

Ireland's questionable 'pogrom'

Sean Gannon on revisionist approaches to Limerick's anti-Jewish 'pogrom'

LIMERICK IS FIERCELY PROUD of its heritage and quick to defend perceived slights on its honour – such as its grim depiction in 'Angela's Ashes', and the sensationalism of the myth of "Stab City".

But another battle for the city's good name has been waged, below the national radar, a battle to erase what is perhaps the greatest blot on the copybook of Limerick's reputation – the anti-Jewish "pogrom" of 1904. According to the generally accepted version of events, a Redemptorist priest, John Creagh, delivered two anti-Semitic sermons in January of that year that sparked anti-Jewish riots and a two-year economic boycott that forced most of the community to leave.

This version was most vigorously propounded by the late ex-Mayor of Cork, Gerald Goldberg, whose family had lived through the events, and by the late Limerick politician, Jim Kemmy. It has also been broadly supported by historian Dermot Keogh and has been widely propagated in the media.

However, over the course of the last 25 years, a number of Limerick historians and writers have called into question almost every aspect of the traditional narrative, believing it to be based on a series of misconceptions and misrepresentations which unfairly sully the "fair fame" of their city.

Whether the events of 1904 may properly be described as a "pogrom" is, for them, at the heart of the matter. Citing dictionary definitions of the term which invariably refer to organised massacres, both the Redemptorist historian, the late Michael Baily, and the writer, Criostóir O'Flynn, have dismissed the term "pogrom" as an "emotive... misnomer for minor disturbances", disturbances that consisted merely of "public harassment in the form of insults and some stone-throwing", mainly by women and children. Des Ryan, a local historian whose pioneering research into

Limerick's Jewish community has provided an important reference point for subsequent studies, also rejects the term.

Certainly, an examination of the historical sources bears out their contention that there was little serious or sustained violence against the Jews as a result of John Creagh's words. Local Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) reports and records from Limerick's Court of Petty Sessions describe sporadic, mainly low-level incidents, most of which occurred in the aftermath of Creagh's first sermon on January 11, 1904, and before his exhortation against violence one week later. By January 22, the RIC was reporting "no further demonstrations against the Jews", while the 'Limerick Leader' proclaimed "Peace in the City" five days later.

Nonetheless, there is a tendency in revisionist versions to downplay the violence too far. This "public harassment" also included damage to property and physical assaults and was carried out on at least two occasions by mud-throwing crowds of 200-300 people. Furthermore, the police believed worse violence was prevented only by their presence.

them from their former homes in Lithuania; in fact, describing 1904 as a "pogrom" risks diminishing their earlier suffering at Cossack hands. Keogh himself appears to have changed his mind on the issue, stating in 1998 that the retention of "pogrom" was justified, but expressing a preference for the word "boycott" seven years later.

However, for the Limerick revisionists, the word "boycott" is yet another unacceptable overstatement. They reject the notion that John Creagh's sermons led to a general Jewish boycott, arguing that only moneylenders and those trading on the weekly instalment system (selling goods on credit) were affected. And despite clear evidence that shopkeepers were targeted and reports that schoolchildren were shunned, this may largely be true. But the ostracism of Jewish credit traders and moneylenders amounted to a general boycott de facto as, with few exceptions, the community's breadwinners all worked as one and/or the other. According to the RIC, about 40 Jews went out collecting instalments the Monday after Creagh's first sermon, amounting to over 80 per cent of the adult male population. And while the incidence of

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But was it a "pogrom"? Gerald Goldberg argued, with some justice, that Jews do not "need a dictionary to define a pogrom", and Dermot Keogh quotes him as saying that the word "came immediately to the lips of Limerick's Jews when they found themselves under attack". However, they would presumably soon have realised that this was not, in Louis Lentin's words, "a pogrom in the Russian sense", and the outrages to which they were subjected in Limerick were not comparable to the murderous Czarist persecutions which had earlier driven many of

money lending has usually been downplayed, it appears to have been more widespread than generally acknowledged. In fact, the UK Jewish leadership suspected that "many of the Limerick Jews indulged in money-lending under cover of peddling"; certainly, families such as the Graffs, Tooheys, Martinsons and Maissells, listed as drapers and peddlars on the 1901 census, also acted as lenders.

