programme stated that the Salters family consisted of six sisters and two brothers. But every one of them left Ireland by April 1922. The narrator stated 'fear' and 'threats' forced the Salter family to emigrate, never to return. But on what basis were these statements made? No evidence was offered in support. The strong suggestion of the programme was that the Salters were forced to leave Ireland because of their religion, by Roman Catholics in West Cork. This is a grave accusation to level at a community, and one wholly unsubstantiated by anything presented in the programme or elsewhere. Mr Harris stated that Irish Protestants "must feel free to talk about their past". So they must. And we all must listen. A good start would be if alleged professional communicators who purport to assist them left their personal agendas at the door. They should also check evidence thoroughly. It is time-consuming but rewarding.

Some speakers at inaugural West Cork History Festival in 2017, collaborated to undermine the ethical and moral standing of the IRA generally. Mr Harris showed his incompetent 2012 documentary, *An Tost Fada*. Festival-goers were informed of at least one serious error, admitted by RTE after I complained. The programme stated that two men, Mathew Connell and William Sweetman, two local Protestant farmers, were presented as shot during April 1922 (after the War of Independence, prior to the civil war). That was false. Connell and Sweetman were shot during the War of Independence on 19 February 1921, over a year earlier. They had testified in court against named members of the IRA. Religion seemingly was not a factor in their deaths.

Despite being aware of the date discrepancy Eoghan Harris included factually incorrect information. Why? There is further evidence that the filmmakers deliberately suppressed the dating error. A camera shot in the film showed the headstone of William Sweetman. Though the headstone contains the date of Sweetman's death, that information was omitted from the image broadcast. This seems to have been a deliberate changing of important historic detail for the sake of narrative. The dates were separated by the July 1921 Truce, the Anglo-Irish Treaty split in January 1922, and the slow descent into Civil War that began in June 1922. Eoghan Harris is good at writing sectarian gibberish including the relentless denigration of those who fought at Crossbarry, Kilmichael and many other revered locations for Irish Independence. I suggest that he abandons the fake history claims and broaden out the War of

Independence discussion so that a more historical and less hysterical analysis is advanced.

I am disturbed that Eoghan Harris was given public money to promote partisan politics in defiance of rules regarding objectivity and fairness. I am also troubled that narrow-minded sectarian propaganda was broadcast uncritically by RTE, ironically in the name of tolerance and remembrance. I am concerned that RTE broadcast a programme alleging that Roman Catholics felt such hatred for their Protestant neighbours, purely on the basis of religious belief, that they harassed and persecuted them generally and then set out to kill and threaten them in a haphazard sectarian manner. I am concerned because the argument is highly contestable, but was not tested in a programme that appeared to deliberately broadcast misleading and wrong information in order to get its sectarian point across

Now, almost a century removed from the Flying Columns era, the necessity and morality of IRA actions during the War of Independence continues to be subject to intense scrutiny by revisionists. It is notable that the actions of British forces during the same conflict are not subject to a similar level of inspection and debate. The recent comments by the Secretary of State for the North Karen Bradley, who said that killings during the recent Troubles perpetrated by British soldiers and police were 'not crimes' confirms this claim. One could almost see Sammy Wilson nodding approval of Ms Bradley's words. Ms Bradley's subsequent claim that she was "factually wrong" in her depiction of events during the Troubles, that it was "a heat of the moment slip of the tongue", do not add up. Due in no small measure to widespread unease in the nationalist community in NI at extra judicial killings by security forces, the former Governor of Hong Kong Chris Patten chaired the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland. Patten proposed replacing a police force which had its roots in both the principles of a private army and local militias with one that would have its roots in a new socially and politically homogeneous community, something we in the South have enjoyed almost since the founding of the State. The Steevens report on institutional collusion between the North's police force and loyalist death squads, the Stalker/Sampson report on allegations of a shoot-to-kill policy engaged in by the RUC, which the British government decided in the 'national interest' not to make public, fuels further suspicion of dysfunctional army and police forces which operated beyond democratic political control. Effectively, the British government stood back and condoned a situation whereby the people of the North were policed by forces which would not be acceptable in England, Scotland, or Wales. The 175 changes recommended, and mostly implemented, in the Patten report came not a moment too soon.

