

The Ghosts of the Civil War Come Home to Roost

By NOLLAIG O GADHRA

THERE has been, rightly in my view, widespread anger at the tone and content of the recent RTE television special to mark the 75th anniversary of the Civil War. Already I note that Eoin Neeson has made some initial attempt to redress the balance in an article in the Irish Times on Friday, January 23rd.

For those who do not know Mr. Neeson, he was born and reared in Cork, his parents having fled from Belfast in those bad old days of 80 years ago when Catholics were being shot at random in the streets of Belfast.

The entire Irish public, including the clergy, were worked up into such an international outcry about it that the British Prime Minister who then as now, claimed ultimate responsibility for "law and order" in the North, was feeling the heat in Britain itself, and especially in the United States.

How things have changed in that regard at least, where we now have the so-called Irish media leading the apologia for sectarian murders, mainly by sins of omission, or by falsely suggesting that the recent shooting of innocent Catholics only began when the I.N.L.A. shot Billy Wright. The systematic attacks on vulnerable Catholics in vulnerable areas of the North has been going on throughout the entire "cease-fire" period. Only when R.U.C. chief Ronnie Flanagan openly admitted that forensic evidence clearly linked these murders with groups who are represented in the "Peace" talks did they own up. And the story of how the R.U.C. were finally forced to admit this link, is a matter for another day when the sources for this latest turn will be less vulnerable... But surely during all this hype, the simple "security" reaction to any such campaign would be to search as many Unionists and Loyalist communities as possible for all these illegally-held guns and other weapons of war? Or is the British Government admitting that it cannot patrol or search even the "Loyal" areas of Belfast for fear of the political repercussions? The clear links between some of the weapons used and the suggestion that U.D.R. and other "legally held" weapons, on the Loyalist side, can also be "borrowed" by the brother who is not in the U.D.A. and used to "do a job" at a week-end is also something that needs to be addressed — not just by the cowardly pro-British media but indeed by Taoiseach Ahern and the law and order heroine Ms. Harney.

The RTE Civil War film was not only bad and unprofessional. It was indicative of a mindset that should have gone out with the removal of Section 31 but which is so ingrained in the RTE system at this stage that they seem incapable of doing anything other than parroting the same old political clichés which were put into the system by Stickies and reformed Stickies like Eoghan Harris and others who had enormous influence on recruitment and training in Montrose in the past. Televisually, it was bad enough to transfer (e.g.) a series of buildings being knocked down in O'Connell Street, Dublin from the *Mise Eire* film on 1916, to 1922 and suggest that the Republicans devastated the centre of Dublin again. The reality is, of course, that even if they had tried they did not have the military firepower that the Free State side borrowed from the British to do so.

But the misuse of film archive is even more unforgivable than the failure to conduct interviews with (e.g.) Ruairí, son of Cathal Brugha, his wife, Máire MacSwiney, or even some member of the DeValera family who, not for the first time, seemed to be the main aim of an RTE spin that once again had Tim Pat Coogan trotting his own, but only his own, view of all these matters. Garret Fitzgerald (but not Liam Cosgrave) was given the opportunity to suggest his father and others had acted from moral considerations, rather than pragmatic power-play and, perhaps, fear, when they initiated a policy of "official" revenge killings of prisoners of war, within 48 hours of the coming into being of the new Irish Free State, and its Constitution that had many good theoretical points, where common law, freedom of the individual, even law and order were concerned.

The shadow of that degeneration into government-led barbarity has, in my view, devalued all official condemnations of "violence" and preaching about law and order by those who undermined the most fundamental laws and rules of morality from the very first day they were given a seat of power. Which is why we should study and discuss the various aspects of the civil war again and again and in particular at a time when we mark the 75th anniversary of the founding of the state.

The fact that former Taoiseach Fitzgerald is also a member of the RTE Authority and that the Minister responsible for broadcasting, amongst others things, is a granddaughter of Eamon DeValera should make the politics of Montrose very interesting in the months ahead. One RTE source indicated to me as soon as he saw the Eoin Neeson article that "of course this was not the final word on the matter — that there could be other programmes". Which is always the RTE response when they make a bag of an issue and do not have the courage to own up or apologise. When you consider that the Irish community in Britain got an apology from the BBC within weeks of taking a complaint over there about some relatively superficial slurs on Ireland and the Irish in general, in a fictitious "Eastenders" episode, those of us who have worn out our typewriters about factual errors in RTE News and Current Affairs over the years must ask what to do next about Montrose spin-doctoring?

The Broadcasting Complaints Commission is months, even years, behind with specific grievances and issues. Nobody any longer seems to wish to promote it as a mechanism for setting the record straight in the same way that RTE encourages citizens to use phone-lines about all sorts of other matters that may be worrying them.

