

ARTICLE

# “All the nightmare images of ethnic conflict in the twentieth century are here”: Erroneous statistical proofs and the search for ethnic violence in revolutionary Ireland, 1917–1923

John M. Regan

School of Humanities, University of Dundee,  
Dundee, UK

**Correspondence**

John M. Regan, School of Humanities,  
University of Dundee, Perth Road, Dundee  
DD1 4HN, UK.

Email: j.regan@dundee.ac.uk

**Abstract**

In the 1990s, Canadian historian Peter Hart claimed tens of thousands of native southern Irish Protestants experienced something akin to “ethnic cleansing” at the hands of the IRA in the early 1920s. Hart's research revised the “Irish nationalist revolution” (ca. 1917–1923) as an essentially ethnic conflict, and this article re-examines his evidence and methodology. Exaggerating the number of forced migrations, Hart's analysis rests on erroneous statistical proofs which he supported with a gross evidence selection bias. To better understand Hart's revision, his work is compared with Michael A. Bellesiles' *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (2000), which also exhibited similar but also very different statistical errors. A central argument in this article is that erroneous statistical proofs are best understood as social constructs, where they articulate the prejudices of their host academies. Greater awareness of this problem is needed if it is to be avoided in the future.

**KEYWORDS**

erroneous statistical proofs, ethnic cleansing, ethnic conflict, ideological revisionism, national foundation narratives, national identities

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, history simply does not add up. Redefining events or a period by overturning what has gone before, some historical revisions advance statistical proofs to confirm beyond doubt their bona fides. Occasionally, interpretative anomalies, great and small, identify the novel scheme is compromised, even perhaps bogus. This article looks at what happens when those all-important headline statistical proofs turn out to be erroneous. Primarily, this article focuses on the statistics underpinning Peter Hart's reinterpretation of the so-called "Irish revolution" (ca. 1917–1923) as an essentially ethnic conflict, and the article also establishes why Hart's figures are wildly inaccurate. Developed during the 1990s, Hart advanced a novel thesis that in the early 1920s tens of thousands of native southern Irish Protestants had been ethnically cleansed (Hart, 1996). Moreover, in his landmark 1998 monograph, *The IRA and its enemies: Violence and community in Cork 1916–1923*, Hart claimed that the Protestant population of county Cork suffered intimidation and mass forced migration at the hands of the IRA. "Hundreds [of native Protestants] were forced to seek refuge," wrote Hart, "[t]housands more went on the run ... Thousands more left permanently in 1921 and 1922, rapidly reducing the Protestant minority in Cork to nearly half its pre-revolutionary size," or a loss of more than 11,000 people (Hart, 1998: 313). There is no denying that sectarian intimidation and worse happened amid the nationalist struggle for independence (1917–1923). What is argued here, however, is that the scale of the violence and intimidation requires careful calibration and the perpetrators must be clearly identified.

To further elucidate Hart's methodology, comparisons are drawn with Emory University historian Michael A. Bellesiles and his prizewinning book, *Arming America: The origins of a national gun culture* (2000). Bellesiles' statistical error originated in an article he published in the *Journal of American History* (JAH) in 1996, "The Origins of Gun Culture in the United States." Wherein, Bellesiles calculated that before 1865, guns in the early American republic were far scarcer and more underutilised than hitherto was understood. Bellesiles' revision challenged notions of a long dominant gun culture, but his statistics could not be substantiated. Employing erroneous statistical proofs, Bellesiles attempted to re-engineer a national foundation-narrative and to modify national identities. For some Irish and Middle Eastern scholars, this kind of applied revisionism, otherwise "invented history," is trumpeted as the historian's true vocation (Fanning, 1986; Lewis, 1975). Quoting Bernard Lewis' (1975) book *History, Remembered, Recovered, Invented*, in 2013, Ronan Fanning acknowledged the so-called "inventors" as those who "would rewrite history not as it was, or as they have been taught it was but as they would prefer it to have been" (Fanning, 2013: 3). As we shall see erroneous statistical proofs are powerful tools when it comes to "improving" the past, and while they may be the haphazard result of statistical ineptitude or even innumeracy, a central argument in this article is that erroneous statistical proofs can be best understood as social constructs of their host academies. This article then tells the story of the struggle between invention and empirical scholarship inside the historical profession on both sides of the Atlantic, and it contrasts some very different responses to the problem of erroneous statistical proofs.

## 2 | RECONCEPTUALISING REPUBLICAN VIOLENCE

In his article "Languages of conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles," Richard Bourke examines interpretative models describing modern conflicts identifying two fundamental types: "theories of primitive regression" and "theories of cultural solidarity." Typically, the former depicts modern conflicts in terms of "tribalism," "atavism" and "mysticism," while the latter describes "clashing civilizations," "cultural collisions" and "ethnic conflicts." Bourke complains that the languages associated with these models were developed to explain past conflicts and are later applied "whenever circumstances seem to fit." "The application of these categories is usually schematic or even inapposite," Bourke says, "so that they lack any efficacy as forms of causal explanation" (Bourke, 2011: 544–545).

Bourke argues primitive and cultural models of conflict are "primordial" (in Clifford Geertz's sense of the term), to the extent that they "understand [group] attachments to be governed by "given sentimental ties." Explaining conflict, both models downplay the role of political principles and overemphasise emotional attachments in the

formation of group allegiances. After 1969, Bourke offers the so-called “Troubles” in Northern Ireland as an example of this mismatch between language and conflict. Applied to Northern Ireland, the primitivist and cultural models reduce the conflict to “automatic emotional responses ... a collision between primordial ‘gut’ reactions,” otherwise tit-for-tat explanations of killing. This kind of analysis diminishes the conflict’s ideological base—the dispute about the form and function of representative democracy in Ireland. Bourke’s contention that “concrete evidence is rarely produced to support such abstract schemes of analysis, which frequently predetermine the interpretation of the relevant data” is a central concern in what follows. Bourke also warns against, “loaded vocabularies inflected rhetorically to serve an ideological agenda” (Bourke, 2011: 546). This problem is identified where insidious or absurd analogies are drawn with other far more violent conflicts, and a politically charged vocabulary is imposed on the study of violence in twentieth century Ireland.

