Eunan O’Halpin, Kevin Barry. *An Irish Rebel in Life and Death*

Frank Rynne
Land. But it was soon blown away by the Great Famine and its sharply increased number of prisoners and fevers.

This book is a key contribution to the research about Irish prisons in the 18th and 19th centuries and its major asset lies in its thorough investigation into the various histories of prison buildings, criminal indictments and grand-jury presentments for courthouses and prison-building works for each county and big city. The appendices are clear examples of that huge archive work and Butler’s impressive study is based on a large range of sources like prison reports, prison works reports, extracts from criminal courts but also journals of architecture, topographical dictionaries of cities and more personal documents like the memoirs and correspondences of notable inhabitants to say the least. Truly fascinating are the plans and pictures published on each page of the book since they capture the inner working and organisation of prison buildings and contribute to their comprehensive review.

But Butler also goes off the beaten tracks by delving into the grand jury system, a unique local form of power in the 19th century, while studying the reforms coming from Westminster through various Acts of Parliament and Parliamentary Papers. All in all, with a clear and precise analysis of the role played by grand jurors along with the early appointment of prison inspectors (which was copied by the English system in 1837) and the involvement of the population in the Association for the Improvement of Prisons and Prison Discipline in Ireland and women’s associations, this book contributes to establish that the Irish prison system was very adaptable and unique; a unicity confirmed at the end of the 19th century by the Intermediate Prison System, a prison with no bars offering prisoners a better chance to rehabilitate.

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*Kevin Barry. An Irish Rebel in Life and Death* is an atypical and extraordinary work by one of Ireland’s most respected and prominent modern historians. It not only explores the Irish revolutionary period in an original and thought-provoking manner, but also illuminates aspects of the course of the republican movement in the period after the formation of the Free State and down to the present century through the prism of the family of a “republican martyr”. Kevin Barry joined the IRA at 17 and on 1 November 1920, less than three months shy of his 19th birthday, the University College Dublin (UCD) medical student became the first IRA volunteer in the Irish War of Independence to die by the hangman’s noose. The book is also centred on women, exploring the lives, actions and reactions of the
women in the story, most notably Kevin Barry’s oldest sister Katherine/Kathleen Barry known to her friends and family as Kitby. She was also the author’s grandmother and this facet of the book makes it a unique historical study. It examines not just Ireland’s independence struggle but also how having a hero in the family was potentially a stifling relic in the lives of all of his siblings and descendants. In some ways the book seems like a personal and familial exorcism of the ghost of a dead hero that lingered over grandnieces and grandnephews of Barry, such as the author Eunan O’Halpin.

O’Halpin is the former Bank of Ireland Chair at Trinity College Dublin (TCD). He has a solid international reputation as an expert on British and Irish foreign policy in the 20th century, he has participated in and is an editor of several volumes of the Royal Irish Academy’s public history project, “Documents on Irish Foreign Policy”. He has written extensively on the British intelligence services in Ireland and former British colonies such as Afghanistan. He was also director and co-author of the research project “The Dead of the Irish Revolution”, which catalogued and gave details of all the casualties of Ireland’s civil unrest from 1916 to 1921. The book, The Dead of the Irish Revolution, by Eunan O’Halpin and Daithí Ó Corráin, who had done much of the heavy lifting on the project from 2003 to 2006, as a post-doctoral fellow at TCD, was eventually published in 2020, a few months before the study currently under review. The Dead of the Irish Revolution gives biographic details and the circumstances of the deaths of 2,850 men, women and children killed between the April 1916 Easter Rising and 31 December 1921.

In the hundred plus years since his execution on All Saint’s Day 1920, Kevin Barry has remained an icon of both physical-force Irish republicanism and the nation building origin-mythologising of Ireland’s main political rivals for much of that century, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Professor O’Halpin notes that generations of Irish children and the children of the Irish diaspora were given Kevin and Barry as their first two Christian names. Furthermore, Barry has been commemorated in the names of public houses, housing estates, Gaelic Athletic Association clubs and he has been the subject of several books and academic papers. Perhaps the most enduring commemorative vehicle, other than an iconic photograph, is the republican anthem “Kevin Barry” which begins:

3. See “Documents on Irish Foreign Policy” online: https://www.difp.ie.
In Mountjoy jail one Monday morning high upon the gallows tree
Kevin Barry gave his young life for the cause of liberty
Just a lad of eighteen summers yet there’s no-one can deny
As he walked to death that morning, he proudly held his head on high.5