Even when the old Commission chaired by Barna woman, Geri Silke, twice ruled against RTE during its coverage of the divorce referendum (including one instance where the station broadcast extra pro-divorce broadcasts than were allocated under the agreed provision for referendum and party broadcasts at the time), the entire thing took far too long to be finalised and was only published in the RTE Guide last summer, even though the decision was given last March. Similarly, a ruling against "Morning Ireland" for the way it treated Professor William Binchy two days before the poll did not appear in print until the RTE Guide published in on the August holiday weekend — when they were all gone to the Galway Races! Far from publishing those cases, which should be of grave concern to everybody, there have been no big debates on RTE about the issues involved, about the efficiency of the B.C.C. to police our airwaves, and most specifically, the on-going failure of RTE to publish any editorial or "fairness to all sides" guidelines like they did have in the old days, when even if you did not like the "spin" they put on something, at least you knew the public published basis for their approach.

Let me stress right away that I am not suggesting that there were two sides only to the Civil War, or that all you had to do was put on Sile deValera against Garrett Fitzgerald or more specifically against Liam Cosgrave, if you could get him to go on. But the huge gaps in the sort of voices that were not represented, the confining of the story, mainly to U.C.D. History and Politics Department, with its accepted bias, and the ignoring of the many published works about the period can only raise again the ghost of those who clearly believe there is an unofficial black list against certain academic as well as political voices that goes back to Section 31 days and to the days when certain Workers' Party gurus in Montrose itself used to boast that they could keep certain valid points of view off the air by appealing to uncomfortable Blue Shirt and even conservative Fianna Fáil opinion in the place.

For example, an excellent book in Irish was recently published by Pádraig O Snodaigh on the background to the first Dáil and the various legal and political

gymnastics that involved the founding of the Irish Free State. RTE has done little or nothing about this work by way of review or discussion. But then those of us who insist on writing books about things like the first Dáil in Irish, if only because the initial proceeding of this All-Ireland Parliament, which was open to elected members from all 32 counties, were in Irish, are hardly surprised. Publish in English and in English about anything under the sun, and RTE chat shows will vie about which one will get you first.

As for Eoin Neeson, who worked in RTE throughout the 1960s and wrote the first useful book on the Civil War in 1966, our paths crossed in a rather funny way in 1968 when I was offered a job in a revamped C.I.E. P.R. and Publicity Promotions Department. I decided against going back to them, even though I had sold tickets for C.I.E. at Kilmallock railway station in Co. Limerick back in 1962. Instead I joined the RTE News Division ... Ach sin scéal eile!

Eoin did join C.I.E. at the time, but within a year had accepted an invitation from fellow Corkman Jack Lynch to head up what used to be called the Government Information Bureau in those days. Mr. Neeson was there for all the difficulties when Ireland broke on the world in a big way in 1969. He was also Jack's spin-doctor when he decided to fire Ministers Blaney and Haughey in early May 1970. An operation which if I may say so, was handled excellently by Mr. Lynch's press people, as I reminded Mr. Neeson after I made contact with him for the first time in 20 years, after his recent rush to the defence of the Republic in the Irish Times. Mr. Lynch was in London the previous day, May 4th, 1970, and rang Neeson that night about 10 p.m. with the contents of his "hair-raising" decision. Having confirmed that this was not a hoax, etc. Mr. Neeson proceeded to tell the Taoiseach that if he wanted to get maximum impact for his decision but which for all that would be nothing more than a four-line statement announcing the two sackings. (Kevin Boland was not sacked but he and his Parliamentary Secretary Paudge Brennan resigned in protest, the morning of the announcement) he should hold it until early morning and "bounce" it on the daily papers at a time when they would have to go to press without reaction or counter-claim from anybody.

Eoin rang around the three Dublin daily papers to establish that the deadline for the last Dublin city editions was about 2 a.m. He then told them the Taoiseach would have a "major statement" by 2 a.m. and to hold the front page. The rest as they say, is history... But is it not curious that Eoin Neeson, who wrote a book on the Irish Civil War has never surfaced either on any RTE programme over the past decade or more. I understand he was interviewed for this Civil War film but he ended up on the cutting-room floor. I wonder how many others, especially Republicans, ended up on the same floor? And how many more were not even asked for their views? And then RTE say they are disappointed when Sile deValera lets it be known that she had revoked the proposal of the outgoing Minister Michael D. Higgins who agreed (rightly in my view) that the RTE licence fee should be index-linked and not subject to the day to day political whims of government.

All of which is by way of introduction to a series of notes which "The Herald" editor asked me to compile to mark the 75th anniversary of the Civil War and which in this part of the country is most poignant at the very end, when six Republicans were executed on Wednesday, April 11th, 1923 in the old workhouse in Tuam. I was reluctant to give a blow by blow account of the lead-up to that sad and tragic event, even if, of course, I do feel we should honour, remember and pray for those noble souls now and in the future. But it is also necessary to try and set these events in some type of context. It is this lack of context, after all, that makes people so annoyed with RTE.

• To be continued next week.

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