'Madam, - Gerard Murphy’s … contentious thesis … deserves further indepth sincere evaluation and verification … rather than an internet campaign of vilification against the author. If ... [it] holds up, I as a proud passionate Corkman will be saddened and profoundly ashamed of my heretofore understanding of this period of Irish history'.(1) Not many history books would inspire members of the public to write this sort of letter to the press, or the editor of one of the most important newspapers of the world, *The Irish Times*, to publish them. Even in Ireland, where people take a fervent interest in national history, *The Year of Disappearances* has made quite a splash. The ‘internet campaign’ to which the above-quoted letter alludes is merely the tip of the iceberg of media attention. The latter includes, besides academic reviews, fiery articles by well-known journalists in leading dailies.(2) One of Murphy’s most severe critics has even asked for the authorities to search the sites where some of the victims of the IRA are alleged to have been buried.(3) The Anglo-Irish War of 1919–21 and the subsequent Civil War were particularly violent in Cork City and the surrounding County, especially in West Cork. This was partly because of the bellicosity of the IRA units in the region – including Cork No.1 Brigade, led by men of proven ability and ruthlessness, such as Seán O’Hegarty, Florence O’Donoghue, and Martin Corry. However, it was also because of a backlash against the region’s large number of Protestants, who were suspected of being actively loyalist. The late Peter Hart (in *The IRA and its enemies*, published in 1998) argued that the IRA deliberately targeted that particular religious minority, in a campaign of sectarian killings, culminating with the massacre of 13 civilian protesters in the Bandon Valley. Although some of Hart’s evidence has been disputed by scholars in reviews and other publications, his work has opened new questions and stimulated further studies. *The Year of Disappearances* is one of them. It argues that in Cork there was sectarian violence on an even larger scale than previously known, and that it continued for longer than previously assumed. One of Murphy’s major, and particularly explosive, points is the allegation that *after* the truce the IRA deliberately and systematically targeted specific organisations whose membership was exclusively Protestant (including the Cork Freemasons, the YMCA and the Boys’ Brigade) in the belief that they had been operating, and potentially could continue to operate, as part of loyalist intelligence network. While the author provides strong evidence for some such killings (including at least two teenagers), his argument largely remains unsubstantiated because most of the other alleged ‘victims’ are simply hypothetical. Thus, the claim that 32 members of the Cork Freemasons’ lodge ‘disappeared’ under sinister circumstances is
based on the fact that their names were struck off membership records by 1925: but it is not clear whether they had been killed or just left, as many other Protestants did in those years. What we know for sure is that their families did not submit compensation claims to the British government, and that there are no references to them being shot in the records of the relevant organizations. Murphy mentions gaps in Cork Grammar School’s records for 1922 as an indication that the headmaster had probably destroyed the relevant documents to protect his pupils from further attacks: however, these records contain so many other gaps for the whole period from the school’s foundation in 1881 through to 1947, when it moved to its current premises, that their non-existence for 1922 seems more part of a pattern than a suspicious exception.(4)

Thus, it is not the brutality of the IRA campaign as a whole which is in question here, but whether the killings about which we knew already represent the full horror of the situation, or, as Murphy claims, ‘the Compensation (Ireland) Commission account[s] for only around half of those killed’ (p. 296). Such a conclusion, however, is difficult to accept without documentary support: absence of evidence cannot be read as evidence of massacres, especially since we have plenty of material on other murders or ‘executions’ – such as those of April 1922 in rural West Cork.(5) The author argues that the silence of the sources is a product of a collusion involving both perpetrators and victims (the latter being eager to find a modus vivendi with the new regime). In other words, lack of evidence is invoked as evidence of a cover-up. It must be said that Murphy’s hypothesis finds some ex-post facto evidence in the unwillingness of Cork Protestants, even as recently as 2008, to speak publicly about the 1920–3 period.(6) But even if we were to accept this approach, we would expect to find echoes of the killings at least in contemporary private letters and unpublished diaries, especially those produced by loyalist émigrés in Britain or elsewhere. However, again Murphy produces no such evidence. This documentary deficit is the most serious flaw in his argument, much of which depends on hypotheses-turned-into-assumptions and presented as factual statements.