While many Irish folk groups such as The Clancy Brothers and the Wolfe Tones have recorded versions of the song, O’Halpin notes that the song was released as an A-side by Paul Robeson in 1957 with his classic 1930s song “Ol’ Man River” as the B-side. By the 1960s it had entered the repertoire of the international folk scene being recorded by skiffle king Lonnie Donegan, folk perfectionist Pete Seeger and it was performed live by Leonard Cohen in 1972. Intriguingly, it was also covered in 1964 by the Swedish folk group the Hootenanny Singers, whose leader Björn Ulvaeus went on to have considerably more success in 1974, with another song about an “inveterate enemy of cruel Britannia, Napoleon Bonaparte”, with the hit “Waterloo” by his group Abba (p. 137).6

In the introduction to the book O’Halpin takes a mild but poignant pot-shot at the Queen’s University, Belfast political scientist Richard English, whose work has often sought to demythologise the IRA. He notably remarks that, in a review of the 1989 book on Kevin Barry by his nephew Donal O’Donovan, Kevin Barry and His Time, English complained that Barry had written and done little that was noteworthy and that his significance was merely that he was a republican martyr. English also complained that O’Donovan had not explored the mythologising of Barry and his propaganda value to extreme republicanism. O’Halpin pithily comments that, despite these criticisms, English in his own works Armed Struggle (2003) and Irish Freedom (2006) mentioned Barry several times. In fairness to English, Barry is mentioned only five times between the two works. However, English acknowledges and perhaps inadvertently elevates Barry’s status martyr noting that: “Wolfe Tone was an early version of a repeated pattern – stretching from Robert Emmet through Kevin Barry to Bobby Sands – of the doomed young Irish republican”.7

O’Halpin’s jibe at the polemist IRA antagonist, English, is coolly devastating as he expands the discourse on youthful fallen heroes beyond IRA and republican hagiography. Listing a series of quotes which could easily have been uttered or written by teachers and comrades of Kevin Barry, he notes that the quotes are about young English, former public-school boys who were killed in France in 1916. He further notes that neither the Irish nor Zionist separatists’ approach to youthful fallen heroes is little different from the English approach to the fallen youths of the Great War. It is the type of leading and probing that continues throughout the book such as the revelation following a detailed account of Barry’s last IRA action, which resulted in his arrest and subsequent execution, that one of the three British

6. Hootenanny Singers, “Kevin Barry”, online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dPZj06lZqQ.
service men killed was in fact a fifteen-year-old who had lied to get into uniformed service. These rhetorical devices are masterfully interwoven in the text producing a stark and often shocking version of O’Halpin’s own family history.

One of the questions dealt with in the book is why Kevin Barry was elevated to the status of the most revered youthful hero when many young men such as fellow UCD student and friend of Barry, Frank Flood, who was hanged in Mountjoy Prison in 1921, remained forgotten.

Kevin was born at 8 Fleet Street in 1902 but his father died in 1908 leaving his young mother Mary with seven children. However, his mother proved capable of managing family affairs aided by family and her eldest daughter Kathleen. Kevin was educated in several schools and the iconic photograph of him in a rugby shirt was taken when he played for his last secondary school Belvedere.\(^8\) Growing up he divided his time between Dublin and the family farm in County Carlow. Kevin’s mother Mary defied her husband’s testament, that she and the children should live on the farm on his death, and held onto the Dublin businesses aided by, and perhaps dominated by her eldest daughter Kathleen. Kitby and Kevin’s first public outing in republicanism was attending a Manchester martyrs commemoration at the Mansion House in 1915. In 1917 both Kevin and his brother Michael joined the Irish Volunteers in Dublin and Carlow, respectively. Noting that Kevin was only 15 when he joined the Volunteers, O’Halpin puts this in context, referencing the fact that many soldiers in both the British and German armies in World War I were under the legal age of recruitment. Throughout the book O’Halpin qualifies and augments the familial narrative with snapshots of government policy and the international situation, while offering unbiased, diverse and well referenced accounts of deaths, ambushes, murders and executions by all parties in the conflict in Ireland. The approach is engaging, and the effect is to qualify and challenge narratives which emerged not only from the British government but also from the republican movement.

