

SEÁN MACBRIDE: A REPUBLICAN LIFE, 1904–1946. By Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid. Pp ix, 245. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 2011. £65.

Flying kites with W. B. Yeats on Normandy beaches and having Tagore, Nehru and Roger Casement dropping by for tea were not standard childhood experiences for I.R.A. volunteers. But then Seán MacBride was not a standard I.R.A. volunteer. Son of Irish nationalist ‘aristocracy’ in the shape of Maud Gonne and John MacBride, some hailed his birth in 1904 as that of ‘the future King of Ireland’. The country was spared that outcome, but MacBride did become minister for external affairs in 1948 and later found fame as an international humanitarian activist, which earned him both the Nobel and Lenin peace prizes. The later MacBride is the most familiar, which prompted Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid to focus on his less well-known early life and years as an active militant republican, a career that ‘encompassed youthful revolution, socialist leanings, humanitarian activity and Nazi sympathies, but above all an acute concern for his own personal advancement’ (p. 199).

The early chapters sketch the privileged childhood of ‘little Jean’, spent mainly in France with his mother and sister Iseult following his parents’ divorce, where Gonne complemented his elite Jesuit education with lessons in British historical misdeeds in Ireland. Returning to Ireland in the aftermath of the Rising and his father’s execution, he was caught up in the changing tides of Irish politics, becoming a boy soldier with the Dublin I.R.A. in early 1920. Though a member of Michael Collins’s personal staff during the London negotiations, he quickly came out against the Treaty and occupied a junior staff position with the anti-Treaty I.R.A. He was arrested as part of the Four Courts garrison at the outbreak of the Civil War and spent the war in jail. MacBride remained in the I.R.A. as it was re-shaped in the later 1920s under the leadership of Moss Twomey, following the formation of Fianna Fáil. (In this regard, the book contains the puzzling statement that the I.R.A. in the late 1920s was ‘the controlling armed wing of the Fianna Fáil party’ (p. 79). Presumably this should read Sinn Féin.) Facilitated by his mother’s wealth, he could become a full-time activist, and as a member of the Army Council, he partook, more for pragmatic than ideological reasons, in the I.R.A.’s leftward shift in the late 1920s and early 1930s, culminating in the Saor Éire debacle of 1931. He remained in the leadership of the I.R.A. following the coming to power of Fianna Fáil in 1932, attempting and failing to establish a united republican front with them, a doomed strategy that, according to Nic Dháibhéid, ‘perfectly underscored the primary problem with the I.R.A. at large and MacBride in particular: a failure to adapt to changing circumstances and to mature politically’ (p. 105). This dubious notion of political maturity, and its close relation, ‘political realism’ (p. 217), is revived in the Conclusion. Does the author assume that all her readers share her views about what constitutes both? If not, then she should be more explicit about the political assumptions that underlie her analysis.

MacBride opposed Republican Congress, and pushed for the formation of another doomed I.R.A. political offshoot, Cumann Poblachta na hÉireann, in 1936. As the government finally moved to crush the I.R.A., he had a brief, disastrous stint as Chief of Staff in 1936. He was called to the Bar in 1937, and resigned from the increasingly ‘grubby’ (p. 125) I.R.A. in 1938 along with most of the surviving old guard. Fianna Fáil used the Offences Against the State Act and the Emergency Powers Act to wage war on the I.R.A. during the Emergency, and the barrister Seán MacBride would find a new public role in this context. The book is particularly interesting on the war period, and reveals MacBride’s close relationship with Nazi agencies and individuals, and ambiguity about Nazism in general, while he was simultaneously establishing his ‘legitimate’ reputation. Nic Dháibhéid goes so far as to assert that, when the Germans were on the front foot, MacBride was preparing himself for an Irish leadership role in a Nazi-dominated Europe (p. 151), a bold claim that is not sufficiently sustained by the evidence presented, and which is watered down with a qualifying ‘arguably’ in the Conclusion (p. 211). When the tide turned from 1942, according to Nic Dháibhéid, he repositioned

himself politically. The high-profile McCaughey inquest in 1946 provided the springboard for the next phase of MacBride's political career, and a brief epilogue sketches the well-known story of Clann na Poblachta and the first interparty government, and traces his subsequent 'stunning reinvention as an international humanitarian' (p. 202).

This book is a welcome addition to Irish historiography (though how many copies will be sold, given its absurd price, is another question). It is clearly written and well-researched. The tone is even and judgements generally fair, though there are some tendentious generalisations, and key arguments are sometimes overcooked while simultaneously lacking all the necessary evidential ingredients. The Conclusion tries too hard in places to link the book's treatment of MacBride with currents and themes in the broader historiography of the years covered, but is overall thorough and authoritative. The MacBride who emerges from this book – remote, vain, and so self-serving that even contemplating becoming a career Nazi was not beyond him – is not attractive, and the author ultimately agrees with Bob Briscoe's curt assessment of him as 'an ardent patriot' who was 'warped by ambition' (p. 204).

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THE BLACK AND TANS: BRITISH POLICE AND AUXILIARIES IN THE IRISH WAR OF INDEPENDENCE, 1920–21. By D. M. Leeson. Pp xx, 294. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2011. £30.

Given the attention that Peter Hart has received over many years, a fixation which shows little sign of moderating post-mortem, it is a brave Canadian indeed that would venture into the wilds of Irish historiography. But Dr Leeson of Laurentian University has chosen to do just that with his first book, *The Black and Tans: British police and auxiliaries in the Irish War of Independence*, and indeed he has dedicated it to Peter Hart.

As one would expect from a book based on a doctoral thesis, the research is impressive and detailed (the chapter based around a case study of the conflict in west Galway being particularly enlightening), and offers a model for any local research on the Royal Irish Constabulary.

The great strength of this book is its thorough, dispassionate and forensic analysis of the breadth of police reprisals across Ireland. But this is no dry presentation. Leeson on occasion writes with great style, presenting minor case studies which function as revelatory mini-dramas within the text.

One point which will perhaps upset some readers, but which this reader feels does ring true, is that it was Irishmen in the Royal Irish Constabulary who were at the forefront of the majority of the unofficial reprisals. The 'Black and Tans', the war-time recruits, simply followed the lead of the locals, rather than being the ringleaders of this practice.

However, the presentation of some events is somewhat problematic. For example, with regard to the local election in Galway in 1920, Leeson states, correctly, that the outcome of the poll showed strong support for Sinn Féin in the region. However, this point requires some qualification: although the *Connaught Tribune* claimed that the Volunteers performed their duties both 'equitably and creditably', members of the I.R.A. were in control of the polling station in question, which, one can safely presume, deterred constitutional nationalists and unionists from casting their votes.

In his final chapter, Leeson resurrects, albeit in a half-hearted manner, the thesis that the British government in some fashion sponsored unofficial reprisals in Ireland. This in many ways contradicts some of the points he makes elsewhere in the book, which clearly presents the reprisals as an organic problem within the rank and file of the R.I.C. Indeed, he cites several instances where policemen faced criminal prosecution for their acts in