

PRESS WATCH

Republican pogroms against Protestants in south act as timely warning from history

If we allow Sinn Fein to rewrite the past, they'll be half-way to writing the future too, Nelson McCausland writes in the Belfast Telegraph.

The Rev David Lapsley was a well-known figure within Presbyterianism and ecumenism in Northern Ireland. He recently died and an obituary noted that he grew up in Donemana and Londonderry.

The obituarist then recalled that: "He only learned later in life that his father's family had to leave Raphoe in Donegal when their home was burned down during the Irish Civil War in 1921."

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I was struck by the fact that he only learned about this "later in life", even though he was born in 1927, just a few years after the arson attack.

It seems that the burning of the family home was rarely talked about and, indeed, that is how some people deal with personal and family traumas.

Irish nationalists and republicans can generally cope fairly well with the events of 1916.

These are portrayed as the actions of "brave Irish patriots", although there is also a growing recognition of the folly of the rebels.

Irish nationalists and republicans will also celebrate the actions of "brave Irish patriots" in the War of Independence, in spite of the fact that more than 2,000 people were killed.

However, the Irish Civil War is more problematic and it will be interesting to see how that centenary is observed.

What is clear, however, is that comparatively little attention has been given to the traumatic experiences of many southern Protestant families and communities during those years of

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what was a bloody civil war and then in the Irish Free State and the Irish Republic.

Southern political leaders and propagandists have generally sought to play down the sectarian violence that was directed against Protestants. But the Lapsley family home in Raphoe was certainly not the only one to be targeted by Irish republican arsonists in the early-1920s.

Protestant homes were burned down in many parts of the south.

Moreover, buildings were not the only targets.

In April 1922, 13 Protestants were murdered by Irish republican gunmen in the Bandon Valley massacre in Co Cork.

Buried Lives by Robin Bury is probably the most recent account of the experience of southern Protestants and covers those difficult years.

The Canadian historian Peter Hart and journalist and commentator Eoghan Harris have also written about what happened in the 1920s, especially in places like Cork and Donegal.

However, some republican propagandists have endeavoured to minimise it all and explain it away.

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I say "some", not all, because in 1985 Sinn Fein published a little booklet with the title The Good Old IRA.

That booklet was intended to silence Irish nationalist criticism of the Provisional IRA campaign by recalling the actions of the old IRA and claiming that the Provisionals were merely following in the footsteps of an earlier generation of republicans.

What is indisputable is that the past is important, and the events of the 1920s are part of the explanation for the dramatic decline of the Protestant community in the south, as opposed to the growth of the Roman Catholic community in Northern Ireland.

There has been a lot of research and writing about the experience of the Roman Catholic community in Northern Ireland, but until recently there was comparatively little about the experience of the southern Protestant minority. They were almost a forgotten people, but theirs is a story that deserves more attention and Robin Bury's book is, therefore, especially welcome.

It is sometimes said that you cannot rewrite the past, but you can write the future.

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There is a sense in which that is true, but there is another sense in which it is untrue.

Irish republican propagandists have long sought to rewrite the past, because they know the truth of the slogan from Orwell's 1984: "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past."

The sanitisation of the old IRA campaign in the south, something that is only now being exposed, should serve as a warning about what Sinn Fein are about today, as they seek to rewrite the Troubles and legitimise the Provisional IRA.

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