The book examines Kevin Barry’s short life in great detail examining his jottings on schoolbooks, his socialist leanings and his fondness for girls. The image of a pious and saintly boy is dismissed and the Kevin Barry who emerges is a rounded normal revolutionary child of his times with a fondness for girls and drinking. It is also clear that Kevin was a resolute IRA volunteer, who saw action in Carlow and Wicklow when visiting the family farm and also in Dublin. In the engagement in which he was captured, the ambush of a British lorry collecting bread at a bakery in North King Street Dublin, three British servicemen lost their lives. One was a 15-year-old who, according to Kevin’s sister, he admitted shooting before his pistol jammed. With his comrades having retreated and he with a jammed Mauser, he surrendered and was taken to the North Dublin Union with the dead boy and two mortally wounded soldiers. Following his arrest, he was prodded with a bayonet and

\(^8\) Keogh Brothers Ltd., “Kevin Barry in Football Jersey, Head and Shoulders Oval Portrait”, National Library of Ireland, Keogh Photographic Collection, online: https://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000029656.
assaulted. This was questioned as a possible torture in contemporary newspapers and also in the insipid eponymous ballad, so widely sung and recorded, but Barry, despite several days of medical treatment for his damaged arm, did not use the word torture in his own account.

O’Halpin examines the preparations for the trial and Kevin’s lack of direction from the IRA general headquarters (GHQ). He enlisted contemporary legal experts, including the recently deceased Frank Callanan SC, to examine the trial and proceedings and they all agreed that under the law and circumstances extant in 1920, Barry would have been found guilty in any circumstances. Barry for his part generally remained aloof of the proceedings and his fate was a foregone conclusion as he had not mounted a defence or questioned any of the sixteen witnesses for the prosecution, fifteen of whom were servicemen. A fascinating aspect of the Kevin Barry myth is dwelling on his stoicism and acceptance of his fate. One aspect of the iconography of Kevin Barry as a republican martyr is potentially derived from the fact that, like many young English officers who died in the Great War, he was also the product of private education and like many of them a rugby player. It is possible to conclude that his grandnephew attaches some blame for his fate on the IRA GHQ and their tardiness and laxity in advising correctly. Therein emerges another poignant reflection in this book: who are the heroes and how are they made?

In this respect and regarding the IRA’s focus, Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, was nearing the end of his life as a hunger striker in Brixton Prison in London. There was also the audacious, yet brutally effective operation planned for November 1920, the execution of British intelligence officers in Dublin which took place exactly three weeks after Barry’s execution in Mountjoy Prison. O’Halpin poses interesting counterpoints for heroic status, ignored by IRA propagandists at the time, such as two IRA volunteers on hunger strike in Cork jail, Michael Fitzgerald and Joseph Murphy. They were both largely ignored by the IRA GHQ propaganda machine even though American-born Murphy had lasted seventy-six days on hunger strike, two days more than MacSwiney and they shared another fate, which was dying on the same day, 25 October 1920. O’Halpin posits it was MacSwiney’s title as Lord Mayor which pulled GHQ attention away from the lesser but equal hunger strikers. Regarding his great-uncle, O’Halpin states that the IRA GHQ failed in their duty of care towards him and did not offer legal support early; but he also recognises Kevin Barry and indeed his sister Kitby and his mother’s role in resisting GHQ’s advice to offer some defence just as MacSwiney’s sisters may have overshadowed his own wife when she pleaded with him not to leave her a widow with a small child as a charge. While he suggests that GHQ did not sacrifice Kevin Barry merely to create a martyr, it is hard not to draw parallels with suspicions surrounding IRA/Sinn Fein leadership during the 1981 hunger strikes. What better poster boy and man than a rugby playing public school boy turned medical student dying for his country and a Royal chartered Lord Mayor?

As the title states, this is a book not just about the dead hero but it examines his times. His family are a crucial element in this investigation, as is the effect
of having a hero in the family. O’Halpin does not shirk from taking a critical view of some members of his family in a soul-searching and sometimes brutal fashion. Kevin Barry’s siblings form a great part of this study. The sections on his great-aunt’s husband, Jim / Seamus O’Donovan who master-minded an ill-fated bombing campaign on UK infrastructure in 1939 and cemented Irish Republican links with Nazi Germany through his frequent travels there in 1939, are notable. O’Halpin notes that despite their leftist leanings, his grandmother, Kitby and grandfather Jim Maloney, were supportive of Hitler until late in the day. He also notes that their friend, Dan Breen, wrote in his diary “Heil Hitler. May he rest in peace” on 5 May 1945. O’Halpin did ask his grandfather why they had supported Hitler and received in response an excuse regarding British disinformation about Germany in World War I and the manner in which it prosecuted the Irish War of Independence. However, O’Halpin notes that recent academic research shows that the British might have exaggerated but did not invent German atrocities in World War I.

