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Lethal mix of Armalite and the ballot box

Brendan O'Leary
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 **Title: Armed Struggle**
Author: Richard English
Reviewer: Brendan O'Leary
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Title: Sinn Féin
Author: Brian Feeney
Reviewer: Brendan O'Leary
Publisher: The O'Brien Press
<http://www.obrien.ie/>
ISBN: 0 86278 695 9 and 770 X
Pages: 463
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Title: A Secret History of the IRA
Author: Ed Moloney
Reviewer: Brendan O'Leary
Publisher: Allen Lane The Penguin Press
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Pages: 600

Price: £20.00 and £8.99

Brendan O'Leary admires a history of the IRA written by a unionist.

Richard English is a unionist with roots in Northern Ireland, and now a professor at Queen's University, Belfast. So his explanation of the actions of the contemporary IRA, through analysis of its own justifications of its existence and performance, in this well-written, thoughtful and controlled history of the organisation, is especially significant. It is a tribute to the author that had the same book been written by a nationalist it would have been adversely reviewed, especially by unionist and revisionist Irish historians with whom he closely identifies.

Armed Struggle is to be commended as a dispassionate evaluation, in which the author's intelligence disciplines his own politics to produce a full-visioned and strategic understanding of the modern IRA's origins, growth, evolution and ceasefires.

In his concluding chapter, English identifies seven arguments that motivate the IRA. First, its resurgence "began primarily in response to defensive need", providing "muscular defence" in 1969-70 for oppressed nationalists in Belfast and Derry against a partisan Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and loyalist sectarian mobs. Second, there was the unfairness towards the minority in Northern Ireland, where the Ulster Unionist Party had ruled uninterrupted since the formation of the region. Third, and relatedly, there was the cause of Irish national self-determination. Fourth, the Provisional IRA regarded Northern Ireland as "unreformable". The treatment of the civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s confirmed this belief, as did the introduction of internment without trial between 1971 and 1975, and events such as the Falls Road curfew of 1970 and Bloody Sunday in 1972.

Fifth, IRA activists defined the conflict as a national liberation

struggle, and for two decades stressed socialist as well as republican commitments. Sixth, they saw unionists as "a residue of British colonialism in Ireland". Last, they regarded themselves as, and often succeeded in behaving as, non-sectarian republicans committed to creating a common democratic state for all Ireland.

One of the many merits of English's book is that he treats these arguments seriously. Naturally, he addresses their deficiencies and disputable elements, dealing seriatim with the IRA's frequently offensive role; its contribution to serious injustice in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, both through actions and provocations; minor qualifications to the picture of a discriminatory unionist regime; Ulster Unionists' case for self-determination and regarding Northern Ireland as legitimate; the autonomous dispositions of unionists, who often resisted the policies of Westminster and Whitehall; the counterproductive nature of the IRA's violence in stiffening unionist resistance to Irish reunification, and in inhibiting a political settlement; and, not least, the IRA's intermittent descent into sectarian killings. Nevertheless, English scrupulously acquits the IRA of sole responsibility for the conflict of the past 30 years, distributing blame across a range of political groups and on British and unionist dispositions without which the IRA would make little sense. He refuses to treat the IRA's conduct as beyond explanation.

None of his writing avoids the elemental emotions and tragedies involved in IRA actions and their repercussions for both the organisation's targets and members. He forgets neither the "Fanonist rage" of some militants, nor the local status and petty power sometimes achieved through being in "the 'RA'", but he refuses to overemphasise the tabloid components of its life.

He treats the IRA as neither corrupt (it was often accused of being a mafia) nor as ruthlessly efficient as it would have liked to have been.