In the 1990s, the primitive and cultural theories of violence Bourke describes drifted into causal explanations of Irish republican violence ca. 1917–1923. In articles and books, Peter Hart totally revised nationalist readings of revolutionary violence (Hart, 1993, 1996, 1998, 2003). Suggestive of descriptions of the contemporary conflicts in Northern Ireland alongside the Balkans, Hart reconceived the Irish revolution as an essentially ethnic conflict. Centring on Belfast, few doubted an ethno-sectarian dimension to the violence in parts of Ulster during the 1920s, but Hart now said something similar happened throughout Ireland.

Comparing 1920s IRA culture with the rituals of agrarian secret societies, Hart’s (1990) debut publication, “Youth Culture and the Cork IRA,” introduced a strident interpretation of primitivist regression (Hart, 1990). Superseding this in 1996, Hart submerged his earlier analysis under an ethnic conflict thesis in his iconic essay “The Protestant Experience of Revolution in Southern Ireland.” In the inter-census period 1911–1926, Hart identified an alarming and indisputable 34% fall in the southern Protestant population (from 327,179 to 220,723). Vital to Hart’s reinterpretation was statistical evidence he gathered purportedly establishing that in the early 1920s tens of thousands of native Protestants experienced forced migration from Southern Ireland’s 26 counties. More alarming still, in nine of these counties Hart reported, “campaigns of what might be called ethnic cleansing” were directed at native Protestants by their Roman Catholic neighbours from inside the IRA (Hart, 1996: 92). This virulent “tribal war” had, apparently, long been suppressed in nationalist memories and subsequently ignored in the historiography of the revolutionary period (ca. 1917–1923).

Hart’s revision was controversial partly because the Protestant mass exodus he described shattered memories of a glorious national-liberation struggle, an inspiration for anti-imperialists the world over. Narrated in song and story, these memories cosseted a warm nostalgia for the war of independence (1919–1921) chivalrously fought by the “old-IRA.” As early as 1993, Hart claimed that in county Cork the old-IRA “wanted to exterminate or drive away all Protestants,” and this bold revision, alongside the attendant diction of genocide, impressed some influential historians (Hart, 1993: 980). In *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation 1890–1923* (2014), Roy Foster articulates Hart’s revision:

The nature of the [civil war’s] violence [1922–3] ... laid bare latent divisions among the revolutionaries, and unpalatable truths about the nature of revolution, already spelt out in the intimidation, score-settling and sectarian episodes which had characterized some IRA actions during the previous campaign [in the war of independence of 1919–21]. Threats were made, inter alia, to exterminate “every male member” of certain family connections, arousing ancient echoes of communal conflict. There was a marked exodus of frightened Protestants from some areas of the new Free State, especially during and after the Civil War (Foster, 2014: 281).

Beyond the academy, adopted by journalists and other influencers, Hart’s revision is still widely disseminated. Elsewhere, Hart’s research is enveloped in noisy disputes about his use of evidence.

Reconceptualising republican violence, Hart inspired more studies to compare Irish experiences with the “unmixing of peoples” across post-1918 Europe and the Middle East. Between 1918 and 1923, Tim Wilson

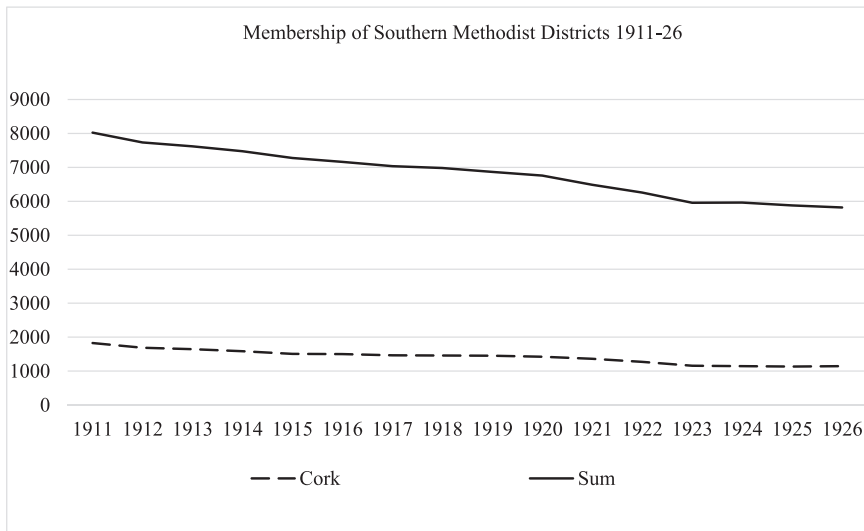
compared southern Ireland's ethnic conflict with Prussian Poland (Wilson, 2002). Likewise, Julia Eichenberg later paralleled the experiences of Jewish and Ukrainian minorities, also in Poland, with the fate of native southern Irish Protestants (Eichenberg, 2010). Gemma Clark's (2014) *Everyday Violence in the Irish Civil War* examines Munster counties Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford and makes comparisons between the experiences of southern Irish Protestants and the expulsion of Palestinian-Arabs from Palestine/Israel. Marie Coleman's recent work on Protestant demographic decline in county Longford apparently confirms Hart's statistical analysis (Coleman, 2020).

As inexplicable anomalies began to be identified in Hart's research there followed some back-peddling. After preliminary work on his doctoral thesis (published as *Frontiers of Violence: Conflict and Identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia 1918–22* [2010]), Wilson abandoned southern Ireland for Ulster as his Irish comparator. In 2003, Hart disowned his ethnic cleansing analogy, saying “necessary factors” justifying the term's application in southern Ireland were missing”; chiefly evidence of “state involvement” (Hart, 2003: 246). Opposing the 1921 Anglo-Irish “treaty” which recognised partition alongside the British King at the head of a new Irish Free state, Hart attributed ethnic violence against native southern Protestants exclusively to anti-state republicanism, most notably to the “anti-treaty IRA.” Other than Hart's, it is difficult to find any definition of ethnic cleansing where state involvement is an essential criterion (Bell-Fialkoff, 1993: 110). Hart's figures for the forced mass migration of native Protestants remained unrevised.

