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Book Review:


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Abstract:

Debates about the past in Northern Ireland still remain hotly contested, and in over twenty years since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, an agreed account of the ‘truth’ about events and actions during the conflict remain as polarised as ever. Yet Southern's book presents a potentially unique (and seldom told) insight into the views and experiences of a key actor in the conflict - the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and officers who served in the organisation. Yet aside from providing some very necessary police officer perspectives as part of the wider conflict narrative, the book also leaves itself open to questions around the robustness of perspective used, in many cases, to unquestionably justify the role of the RUC.

Key words:
Policing; Royal Ulster Constabulary; Terrorism; conflict; the past; history

Review:


In the words of Mulcahy (1999), it may be seen that peace itself can constitute a crisis in the aftermath of conflict. And no less in context of the Northern Irish conflict, one particular strand of that ‘crisis’ centres upon an agreed account of what actually happened, and who was responsible for, the multitude of atrocities and human rights abuses perpetrated as part of the largest, internecine armed strife in post-war Europe. Indeed, the broad period demarcated by the peace process, culminating of ‘Good Friday’ Agreement of 1998, created a new political (and policing) dispensation in the country, designed to engage all sections of the community as part of a fully democratic and equitable society (Bew, 2007). Yet fundamentally, this process failed to embed any wholesale, deliberative process which actively sought truth or justice (or both) related to actions and actors from all sides of the asymmetrical conflict which resulted in over 3500 deaths (Lawther, 2010). It is therefore unsurprising in the 20 years since
the Good Friday Agreement, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) are still consulting about how best to address the very issue of the past (NIO, 2018).

Set within this vacuum, political and academic contest about ‘the past’ has flourished – outside the scope of the present review. However, one general exception to the various commissions, investigations, consultations and third sector organisations which have sought to put forward their narratives and accounts of activity and victimhood, have been the voices of police officers themselves. This is especially so for those who served as part of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) during the conflict, prior to the reform process initiated by the Independent Commission for Policing in Northern Ireland (ICP, 1999). It is in this context in which Southern’s book offers a potentially unique (and rare) glimpse into the lived realities of ‘doing policing’ for those officers.

Having negotiated access to the notoriously ‘closed’ Northern Ireland Retired Police Officer’s Association (NIRPOA), Southern’s book represents an important empirical contribution to the debate. And as part of the current status quo in the country of disagreement about ‘the past’, the views and experiences of all actors in the conflict should be heard. In this regard, this book review will, rather oddly, start in the middle, as shall be explained.

While the author does not explicitly detail the precise numbers of interviews undertaken as part of this seven year project, nor provide any precise methodological frame, not since the ethnography of Brewer and Magee (1991) has such a ‘window’ into the lives of RUC officers been exposed. Covering a range of thematic issues including on/off-duty threat, the impact of terrorism on family, injured officers and female perspectives, it is rare that such intricate and intimate knowledge is laid bare about how individual officers experienced the ‘blunt’ end policing the conflict. Whether or not the reader wishes to agree or disagree with the views of the RUC officers set forth in this book as part of chapters 3-7, it remains that these are their views – at least on an individual officer level.

Yet in stepping back from this narrative account of how RUC officers saw their role, along with the impact that role had upon their lives, these valuable middle chapters do not sit neatly with the those which contextualise policing the conflict, nor the conclusions drawn in relation to this body of work. Indeed, one critique of the book is the adequacy of connection between the ‘lived realities’ of RUC officers as documented, and the unionist historical lens used to propose a simplified ‘battle’ between the ‘good guys’ (the RUC) and the ‘bad guys’ (the terrorists). It may also be seen that the book does in places, lend itself towards straying over the line of academic argument and justification – and into relativism. Upon reading this book, one can’t help wonder if an explicit foregrounding of the unionist perspective adopted might help to more accurately demarcate the purpose and intent of the book.

Opening up on page two with a defence of the U.K government PREVENT programme – in spite of lack of evidence related to effectiveness according to UN Special Rapporteur Tendayi Achiume (2018) – Southern’s initial salvo in the book is that university departments remain guilty of engaging in ‘fuzzy’ moral teaching around terrorism; and that universities are somehow (unreasonably) resisting an otherwise ‘sound’ PREVENT counter-terrorism programme in England and Wales. Re-doubled in the final chapter, the author also claims that the ‘scholarly left’ and civil liberties groups (p.278) do not sufficiently grasp the ‘dark underbelly’ of human nature, which require more robust counter-terrorist measures. Using the logic of Dershowitz (2002), Southern also contends that such liberal thinking is merely an
attempt to cling to ‘ideological climbing pegs’ (presumably referencing human rights standards) in the face of a crumbling rock face – connecting (remarkably) the ‘weakness’ of such ‘flaky’ thinkers to the potential of a nuclear strike where brute force is not used against terrorists. This tone forgets that the counter-terrorist powers enjoyed by the RUC in Northern Ireland during the conflict were some of the most draconian in the western Europe at the time (Hillyard, 1993; McGovern and Tobin, 2010).

