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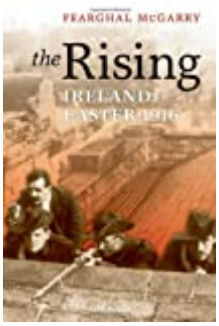

Fearghal McGarry. *The Rising. Ireland: Easter 1916.* Centenary Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 400 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-873234-1.

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In 1947, the Irish government established the Bureau of Military History (BMH), an organization overseen by senior military figures that brought together professional historians with former members of the Irish Volunteers (the precursor to both the Irish army and the Irish Republican Army [IRA]). The mission of the bureau was to compile witness statements from those directly involved in the 1916 Easter Rising as well as the Irish War of Independence (1919-21) and civil war (1922-23). In operation for a decade, the BMH accumulated a total of 1,773 statements running to 36,000 pages of oral testimonies, as well as 150,000 ephemeral documents from this formative period of modern Irish history. And then, inexplicably and to the dismay of the historians who had collaborated with the project, the Irish government placed the entirety of the collection in storage in government buildings in Dublin, refusing to make the witness statements available to either the general public or to researchers. The eighty-three steel boxes of oral history files remained off limits until March 2003, when the last holder of a military service pension died (p. 5).

Fearghal McGarryâs account of the Easter Rising, first released in 2010 and here republished in a special centenary edition, draws heavily on the BMHâs witness statements to craft an animated and readable account of this rebellion at the heart of what was then one of the major cities of the United Kingdom. Yet he does little to unpack the nature of his source material. The Easter Rising, a military failure in April 1916 that was condemned by almost all mainstream Irish nationalists, soon came to be seen as a heroic deed rather than a treacherous attack on the British state. A large dose of mythmaking soon emerged, myths that in turn became part of the Irish stateâs carefully protected nationalist narrative. The witness statements of the BMH cannot be read as unadorned accounts of what *really* happened in the rising. Rather, they were also partially a product of the same processes of post-1916 mythmaking. As McGarry points out, in some cases, the witness statements âwere written by the witnesses but, more frequently, they were formed into a coherent statement by the investigators before being submitted to the witness for verification and signed approvalâ (p. 5). Yet McGarry never interrogates the meaning and limits of this state-curated act of oral history collection, much less that the post-1922 Irish state had a strong track record of both invasive censorship and zealous protection of national mythologies.

To a large degree, these witness statements are more reflective of the constructed memories of post-1916 Ireland than of the lived realities of the rebellion itself. And

indeed there are quite a number of fanciful memories recounted without critical comment by McGarry: a participant in the rebellion who claimed that âI never slept one single hour of that weekâ (p. 191); a female combatant who said that for the eleven days she was imprisoned in unhygienic conditions in Kilmainham Gaol after the rising, âI never went to the lavatoryâ (p. 261); and parents who were âprepared to sacrifice their children for the causeâ (p. 125). There are clearly some invented memories at work here, reflecting the ways in which the rising came to be seen as a moment of profound self-sacrifice for the cause of the nation. Other memories are more subtly problematic. One witness statement recalled, with an air of pride, that in the rising, âthe Irish Republican Army had taken Dublinâ (p. 133), despite this organization not formally existing until 1917. Leslie Price, a member of the female milita, Cumann na mBan (The Womenâs Organization), and later the wife of the IRAâs Tom Barry, described seeing the leaders of rebellion in a funeral a year before the rising: âWhen the armed Volunteers passed I then suddenly realised that the men I had seenâTom Clarke, The OâRahilly, SeÃ¡n McGarryâlooked as if they meant serious businessâ (p. 92). The subtly prophetic tone, as if she could tell what they were already planning for Easter 1916, points to how much of a constructed memory this is.

McGarry does show an awareness of the problems of an empiricist approach to historical knowledge, alluding to âthe heroic narrative that emergedâ about the executed rebels, which obscured the more grim realities of their deaths (p. 273). As he adds soon after (p. 276): âAccounts of the executions (all at least second-hand) vary, but emphasize the bravery of the rebels.â An equally satisfying description is McGarryâs observation that one witness statement âconveyed a resilient tone more characteristic of the prison memoir genreâ (p. 268), thus recognizing how constructed these politically generic memories were. Yet he undercuts this by talking of the âwillingness with which the rebels embraced death,â and âdying for their cause, and increasingly confident of its vindication, some of the leaders met their death in a near ecstatic conditionâ (p. 273). How any historian could know what emotions Patrick Pearse or James Connolly were experiencing at the moment of their execution remains murky at best.