In the early 1990s, David Fitzpatrick, among Ireland's foremost demographic historians, first supervised and then examined Hart's doctoral dissertation at Trinity College Dublin, with Charles Townshend the external examiner (Meehan, 2014, 2015: 357–370). In 2013, Fitzpatrick made a remarkable intervention in the Hart controversy with his article “Protestant depopulation and the Irish revolution,” which all but demolished his former student's thesis. “To advance the study of Irish ‘ethnic cleansing’ beyond conjecture,” Fitzpatrick announced, “we must search for new sources.” Among the purportedly “fresh evidence,” Fitzpatrick uncovered is a “neglected set of annual returns” recording the membership of the Methodist Church in Ireland. Between the census years of 1911 and 1926, the Methodist returns enabled Fitzpatrick to forensically profile the Methodist demographic year by year. Fitzpatrick hypothesised that the Methodists characterise wider Protestant experiences of population decline. In the revolutionary triennium 1920–1923, Fitzpatrick reported native southern Protestant decline was slower than during the relative pre-war calm of 1911–1914. “Cork, Hart's prime example,” Fitzpatrick said, “did not experience abnormally heavy Protestant depopulation.” Adding “several other counties experiencing ‘similar campaigns of what might be termed “ethnic cleansing”’ ... were even less effected [than county Cork]” (Fitzpatrick, 2013: 644–645, 648).

Confirming earlier research by other scholars, Fitzpatrick concluded that after 1911 chronically low levels of births and marriages, alongside the failure to recruit new church members, explains the dramatic decline in the native southern Protestant population (Delaney, 2000; Farry, 2000; Keane, 2012; Maguire, 1993). Native Protestants had not been forced out. They had died out, in a demographic trend which can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century.

Perhaps surprisingly, given what Fitzpatrick had to say about “neglected sources,” Hart's (1996) revision also drew heavily on the Methodist returns. Indeed, in a footnote, Fitzpatrick added to this confusion where he attempted to resolve the anomaly of Hart's interpretation of the Methodist returns radically disagreeing with his own. Fitzpatrick wrote, “In a passage citing Methodist Church Minutes (1911–26), Hart claimed that ... ‘1921–3 were the crucial years, accounting for seventy-four per cent of the lost population [between 1911 and 1926].’” Fitzpatrick continues with his explanation of Hart's erroneous statistical proof: “Though it is true that 74 per cent of the loss between 1920 and 1926 occurred in 1921–3, this period [1921–3] accounted for only 30 per cent of the total decline from ... 1911 to 1926” (Fitzpatrick, 2013: n. 41). Changing his statistical base unannounced, Fitzpatrick speculated, Hart misled his readers into thinking there was a massive exodus of Methodists after 1921. Yet Fitzpatrick also quotes Hart saying “‘Methodist membership (in Cork district) was higher in 1918, 1919, and 1920 than in 1914, but fell precipitately thereafter.’” The Methodist returns in Figure 1 chart no such rise and subsequent dramatic fall in the Methodist congregations either side of 1920. Recognising Hart miscounted his Methodist data, Fitzpatrick's explanation of Hart's error as being one of shifting statistical bases is unsatisfactory.



Source: Minutes of Conference 1911-26, Sample: Cork, Waterford, Sligo, Limerick and Dublin Districts (Methodist Historical Society of Ireland, Edgehill College, Belfast).

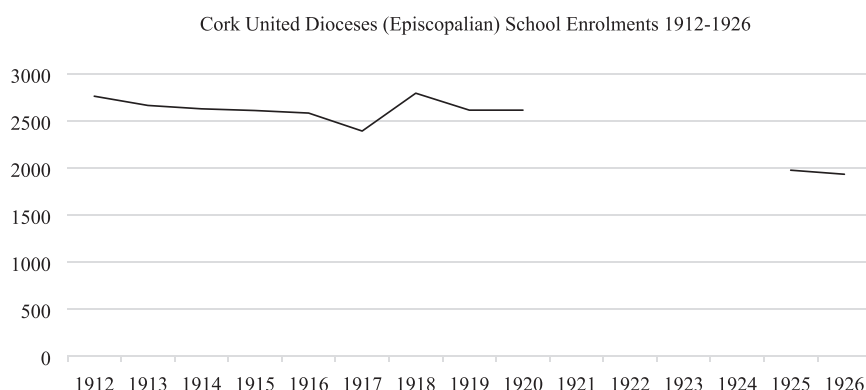
**FIGURE 1** Membership of Southern Methodist Districts 1911-1926

### 3 | MISCOUNTING NATIVE SOUTHERN IRISH PROTESTANTS

Establishing that forced ethnic migration explains native southern Protestant depopulation in his 1996 essay, Hart advanced what at first appears to be a logical causal explanation employing three criteria. First, Hart identifies (false) *correlations* purportedly demonstrating a relationship between republican violence and native Protestant flight. He then establishes a *temporal relationship*, where the cause supposedly predates the effect. Lastly, Hart determines the *presumptive agency*, identifying the cause behind the effect as widespread ethnic conflict driven forward by the IRA.

Sketching the hypothesis he enumerates in the next eight sentences, Hart begins quoting the *Church of Ireland Gazette* from 1923: “‘It is the bare truth to say that we have lost more of our people during the last three years than in the fifty-three since disestablishment [of the Church of Ireland]’” (Hart, 1996: 82-83). Hart then comments “the *Gazette*’s ... impression is supported by the annual reports of the Board of Education of the united dioceses of Cork, Cloyne, and Ross.” Where they “reveal a 30 per cent drop in the number of pupils between 1911 and 1926,” the Board’s reports do indeed follow the broad trend of Protestant decline, but Hart says “nearly three quarters of which took place in 1920-2.” Demonstrated in Figure 2, this is not however borne out in the Board’s reports. Because of the disturbed conditions, no register of school enrolments was taken between 1920 and 1924. Hart’s claim that nearly 75% of the decline in enrolments between 1911 and 1926 happens in 1920-1922, at best is a guess.