In this respect, the author appears (p.27) to tacitly support the use of Guantanamo Bay, waterboarding and rendition as viable tactics in the ‘fight’ against terrorism. Engaging a process of relativism, as is achieved throughout the book, Southern claims (in the broader fight against terrorism), use of force against the civil rights protests in Derry in 1968 were somehow ‘not as nasty’ as Paris or London, so therefore acceptable; that while ‘some’ terrorist ‘suspects’ may have been ‘roughed up’ by the RUC during interrogation, it wasn’t in the same league as the abuses of Abu Ghraib in Iraq (p.26); and even remarkably, that the Irish state wasn’t doing enough because it didn’t deploy the same number of troops to the border during the conflict as it did during the unrelated 2001 ‘foot-in-mouth’ crisis. Such relativism says more about the seeming desire to unquestionably justify the views and role of the RUC in the conflict more than the empirical robustness such comparative examples. Similarly, the glib determinism in the book about the role of the wider Catholic/Nationalist community in ‘supporting’ the Provisional IRA (and therefore working against the RUC) aligns closely with staunch Conservative strains of thinking throughout the conflict, captured by the former Telegraph journalist Peregrine Worsthorne, stating that ‘such people may not positively help the IRA. But nor are they properly speaking, innocent…’ (Worsthorne, 1989 Sunday Telegraph cited in Hillyard, 1993:260). Indeed, the deleterious effects and lessons of stigmatization, labelling, and making ‘suspect’ particular communities, appear to be lost on the author (McGovern and Tobin, 2010) – or at least not relevant to this analysis of the RUC.

While of course such perspectives are entirely valid – and welcome as part of plural debate – they must be qualified in the face of evidence. Indeed, the views and lives of RUC officers interviewed for this book, while entirely valid in and of themselves, do not however, fully constitute a rational basis for wider claims and interpretations of RUC organisational action. A key, and missing part of the analysis, is the class and sectarian conflict of the country, which itself became an object of security to be managed by the state. However, it is this crucial point which is absent in terms of attempting to justify RUC actions. Taking for example, the narrative in chapter 2 about the role of the RUC in the civil rights marches of 1968 in Derry, the unmistakable tone of the writing is that the (mainly Catholic) protestors where somehow complicit in their own victimisation, ‘choosing’ a particularly contentious route past a Protestant area to raise tensions. Further labelling the civil rights march as a republican ‘trojan horse’, the book states that civil rights protest had a ‘radical orientation’ – as if decades of political, societal and structural inequality would not engender something more than polite debate. Such interpretations sit very closely with more authoritarian ideologies, such as that of Hu Jintao, the former Chinese Communist Party leader, renowned for his notion that participation in democracy should occur, but in an orderly fashion (Kuhn, 2011).

Notwithstanding this particular example, the book does in general, refuse to acknowledge – or at least engages in silence - about any significant critique of RUC practice itself. While undoubtedly the individual officers interviewed ‘got on with the job’ and faced
the grim extremities of terrorism, very often directed at them – again as a story which needs told – a rebuttal of organisational criticism is not so much attempted, but in fact, completely ignored. Indeed, somewhat of an irony for the book, is that the very ‘gatekeeper’ of the NIRPOA to which the author had unique access – former head of RUC Special Branch Raymond White – remains at the centre of controversy as to the actions of the RUC during the conflict. Publicly quoted as discouraging former officers to comply with historical investigations into RUC practice (Belfast News Letter, 2013), the actions of the RUC in human rights abuses have been core to a range of investigations and research by statutory and human rights organisations over the years. Indeed, the very terrorist organisation which caused so much of the suffering for RUC officers was to varying degrees, also under the control and direction of, the British state and RUC Special Branch, as typified through the ongoing Operation Kenova, led by John Boutcher (Morris, 2017).

Probing the RUC handling of the high-level IRA informer known as ‘Stakeknife’, lack of reference to such layers of context ignores not just the wider actions of RUC as an organisation and the outward facing consequences of that, but its overlap the ‘deeper state’ in acts of collusion, so-called shoot-to-kill, relations with loyalist and republican paramilitaries in terms of using informers, British Army collaboration – and not least, the murder of Pat Finucane in 1981 by loyalist paramilitaries, as a lawyer of the conflict who dared to hang onto human rights ‘climbing pegs’. As one of the (many) defining incidents of the conflict involving the RUC, this dark chapter of the conflict has on the one hand extracted an apology from for Prime Minister, David Cameron; but on the other, has been part of the British government’s extensive efforts to bury information about the incident too (McDonald and Bowcott, 2012; Phoenix, 2017).

Continuing in the vein of relativism, the author qualifies the actions of the RUC in a race-to-bottom explanation of who managed to kill less people in the conflict (at least officially) compared to the ‘terrorists’ (which the author loosely defines at the start as the Provisional IRA). Of course the RUC did ‘officially’ kill less people during the conflict – and undoubtedly officers made difficult decisions in extreme circumstances. But again, this analysis is devoid of wider actions short of death; along with moral and ethical questions about the role of the state in upholding the rule of law, along with where and how far over those lines were crossed. And importantly, precisely how many people might have ‘unofficially’ been killed or harmed due to collusion for example, does not merit attention.

Indeed, it is the interpretative ‘bookending’ of this unique perspective from RUC officers which distracts from the opportunity to appreciate more fully and clearly, the genuine, ‘lived reality’ of being a police officer during the conflict – as a much needed narrative from one key actors in the conflict. Dismissing the ICP as republican opportunism to besmirch the name of the RUC, which while a legitimate view of individual RUC officers in the NIRPOA interviewed (p.261), is of course not representative of wider public sentiment in the country, especially set against the mandate of the Good Friday Agreement. But this is a question, outside the core chapters 3-7, the reader is potentially left with by the book – is this an objective account of the RUC victimhood derived from policing the conflict, as it is in places? Or are the views of the RUC officers used to support the author’s particular perspective of the state role in the conflict? With the answer lying somewhere in the middle, in many ways, the approach of this book is guilty of the same faults it accuses ‘left scholarship’ of doing in the
opening and concluding pages – creating its own blend of moral ‘fuzziness’ about the role of the RUC in combatting terrorism during the conflict.


