

Kilmichael Ambush site should not commemorate auxiliaries

BY PÁDRAIG ÓG Ó RUAIRC, Aug 2013

THE Southern Star recently reported on an approved planning application to redevelop the Kilmichael Ambush site. This application includes a plaque naming the RIC auxiliaries killed, and has been described as a 'suitable commemoration for both IRA volunteers and auxiliaries.'

Unsurprisingly, this plan has produced strong opposition. This controversy raises important questions about who we should commemorate.

Commemoration is a political act. Communities make decisions on whom to commemorate based on their current political values. This year saw hundreds of suffragette commemorations - there was none to remember those who campaigned against giving women the vote. This is because society now accepts women are entitled to equal rights. The Dublin lockout commemorations will honour the workers who fought for decent working and living conditions. There are no plans to similarly honour William Martin Murphy and the Employers' Federation because it's accepted that workers have the right to join a trade union, and that those who struggled to secure that right were justified in doing so.

Traditionally, the same approach was taken regarding War of Independence commemoration in southern Ireland. The traditional view was that when Irish republicans launched their campaign for independence they were justified in doing so, and fought a 'clean' campaign against the British forces. Of course the conduct of the war was far more complex than this – but claims by the historian Peter Hart about the IRA's 'dirty war' went to the opposite extreme and were frequently exaggerated or oversimplified. Hart's work was promoted by those who sought a reassessment of the British forces' role in the war and called for them to be formally commemorated – a process which has now begun.

The proposed redevelopment at Kilmichael is set to cost €100,000 in public funds. Surely it is wrong for semi-state bodies to spend public money commemorating those who fought to prevent the emergence of an Irish state, and sought to deny Irish people what we now accept are fundamental democratic rights?

Independence

Recession has refocused Irish minds on the importance of fiscal independence. 'Autonomy', 'independence' and 'sovereignty' are now political buzz-words employed by politicians stressing the importance of reclaiming these rights. If these freedoms really are that important, why would we commemorate and celebrate the memory of those who fought to deny them to our forefathers?

It would be natural for the British to want to commemorate those who fought to keep Ireland under British rule. However, few Britons are eager to do so. British histories, school texts and military museums gloss over the conflict or ignore it entirely. British memorials

naming soldiers killed in 'peace time' do not mention those killed in Ireland. The British don't commemorate these troops because they are not proud of the appalling reputation they earned in Ireland.

The auxiliaries, in particular, have one of the worst track records. The auxiliaries were involved in the Bloody Sunday massacre at Croke Park in November 1920. A week later auxiliaries killed two Galway brothers who were in the IRA, Pat and Harry Loughnane, and left their charred bodies so disfigured that there was nothing left of Harry's face except his chin and lips. The auxiliaries were also responsible for the burning of Cork, which caused £3 million damages, left two locals dead, and 2000 others unemployed. In March 1921, Limerick's mayor, George Clancy, and his predecessor, ex-mayor Michael O'Callaghan, were assassinated by auxiliaries.

C Company

'C Company' – the unit of the auxiliaries ambushed at Kilmichael – also carried out reprisals. Two weeks before Kilmichael, an auxiliary from C Company shot dead Jim Lehane, an innocent civilian. Lehane's killer celebrated by getting drunk and proclaiming that shooting Irishmen was the 'one way of teaching them manners'. The auxiliary in question was Cadet Guthrie who escaped the IRA at Kilmichael only to be killed a few hours later. Another member of C Company, without any provocation, shot dead Cannon Magner and his travelling companion, Timothy Crowley.

It is interesting that people from southern republican/nationalist backgrounds have been prominent in organising commemorations for the auxiliaries. This is possibly the result of post-peace process politics and 'parity of esteem'. Alternatively it may spring from the 'delusional' and 'warped sense of nationhood' that Geraldine Moane, senior lecturer in psychology at UCD, has stated is a legacy of Ireland's colonial experience.

If Irish people commemorate those who fought to deny our forefathers the rights we now cherish, surely it will be 'political correctness' taken too far. Once we stop asking what people fought for, and whether their actions were justified, we will have reduced history to a bland equation where there is no context, morality or sense of right and wrong.

The British don't commemorate the Germans, Turks and Irish rebels killed during the 'Great War' – nor do we expect them to. Americans don't erect monuments to the Redcoats killed by Washington's army. British soldiers killed in the Indian Mutiny aren't celebrated by Indians. Those killed fighting the Mau Mau aren't commemorated in Kenya. Indeed as the recent apology to the Kenyans demonstrates, it is more common for the British to make apologies for their past colonial misdeeds than for the colonised to honour their colonisers. In Ireland we seem intent on moving the opposite direction.

We can't ignore the presence of the auxiliaries at Kilmichael and pretend it was a bloodless ambush. But there is a significant difference between recalling some people's place in history and celebrating them through commemoration. The significance of the Kilmichael ambush and the debates about the war are too nuanced and complex to be adequately explained in a few lines on a plaque.

Museum

If those intent on developing the ambush site want to foster a deeper understanding of our history, the €100,000 they want for the scheme would be better spent renovating a farmhouse as a Kilmichael museum. This would give greater scope to explore and debate the history and controversies from that time. If a museum were established within walking distance of the ambush site, visitors could go to view the battlefield without spoiling its integrity. A museum

would also benefit the local economy, through seasonal employment and sustainable tourism – benefits the proposed re-development is unlikely to bring.

During the ‘decade of centenaries’, we need to have serious debates about our history. We need to ask hard questions, and be prepared to abandon comfortable fables in favour of difficult facts. Today Irish people are free to commemorate whoever they want – but we need to consider whose memory we are celebrating and why. We should also keep in mind who won this freedom for us - and how it was won.

Pádraig Óg Ó Ruairc, author & historian

Aubane mailing list

Aubane@heresiarch.org

http://heresiarch.org/mailman/listinfo/aubane_heresiarch.org