With almost boring predictability, revisionist historiographers, political chameleons and unionist propagandists, stridently express their legendary anti-nationalist bile and narrow-minded sectarian visions of those who fought for Irish freedom, while remaining consistent to another singular viewpoint, that of unquestioning support for the political and social position of those who conspired to maintain unionist hegemony in colonial Ireland. They have for decades promoted a false sectarian narrative about the War of Independence which is as far removed from the truth as it is possible to get without appearing to lie. Their relentless incendiary assaults on the nature of republican participation in the War of Independence appear to be attempts to foment sectarian division this side of the border. Some revisionists reserves their bitter

invective almost exclusively for those who fought to rid this country of British misrule including the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries who, during a drunken orgy of reprisals sacked and burned more than three hundred buildings in Cork City in one night. This group of uniformed thugs further sated their lust for pyromania by burning Balbriggan and Trim towns, and numerous other atrocities. Even the commander of this undisciplined group of terrorists, General Frank Crozier, resigned in protest at the deployment of these men.

Narrow versions of Irish identity are contrasted by the broadminded response from southern Protestants in Irish civil society during 1920-22 who said that Republicans were non sectarian in the War of Independence. Indeed, one of the reasons we had an Independence struggle in the first place, was in reaction to the sectarian nature of British rule. During and after the War of Independence, southern Protestant opinion was divided. Most were revolted by Crown Force methods. A minority actively supported British reprisals and torture. The IRA targeted these latter when republican lives and liberty were put in jeopardy. The same happened with Roman Catholic informers and spies. There is no solid evidence of religion-based targeting. Republicans acted generally in the non-sectarian traditions of the movement founded by Wolfe Tone. That is why some Protestants joined it. Others said they feared Crown Forces more so than 'Sinn Feiners'.

The killings of Protestants during the period 1918-1922, were not sectarian in nature, they were political. The theory put forward that there was a conspiracy to drive out Protestants is Paisleyite myth mongering. Who said so ? Protestants did. Leading Methodist Crown Prosecutor and West Cork independent TD Jasper Wolfe (coordinator of loyalist compensation claims) discounted that the April 1922 killings of 10 Protestant civilians in the Bandon Valley area were sectarian. After these killings, a Protestant Convention, fully representative of southern Protestantism, met in the Mansion House in Dublin. On 11 May 1922 they resolved, 'that until the recent tragedies in the County Cork, hostility to Protestants by reason of their religion, has been almost if not wholly, unknown in the twenty six counties in which Protestants are in a minority.' In other words, Protestants regarded these killings as exceptional. Trading on and promoting society's capacity for self-doubt and introspection, revisionists generate a propaganda diet reminiscent of that promoted by Carson and Craig. They drove thousands of Catholics out of jobs and houses in 1920-22. Brave Protestant socialists who opposed this unionist sectarian drive to divide the working class in Northern Ireland were also driven out.

Present day Protestants who oppose the sectarian view of the War of Independence are also subject to ad hominem attack. Dr Martin Mansergh, who served under three Fianna Fáil leaders as Director of Research, Policy and Special Adviser on Northern Ireland, was a target of Eoghan Harris on this very issue. Writing on October 9th in 2005 on the killing of the Protestant Pearson brothers in Coolacres, Mr Harris had the effrontery to term then Senator Mansergh a "posh southern Protestant" who "provides a rotten role model for any young Protestant Irishman". Harris was equally offensive the following week: "Dr Martin Mansergh.... has a posh accent. I could almost hear his dulcet tones in his Irish Times column last week".

The Pearson brothers had deliberately and consciously engaged in an act of war on the British side, so their execution was a legitimate act of war. The sole motive in these

IRA executions was political, without regard to creed or class. Many Catholic collaborators were also subject to the same treatment. Indeed, just prior to the execution of the Pearsons, the South Offaly Brigade IRA killed one spy, two informers and three RIC men - all Catholics. Between 21st September 1920 and 29th June 1921 six RIC men were shot dead in Co Offaly alone, all Catholics. It must be remembered that members of the RIC were the muscle of a system that for many republicans ended on the gallows or the convict ship. It appears that the compilation of the chronicle of events surrounding the Coolacrescent incident disseminated by British verisimilitude is now being peddled by Irish history revisionists, whereby the acceptable version of 'facts' are those favourable to British/unionist propagandists. Although the War of Independence was won, the battle against revisionism continues.

