

Book sheds new light on Westmeath's role in revolution



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Westmeath was the site of the third highest rate of destruction to the built and environment in Ireland during the Irish War of Independence, according to newly-published research.

The county was behind only neighbouring Meath and the cauldron of Cork in terms of damage to buildings and infrastructure, historian Justin Dolan Stover states in his new book, 'Enduring ruin: environmental destruction during the Irish Revolution' (UCD Press, 166 pp).

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In painstakingly researching the book, Dr Stover assembled an impressive array of data on 'landscape manipulation and ensuing damage to the built and natural environment'. Among these, he recorded 1,120 instances of damage caused to the built environment (destruction of/damage to buildings, bridges, roads, railways, communications infrastructure, vehicles etc).

Unsurprisingly, Cork – already well established as the most violent county in Ireland from 1919-23 in terms of impact on life and limb – was top of the list with a rate of 7.8 incidents per 10,000 people.

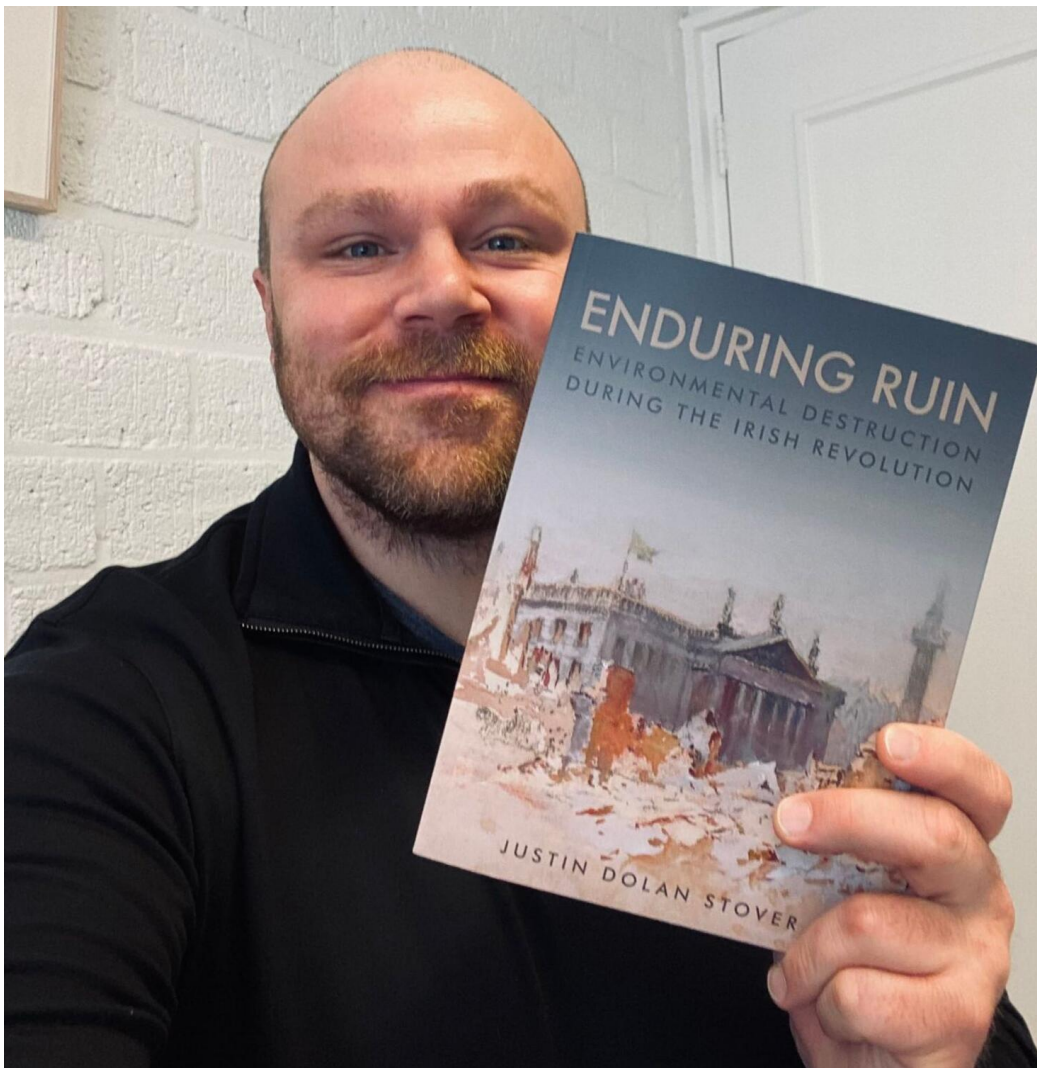
However, coming in a clear second and third were Meath (5.53) and Westmeath (5.16) – two counties regarded as being on the quieter end of the scale in terms of activity and violence on the part of both the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Crown forces.

