

Tyrone during the Troubles

Death in the Fields focuses on IRA activity in East Tyrone; its origins, and its campaign throughout The Troubles – as told by the people involved, including veterans from all sides in the conflict

BY MAL ROGERS

DEATH in the Fields tells the story of the IRA's East Tyrone Brigade and its war with the British from the beginning of the Troubles through to the ceasefire. The author is Jonathan Trigg a former British army officer, now a respected academic and an acknowledged expert on the history of World War II.

His book on the Tyrone Provos traces the origins of the modern organisation in the county all the way back through the Border Campaign of the 1950s, the Second World War, the 1916 Rising and the Anglo-Irish War. Trigg delves into the seeds of the conflict with the Plantation of Ulster and before that the 12th century invasion by the Anglo-Normans.

Based on dozens of interviews with veterans from all sides of the conflict including former members of the British army, the RUC, the UDR, the Special Branch, British Special Forces, loyalist paramilitaries and the Provisional IRA – many of whom spoke openly for the first time – this is one of the most comprehensive insights into the paramilitary struggle.

Trigg, despite his British military background, seems to come with very little colonial baggage. He is a skilled historian, and gives a comprehensive account of conflict in the ancient province of Ulster, Tyrone in particular.

“War and banditry became part of Tyrone’s character before the Flight of the Earls in 1607 left the native Irish leaderless,” he writes, and history certainly bears him out. The seemingly soporifically beautiful and tranquil lands of Tyrone saw some of the worst events of the Troubles, and – as Jonathan Trigg points out – insurrection in the county took place over centuries.

In 1177 John de Courcy, second son of an Anglo-Norman noble, set out from Dublin to conquer as much of present-day Tyrone as he could. Four hundred years later the arrival of thousands of Scots and English Protestants created a mixed population where Catholics were second-class citizens.

In the run up to the First World War, Protestants and Catholics in Tyrone viewed each other with suspicion as the argument for Home Rule raged.

Both traditions fought together in the trenches even as the Easter Rising of 1916 created a national trauma back home. But the Rising was a conspicuous failure in Tyrone, which helped foster insurgency – Tyrone became a battleground in the Anglo-Irish War, but was left in the new state of Northern Ireland.

The IRA tried again in World War



A DISPUTED LAND: The now peaceful countryside of rural Tyrone Picture: Courtesy of Tourism Ireland

II; England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity, but the IRA’s plans to unite Ireland by force of arms came to nought.

In 1956 the IRA launched Operation Harvest, yet another attempt to destroy Northern Ireland. But lacking popular support the IRA gave up its offensive in the early 1960s.

The book is arranged chronologically into decades.

1969 & THE 1970S: THE IRAS EARLY YEARS IN TYRONE

The 1960s saw civil rights protests grip Tyrone, but despite key events such as the Caledon squat (a pivotal moment in helping to kick-start insurgency), the outbreak of the Troubles didn’t really touch Tyrone at first.

The introduction of internment in August 1971 transformed the fortunes of the Provisional IRA in the county, and volunteers killed the first British soldier in Tyrone the following month.

The Tyrone IRA increasingly began to target the RUC and local members of the UDR, mostly when they were off-duty. This side of the conflict in the county was viewed as nakedly sectarian by the county’s Protestants and sowed a legacy of bitterness that endured for decades.

On February 26, 1978, Britain’s Special Air Service shot dead IRA volunteer Paul Duffy as he retrieved a mortar bomb from a weapons cache – the first of many such SAS operations against the Tyrone IRA.

Britain’s response to the IRA campaign was becoming more



FORTIFIED: Loughgall Police Station in 2010 Picture: Henry Clark on Wikimedia Commons

sophisticated, and as their intelligence gathering improved, particularly through the use of informers, the Provisionals were in danger of defeat.

The IRA’s response was to radically overhaul their organisation, creating small, tightly knit units where information was strictly controlled.

THE 1980S: THE RISE OF EAST TYRONE’S A TEAM

On January 22, 1981, East Tyrone IRA attacked 86-year-old Sir Norman Stronge in his ancestral home at Tynan Abbey, killing him and his 48-year-old son James. It was the start of a deadly new phase in the IRA’s war in Tyrone.

The RUC stations were destroyed and a number of contractors who helped build or repair RUC stations were killed. Tyrone had become a blood-stained war zone.

1987: LOUGHGALL

The so-called A Team of the IRA targeted the isolated RUC station in Loughgall in north Armagh, planning to use a bomb in a JCB digger to destroy the station.

The author Trigg evidently knows a lot about ambushes and counter-insurgency.

The chapter shines a light into an organisation that is almost like an ancient clan system, and how they went about planning and executing their missions.

Heavily armed, the team launched the attack in Loughgall, but the SAS had prior knowledge. All eight volunteers were shot dead by the SAS in the IRA’s biggest ever loss since Clonmult in 1921. An innocent civilian was also killed in the incident.

Did an informer tell the British about the plan, and if so who was he or she and are they still alive – or did they die in the crossfire?

These and many other questions are posed in this compressive book. There are, of course, many books about the Troubles, but this is one of the few that focuses on one area, and on one unit.

■ **Death in the Fields: The IRA & East Tyrone** by Jonathan Trigg is published by Merrion Press