Yet, this raises another interesting question: as the author himself has noted in a response to a previous review, if The Year of Disappearances is ‘a work of fiction, or … poorly researched and badly written’, why do so many scholars bother to review it at all?(7) In my view, there are at least three reasons for the attention the book has received. The first is that, although Murphy’s evidence and arguments are patchy and at times confusing, parts of his book are actually meticulously researched. Even some of his harshest critics acknowledge his skilful use of sources such as the Cork Military liaison record, Registry of Deeds, the petitions of the Irish Compensation Claims Committee, and the records of the census of 1911. Thus, in an otherwise damning review, John Borgonovo admits that ‘Murphy’s hard work rewards him with a series of impressive nuggets found in forensically researched chapters’. (8) Second, the story is engagingly presented as a personal journey of discovery into Cork’s troubled past. This rhetorical strategy makes it more intriguing, but it also has its drawbacks in that it compounds the reader’s difficulty in trying to assess how precisely the author reaches his conclusions. Such narrative technique betrays the book’s origins as a novel, based on local folklore about an IRA ‘killing field’ outside Cork city. Indeed, the author is not a professional historian; and it shows. The Year of Disappearances is his first non-fiction work. It was because of the controversial nature of the stories Murphy heard, that he decided to turn his projected novel into a history book, a process which has required, we are told, seven years to complete, but which would clearly have required more months of work and proof reading to be satisfactorily completed. Finally and most importantly, the sensation which Murphy has provoked in both the scholarly world and the general public can be explained as a reflection of the delicate nature of the political issues at stake, involving – to an extent – big questions about the plausibility of the whole republican interpretation of Irish history, at a stage when the scandals besetting institutions such as the Catholic Church and Fianna Fáil cause people to re-examine the received version of the national self.(9) In other words, here we have ‘public’ history in the raw, but – alas – without enough historical discipline in it.

Notes

1. ‘Political killings in Cork’, letter to the editor of The Irish Times, 13 January 2011, p. 17. Back to (1)

4. I am grateful to Dr Ian d’Alton for this piece of information. Back to (4)

5. Some of such evidence has been used for example, by Murphy himself, pp. 324–30 and by P. McMahon, *British Spies and Irish Rebels. British Intelligence and Ireland 1916–1945* (Woodbridge, 2008), pp.75 and 446. Back to (5)

6. A conference on the period 1920-23 organised by the Anglican Diocese of Cork in December 2008, addressed by historians and sociologists, with the participation of Sen.E.Harris, was tightly controlled – invitation only to members of the diocese and their guests, publicity virtually non-existent. Members of the public were not permitted to attend. Heavy security was in place to ensure that the conference would be run as an in-house event for members of the diocese alone. This, however, did not prevent vigorous polemics during and after the conference: see <http://www.independent.ie/opinion/columnists/eoghan-harris/scared-by-forced-exodus-of-southern-protestants-1574348.html>[4] and <http://aubanehistoricalsociety.org/bishop_cork.pdf>[5]. Back to (6)


**Other reviews:**

**Sunday Tribune**

**Irish Times**

**Irish Examiner**

**Irish Independent**
http://www.independent.ie/opinion/analysis/the-ira-campaign-in-cork-against-protestants-and-nonrepublicans-was-on-a-truly-vast-scale-2417300.html [10]

**Sunday Independent**

**Irish Story**

**Academia.edu**
http://gcd.academia.edu/NiallMeehan/Papers/342171/An_amazing_coincidence_that_could_mean_anything_Gerard_Murphy's_The_Year_of_Disappearances[13]

**Dublin Review of Books**
http://www.drb.ie/more_details/11-03-17/History_In_A_Hurry.aspx [14]

**History Ireland**
Source URL: https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1053#comment-0

Links
[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/5366