



One man's terrorist. A political history of the IRA

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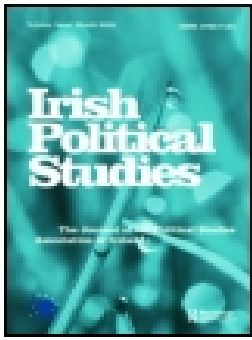
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One man's terrorist. A political history of the IRA

by Daniel Finn, London, Verso, 2019, 272 pp., €22.99 (hardback), ISBN 9781786636881

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BOOK REVIEW

One man's terrorist. A political history of the IRA, by Daniel Finn, London, Verso, 2019, 272 pp., €22.99 (hardback), ISBN 9781786636881

Daniel Finn's *'One Man's Terrorist'* tracks the development of left-leaning, progressive politics within the Provisional republican movement during the Troubles, while also weaving in some history of the Officials, the Irish Republican Socialist Party, and the role played by People's Democracy. Finn's analysis of the Official-Provisional split is robust and adds to those who challenge the over simplistic narrative of Official 'politicians' and Provisional 'militarists'. While the issue of 'deliberately downgrading' the IRAs military capabilities after the disastrous Border Campaign is often cited, Finn suggests that Goulding and others in the mainly Southern-based leadership were caught unaware by the rapid eruption of inter-communal conflict, and naively underestimated the intensity of sectarian violence, particularly in places like Belfast. The primary difference between the Officials and Provisionals, according to Finn, was their priorities; while the Officials sought to blend mass mobilisations and left-leaning politics alongside armed struggle, the Provisionals were consumed with the immediacy of the escalating conflict, effectively postponing politics until a later date.

From the outset, Finn offers a left analysis of the often-vexed relationship between republicanism and socialism, and the book meticulously documents the perennial friction between those deemed 'traditional militarists' and those seeking to broaden the movement's ideological canon. Finn is correct to highlight the 'broad church' character of the Provisionals; while some key leaders such as Billy McKee were openly hostile to any semblance of socialism, at the other end many leading Provisionals such as Gerry Adams and Brendan Hughes openly espoused the importance of socialism to the republican struggle. The book convincingly argues that periods where the elitism of republican armed actions and mobilisation of the masses coalesced as common causes, such as the period of 1971–72 and the prison protest period, particularly 1980–81, are the instances which left a permanent mark on republican politics and Irish history in general. Finn astutely points to the fact that mass mobilisation in support of the prisoners in 1980/81 attracted far greater numbers than that of the Civil Rights marches a decade previous, a significant point often overlooked in other accounts.

In detailing the first green shoots of what would be the development of a Provisional political front in 1977, Finn speaks about the complex and at times confused debate going on within the Provisionals (p.136). There were numerous occasions, such as this, where the text needed to drill down further and excavate the internal politics of the Provisionals. Relying on secondary sources limited the book's ability to achieve that. While contemporary interviews are of course

clouded by the politics of the present, first-hand accounts from a broad range of current and former activists could have allowed for greater insights into the internal wrangling and political direction of the movement during some of these seismic moments.

With regards to the ending of the IRA campaign, Finn alludes to a series of factors including the reality of a military stalemate, the increased pressure from loyalist paramilitaries, but ultimately cites the Provisionals' engagement with electoral politics and constitutional nationalist parties in a path dependent form of analysis. The book finds that the new post-ceasefire Provisional politics of 'community resistance' was less concerned with universal ideas regarding sovereignty and self-determination, and more to do with flags, culture, marching and language rights, signifying its steady departure away from 'radical' politics to the centre.

In many places, the book is as much a political history of the Troubles as of the IRA. In contrast to other recent contributions which focus their analyses solely on the internal politics of the republican movement, Finn follows a chronological ordering of the main events of the Troubles, sometimes to the detriment of the book's focus. Given the leftist approach to the subject matter, the book is surprisingly androcentric and almost exclusively male in its narrative. Like so many accounts of the period, the hardships, struggles and hunger strike by women in Armagh jail does not warrant a single mention. Also, conspicuously absent is the formation of the Sinn Fein Women's Department and the development of 'republican feminism' and despite the acrimonious internal battles regarding abortion, the book affords it an ephemeral mention. More dolefully, the only 'voice' we hear on the matter is a male one, Gerry Adams.

Researching and writing a history of the IRA throughout the course of the Troubles is something of a herculean task and Finn is to be commended for producing a comprehensive study. For the more seasoned scholar and reader of republicanism, there will be little new gleaned from the text. However, for the non-specialist or left-leaning international readers with a growing interest in republicanism and/or the Troubles in Northern Ireland (which is, presumably, the author's intended audience), the strength of the book resides in its ability to produce a detailed account and wide-ranging analysis that is both informative and accessible.

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