It is regrettable that revisionists are given almost unchallenged column inches to promote partisan politics in defiance of objectivity and fairness. It is also unfortunate that narrow-minded sectarian propaganda is published uncritically, ironically in the name of balance and fairness. It is also unworthy of some present day publications to relentlessly permit allegations that Roman Catholics felt such hatred for their Protestant neighbours, purely on the basis of religious belief, that they harassed, persecuted and even murdered them generally in a sectarian manner. These allegations by those who believe that we are the primary architects of our own problems by daring to assert our version of our own history, that the primary motivation behind the killings of Protestants during the War of Independence was sectarian, is itself sectarian. Such a mindset is a sober reminder of just how many generations it can take to breed out the colonising gene.

Some historians put the decline in the Protestant population in the area of Independent Ireland after the War of Independence as proof of widespread intimidation and discrimination. Such claims continue to provoke analysis and comment. In studies of Protestant depopulation in Ireland conclusions were reached that the causes of this decline were primarily social and economic. The de-industrialisation of Ireland led to economic decline, leading in turn to a fall in immigration of Protestant persons from Great Britain, along with accelerating out-migration of Irish Protestants. This exodus of tens of thousands of Protestants from the nascent Irish Free State heralding the decline in the Protestant population was not as a result of sectarianism, intimidation or land-grabbing. Such stated views clearly promote a sectarian narrative about republican actions during the War of Independence and are not supported by evidence. In a small number of cases Irish Protestants were victims of a process of expulsion, coercion, and even murder – acts which would have been abhorred by those who planned the Easter Rising and War of Independence – however, there are other reasons for this population decline

A significant contributor to this decline can be identified with the First World War and aggressively encouraged Protestant relocation north. The horrific slaughter of young Irish Protestant men in the 1914-1918 war had a devastating and disproportionate impact on the male Protestant population of the south. This was reflected in the birth rate for decades following the war. In addition, the Northern Ireland regime led by Sir James Craig enticed large numbers of Protestants, through the offer of government jobs and housing, to relocate north of the Border in an attempt to offset Catholic majorities in Border counties. Some in government service chose to leave with their

families rather than enter the civil/public service of the Free State. In addition, there was a large British military establishment in Ireland which was stood down in 1922. This group was disproportionately Protestant. Others left because they no longer enjoyed the social and official privilege being Protestant once brought. Furthermore, the strong religious, cultural and political ties which southern Protestants had in common with the northern majority resulted in a sizeable shift of Protestants north across the Border. It is worth noting that two Protestants who decided to stay south subsequently became presidents of Ireland. Another very significant factor was the social force of marriage, especially the marriage pattern of Irish Protestant women marrying British military grooms on an Irish tour of duty. Research found that fully one-third of Protestant brides married British military grooms. The loss of young marriageable females to British soldiers was much more significant than the Ne Temere decree in depleting Protestant society in Ireland. This research also confirmed that social class was more important than religion in explaining depopulation.

In this generation we have seen Irish people become European and Europeans become Irish. The sacrifices of the men of Crossbarry are all the more relevant today with the arrogant and reckless actions of British Brexiteers and Loyalist extremists who have in effect undermined the very foundations of the peace process and expelled hundreds of thousands of Irish Citizens from the European Union against their clearly expressed democratic wishes with a cavalier disregard for their economic and social interests. The hubristic actions of Brexiteers like Jacob Rees Mogg and Boris Johnson have ironically done more to internationalise the issue of the partition of Ireland than Eamon De Valera, Sean Mc Bride and Patrick Hillary did. The partition of Ireland is now no longer solely an Irish or a British problem. It is a European problem and may have a European solution if some pragmatic unionists view their future interests would be better served within Europe. If we truly want to honour the memory of those who died here nearly a hundred years ago, along with those like Jim Crowley and Dan Corcoran who were wounded and others like Tom Barry, Liam Deasy, Tom Kelleher and the "piper of Crossbarry" Flor Begley who fought here, then we all must continue relentlessly to achieve the objective of an independent and united Ireland for which they sacrificed so much. They did the heavy lifting in ploughing a dangerous furrow to secure Irish Independence. Although many of these brave men did not live to reap the harvest they had sown, we in this generation are the fortunate beneficiaries of their heroic endeavours.

It is our duty to defend their sacrifice, confront their detractors and prevent their names being dishonoured and besmirched. These brave men did not sacrifice their lives for riches. They did not sacrifice their lives for glory. They did not sacrifice their lives for power. They sacrificed THEIR lives for OUR future. A future still, as yet, unrealised. A future when Ireland is at peace, united and free and we should protect their memory from those who resented the emergence of the Independent Irish nation they were pivotal in establishing. Their legacy is that the country they fought to free is now one of the most stable democracies in the world. We salute you.

**Tom Cooper, 24<sup>TH</sup> March 2019**