

Defending Trinity College Dublin, Easter 1916
By Rory Sweetman. Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2019.
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Reviewed by Brad Patterson

Understandably, the centenary of the Dublin Rising of Easter 1916, a critical turning point in modern Irish history, has generated literally shelves of new interpretations and commemorative volumes: some overtly celebratory; others more soberly reflective; yet others again offering quite fresh perspectives. Rory Sweetman's *Defending Trinity College Dublin, Easter 1916* falls clearly into the third category, in many respects as a footnote to the mayhem, albeit an intriguing one. Focusing on an attempted rebel attack on the College on the first night of the Rising, and the defence that was mounted, the author strongly argues that what transpired has long been misinterpreted, when not completely ignored by Irish historians. In consequence, the efforts of a small group of primarily New Zealand soldiers have been consigned to the dustbin of history. He argues strongly that the contingent's contribution was critical to saving the College from almost certain destruction in later fighting, thereby ensuring it survived to become the respected institution it remains.

The historiographical problem that Sweetman almost immediately confronts is did in fact the rebels make any serious attempt to take the College? The received wisdom has been no. But if not, they arguably should have done so, the complex, between the two main clusters of rebel activity, occupying a strategic location within the city and astride the principal communication line between the two. Further, within the College grounds there was an OTC armoury storing rifles and ammunition. Yet, for whatever reasons, when the rebel corps took up their positions early Easter Monday morning there was no immediate move on the College. Initially largely undefended, only a skeleton group of defenders could immediately be assembled, but throughout the day little happened, sporadic sniping apart. In the course of the evening, however, there is strong evidence from subsequent rebel statements that a decision was made to launch an attack on the College's West Front Building, and in preparation further snipers were placed on the rooftops of buildings behind the Bank of Ireland, directly across the road on College Street. To their surprise, their firing was met by an accurate fusillade from the roof of the West Front Building, a three-hour gun battle eventually ending in stalemate. While it has been suggested that the defenders may have believed their counter was to an attack on the Bank of Ireland rather than their own position, by morning any idea of an early takeover had been abandoned by the rebels.

At the outset the group preparing to defend the College was eclectic, a mix of academics, current students and alumni, as well as College porters. It was undoubtedly soon stiffened by the serendipitous arrival of a small band of colonial troops: South Africans; Canadians; one Australian; and five New Zealanders. Caught in the confusion in the city, all had sought refuge within the College walls. Sweetman's concentration is on the New Zealanders who took part in the defence (Corporal Alexander Don, Sergeant Frederick Nevin, Corporal John Garland, Lance-Corporal Finlay McLeod, and Private Edward Waring), all combat veterans. As far as he is able, he weaves pen portraits of the five, their pre-service backgrounds and their military experiences. That the Kiwis came to be involved at all was a matter of pure chance, they being in the city either on furlough or as convalescents. Their recent record proved a boon, it being on their initiative that the western perimeter was bolstered, the New Zealanders themselves taking up the key marksmen's positions on the West Front Building roof and engaging the rebels. They were to remain there for 72 hours, notwithstanding the College defenders being relieved by regular troops late Tuesday.

Their application to the task drew the admiration of their fellows, John Joly, professor of geology, and himself present throughout, lavishing high praise: ‘they were an outstanding gang. I have never seen their like’.

Why, then, the century of silence? Sweetman’s digging into some past accounts suggests some possible reasons. Contemporary newspapers, Irish and British, misconstrued what had happened, if indeed they reported on the episode at all. The notion that it was the Bank of Ireland that was under threat attained greater credence. Moreover, with the danger past, the College itself chose rather to extoll the gallantry of its own staff and students who had risen to the occasion, preventing damage to the College and discouraging looting in its immediate environs. At the time this was conceived as a public demonstration of loyalty to government and Crown, ultimately leading to distinguished conduct recognition, this including several senior staff absent from the College at the time. The vital role of the colonial troops was never publicly acknowledged. If indeed there was a planned attack, for Irish nationalist historians a failure was not to be dwelt upon. Over the years even the participation of staff and students came to be minimised. In post 1922 Ireland there was no positive margin, successive official Trinity College histories including little on the affair, the latest - published in 2015 – going so far as to claim no attack on the College was ever countenanced. *Ipsa facto*, any stout defence was imaginary. It was this final discounting that aroused the author’s interest, motivating his meticulous re-evaluation.

Sweetman, as has come to be expected in his writing, emphasises the need for historians to constantly interrogate their sources, taking nothing as given. His use of evidence gleaned from archives in six countries, his ability to turn up previously ignored fragments, is impressive. Notwithstanding institutional coyness, records held at Trinity College have been integral, these including letters from cadets and staff enrolled in the OTC, also reports by individuals such as Ernest Alton, the nominal commander, and John Joly, the latter’s extended reminiscences providing a valuable counterpoint to hitherto accepted official versions. An invaluable additional source has been the retrospective testimonies of rebel participants, held by the Bureau of Military History. It was from these that the intent to belatedly launch an assault on the College was confirmed. Unfortunately, there are no similar files for the New Zealand soldiers, and they appear to have left no relevant personal papers, but the void is to an extent offset by publication of their letters home in New Zealand newspapers. A tendency to over romanticise, however, has to be taken into account. Contextualising these personal statements has been research in military personnel files, not only in New Zealand but also in South Africa, Canada and Australia, as well as the United Kingdom. The author’s combing of newspapers and periodicals has been extensive, the whole of the research well backed by wide reading in the secondary literature.

If Trinity College had been physically destroyed or even badly damaged in the conflict, whether by rebel action or an uncompromising British response, a not unlikely outcome, Sweetman suggests that the emerging Irish state would have been loth to pay for its restoration. An Ascendancy symbol, it was widely seen as ‘a bastion of Protestantism and Unionism’. If that had happened there would likely have been no record of the five New Zealanders presence in Dublin during the momentous days of the Rising to reclaim. Equally, to interpose a personal note, there would have been no opportunity for the author to himself become an alumnus of Trinity half a century later. In the Introduction he recounts how, notwithstanding his Irish birth, he was required to pay international student fees on his enrolment in 1977. Tongue in cheek, he proposes that having set the record straight about the New Zealand involvement in defence

of the College, consideration of a refund on the basis of his New Zealand citizenship might not be out of order!

Some might argue that this Easter Week vignette could as effectively been presented as a substantial journal article rather than as a short monograph, but we have reason to be grateful for the detail in the supporting evidence offered, a rare pleasure in the age of outlines, tweets and sound bytes. As a New Zealand citizen of Irish of Irish origin, Dr Sweetman felt impelled to do those otherwise undistinguished soldiers from his adopted country justice; as an Irish citizen of New Zealand origin, this reviewer is glad he has done so.