

REVIEW: SINN FÉIN AND THE SDLP

Ian S. Wood

Gerard Murray and Jonathan Tonge, **Sinn Féin and the SDLP: From Alienation to Participation**, London: Hurst & Company, 2005, 300 pp, hb, £40, ISBN: 85065 649-5; pb, £16.95, ISBN 85065 648-7.

In the final paragraph of this work, the authors make a cursory reference to the December 2004 Northern Bank robbery in Belfast and the likelihood of it being the work of the IRA. Understandably, the criminal godfathers who sit in high places in the Irish republican movement will feel, if they read the book, that Dr Murray and Professor Tonge have given them an easy ride, something they continue to get from all too many writers and media commentators.

There are honourable exceptions, one of whom is the **Observer's** Henry McDonald. His recent book, **Colours: Ireland from Bombs to Boom**, is part autobiographical, but it is also a salutary reminder of what courageous and streetwise journalism can provide as an antidote to the apologetics of books like the title under review.

McDonald documents the degree to which leading members of the republican movement have grown wealthy on the back of a brutal and sectarian 'armed struggle', now abandoned in favour of a partitionist settlement mocked and vilified by them when it was on offer decades ago. One of them, Thomas 'Slab' Murphy, an absentee from the work of Dr Murray and Professor Tonge, is a multi-millionaire from money laundering and cross-border smuggling of everything from livestock to cut-price cigarettes and alcohol of often highly dubious quality. His oil and diesel washing operations, which pay off massively in the form of 'competitive' prices for motorists in Northern Ireland have, Henry McDonald points out, left behind dangerous toxic waste, the dumping of which in 2003 and 2004 posed a serious threat to the water supply of North County Louth.

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There was also the grotesque episode of Sinn Féin's Bairbre de Brun's tenure of the position of Health Minister in the devolved executive set up under the Belfast Agreement. She made many sombre speeches and chaired conferences aimed at tackling the relationship between smoking and lung cancer in Northern Ireland, even as her party cashed in on the flooding of areas like West Belfast with cheap smuggled cigarettes as well as those taken at gunpoint.

Open criticism of this organised criminality is dangerous, especially if it comes from anywhere within what Gerry Adams likes to call 'the republican family'. A brutal reminder of this was the sadistic knifing and beating of Eamon Collins which, in 1999, left him barely recognisable to his wife when she had to identify his body. Collins, a disenchanted former IRA intelligence officer, had dared to go into open court as a witness against 'Slab' Murphy in a libel action which he had brought in Dublin against a newspaper.

Murray and Tonge do refer more than once to the writings of Anthony McIntyre, a former IRA prisoner and postgraduate researcher who, for a time, taught at Queen's University in Belfast. However, they have little to say about the ostracism he and his wife have suffered for daring to suggest IRA involvement in the October 2000 murder of the republican dissident Joe O'Connor. McIntyre remains a trenchant critic of Sinn Féin/IRA's methods with its critics as well as its hypersensitivity to questions about its income sources and the expensive lifestyle of many of its leaders. In fact, as Henry McDonald has put it, West Belfast and other republican-controlled areas are now akin to 'Sicily without the sun', run by what locals freely, though off the record, refer to as the 'Rafia'.

All this is simply to make the point that these authors have carried out industrious research on a book which ends up, perhaps to understate the point, semi-detached from uncomfortable and vicious reality. There are also some disturbing signifiers of the authors' perspective on the Troubles. Bloody Sunday is described as an atrocity, but not the Kingsmill massacre of Protestant mill workers by republican gunmen in 1976, which receives a passing mention six pages earlier. After that year, Dr Murray and Professor Tonge solemnly advise us, sectarian killings by the IRA virtually ceased. This will be news indeed to the families of those who died at the La Mon House hotel, Enniskillen, Teebane Cross, or in the 1993 Shankill Road fish shop bombing. Had the IRA's war really been a sectarian one, they argue, it would have targeted the Orange Order itself. Yet that is exactly what happened. Orangemen were murdered and Orange halls repeatedly attacked, the latter something that goes on still.