According to David McKittrick *et al's* *Lost Lives* (cited by

English at the close of his book), the Provisional IRA was responsible for 48.5 per cent of all deaths arising from the conflict between 1966 and 2001, that is, it killed nearly twice as many people as the two largest loyalist paramilitary organisations. It lost 293 of its volunteers, 8 per cent of the total victims. English maintains that civilians formed the largest single category of IRA victims (642), followed by the British forces (456), the RUC (273), the Ulster Defence Regiment or Royal Irish Rangers (182), republicans (162), loyalists (28), prison officers (23) and others (12). A different way to frame this data is to note that 934 of the victims were military, police or prison officers -that is, the IRA killed more such targets than civilians. But that still means only just over 52 per cent of its 1,778 victims fell within the IRA's official categories of legitimate targets: one in two. In any military-minded internal evaluation of its war, this must constitute the strongest indictment of IRA conduct. That said, it did become more efficient and effective in striking its official targets, but then so did the police and the British Army.

The IRA failed militarily to drive the British state out of Ireland. If Ireland is reunified in future, it will be through ballot boxes and institutionalised negotiations. The Good Friday Agreement, endorsed by the people of Ireland, north and south, means the partition of Ireland presently rests on a decision of the people of Ireland -as do the institutions, agencies and policies embedded in that agreement. It is a compromise: a subtle version of Irish national self-determination; and the handicraft of John Hume's Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), as well as Sinn Fein, the Ulster Unionists and Irish and British officials. Bobby Sands' sister, a key figure in the "32 County Sovereignty Movement" that supports the breakaway Real IRA, maintains that her brother did not die for the Good Friday Agreement. That is true, but nor will the Real IRA realise her goals. Moreover, contrary to what she thinks -as the wife of the man recently convicted of directing the Real IRA -it is not obvious that the IRA has failed politically to the degree that it has failed militarily.

Many think, and English on balance agrees, that a reformed

Northern Ireland could have been achieved earlier, without the IRA's campaign. We shall never know. Yet the IRA, in action or on ceasefire, eventually made it impossible for a political settlement to avoid addressing the denial of Ireland's right to self-determination in 1920, or to avoid radical police reform. The IRA did not fight for power-sharing, nor did it design power-sharing institutions, or initially endorse the Good Friday Agreement, but its existence obliged others to create comprehensive power-sharing institutions in Northern Ireland, Ireland and Britain.

Those of us who opposed the IRA, arguing that its actions were unjust and ineffective, cannot easily refute the republican claim -and the unionist accusation -that the threat of the IRA obliged UK governments to address a nationalist as well as a reform agenda in the 1990s.

Sinn Féin, the IRA's party -for originally it was little more than that - was to become a key player in this more productive politics. It gained greater autonomy from the IRA as a direct result of the politicisation of the republican constituency in the 1980-81 hunger strikes. Sands died not for the Good Friday Agreement but "to broaden the battlefields". In this respect, he succeeded beyond his colleagues' expectations. His hunger strike, his victory in a parliamentary by-election and his death, followed by the deaths of nine other prisoners, cemented the political status of his organisation.

The political legacy of the deaths of the ten republican hunger strikers was the electoral eruption of Sinn Féin. The party would shortly gather one in three northern nationalist votes on a platform of supporting its army, the IRA. As Brian Feeney, a historian, political columnist and former SDLP councillor, observes in his racy, readable and compelling narrative, *Sinn Féin: A Hundred Turbulent Years*, it was the second time the party had become a major player in Irish politics, once again in a supporting role to armed republicans. Indeed, the combination of an ethnic base, a party and a paramilitary army is arguably an Irish political innovation.

Sinn Fein, meaning "Our Selves", grew out of the writings of a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, Arthur Griffith. *The Sinn Féin Policy* (1905) promoted separatist ideas, and Ireland's cultural distinctiveness from England. What captured the imagination of some of his contemporaries were two of Griffith's political adaptations. One recommended that those elected in Ireland to the Westminster Parliament should refuse to serve in London but reconvene and restore Ireland's parliament. The other, dual monarchy, recommended that the king of England become the king of Ireland with Ireland's parliament as sovereign and as free as England's. This was conceived in a spirit of compromise with Irish Unionists; Griffith became a proponent of the single transferable vote for the same reason.

