

# An Exciting and Fresh Look at the Irish Revolution

BY MARIE COLEMAN

**W**RITING IN 2002 in the edited collection *The IRA at War*, the later Canadian historian, Peter Hart, issued a manifesto for how to construct a “new revolutionary history” of Ireland between 1916 and 1923 that would shy away from traditional heroic narratives focused on political and military events and approach the period from a wider thematic perspective. This would include a more nuanced analysis of the nature of revolutionary violence, consider the “revolutionary” nature of the events and explore wider socio-economic aspects such as gender. In the past twenty years, with a wealth of new publications inspired by the decade of centenaries, this multi-faceted consideration of the revolutionary years has expanded to include many new directions including, global, sensory and emotional history and now thanks to Justin Stover a detailed consideration of the environmental impact of the various conflicts that were waged on the island of Ireland between 1916 and 1923.

## JUSTIN DOLAN STOVER.

*ENDURING RUIN: ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION DURING THE IRISH REVOLUTION*  
DUBLIN: UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN PRESS, 2022.

The book is neatly divided into chapters dealing with the Rising; the interregnum between the Rising and the War of Independence; the War of Independence itself—a conflict which is allocated two chapters (one dealing with the IRA’s manipulation of the environment and a second with the Crown Forces’ destruction of it); the exploitation of the latter for propaganda purposes internationally; and the final chapter on the Civil War allows the volume to be book-ended neatly by the two conflicts that brought destruction to Dublin city at the outset and conclusion of the revolution.

A question might be asked as to why nobody has written about the environmental history of the revolution before. The answer to which is that they have but either did not realize they were doing so or did not describe it as such; an example being G.A. Hayes McCoy’s discussion of the IRA’s use of the natural environment to lay ambushes in *The Irish at War*, published sixty years ago. One of the great services which Stover does in this book is to identify this approach rightly as environmental history.

Perhaps one of the reasons that we have not until now had such a systematic consideration of the topic has been the suitability of source material. Undoubtedly Stover task

has been facilitated enormously by releases of even more (and there was a considerable amount prior to the decade of centenaries) primary sources since the 2010s. In particular he makes extensive and excellent use of the National Archives of Ireland’s Finance Compensation Files (FIN COMP series) but also digs deeper into complementary court records for criminal injuries as these claims for post-Truce compensation taken under the 1923 Damage to Property (Compensation) Act were defended at the Quarter Sessions / District Courts. Not all files have been newly released though and he reveals the wealth of material to be drawn upon in the United Kingdom National Archives (CO 904 and 905 series), records which were opened in the 1970s but used sparingly to date in spite of the popularity of the revolutionary period for historical research.

One might ask, “what is environmental history?,” and that is not an easy category to delineate. The focus here is largely on the destruction of two elements of the environment—the urban built environment and the natural rural landscape. The most prominent examples of the former—the destruction of the center of Dublin City during the Rising and Civil War and the incendiarism of the Black and Tans in Cork in December 1920—are all dealt with in great detail here. Chapter 3 is an excellent analysis of the IRA and Cumann na mBan’s use of the landscape as a “natural ally” in warfare, or as Stover suggests here “a fifth column” of felled trees, trenched roads and carefully concealed ambush sites that were central to the guerrilla warfare of the War of Independence. In over twenty years of teaching the Irish revolution I have this year for the first time been able to set students assignments on the environmental history of the conflict, thanks to the publication of this book.

Yet, Stover conceives of a much broader conception of environment that also examines topics such as the difficulties of disposing of the dead—human and animal—in Dublin in 1916, the rain in Dublin that week that reduced the Irish Citizen Army’s trenches in St Stephen’s Green to Flanders-like “slop,” and the ineffectiveness of using aeroplanes to counter the destruction of roads in 1921. Chapter 2, which focuses on 1917 and 1918, is strongest in this regard. There not having been much destruction of buildings or need to disrupt road or rail communications in these years, the focus on the environment here looks at the effective use of public spaces and the destruction of statues, and also the concept of “social environments” and how these were disrupted by the institution of the RIC boycott.



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Stover’s work aligns well with Terence Dooley’s *Burning the Big House*, published at the same time, but there is also a chime with another recent trend in revolutionary historiography which focuses on its trans national and global elements. Stover’s fifth chapter “Cultivating Environmental Victimhood in Ireland and Abroad” makes a valuable contribution to this approach to the revolution. Republican propagandists made extremely effective use of the destructive impulses of the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries (described in detail in the preceding chapter) to compare the Irish suffering with

that of Belgium and France during the First World War.

While Stover does not see his book as either “a fundamental environmental history” or a “definitive study of damage” during the Irish revolution, he has produced the first serious examination of the environmental impact of the revolution that paves the way for other works on this important and evolving topic within the ever-evolving “new” history of the revolution.

—Queen’s University Belfast