

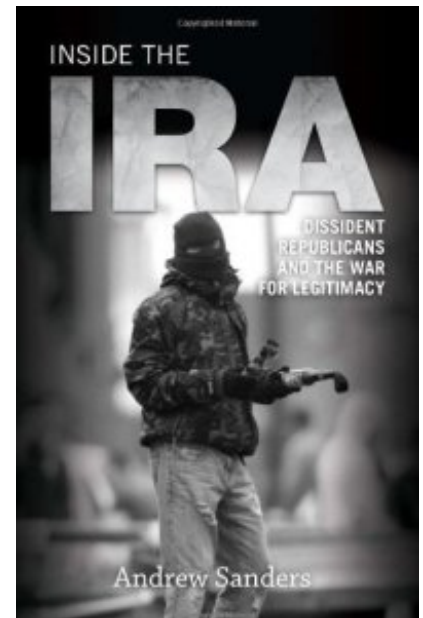
# Book Review: Inside the IRA: Dissident Republicans and the War for Legitimacy

Dec 24 2011

*Andrew Sanders provides readers with an excellent backdrop to the underlining tensions that continue to persist in modern Northern Irish civil and political society, finds Ben Davies.*

**Inside the IRA: Dissident Republicans and the War for Legitimacy. Andrew Sanders. Edinburgh University Press. April 2011.**

It is curious as to the ignorance afforded to the politics of Ireland from these shores when our own histories are so inextricably linked. Whilst Andrew Sanders is not attempting to address this issue in the symbiotic manner of historians such as Roy Foster in accomplished works such as *Paddy and Mr. Punch: Connections in Irish and English History*, in *Inside the IRA* he does provide his audience with a well-rounded and highly objective overview that summarises the complexities of Republican politics on both sides of the Irish border. With the issues of sectarian conflict again creeping back into the news, this seminal work, which provides us with the first scholarly analysis of Irish Republican division, provides us with an excellent backdrop to the underlining tensions that continue to persist in modern Northern Irish civil and political society. Focusing on the development, rampant factionalism and finally implications in contemporary Northern Ireland of the Republican movement, this work is thoroughly researched, accessible and provides the reader with a broad insight into the complexities of the oft-misunderstood Republican campaigns from 1916 to the present day.



The opening quote in the book, attributed to author Brendan Behan, provides an apt overview to Sanders' core argument throughout the text. Behan quipped; '*The first item on the agenda of any new Irish organisation was the split*'. Although glib, as the book progresses, Sanders' research conclusively strives to validate this claim. This is a key leitmotif and emerges from the first chapter. This seeks to provide context to the origins of Republican division and acknowledges any common themes that appear across the twentieth century. One example of this is provided by the formation of *Clann na Poblachta* by Seán MacBride in 1946. This is seen as an apt metaphor for the failures of the wider Republican movement. Sanders concludes that upon being in a five-party coalition with *Fine Gael*, *Clann na Poblachta* recognised the legitimacy of the Dáil Éireann, in the process confirming the existence of a non-thirty-two county version of the Republic. This, Sanders correctly asserts, is part of a wider theme across Republican movements, notionally the inability to redress ideology and pragmatism and the relationship of these two concepts to formulating effective, populist strategies. He says; '*Groups have frequently found it difficult to maintain a position of principle of lengthy periods of time once it becomes apparent that the route to power lies inside government rather than outside*'. This quote is as true of *Clann na Poblachta* in the 1940s as it would be of Official IRA in the 1970s and later *Sinn Féin* in the 1990s.

Sanders acknowledges that the troubles of the 1970s provided the nexus in cementing the very real and problematic schisms in the Republican movement. He analyses these events through a broad perspective which adds legitimate context to the intricate tapestry from which Republican division was woven. It is of particular interest how he uses the wider geo-political conflict of the Cold War as an embodiment of this split, in which the Official Republicans maybe misguidedly looked to the Soviet Union for external support, a peculiar move considering the uneasy historical relationship between Marxism and Irish Republicanism, whilst the Provisional IRA successfully exploited the historical ties between Ireland and the United States. In light of the body of research Sanders has committed to assessing the impact of Irish Americans upon the Republican movement, I feel that the wider implications of the Official IRA's relationship with Brezhnev have to be examined in greater detail. This is a minor criticism however, particularly when considering Sanders' wider assertions on how traditional Republicanism was undermined by a lack of practical, domestic insight. He states that the decline of support for the Official IRA hinged upon its failure to engage with the everyday realities facing the Catholic community in Northern Ireland and these arguments remain well-sourced and convincing.

An interesting dimension to *Inside the IRA* is the thorough analysis of the origins, development and decline of American involvement in the Republican movement. This area of historiography has been surprisingly neglected, although Sanders' approach to the topic is unusually disjointed and would merit better representation in a text dedicated solely to the subject. This however does provide wider context as to the evolution and impact of harnessing American support towards Republicanism and the impact of shifts in Republican strategy on its Irish American support base. Sanders provides an excellent example that feeds back into his initial pragmatism against ideology argument in which he states; '*With Sinn Féin moving towards a more politicised version of the struggle, it was natural they should seek political allies*', citing the interest of senior representatives such as Tip O'Neill and Ted Kennedy during the prison campaign of the 1980s.

The major strength behind this work remains its objectivity, coupled with Sanders' dedication to research. Invariably topics of this nature rouse often polarised and biased accounts of questionable empirical value. Sanders does not fall in to this trap, and creates a sustained, logical argument of the reasons behind Republican dissidence whilst drawing upon exclusive interviews that have been gathered from members of all dissident and mainstream republican organisations, loyalist factions and security force sources. This is particularly impressive considering the traditional omertà that surrounds these groups. Sanders successfully constructs a narrative of the evolution, and some could conclude dissolution, of the complex development of Republican activity across one hundred years. He avoids making knee-jerk assumptions and is quick to balance his assertions towards the split in Republican movements by off-setting this with, per se, the feuds prevalent amongst Loyalist paramilitaries in the 1990s.

*Inside the IRA* triumphs in its attempts to provide a consistent narrative and analysis of what is a complex and often controversial era of history. This book succeeds in providing a solid foundation and broad overview to the Republican movement and places this into a broader context with the internal situation in Northern Ireland, particularly with the British involvement and the actions of the Loyalist paramilitaries. However, without appearing to be overtly critical, it is a truly thankless task producing a totally integrated work. I feel that a broader interpretation of the external influences on the Republican movement, particularly focusing more expansively on its international relationships, would provide a more far-reaching perspective. However Sanders' work currently stands alone in this field and is a testament to thorough scholarship and cogent historical reasoning.

**Inside the IRA: Dissident Republicans and the War for Legitimacy. Andrew Sanders. Edinburgh University Press. April 2011.**