

Review: Killing Rage and Before the Dawn

Eamon Collins (with Mick McGovern) “Killing Rage” (Granta Books: London, 1997) and, Gerry Adams “Before the Dawn: An Autobiography” (William Heinemann: London, 1996)

Anarchist Communist Federation

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These political autobiographies (recently released in paperback) by two long-serving activists in the ‘physical force’ tradition of modern Irish Republicanism offer revealing insights into the evolution of both Sinn Fein and Provisional IRA strategy in the critical decades since the eruption of ‘the Troubles’.

They are sharply different stories. Eamon Collins’ book, *Killing Rage*, is the graphic and lurid account of the breakdown of a committed IRA volunteer, who – after an intensive period of active service – becomes disenchanted with the Republican movement. Arrested by the Brits, Collins betrays his former comrades-in-arms to the security forces, renounces his former ideals and disowns his paramilitary past.

Gerry Adams’ *Before the Dawn*, in contrast, tells the life-story of a young nationalist, drawn into the Republican movement by the explosive events of 1969, whose evolution from front-line military activist to front-page political leader is driven by a commitment to the ‘nationalist project’ that never falters. Together these life stories – one of the turncoat and traitor, the other of the dedicated career Republican – provide convincing evidence of the inescapable capitalist logic of contemporary northern Irish Republicanism.

In the years of the Cold War, many former committed Communist Party members in Britain and the US wrote memoirs recanting their dubious political past and exposing the repellent internal life of their own organisations. The fact that these books were greeted as welcome propaganda by right-wing capitalists from the Conservative Party to the CIA and back did not stop working class militants, eager to expose the ugly realities of western Stalinism, from raiding these texts for their own ends.

Critical

Similarly, the fact that *Killing Rage* has been seized upon by unionist politicians as the ‘literal truth’ of the ‘innate evil’ of the modern IRA, should not prevent an intelligent and critical reading of it. *Killing Rage* comes with a ‘hidden agenda’ painfully transparent on every page. Collins intends to exonerate himself, through a merciless assault on his fellow volunteers, in which he ‘proves’ Republicanism to be an irreformable enemy of ‘democracy’ – an ideology he now supports in its place. Once that is recognised, a sceptical reading of the story of his part in the work of the Newry IRA in the early 1980s can still be illuminating. Collins recounts in detail the paramilitary operations he claims to have organised; his promotion through the ranks; his subsequent capture, and decision to turn ‘supergrass’. The account ends with his trial and eventual release.

The stories of the often botched and chaotic missions; the amateurish and inept intelligence work; the clumsy and lazy selection of targets; and the make-up and motivations of many of the recruits, all provide a useful corrective to the deluded romanticism of the IRA-cheerleading left. Collins himself emerges as venal, repulsive and utterly self-serving. Having agreed to turn state’s evidence, he flits back and forth, tearing up his testimony one minute, rewriting it the next, withdrawing it again the next day, over and over – to the intense frustration of his Special Branch handlers. It seems surprising that someone so clearly unstable and unreliable (and just plain vain) as Collins could rise to a position of responsibility in the rigorously policed ranks of the IRA. When released by the courts on the ruling of the judge, Collins suddenly finds himself overwhelmed with loyalty for the British system of justice which ‘when it operated impartially

according to its highest principles... could still represent the highest achievement of a civilised society' (p341), which, in this case, meant freeing the now penitent Collins.

It is a telling fact in itself that politics — even Republican-green capitalist politics — is almost completely absent from Collins' book. Unsurprisingly Adams' autobiography is chock full of it. Beginning with the story of Adams' upbringing in West Belfast, the book really takes off with the outbreak of 'the Troubles' in 1969, which pushed to the fore a new generation of nationalist militants (Adams and McGuinness among them) ready to challenge the ossified Republican 'old guard'. What follows is a revealing insider's account of the rebirth of 'physical force' Republicanism in the north. Adams describes the effects of 'internment', documents the split in the movement between its 'official' and 'provisional' wings, and recalls the negotiations with the British government that accompanied the June 1972 IRA ceasefire. The nationalist working class, of no concern to Collins, appear in Adams' book in a passive, supporting role — enduring the miseries of the unionist ascendancy, and the brutality, oppression and violence meted out by the British state. But, for Adams, that community exists only to offer unwavering and disciplined support to the official Republican leadership and its programme of national reunification and state-building.

Aftermath

Even though his story concludes more than a decade ago, Adams is able to confirm that it was the aftermath of the hunger strike campaign in 1981 that convinced the movement's leaders of the value of 'mass mobilisations and popular actions, of electoralism and broad front work' (p316). It is in that shift that the origins of the current Republican peace strategy can be found.

In his book, Collins is careful not to implicate himself as a trigger-puller, claiming his role always to have been limited to that of 'scout' or getaway driver. Adams, in contrast, includes a 'fictional' story of an IRA sniper hit on a British army patrol, an editorial decision he has since publicly 'regretted', alongside implausible denials about its obvious meaning. According to Collins the two authors met only once, in 1984, when he confronted Adams at the funeral of an IRA volunteer, berating him for the 'creeping constitutionalism' that at that time he saw was at the heart of the new 'ballot box and armalite' strategy. Some fourteen years on, and Collins is the sworn enemy of a Republican movement now reliant exclusively on electoral politics.

The standard argument of the British left is that modern Republicanism lost its innate revolutionary momentum when it began to seek an accommodation with the Orange statelet. Its refusal to pursue a cross community agenda of working class unity — so the argument goes — saw the movement stagnate in its traditional heartlands, as the 'long war' dragged on. But this explanation begins from a false premise — that Republicanism has revolutionary roots that have since withered.

As the 'peace process' in the north stumbles forward, the thinking revealed in these very different biographies confirms the opposite: the ideology of northern Irish Republicanism stands in stark opposition to the interests of the working class in the six counties, the Republic and beyond.

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