

Northern Ireland's "Troubles"

Thomas Mitchell

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Review Essay

Northern Ireland's "Troubles"

Toolis, Kevin. *Rebel Hearts: Journeys Within The IRA's Soul*. London: Picador, 1995.

Stevenson, Jonathan. *We Wrecked the Place: Contemplating an End to the Northern Irish Troubles*. New York: The Free Press, 1996.

Northern Ireland's "troubles" are the most written about internal war in history, far surpassing the nearest competitors. There have been several excellent histories of both the "troubles" themselves and of the main perpetrators the Irish Republican Army (IRA), often by the same authors, such as American J. Bowyer Bell or Irishman Tim Pat Coogan. So what more is there to write? One of the neglected areas is the loyalist paramilitaries, who in the two years before the 1994 ceasefire surpassed the republicans in terms of numbers killed. Academic Steve Bruce did write a very good treatment of the loyalists published in 1992 just as they were becoming most deadly. But he did not really deal with the political side of the loyalists, their two parties: the Progressive Unionist Party and the Ulster Democratic Party, which are both represented in the peace talks. And he wrote before the 1994 ceasefire.

Toolis and Stevenson are both very partisan authors. Toolis makes no secret of his republican sympathies, whereas Stevenson does a very poor job of concealing his unionist bias. But each book serves as a good antidote for the other.

Toolis, a Briton of Irish descent, secured the trust of the IRA during the late 1980s. His book basically deals with the 1980s, although it does have flashbacks to 1969 and the early 1970s. Each chapter deals with a different subject: informers, prison, recruitment, Sinn Féin, life underground, etc. Toolis provides a very good account of the 1983 Maze prison break.

The only chapter dealing with politics, written before the 1994 ceasefire, is a portrait of Sinn Féin's deputy leader Martin McGuinness who Toolis portrays as being the real voice of Sinn Féin and the IRA. Toolis states that the men in the field do not quite trust Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams to be tough enough to guard the republic in negotiations with the British, so McGuinness is there to keep him honest. Whether it is a true portrayal of their relationship or not, it is a good indicator that the ending of the seventeen month ceasefire was no accident. McGuinness was the head of the IRA in Derry in the early 1970s before becoming head of Northern Command in 1978. Adams was during this same period a leader of the IRA in Belfast before establishing Sinn Féin as the republican movement's political wing in 1976.

Toolis asks many hard questions about the IRA's targeting policy which seems to stretch elastically to include anyone who is not a republican as the enemy. But in the afterward he confesses that although he opposes violence, he remains a republican at heart he is probably confused and meant that he is a nationalist at heart.

Stevenson asks the tough questions, but usually only of the republicans. He provides impressive statistics to refute the IRA's claims about the nature of the war. While he condemns the IRA's war as a sectarian war, he seems not to realize the sectarian nature of Northern Ireland. He identifies with the loyalist leaders who are much more contrite than the republicans. Stevenson seems to be a true believer in rehabilitation because he parades before us the accounts of several loyalist terrorists who have repented. But because the IRA volunteers have no change of heart he condemns them, even those who are inside for guerrilla attacks on British troops as opposed to killing a Catholic and claiming that he was IRA.

When loyalist politician Billy Hutchinson claims that the civil rights movement became sectarian, Stevenson lets this pass without comment. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association had Protestants such as Ivan Cooper among its leadership. Cooper was one of three NICRA independents elected to parliament in 1970; he then became a founding member of the Social Democratic and Labour Party. It was mobs of B Specials and Paisleyite thugs attacking the marchers of NICRA during their protests in 1968-69 that made the movement sectarian. When similar biased statements are made by IRA activists Stevenson never lets them pass without comment. Stevenson also makes a big point of noting that both sides drove out members of the other community in 1969, but he fails to mention the numbers of homeless on both sides or who started the burning.

Stevenson's book is most useful for its portrayal of loyalist prison life. This is also the most up to date account of the ideology of the two new loyalist parties who in June 1996 had delegates elected to the peace talks with about two percent of the vote. Stevenson admits that the loyalists have little political future as they are regarded with loathing by middle class unionists and as competitors by Ian Paisley's DUP. Unionists find violence acceptable only when it is dispensed by state agents rather than by free lancers.

Thomas Mitchell

Madison, Wisconsin