As a party, Sinn Fein challenged the Irish Independence Party, which it accurately portrayed as atrophied, but it did not come into its own until the first world war, the Easter Rising and Ireland's war of independence. The Easter Rising was blamed on Sinn Feiners, even though the party had played no role in the insurrection. The following year militant republicans and Griffith's dual monarchists together renewed the party when it won a crushing victory in the 1918 Westminster elections. Through Sinn Féin, Ireland would negotiate its independence -with the Irish Volunteers in the background; and they would eventually settle for something like Griffith's original plan.

Feeney treats the party's history carefully, with deft humour, and pays especial attention to its electoralist, abstentionist and purist moments.

In 1921, it famously split over the issues of the crown, limitations on the new state's sovereignty and the partition of Ulster. The defeated side kept the name, but after the Irish civil war its leader, Eamon de Valera, eventually abandoned it to create Fianna Fáil, an electorally competitive political party, rather than one dedicated to purist and romantic abstentionism from the new state. Sinn Fein's rump ceased to be a major force and was mostly an extinguished volcano between the 1920s and 1960s; Fianna Fáil, by contrast, became the dominant party in

the Republic of Ireland. Then the outbreak of conflict in the north breathed new life into Sinn Féin but not before a further split into Official and Provisional factions, with the latter retaining the orthodox nostrums about non-participation in the Dublin, Belfast and London parliaments. Today, they participate in Dublin's Dail Eireann and the Northern Assembly (when it is not suspended), and have offices in Westminster.

Feeney is a lucid narrator of these twists and turns. He suggests a simple logic to the contemporary peace process. In the interests of electoral gains, reinforced by their materialisation, Sinn Féin has slowly displaced the army as republicans' preferred organisational means of struggle. The party now has many members, probably an overwhelming majority, with no military record; and many of these are prominent parliamentarians in the north and south.

Combining the ballot box and the Armalite proved unsustainable: success with one undermined success with the other. From being the inspirer of the party, the army became a constraint on electoral growth. The IRA's decision to organise a ceasefire, and later to renew it, had one primary beneficiary: Sinn Féin. The party doubled its vote share in the North within a decade, recently winning four seats in the Westminster Parliament, five in Dáil Éireann, and becoming, just, the largest nationalist party in the north. It stands a chance of becoming the largest party in the north and playing a significant role in government, north and south. That will depend on future elections and the issues of completing IRA (and loyalist) disarmament, lifting the UK's suspension of the Assembly, and of finding unionists willing to finish the process.

If one were to believe Ed Moloney's *A Secret History of the IRA* -which would be more accurately titled "A Secret History of Gerry Adams as told to the author by secret and disgruntled IRA sources" -roughly the above scenario has been in the mind of Adams, Sinn Fein's president, since 1986.

The former IRA chief-of-staff is very canny, and a consummate politician, but this portrait of his prescience is not compelling.

Moloney's book is also more difficult to take as history than Feeney's and English's, whose sources are respectively accessible and professionally documented; Moloney's are his alone.

The author appears angry that he was misled by the IRA and angry that it is going out of business, even though he sincerely objects to that business.

Surely, the reader wonders, Moloney should credit Adams and Martin McGuinness with leading the IRA out of armed struggle and into politics, following the path of de Valera, rather than berating them for misleading others on how far they would go. *Secret History* is an odd "revenge review" that rebounds on the author.

There will be many more histories and memoirs as IRA militants become ageing veterans. If the peace process is successful, other historians will attempt to write definitive histories of the IRA, in the expectation that there will be no more IRAs and in the hope of displacing English's book from its deserved eminence. Political scientists, by contrast, will focus on Sinn Féin, wondering whether its MPs will ever vote at Westminster before the act dissolving the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

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