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There are reservations that demand to be made in any review of a work which purports to be a contribution to our understanding of the politics of the Troubles and of the peace process. The authors give us a book of two halves, reflecting what they rightly identify as the historic split within Irish nationalism between its physical force and constitutional traditions. Within the context of that split, they see the SDLP as heirs to a constitutional tradition created by O'Connell, Parnell, up to a point, and Redmond, who have emerged from the Troubles as political winners but electoral losers. Here they do have a strong case. What they are saying is that the SDLP, especially under John Hume's leadership, played a key role in bringing Sinn Féin/IRA into a painfully long dialogue leading to an ultimate abandonment of a futile armed struggle under the terms of the Belfast Agreement, only to lose ground steadily to Sinn Féin in elections ever since. This is because of Sinn Féin's lavishly funded political machine and also its ability to repackage itself as a party whose *raison d'être* has been to secure civil rights, power sharing and an agenda for cultural equality within Northern Ireland.

Across the border, in what is arguably Western Europe's most corrupt democracy, Sinn Féin's criminal links do it as little harm as in the north. It could hardly be otherwise in a political culture in which an avaricious charlatan like Charles J. Haughey is still as much admired as he is vilified, though the real crunch may come when the Gombeen men who dominate the *Dáil* have to consider the reality of sharing power with Sinn Féin.

The authors' exploration of just how political republicanism moved to centre stage as the Troubles dragged on cannot be faulted for its attention to sources, and they do address the crucial issue of whether the road to ministerial cars and Stormont portfolios was decisively influenced by the SDLP or simply driven by the ambitions and political acrobatics of Gerry Adams. They need, however, to stress just how well protected by the much-demonised 'secret state' against his internal enemies this Teflon opportunist was, as he sought to uncouple republicanism from so much of the baggage Irish history had forced it to carry.

Overall, though, this book does not add much to Ed Moloney's work or to Richard English's masterly de-construction of republican myth-making in his 2003 book, **Armed Struggle**. They do, however, touch in passing on Anthony McIntyre's view that the new republican agenda of the 1980s has been shaped primarily by the priorities of the British state. If he is right, then some credit at least is due to its operatives for their ability to infiltrate Sinn Féin/IRA at the highest level, not just for intelligence but to neutralise and indeed, when it had to be done, to eliminate elements uncompromisingly opposed to any political

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road for republicanism. Despite the Scappaticci and Donaldson cases, this manifestation of collusion between the state and the republican leadership has thus far received much less attention than Loyalist links with the security forces, though they arguably helped to break the IRA's will to go on with its 'long war'.

These are of course murky waters, which the authors have preferred not to trawl, and nobody can deny the importance of explaining why the SDLP looks like ending up as one of history's losers. Few of its adherents will find this book welcome reading, and nearly all of them will hotly dispute the assertion quoted in it by Danny Morrison that SDLP bargaining power was never more than a product of IRA firepower. Morrison was on the inside track where the use of that firepower was concerned, especially against real or suspected informers. He may be touting his wares round the book festivals now but it was not for nothing that he earned himself the nickname of 'the Lord Chief Justice' within the ranks of the Provos.

IRA firepower may be in the process of being consigned to history, or at least it is being put on hold, apart from fundraising robberies, but the SDLP's failure to reap any electoral rewards for its part in bringing this about remains an irony which Professor Tonge and Dr Murray are right to address. It is an irony which would not have been lost on co-founders of the party such as Paddy Devlin and Gerry Fitt. In the darkest of times they saw it as a beacon of hope for Northern Ireland but, tragically, these brave Socialists came to feel that in any contest for votes with Sinn Féin/IRA the new party would be in danger of compromising its political integrity and losing its way.

An enduring image of the Troubles, recaptured for us by the authors, is of Gerry Fitt in his underwear and with a revolver in his hand, defending his home on Belfast's Antrim Road in 1976 against a vengeful republican crowd who had broken into it and would, two years after the 1981 hunger strikes, return to burn it down. Symbolically, and in that same year of 1983, Gerry Adams would capture Fitt's West Belfast constituency for Sinn Féin.

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