

D. M. Leeson. *The Black and Tans: British Police and Auxiliaries in the Irish War of Independence.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xvi + 294 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-959899-1.



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British Police in West Galway in the Irish War of Independence

“The (Irish) War of Independence,” says D. M. Leeson in his *The Black and Tans*, “was a liminal period in modern Irish history—a period of between-ness, of ambivalence” (p. 96). Fittingly, the conflict was distinguished by mutual incomprehension between the opposing sides and a sense of the criminality of the enemy. The Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) had originated as a paramilitary gendarmerie; its men were trained as such and given responsibilities of countering political subversion, yet by 1919 had become “a thoroughly domesticated, civil police force” (p. 16). From the mid-1920s, they were supported by “Temporary” and “Auxiliary” constables—the former being christened “the Black and Tans”—in large part veterans of the First World War. To the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries were the dregs of British prisons and mental hospitals; as for the men of the RIC they were nothing more than traitors. To the British, the IRA was a collection of “murder gangs” filled with cowards. Both sides were, surely, participants in an unplanned and quite unwanted war.

Popular narratives of the war—at least on one side—

often portray British soldiers and policemen as swaggering bullies, convinced of their superiority until shown otherwise by the military feats of plucky, amateur but daring, and sometimes reluctant Irish guerrillas. What Leeson emphasizes, however, in this study of the war from the perspective of the British policemen, focused on West Galway in the province of Connacht, is the exact opposite. He contends that the certainty among these men was that *they* were the victims, that “the guerrillas did most of the killing, and the police did most of the dying” (p. 130). This, indeed, appears to be borne out by war casualty figures for all British forces in Ireland provided by other historians, such as Michael Hopkinson in his study of the conflict, *The Irish War of Independence* (2002). The IRA tended to inflict greater damage on the British than vice versa in ambushes, Leeson argues, a mode of fighting to which British First World War veterans were unsuited. The British tended to do better when IRA units attempted attacks on fortified British positions. But as he puts it, at least in West Galway, “most of these engagements have one thing in common: they ended in defeat

for the policeâ (p. 147). Again this contrasts with popular narratives—such as those of Old IRA fighters, for example, Thomas Barry of West Cork, the famous commander of that areaâs âFlying Columnâ—which emphasize hard odds faced by the IRA in engagements.

The book addresses a deficit in historiography of the war by examining the war experience from the perspective of the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries, focused on West Galway, âthe most violent district in the province of Connaughtâ (p. 39). In this sense, it is as much a social history of these forces as a military or political historical narrative, based on archival research predominantly from the UK National Archives and contemporary British newspapers. Leeson does not use records of the Irish Bureau of Military History or those of the general headquarters of the IRA. Leesonâs work correlates with existing accounts of the war by making clear the haphazardness and incoherence of British policy and strategy; the lack of effective coordination between the different British forces in Ireland; the apathy of much of the British police apparatus in Ireland; and the unwillingness to treat what was regarded by most on the ground as an actual war (on the soil of the United Kingdom as opposed to a far-flung colony) with all that this implied and demanded.

He also accepts what is now the prevailing view of the conflict among most historians, that it was no war in any conventional sense of the term, but a highly contingent, very small-scale and low-intensity conflict in which assassination was as important as ambush or fixed battle. In chapter 5, he states that in many cases âpolice were deliberately shot, sometimes execution-style, especially if they were alone or in pairsâ (p. 141). Leeson argues that the deployment of British police personnel to Ireland unwittingly served a purpose for the Irish Republicans by making it easier for them to portray the struggle as a purely British-Irish one, obscuring the role played by the Irish (mostly Catholic) RIC in the conflict. Interestingly, liberal British politicians and commentators, for their part, were also able to condemn the excesses of their police in Ireland through the prism of their own national self-understanding, without necessarily compromising their belief in the rightness of British government in Ireland, by painting such excesses as more the actions

of âmilitaristic Prussians and barbarous Turksâ than honorable Britons (p. 194).

Yet even if the vast majority of British police in the War of Independence were bullies, Leeson argues that more than anything else they became bullies because of their circumstances. In the study of a conflict that still carries as much emotional and political âbaggageâ as this one, this is a necessary and important argument. More provocatively, perhaps, he claims that while Irish policemen often felt little but disdain for their British counterparts, the latter tended often to simply follow the example of their RIC counterparts, good or bad; âhistorians have underestimated just how deeply and widely implicated the Irish police really were,â he maintains, adding in his final chapter, âWhen British police and Auxiliaries took reprisals, they were following the bad example set by their Irish comradesâ (pp. 3, 191). Again, Hopkinson, in *The Irish War of Independence*, likened the âWar of Independenceâ quite straightforwardly to a civil war.

While the war was driven by local circumstances and localized study is undeniably important for gaining a full picture of the conflict in all of its regional variations, Leesonâs focus also seems quite constricted. Galway in general was not one of the more violent parts of Ireland during the conflict. This focus perhaps makes generalizations about the British police forces in the war more difficult than, for example, even a study of them in the whole of Galway or on a wider scale in Connacht, a comparison within or between provinces, would have. The fifth chapter, on fighting between the British police and the IRA, does however survey, albeit briefly, incidents across the country. The author apparently ignores the—relatively few, admittedly—Irishmen who joined these British forces in favor of focusing on âmainlandâ Britons.

In any case, this is still a very strong book. Leeson, in paying close attention to the British police forces with respect to recruitment, composition, combat experiences, and the vexed question of police reprisals, has contributed to a fruitful and important area of localized research on the Irish revolution of 1916-21. Last but certainly not least, this is a well-structured, well-argued, and clearly written work.

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