Having employed a false interpolation to report another false correlation, Hart introduces his third source. Between 1911 and 1926, parish preachers’ books record attendance at Sunday services in sampled Episcopalian churches across West Cork. “After 1919,” Hart writes, “attendance fell by 22 per cent with more than two thirds in a single year—1922.” Switching his statistical base from 1911-1926 (school enrolments) to 1919-1926 (church attendance) gives the false impression of sudden decline, because in the shorter period effects peculiar to 1922 are amplified. Notably, the evacuation from Southern Ireland of non-native Protestants in British crown forces along with their dependents.



Source: Annual Reports of the Board of Education of the Church of Ireland United

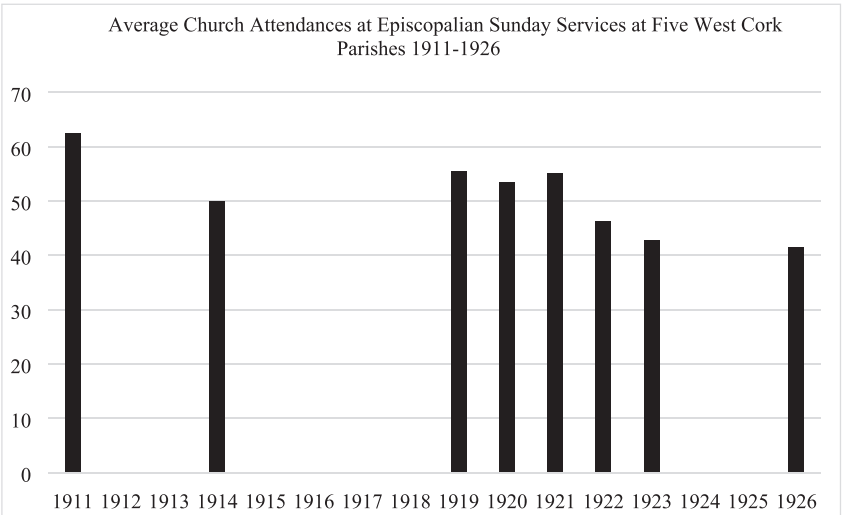
Dioceses of Cork, Cloyne, and Ross 1912-26 (Cork Diocesan Archive).

**FIGURE 2** Cork united dioceses (Episcopalian) school enrolments 1912–1926

Hart's West Cork churches go unidentified, but it is possible to examine the surviving preachers' books in the parish unions he sampled. Hart notably said that the crown forces “played no part in the West Cork figures” (because many were non-natives), but this is unlikely, if not impossible, because the preachers books record church attendance, not the occupations of members of the congregations (Hart, 1996: 83). Nevertheless, Abbeystrewry church is excluded from my sample, because before February 1922 its congregation was swelled by Skibbereen's British Army garrison. In the remaining five churches, between 1919 and 1926, Figure 3 identifies average Sunday attendance fell by 25%, and 1922 accounts for 63% of the total decline 1919–1926. These figures are extremely close to Hart's. However, counting Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) Auxiliary cadets among its congregation, my sample still includes St Coleman's Macroom. Excluding St Coleman's in Figure 4, typically, attendance falls by 32% between 1911 and 1926 in the remaining churches, with 1922 accounting for 8% of the total decline in this period. These Episcopalians behave much more like Fitzpatrick's Methodists than Hart's refugees, further establishing the Methodists are indeed representative of the wider Protestant experience. Accurately reported, none of Hart's datasets identify correlations between a mass exodus of native southern Protestants and the onset of republican violence. Moreover, all of Hart's datasets are miscalculated or misrepresented, yet somehow they are all made to agree with one another.

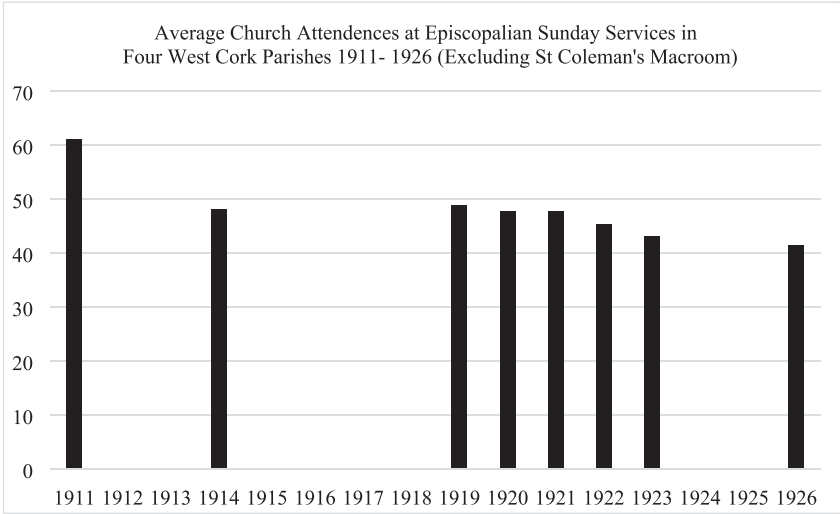
Purportedly, Hart identifies something resembling a temporal relationship between pre-existing ethnic antagonism and later manifestations of nationalist sectarianism in southern Ireland: “It was the Home Rule crisis (1885) that first raised the spectre of sectarian violence in the south, just as it did in Ulster.” Relating to “spectres,” this statement is likely true, but the actualities of the crisis played out differently in Ulster from the rest of Ireland, where in the south no evidence of widespread ethnic violence emerged. Hart presents further anecdotal evidence of Protestant *fears* of reprisals during the conscription crisis of 1918, which he claims were later realised after 1920: as “revolutionary violence spiralled upwards, more and more of its victims were civilians, and more and more of them were Protestants” (Hart, 1996: 89). For lack of hard evidence, Hart failed to establish a pre-existing ethnic conflict.

