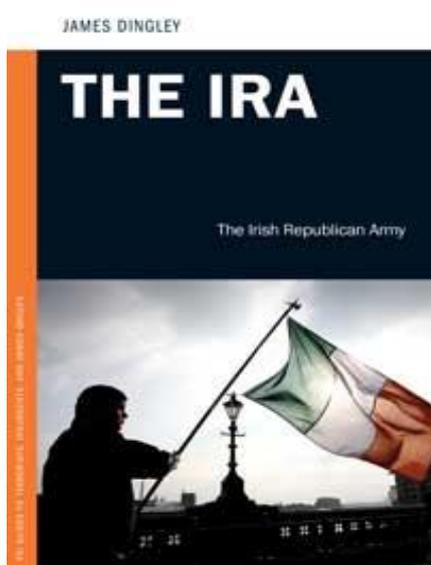


James Dingley, *The IRA: The Irish Republican Army*, Praeger, Santa Barbara, Ca, 2012

di *Marcello Mollica* \*



*The IRA: The Irish Republican Army* is an interesting book, not least because it attempts a sociological as well as an historical and political analysis of the terrorist group that probably led the world in modern terrorism. This, naturally, will cause some controversy precisely because it attempts to analyse rather than just provide a narrative account of the IRA. As such it suggests a slightly older style than post-modernists or politically correct academics would appreciate and certainly places it in the ‘revisionist’ camp of Irish studies that tries to critically analyse the movement by applying a scientific method, in alternative to anti-revisionists who oppose ‘scientific’ Irish studies and try to maintain the traditional nationalist narrative (Brady 1995; Boyce & O’Day 1996).

This research is also rooted in classical sociology (references to Durkheim, Berlin and Gellner are important markers), which represents a relative novelty in Irish or security studies, too often bereft of good and theoretically solid social analysis. At the same time, there is also a strong undertone of Marxism in the analysis, as Dingley explores the socio-structural role of economics in conjunction to that of religion, as well as the religious origins of the activists. Against this background, the author also draws a clear cut distinction between the Provisional IRA (PIRA, effectively becoming the IRA the world knows only with Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness) with a very traditional Catholic mind-set, and the Official IRA (which called off armed struggle as sectarian very early on and became the Workers Party) whose members were Marxist and tried to address major socio-economic and class issues. There is an important lesson here for the Left: anti-state movements not necessarily need be ideologically progressive. As a result, an independent Republic of Ireland rapidly became one of the most Catholic and reactionary states in Western Europe.

This takes the reader to the core of Dingley’s argument: the IRA (PIRA from 1969 on) was essentially a Catholic nationalist movement in the Romantic mould, not the kind of Enlightened nationalism of

---

\* Marcello Mollica è ricercatore “Rita Levi Montalcini”, membro del Consiglio del Centro Interdisciplinare Scienze per la Pace, Università di Pisa. Email: marcello.mollica@sp.unipi.it

the *Risorgimento* or the French Revolution, as it was the case for many early Irish nationalists before 1848. This, Dingley argues, reflects the religious and economic realities of Ireland that were rooted in different modes of production: Ulster Unionists, as Protestants and based on an industrial model had no interest in the nationalist ideal of a peasant-proprietor economy centred on the Catholic Church. More contentiously he argues that the IRA's violent strategy was rooted in its highly conservative Catholicism, embedded in anti-rationalism and anti-modernism. Accordingly, the author links it to further struggles that occurred throughout Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries, which would certainly fit in with much history of religion and classical sociology (Nisbet 1996; Remond 1999).

This Catholic anti-modernism certainly connects with Romantic nationalism. Dingley explores this connection extremely well. Moreover, given that Ireland (North and South) remained an almost forgotten backwater after 1923, one can understand how Northern Ireland's sectarian divisions remained unresolved and festered until they broke out in more sectarian inter-communal violence in 1969. An interesting, but undeveloped, point here is how much of Northern Ireland's problems lay in the State staying inactive and tolerating mutually agreed segregation to appease both religious camps. Meanwhile, an overtly Catholic Republic of Ireland maintained a claim to Northern Ireland, whilst doing nothing to address the real religious differences behind the partition of Ireland, lamented by it and the IRA as well.

Dingley is surely correct as he emphasises the overtly religious nature of the conflict, too often ignored, and how it links to economics and politics, both symbolised in religious terms. This makes Ireland no different from the rest of the world, as sociologists and anthropologists would observe. The core problem for all religions in 19th century Europe was that other forces were invading its traditional monopoly over morality, applied in terms of moral economy and social relations, and the Catholic Church specifically saw its strength in the kind of medieval peasant community modern Irish nationalism advocated. This, of course, combined with the kind of Romantic politics Berlin (2000), Russell (1996) or Pagden (2013) discussed and fed into the rise of Fascism, where violence and sacrifice for patrie easily combine with religious martyrdom, e.g. hunger strikers (Mollica 2012). Indeed, Dingley does draw this parallel with the IRA, which some may find contentious, but is supported by well researched studies on early IRA membership. In this context, Hart's work on IRA membership (Hart 1998; 2005) should be a compulsory reading, supported by contemporary readings on nationalism, e.g. Kedourie (1993) or Greenfeld (1992).