According to the Limerick revisionists, these were the men in Creagh's crosshairs. His target was not the Jewish community's religious beliefs but the trading practices of

these of its members. And this was the view of the RIC at the time: it reported that there was "no religious censure" of the Jews and that Creagh advocated a boycott "not so much because they are Jews as because their methods of dealing are in his judgement injurious to the poorer classes".

But if Creagh's sole concern was the economic exploitation of the poor through "usurious percentage", he need have looked no further than his own flock. Limerick's leading moneylenders were Christians and non-Jewish businesses extended far more credit than Jews. And, despite Creagh's claim that the Mayor's Court of Conscience, where small debts were recovered, had become "a special court for the whole benefit of the Jews" (337 Jewish summonses had been issued in 2002, he said; 226 in 1903), in

the ritual murderers of Christian children who, as the "greatest haters of the name of Jesus Christ and of everything Christian", worked tirelessly against Catholic interests.

But the revisionists have shrugged off Creagh's egregious Jew-hatred in their efforts to mitigate his actions. For example, Michael Baily dismissed it as "regrettable sectarian pulpit oratory" which was "the stock in trade of polemics at the time", while Des Ryan argues that although admittedly "a bit strong", Creagh's language was no stronger than that which he used in his previous campaign against Limerick's publicans.

For Criostóir O'Flynn, however, Creagh's anti-Judaism poses no problem at all as it is, he believes, fundamentally sound. On the charge of deicide, Creagh was simply "stating what every Christian believes", while periodic,

screened here on Holy Thursday night.

O'Flynn, a member of Aosdána in receipt of the *cnuas*, even appears to give credence to the myth of ritual murder.

The revisionists are on surer ground in challenging the notion that the events of 1904 sounded the death knell for Jewish life in Limerick. Keogh writes that "virtually the entire Jewish community in the city joined the exodus" while, according to Kemmy, the "pogrom" precipitated a decline which "could not be arrested until eventually only one Jewish family remained in the city". The real figure, however, is clearly lower than that generally given (though conflicting historical sources make it difficult to ascertain precisely how many Jews left Limerick as a result of the boycott).

Most published accounts maintain that just six Jewish families remained by October 1904. But a detailed RIC County Inspectorate report states that, of the 32 Jewish families living in the city in January 1904, just eight had left by March 1905, and just five of these "directly owing to the agitation". Furthermore, Des Ryan's careful analysis of the 1901 and 1911 city census records reveals that, of the 26 Jewish families remaining in Limerick in March 1905, at least 13 were still there six years later. And the fact that, according to the 1911 returns, nine new Jewish families had by then joined the community demonstrates it was not in irreversible decline (it numbered 122 persons in 1911 as against 171 in 1901). True, almost all Limerick's Jews had departed by the mid-1920s. But to blame a 20-year old "pogrom" for this is perverse.

So, while some of its conclusions must be qualified, the work of the Limerick revisionists has undoubtedly shaken the foundations of the traditional history of 1904. The agenda-driven polemics of Criostóir O'Flynn may be legitimately discounted but the issues raised in Des Ryan's dispassionate, evidence-based articles cannot be so easily ignored. Further research is required to provide a definite picture of what happened and why. But enough information has now been unearthed to disentangle reality from myth and put events in their proper perspective.



A real pogrom: Bialystok 1906

reality non-Jews summoned far more defaulters. Both Des Ryan and Criostóir O'Flynn take Creagh's figures at face value. But on the evidence of surviving court ledgers (those for 1900-1909 have unfortunately been lost), those figures would appear to be greatly inflated. And, of the 1,387 actions heard in other Limerick courts in 1903, just 31 were taken by Jews.

In any case, the fact remains that, whatever Creagh's primary motivation, his sermons were virulently anti-Semitic. He denounced the Jews as divinely rejected Christ-killers and

"open and active hostility to Christians" by Jews is a matter of historical record. In his book, 'Beautiful Limerick', O'Flynn cites examples of Jewish anti-Catholicism: alleged Israeli discrimination against Christian religious; an unfavourable review of Mel Gibson's 'The Passion of the Christ' by the Dublin-based Israeli sociologist, Ronit Lentin; and a Discovery Channel documentary, 'The Real Jesus', in which, he writes, "a string of Jewish academics" disputed the Gospels' historicity and which "some Jewish source in the US" malevolently arranged to have

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