Lastly, Hart supposedly establishes ethnic violence as the presumptive agency leading to the flight of the native southern Protestants. Anticipating Bourke's observation on the diminished role of political principles in primordial explanations of conflicts, Hart first eliminates political explanations of violence directed at southern Protestants in a section subtitled “How loyal were the loyalists?” Which question Hart answers by saying that “importantly what Protestants—the vast majority of them—did not do during the guerrilla wars was resist the IRA or assist government forces.” Where Protestants were targeted in reprisals, Hart contends “this ... had little or nothing to do with the



Sample: Parish Preachers' Books for: St Coleman's, Macroom; St Helen's, Moviddy; St Peter's Carrigrohane; St Gobnait's Ballyvourney (Representative Church Body Library, Dublin). St Matthew's, Drimoleague (The Rectory, Dunmanway, county Cork).

**FIGURE 3** Average church attendances at Episcopal Sunday services at Five West Cork Parishes 1911–1926



Sample: Parish Preachers' Books for: St Helen's, Moviddy; St Peter's Carrigrohane; St Gobnait's Ballyvourney (Representative Church Body Library, Dublin), St Matthew's, Drimoleague (The Rectory, Dunmanway, county Cork).

**FIGURE 4** Average church attendances at Episcopal Sunday Services in Four West Cork Parishes 1911–1926 (excluding St Coleman's Macroom)

victims' actual behaviour." Instead, Hart advances three more colorations supposedly establishing that Protestants were targeted because of their religion. Of 113 houses burnt by the IRA, Hart contends, 85% belonged to Protestants, and all the farms taken over by the IRA from alleged "spies" were Protestant owned. A comparable 2012 study by James Donnelly Jr. concludes:

... examination of Big House burnings in 1920–21 does not offer any significant support to the view that members of the embattled Protestant landed elite of Cork were victimized because of their religion. What especially invited the hostility of the IRA were the political and social entanglements of particular landed families with the crown forces (Donnelly, 2012: 197).

Of over 200 civilians "shot" between 1920 and 1923 in county Cork, Hart says 70 were Protestants or 36%, whereas Protestants made up less than 8% of the population. Here, Hart counts as "shot" civilians wounded or killed by IRA firearms. Overrepresentation of Protestants in this category is likely explained by the participation of loyalist Protestants in anti-republican activities, most especially in West Cork, the critical evidence for which we will see Hart elided. Once the causal explanations linking republican violence to ethnic flight are debunked, Hart's thesis begins to flag.

Using erroneous statistical proofs joined to a fallacious causal explanation, it is remarkable to observe the new panorama Hart surveys: "All the nightmare images of ethnic conflict in the twentieth century are here: the massacres and the anonymous death squads, the burning homes and churches, the mass expulsions and trains filled with refugees." Hart concludes saying, "The timing and context of population loss turn the census figures into a political and social event, and turn Protestant decline into a Protestant exodus" (Hart, 1996: 98). Hart's revision was breathtakingly audacious, but it now rings hollow. That unburdened by verifiable evidence, and under the strictures of peer review, Hart's revision took root and continues to be endorsed by new research should be of interest to students of nationalism and ethnic conflict everywhere.

#### 4 | RE-ENGINEERING NATIONAL IDENTITIES

If Peter Hart made tens of thousands of native southern Irish Protestants disappear, Michael A. Bellesiles did something very similar for firearms in the early American Republic. Bellesiles identified the percentage of sampled probate inventories listing firearms rising from just 14.7% for 1765–1790 to 32.5% for 1858–1859. Reported in "Table One" in his 1996 *JAH* article and later reproduced in *Arming America*, this statistical proof is the foundation-stone of Bellesiles' revision. Provocatively, Bellesiles challenged both the idea that gun ownership was fundamental to "American identity" and the "myths" this belief fostered, among them that "arms ownership has always been nearly universal," and "American liberty was won and maintained by the actions of privately armed citizens." Motivating Bellesiles' revision was his conviction the "nation's history has been meticulously reconstructed to promote the necessity of a heavily armed American public" (Bellesiles, 2000: 9). Retelling the national story guns were made appear inconsequential in *Arming America*.

Bellesiles purposefully engaged the gun-control debate. Sickened to the core by America's gun violence, he attributed the killing to a tolerance of a pernicious, if undefined, "gun culture" (Bellesiles, 1996: 425–426). Referencing the recent massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado, Bellesiles' introduction to *Arming America* savaged the National Rifle Association (NRA) (Bellesiles, 2000: 7–8). It was a view which found warm support among America's liberal intelligentsia. For best article published in the *JAH* in 1996, Bellesiles collected the Brinkley-Stephenson prize from the American Organization of Historians (AOH), which accolade led to a book contract with the prestigious publishing house Knopf. Awarded by the trustees of Columbia University, in 2001, *Arming America* took the Bancroft prize for American history. Likewise, in 1999, *The IRA and its Enemies* won the Ewart-Biggs prize, awarded for promoting "peace and reconciliation in Ireland." Hart and Bellesiles received laudatory reviews in the



press and scholarly journals. For Bellesiles, the plaudits lasted but briefly. Both historians advanced positions acceptable to the sensibilities of their respective academies, while antagonising noisy lobbies outside the academic pale. Unsurprisingly, Bellesiles' sternest opposition came from within the NRA. In Britain and Ireland, Hart's revision incensed some Irish nationalists, the most vocal of whom were members of the Aubane Historical Society a small but influential ginger group. "The Aubane" opposes what it calls the "revisionist movement" or, alternatively, an alleged anti-nationalist sentiment in Irish historical scholarship (Clifford, 2002).