North Westmeath and the greater Mullingar area, in particular, saw little or no attacks on the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) or the British Army by the IRA, and no British reprisals of note. The only RIC fatality outside of the Athlone area was that of Head Constable James McElhill in Kilbeggan, who was shot dead by the IRA in June 1921.

But in mapping the rates of violence against buildings and infrastructure, Dr Stover has cast Westmeath's place in the revolutionary period in a new light.

'Enduring ruin' is a welcome study in that it departs from the normal discussions around either politics or the metrics of death and violence in quantifying revolutionary activity in Ireland from 1916 to 1923.

The rate of destruction in Westmeath (5.16) is interesting when compared to Longford (3.19), where the IRA, under the leadership of Seán Mac Eoin, was an outlier in the midlands and indeed Leinster in terms of violence against the police and military. However, in Dr Stover's study, Longford lags behind Meath, Westmeath, Laois and Offaly in the rate of destruction to the built environment.



Dr Justin Dolan Stover, Associate Professor at Idaho State University, with a copy of his new book 'Enduring ruin: environmental destruction during the Irish Revolution'.

Defining IRA activity in terms of violence causing death, and by extension making a judgement about the extent of a revolutionary atmosphere in a particular place, often ignores the impact of other categories of activity. 'Landscapes were often primed for ambushes that never occurred; while evidencing activity in an area, it did not evidence violence,' Stover writes, offering the explanation that terrain and geography may have been a 'local inhibitor' to such ambushes materialising.

And while Westmeath was certainly flat country unsuitable to such activity, there were also other factors – among them, an unwillingness to open a Pandora's box of unrestrained violence in a particular community. One interesting example which can be found in the files of the Military Archives was the aftermath of Seán Mac Eoin's arrest in Mullingar in March 1921.

The following month, under orders from Michael Collins, Mullingar Brigade IRA officer James Maguire assembled a large body of men to effect a rescue of Mac Eoin at Griffinstown, between Coralstown and Kinnegad, en route to Mac Eoin's murder

Dublin. Mines were planted on the road, and the plan was to engage the convoy and secure Mac Eoin using lethal force against his captors.

Ultimately, the plan went astray; an RIC district inspector who was on Collins' payroll but reluctant to countenance an inevitable bloodbath ensured that Mac Eoin's convoy took a different route to Dublin. This and other near misses earned the Mullingar Brigade the contempt of the IRA's GHQ, and to add insult to injury, one of the mines on the old Dublin road detonated, causing a massive crater and an explosion that could be heard as far away as Mullingar and Edenderry.

Such an incident is a non-event when looking at revolutionary activity through the narrow prism of death, but is nonetheless significant when addressing activity through wider parameters, such as environmental destruction.

When one factors in these near misses, trenching of roads, destruction of bridges, and burning of buildings, the general impression of the scope of activity and conflict in Westmeath from 1919-23 begins to change.

Author Justin Dolan Stover is Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of History at Idaho State University. He has published articles in several Irish studies journals, including *Éire-Ireland* and *Irish Historical Studies*.

— **'Enduring ruin: environmental destruction during the Irish Revolution' is available from UCD Press and in bookshops at €30.**



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