For sure, McGarry makes a strong use of the BMH witness statements to convey some of the realities faced by the rebels barricaded into prominent buildings in Dublin. There is a richly layered feel to how he recounts the bloodshed, the looting, or the massive fires that erupted as the British army shelled the center of the city from gun ships docked in the Liffey River. But in taking such a conventional, almost novelistic narrative approach, he ends up quietly perpetuating a number of nationalist tropes about the events of 1916, rather than thinking about the construction and nature of these tropes.

The rebels in 1916 were keen to portray their insurrection as part of a longer tradition of nationalist resistance to British rule in Ireland. Their famous Proclamation spoke of how âin every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty; six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State.â The roots of the rising obviously predate the events of 1916. McGarry thus appropriately starts his narrative in the later nineteenth century, and centers his discussion on the claim that radical nationalism was a fringe movement at the turn of the century. Many of the quotes McGarry marshals from BMH statements seem to bear out the notion that radical separatism was moribund before 1916. He quotes one interviweeâs memory that after 1914, âthe country generally had lost its old national spirit. We were sinking very low nationallyâ (p. 83). But this is where a fuller consideration of state-backed memories would have been helpful. Is this an âaccurateâ recollection? Or is the claim of denationalization followed by the resurrection of Easter 1916 an ideological reconstruction of the past that buttresses a whole host of nationalist political claims? Similarly, Denis McCullough, president of the Irish Republican Brotherhoodâs (IRB) Supreme Council on the eve of 1916, recalled that a large amount of IRB members were âmostly effete and many of them addicted to drinkâ (p. 22). Again, this seems to be a narrative of decadence that fits with the narrative of revival, of social decay followed by rapid change. This is a very nationalist narrative of rupture and revolution, one that is carried over uncritically by many Irish historians. Moreover, McGarryâs presentation of radical separatism as a spent force by the early twentieth century ignores how seemingly nonpolitical forces, such as the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association, acted as vehicles for separatist ideas. He seems to understand âpoliticsâ in overly conventional terms, rather than investigating how âcultureâ was saturated with political concerns.

Analyses of political ideology are a major weak point of this book. McGarry notes that talk of âclass conflictâ

is âgenerally absentâ from the witness statements (p. 38). But he never considers that the absence of considerations of class is itself the product of an ideological imperative. He states that âseparatist organizations like the IRB were reluctant to get drawn into socially divisive questions, while all the nationalist parties, including Sinn FÃ©in, prioritized national over sectional causes (as was demonstrated by Arthur Griffithâs opposition to the workers during the 1913 Lockout). The Catholic Church, the most important social and cultural force in Ireland, was explicitly opposed to class politicsâ (p. 38). âClass politicsâ for McGarry, as for most Irish historians, seems to have the conventional meaning of socialism and other leftisms. This stance elides the fact that middle-class politics and capitalist nationalism also represent a form of âclass politics,â one that has had a far greater determining impact on the thought and praxis of Irish nationalism than Connollyâs socialist republicanism. McGarryâs claim that âthere is remarkably little discussion of ideologyâ in the witness statements is itself a deeply ideological statement (p. 41), one that assumes that only radical ideas like socialism count as *ideology*, whilst capitalism or bourgeois respectability are *just the way things are*. McGarry uncovers fascinating evidence about how the rebels were shocked by the looting during the rising, which he ascribes to a respect for private property and a sense of disgust at âthis assault on private property.â As he notes, âboth rebels and British soldiers fired on looters, killing some, with little effectâ (pp. 144-145). In other words, the rebels had a clearly middle-class ideology that privileged the sanctity of private property, even if McGarry does not label it as such. Indeed, class ideology was clearly on display in Mary MacSwineyâs disgust that the Volunteers, âa fine body of men,â were âbeing dragged at the tail of a rabble like the Citizen Armyâ (p. 224), Connollyâs socialist militia. As with his discussions of class, when McGarry talks of âgenderâ (p. 165), he means the experiences of women, in other words, those who have a âgender,â rather than analyzing the gendered ideological assumptions (assumptions about both femininity *and* masculinity) at the heart of Irish nationalist politics. Thus, what he engages in is more of a counting exercise than an analytic one.

This is an opportune time for a thorough revision of some of the conventional assumptions of Irish history writing; the economic crisis of 2008 seriously undermined establishment truths and the Decade of Commemorations have brought the events of 1912-23 into the center of popular debate in Ireland. There is a vacuum here, waiting to be filled by new and radically innovative ways of thinking about the Irish past. McGarryâs book makes large promises about asking new questions about the Easter Rising. It is a shame, then, that the answers he provides are so conventional in their approach to history writing.

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