To communicate the scale of Hart's and Bellesiles' revisions, reviewers seized on their statistical proofs. In the *New York Times*, Garry Wills wrote that "searching through ... probate records from the frontier sections of New England and Pennsylvania for 1763 to 1790 [Bellesiles] found that only 14 percent of the men owned guns" (Wills, 2000). Richard Slotkin's review in *The Atlantic* noted "that from 1765 to 1790, on average, only 14.7 percent of such inventories listed firearms, and although the percentage rose steadily (as guns got cheaper), as late as 1859 it had risen no higher than 32.5 percent" (Slotkin, 2000). Reviewing Hart's, 1996 essay, Edna Longley reported the decline in native southern Protestants before 1926: "Hart shows 1921-3 were the crucial years, and the trigger was the increasingly sectarian thrust of the IRA's guerrilla campaign" (Longley, 1997: 108). Ruth Dudley Edwards devoted three pages of her book *Faithful Tribe* (1999) to Hart's essay. "The average Ulster Protestant," reported Edwards, "believes that between terror and Rome rule, Protestantism was virtually wiped out in the south of Ireland. The statistics back this up" (Edwards, 1999: 329-331). Developed during the 1990s, Hart's ethnic conflict thesis was constructed at a time of aggravated sectarian tensions and killings in Northern Ireland.

While ostensibly Bellesiles and Hart's revisions addressed gun ownership and demographic decline, by deconstructing national foundation narratives, they disturbed deeply held beliefs important to some American and Irish self-understandings. Both historians were re-engineering national identities using powerful erroneous statistical proofs. While this was undoubtedly revisionism at its most iconoclastic, it was never scholarly revisionism, not remotely.

A software engineer, Clayton Cramer, was Bellesiles' earliest challenger. Cramer's research for his master's degree disagreed with Bellesiles, and they exchanged correspondence in the pages of the *JAH*. Between 1810 and 1840, Cramer advanced evidence of high levels of gun ownership. Bellesiles curtly replied that the point of his prize-winning article "was to get beyond random anecdotes." Cramer then insisted that if Bellesiles' "probate data shows that guns were owned by a small minority of white males, then I conclude that the data suffers from a serious selection bias." Bellesiles countered that Cramer did not "cite any specific bias which ... [probate] records may introduce into the final statistical base." Bellesiles then drew attention to Cramer's posts on the website "Firearms Alert" soliciting gun enthusiasts to challenge "'Dr Bellesiles' laboratory of Frankenstein history." Bellesiles rounded on Cramer saying his "approach is not only ill-mannered and illogical, it is also highly unprofessional" (Bellesiles & Cramer, 1997: 1188-1190). Whatever else might be said, there was nothing illogical about Cramer.

Revising and republishing his 1996 essay in *The IRA at war* (2003), Hart replied to two academic critics: Enda Delaney, an emerging historian of Irish demography, and Michael Farry author of an impressive study of post-revolutionary county Sligo (Delaney, 2000; Farry, 2000). "The suddenness and scale of this movement [of native southern Protestants] eliminates any long-term demographic explanations," Hart confidently wrote. Delaney and Farry, added Hart, failed to grasp at issue was "relative decline," which for Protestants, unlike Roman Catholics, had experienced a violent jolt in the early 1920s. Farry's counter observation, Hart said, "may fit county Sligo ... but [it] does not work for the whole of southern Ireland" (Hart, 2003: 226). Earlier, Delaney had cautioned, "establishing a direct causal link between sectarian intimidation or harassment and migration is problematic." "The long interval between these two censuses [1911 and 1926]," continued Delaney, "makes it impossible to identify the precise timing of the changes over this period" (Delaney, 2000: 71). Saying this Delaney dismissed Hart's datasets, notably the Methodist returns which if consulted in Belfast could have quickly resolved matters. Responding that they failed "to explain the specific timing of the [Protestant] departures," Hart politely dismissed his academic critics. Overtaken by other controversies, and its significance unrecognised, the demographic debate faded from sight.

In 1998, Hart was awarded a research fellowship at Queen's University Belfast, where he soon took up a five-year-appointment as lecturer in history.<sup>1</sup> In 2002, Hart was appointed to a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Research Chair of Irish Studies at his *alma mater*, Memorial University in Newfoundland. A post Hart held until his tragically premature death in 2010. Astonishingly prolific, and loudly endorsed by his seniors, Hart was acknowledged by many as Fitzpatrick's heir apparent as the doyen of Irish revolutionary history.

Authored by professional historians, when negative reviews of *Arming America* eventually appeared, inside the American academy the early praise soon ran cold. Other than probates, Bellesiles used a dazzling array of sources, and, together with some of his more outlandish statements, all were now scrutinised (Churchill, 2001; Malcom, 2001). In a "Forum" published in the *William & Mary Quarterly* in January 2002, experts Gloria Main, Randolph Roth, Jack Rackove and Ira Gruber, endorsed some of the emerging criticisms of Bellesiles' scholarship (Roth et al., 2002). Used by Bellesiles, and again in an as then unpublished article by James Lindgren and Justin Lee Heather of Northwestern University, Roth checked the probate records for Vermont and confirmed Lindgren and Heather's higher count of gun ownership (Lindgren & Heather, 2002). Roth found Bellesiles' low homicide figures unconvincing, and Roth was also scornful of Bellesiles' arithmetic. The cells of Table One did not add up, including those for the headline statistic of 14.7% for gun ownership between 1765 and 1790 (Roth, 2002: 223–240, 228 n. 17). Roth had identified the source problem in Bellesiles' *magnum opus*, but Roth put most of his criticism of Bellesiles' statistics into a footnote, and this relegation is material to our discussion.