One of the strongest characters in this work is that of O’Halpin’s grandmother Kathleen / Kitby Barry Moloney. Like Kevin she was a committed Irish republican and was a member of the women’s revolutionary body Cumann na mBan. She insisted on remaining in the anti-Treaty HQ on Sackville Street during the early fighting of the Civil War and acted as the main message carrier between Eamon de Valera and commandant of the anti-Treaty forces, Liam Lynch. She was obviously a remarkable and singular woman as is evidenced by a quote from Todd Andrew describing a young woman in fashionable clothes approaching Lynch’s hideout on the Cork/Kerry border in 1923 and stopping to apply lipstick as she approached. He noted that lipstick was not only uncommon in the cities but was certainly not common in Republican circles. Andrews noted it was like seeing an apparition.

Kitby stands out in this book about a hero of Irish republicanism as its de facto hero / heroine. In her family it was she who curated the memory of her dead brother. Her mother referred interested parties to her, and she was the only sibling to give a statement to the Bureau of Military History, which interviewed participants in the revolutionary struggle for posterity. In this manner her narrative shaped previous biographies. The author of this book, while placing his grandmother’s role central, also seeks to expand the narrative and interrogate the familial claustrophobia of Barry’s legacy. He also examines the role of women including his grandmother and great-aunt in the republican movement, paying particular attention to trips to the USA and Australia to fund-raise for the nationalist cause. Kitby remained a committed republican and maintained close friendships with many of her former comrades but nursed a deep distrust of Eamon de Valera. When she died in 1969 her funeral was attended by not only Civil War foes like Dick Mulcahy but also a who’s who list of anti-Treaty republicans as well as the president of Sinn Fein and the chief of the IRA and the then president of Ireland Eamon de Valera.

In 2003 the bodies of ten IRA men executed in Mountjoy were disinterred and in the case of nine of them reinterred in Glasnevin Cemetery. That it had taken so long was a matter of both state and familial hesitancy. The author of this book
was among the pallbearers of Kevin Barry’s coffin. The Forgotten Ten as they were known should more accurately have been called the forgotten nine. Kevin Barry was never forgotten.

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Postscript, author’s note and disclaimer: Following my primary degree in history at Trinity College Dublin I was accepted as a PhD candidate under the supervision of William Edward Vaughan. In this capacity I was offered the role of tutor. During one of the years I tutored, the second-year course in modern Irish history was taught by, amongst other lecturers, Professor Eunan O’Halpin. However, it was the Wednesday seminars in modern Irish history, organised by Eunan and Anne Dolan, that brought me into the closest contact with Professor O’Halpin. Regular attendees included former Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald and a cornucopia of descendants of the participants in the War of Independence and both sides of Ireland’s Civil War (1922–1923).

Having successfully defended my PhD in 2013 the formal award ceremony was in 2014. I invited friends and colleagues for drinks and nibbles at La Cave in Dublin. Among the attendees was Eunan O’Halpin, who boasts not only a grandmother and grandfathers but also great-uncles and great-aunts as republican activists in the revolutionary period and beyond. My dear friend Niall O’Sullivan, who played guitar in our band in the 1980s, had a great-grandfather who served in the Royal Irish Constabulary. Daragh McCarthy, who later played bass in the same band, also attended; his grandfather, Sean O’Neill, was a participant in the IRA raid which led to Kevin Barry’s arrest and he later became a prominent leader in the Dublin IRA. Another friend, Kevin Barrington, also attended. Kevin’s maternal great-uncle was Harry Boland while his paternal great-uncle was Brendan Bracken, the UK Minister of Information during World War II.

My own great-uncle William Rynne was active in 1916 and was interned for a period at Wakefield Prison in the United Kingdom. He was also active in the IRA in 1917, the Irish War of Independence and the Civil War. He emigrated to the USA in 1923–1924. O’Halpin’s work with Daithí Ó Corráin, The Dead of the Irish Revolution, published in 2020, potentially identifies him or his namesake as being amongst the executioners of Eric Steadman near Tullamore, Co. Offaly, on 9 July 2021. Either Steadman was the spy he was accused of being or he was merely a shellshocked ex-serviceman who failed to heed an IRA warning.