Nevertheless, Dingley may be criticised for not directly interviewing IRA and Sinn Fein members (the IRA's political wing), although he has interviewed senior security personal who dealt directly with the IRA.

However, such interviews already exist in other ways (Sinn Fein effectively represents the IRA in the public sphere anyway) and one often wonders about the value of interviewing terrorists who will almost always be able to justify their own actions. A rigorous analysis not necessarily relies on interviewing actors, and one doubts if any terrorist movement would permit the kind of detailed scrutiny of its internal affairs that would be required for it. Meanwhile, much of the analysis developed by Dingley fits in with what we already know on similar terrorist groups around the world, e.g. Clark (1984) on ETA.

The second half of the book deals almost exclusively with the organisation, operational, tactical and strategic aspect of PIRA, which is thorough and informative but not significantly covers new ground. Although it summarises much that was already known from a variety of sources, providing an useful synthesis of the state of the art, plus a few sharper insights thrown in from Dingley's obviously good security connections. Of particular note here would be the induction of recruits and the meticulous preparation, planning and organisation of PIRA, including its expensive economic operations and the final recognition that Britain's strategic weakness against them was also economic (bombs in London). From this perspective, it is correct more than original, although the extra details will be of some use to those who specifically seek to understand those issues.

The key element of originality consists here in Dingley's profiling of the IRA's personnel. The picture that emerges of the typical activist is not of an intellectual or even of an ideology-driven individual. Most were not highly educated, came from working class or lower middle class backgrounds, were male and had grown up in a very Catholic environment (home, school, community, social clubs and activities). Their Catholicism seemed to be the most significant feature about them, and Dingley particularly calls attention to the scholastic mind-set resulting from a Catholic education, reintroducing here the crucial role of ideology, culture and early social conditioning into terrorism studies.

Of course in a religiously sectarian society, any member of the minority sectarian group will always resent their minority status and more limited opportunities, but apart from 'wrecking the place' (Stevenson 1997) PIRA seemed incapable of any ideas of how to create a genuinely non-sectarian society. Perhaps this could be more fully developed in future works on the issue.

Few would deny the truly sectarian nature of Northern Ireland, but how to advance beyond that, without simply making Protestants a discriminated group in a Catholic dominated all-Ireland where most workers would be worse off (something the Marxist Officials grasped), seemed to escape to PIRA. Violence, something to which PIRA was very adept, seemed to be their only answer to deep rooted problems, although Unionists hardly seemed to have any ideas either. And although it was probably not part of the book's aim, one would have liked to have read something on how the security forces so successfully contained and then defeated PIRA.

Equally, the role of Protestants and Unionists and why they clung to the Union so strongly, feared being part of a Catholic state and their responsibilities for the violence would have been a useful issue of inquiry. Again, this was probably beyond the book's remit as part of a commissioned security series.

In conclusion, with his classical sociological background and his security connections, Dingley has certainly produced a book that those in the security sector, and the 'revisionist' scholars of Ireland, will find useful, largely agreeing with its analysis. It is also a book more easily to accord with rather traditional social science analysis. At the same time, one suspects the book will produce serious opposition from 'anti-revisionists', post-modernists and politically-correct milieus. Moreover, Dingley almost pointedly utilises very traditional language, which perhaps appeals better to security audience. Nevertheless, it is no bad thing at all to encourage new and refreshing debates, in order to get a larger and deeper perspective, which has often been missing both in terms of understanding the

IRA, Ireland and terrorism in general, and of taking religion seriously enough to make it central in the sociological analysis.

## References

- Berlin, I. (2000), *The Roots of Romanticism*, Pimlico, London.
- Boyce, D.G & O'Day, A. (eds) (1996), *The Making of Modern Irish History. Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy*, Routledge, London.
- Brady, C. (ed.) (1994), *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism*, Irish Academy Press, Dublin.
- Clark, R. (1984), *The Basque Insurgents, ETA 1952-1980*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.
- Greenfeld, L. (1992), *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Hart, P. (1998), *The IRA and Its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916-1923*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Hart, P. (2005), *The IRA at War, 1916-1923*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Kedourie, E. (1993), *Nationalism*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Mollica, M. (2012), "Political Manipulations: Death and Urban Graveyards Northern Ireland", in G. Prato & I. Pardo (eds), *Anthropology in the City: Methods, Methodology and Theory*, Ashgate, Aldershot, pp. 155-172.
- Nisbet, R. (1996), *The Sociological Tradition*, Transaction, New York.
- Pagden, A. (2013), *The Enlightenment: Why it Still Matters*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Remond, R. (1999), *Religion and Society in Modern Europe*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Russell, B. (1996), *History of Western Philosophy*, Routledge, London.
- Stevenson, J. (1997), *We Wrecked the Place: Contemplating the End to the Northern Irish Troubles*, Free Press, New York.