Explaining major anomalies in historical writing the practical obstacle remains that on first sight, there is no obvious hierarchy of significance in the evidence. Confronted with a bewildering array of citations in hundreds, even thousands of footnotes, it is difficult to know where to begin to look for the source of the problem. Yet errors made interpreting anecdotal evidence necessarily do not jeopardise or even impinge on any overarching thesis. Statistical proofs on the other hand are very different beasts, and they need to be branded as such. This is because statistical proofs behave more like Kuhnian paradigms, providing law-like superstructures into which unlimited anecdotal evidence is selected and slotted or as sometimes pressed (Kuhn, 1962). Unlike most Kuhnian paradigms, statistical proofs can be expressed in numbers, as simple fractions or as a lonely percentage. Statistical proofs can be described in a sentence, a graph or a table, and their dimensions instantly comprehended by all. Partly, this comprehensibility explains the statistical proof's powerful influence in the public sphere. Not least in ahistorical public histories, where these statistics can alter vast historical landscapes, potentially affecting seismic shifts in our memories in ways anecdotal evidence simply cannot. Statistical proofs therefore need to be identified early, treated with caution and rigorously tested. To anyone experienced working with quantitative material, it might be argued these observations are old hat. That may be. Nevertheless, erroneous statistical proofs are a recurring issue in historical scholarship and when they appear the consequences can be disastrous (Howe, 2000; Peters, 2002; Said, 1986).

By July 2002, Emory had appointed an Investigative Committee of historians to report on *Arming America*: Stanley Katz (Princeton), Hanna Gray (Chicago) and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (Harvard) (Hoffer, 2007: 165). The Committee was tasked to investigate whether Bellesiles engaged in "intentional fabrication or falsification of research data" or deviated "from accepted practices in carrying out or reporting results from research" specifically in his work on probate records and militia censuses. After interviewing Bellesiles and sampling his sources as best they could, the investigators unravelled Bellesiles' idiosyncratic methodology. Apparently, he began researching probates in 1983, but Bellesiles' early work was never specifically on firearms. Building his databases, Bellesiles recorded the presence of guns in probates and wills with ticks in yellow legal-pads. Following Roth's revelations, the investigators zoomed in on Bellesiles' statistical proof. "Evaluating Table One is an exercise in frustration," the investigators' *Report* said, "because it is almost impossible to tell where Bellesiles got his information." On issues of fabrication and falsification, the Committee said that they "cannot judge the issue of *intentionality* ... But we are seriously troubled by Professor Bellesiles' scholarly conduct." The *Report* concluded, "the best that can be said of his work with the probate and militia records is that he is guilty of unprofessional and misleading work" (Katz et al., 2002: 6, 16). At the end of 2002, Bellesiles left Emory, Knopf withdrew *Arming America* and Columbia rescinded the Bancroft prize. Resolving "the worst scandal to hit the American historical profession in recent memory," after 6 years, Bellesiles'

erroneous statistical proof was finally undone (Malcolm, 2003: 22). Discovery of Hart's errors took closer to 20 years though many scholars refuse to see them as errors at all, and these contrasting timescales alongside different responses should attract our attention.

After personal threats were sent to Bellesiles in May–June 2001, the American Historical Association (AHA) and the OAH published statements defending academic freedom. Giving a paper to the Historical Society at University College Cork in November 2000, Hart experienced a boisterous confrontation with local critics objecting to his portrayal of the old-IRA as genocidal serial killers.<sup>2</sup> Hart was never subjected to the kind vitriol or personal threats Bellesiles experienced. Nevertheless, in both cases, anger directed from outside the academy antagonised historians who understandably rallied around their embattled colleagues. Delaying resolution, the strong emotions aroused amid this uproar distracted from more scholarly debates about evidence and its interpretation.

Independent scholar Meda Ryan's 2003 biography, *Tom Barry*, and her 2007 article, "The Kilmichael Ambush 1920: Exploring the Provocative Chapters," begun in earnest a third round of peer review for Hart's research. Ryan made two contentions. Hart's claim was wrong, that after the November 1920 Kilmichael ambush surrendering RIC Auxiliaries were unjustifiably massacred by the Cork IRA. And the sectarian motive Hart attributed to the IRA's killing of native Cork Protestants was unfounded. Neither contention was fully driven home; nevertheless, Ryan raised difficult questions for Hart about his use of oral testimony. Owing to assurances given to interviewees, Hart refused to identify them or to share their testimonies with other scholars. However, Ryan said no Kilmichael veterans were available or even alive when Hart dated some of his interviews (Ryan, 2007: 238–242). Two of Hart's interviewees now looked wholly implausible, if not impossible. In a television interview broadcast posthumously in 2011, Hart conceded that however unlikely, one of the Kilmichael IRA veterans he interviewed might have been "a hoaxer."<sup>3</sup> Hart was unsure who his interviewees were.

In an interview published in *History Ireland* in 2005, Hart replied to Ryan. "Ryan's book contains almost no new evidence," he said, adding "she isn't interested in dealing with the substance of this [Hart's] evidence in a rational way" (Hart & Hanley, 2005: 50). These comments were unfortunate, because Ryan is not irrational. Critiquing Hart's research in 2008, the Aubane published *Troubled History*. Co-authored by lecturer in journalism Niall Meehan and historian Brian Murphy, the pamphlet was sold at a conference Hart addressed at Queen's University Belfast in June 2008 (Meehan & Murphy, 2008). Leiden University historian Joost Augusteijn commented *Troubled History* raised "serious questions over Hart's use of source material" and called for Hart to "systematically answer" his critics (Augusteijn, 2009: 56–57). Hart had promised a book-length reply, submitting a short manuscript to Dublin publisher Gill & Macmillan in 2005, but nothing appeared.<sup>4</sup>

For years, Hart's research was pilloried, but to 2008, much of the criticism could be dismissed as nit-picking. In any case, anomalies discovered in his research were covered by the "baseline argument"—we do not know how many errors normally occur in historical writing and, specifically, where the "baseline" of unacceptable error sits. Hart complained the interminable debates about events like Kilmichael were of little importance as "my general arguments ... are almost all statistically based" (Hart & Hanley, 2005: 50). Unlike with *Arming America*, few Irish historians gathered comparable quantitative data to test Hart's heuristic thesis. Those who had were ignored (Maguire, 1993). Meanwhile, the gaze of Hart's critics fixed on a relentless examination of his footnotes with two notable exceptions.

Published in 2012, historical-geographer Barry Keane's article "Ethnic Cleansing? Protestant decline in West Cork between 1911 and 1926" concluded, "the surprise is not how many native Protestants left, but how many remained" (Keane, 2012: 38). Excluding non-native Protestants from his cohort, Keane counted the native Protestant population in West Cork's District Electoral Divisions and identified an "extra" 10% in native Protestant over native Roman Catholic decline. When "natural increase" (negative for Protestants) is factored, Keane's extra 10% all but disappears. Though the implications of Keane's research were not immediately understood in 2012, Keane's is the decisive intervention in the Hart controversy. Where Keane and later Fitzpatrick counted heads, in 2013, Andy Bielenberg estimated of the 100,000 decline in southern Protestants between 1911 and 1926, that between 2,000 and 16,000, native Protestants "could plausibly have been driven out by violence ... during the nationalist revolution" (Bielenberg, 2013: 230–231).

Citing Bielenberg above, Andrew Holmes and Eugenio Biagini recently wrote in the *Cambridge Social History of Ireland* (2017), “Bielenberg’s estimate that at least 16 per cent of the [native southern] Protestant demographic decline [between 1911 and 1926] was due to involuntary migration” (Holmes & Biagini, 2017: 103). The “at least 16 per cent” misrepresents Bielenberg, who clearly makes no hard claims for the actual number of involuntary migrations. When it comes to the difficult job of enumerating the ethnic conflict thesis, too often, the numbers are plucked from a blue sky and then tied to an authoritative source. There is, perhaps, one exception where the numbers purportedly endorsing the ethnic conflict thesis need no embellishment, and it is to the “Bandon Valley massacre” of late April 1922 we turn next.

## 5 | EVIDENCE OF ETHNIC INTOLERANCE

If so far nothing has been said of the Bandon valley massacre, when the IRA cold bloodedly murdered 10 Protestant males in West Cork during a truce, it is not because that tragedy refutes the argument advanced so far. Though the massacre was presented by Hart as the most striking example of ethnic conflict in southern Ireland, as Brendan O’Leary recently cautioned, the motivations behind these murders remain uncertain (O’Leary, 2019: vol. 2, 198). What we now see is that Hart constructed his ethnic conflict thesis by manipulating statistics to meet the needs of a fallacious causal explanation, wherein invented correlations largely explain causation. In the Bandon valley massacre, the correlation between religious identity and victimhood is enough to convince many that the killings were an ethnic bloodbath, pure and simple (Bielenberg & Borgonovo, 2018: 12). Yet correlations alone never explain causation. If there is no immediate prior history of ethnic conflict in the south, or any evidence of widespread ethnic violence in 1922 or indeed ethnic flight, then it appears what happened along the Bandon valley is an unlikely fit for an “ethnic massacre.”

Of only two Roman Catholics targeted during the massacre, one was an ex-policeman, the other a boycotted loyalist and both survived more-or-less unscathed. Of the 23 targeted Protestants so far identified, nine had previously come under IRA suspicion for spying. Three more are identified in compensation claims to the British Government’s Irish Grants Committee (IGC), as having informed on republicans to the crown forces (Bielenberg et al., 2014).<sup>5</sup> While we can never hope to recover the motivations lying behind the massacre, we do know something significant about Hart’s reconstruction. Hart wrote the “Protestant community in Bandon and elsewhere in Cork had ... been notably reticent during the Tan War [otherwise the war of independence, 1919–21] and provided far more frustration than support to the Crown Forces” (Hart, 1992: 382; Hart, 1998: 285). As we have seen, the idea that native Protestants were politically inactive is the central plank in Hart’s ethnic conflict thesis, and in support of this, Hart quoted from the British Army’s official history of its Irish campaign *Record of the Rebellion in Ireland* (vol. II) “in the south [of Ireland] the Protestants and those who supported the Government rarely gave much information because, except by chance, they had not got it to give” (Hart, 1992: 413; Hart, 1998: 305–306). In both his doctoral dissertation and monograph, Hart omitted the *Record*’s next sentence: “‘An exception to this rule was in the Bandon area where there were many Protestant farmers who gave information ... it proved almost impossible to protect those brave men, many of whom were murdered while almost all the remainder suffered grave material loss.’”<sup>6</sup> Eliding this sentence, Hart obscured the correlation between victimhood and espionage identified above.

During the war of independence in the area around Bandon, 11 of the 19 civilians executed for espionage by the IRA’s third battalion were Protestant loyalists (Bielenberg & Donnelly, 2017).<sup>7</sup> Establishing a temporal relationship between espionage and victimhood for the Bandon valley massacre, predating April 1922, the IRA in West Cork executed Protestant loyalist spies frequently and in relatively large numbers. In the by now conspicuous absence of any verifiable evidence of widespread ethnic conflict, IRA counterintelligence identifies the plausible presumptive agency for the Bandon valley massacre.

Also citing the British Army’s *Record of the Rebellion in Ireland* in his 1977 seminal study of war and revolution in county Clare, *Politics and Irish Life*, Fitzpatrick wrote that “Army historians later lamented the inability of the secret

service to penetrate the inner circles of Republicanism, and the increasing reluctance of loyal citizens to turn informer". Fitzpatrick then added what appears now to be an important qualification, "a number of Protestant farmers near Bandon who did were killed by the IRA" (Fitzpatrick, 1977: 31). Fitzpatrick's interpretation rests on the sentences elided by Hart. Developed in his doctoral dissertation, Hart's ethnic conflict thesis is dependent on a gross evidence selection bias which should have been identified early on during the supervision and examination of his doctoral dissertation.

Realising the Bandon valley killings no longer fit Hart's thesis presents a problem for historians who in their treatments of other counties confirm or expand on Hart's apocalyptic vision. Perpetrated by the anti-treaty IRA, Gemma Clark has produced a deeply researched monograph on violence against civilians during the Irish civil war in three Munster counties. Notably, the campaigns of arson and intimidation waged against the 4–5% of "ethnic" Protestant loyalists whose "religion was closely entwined with ... social status, land ownership and British service." "Threatening letters many issued on behalf of the anti-Treaty IRA," claims Clark, "made specific threats against the Protestant community." From her impressive sample of over 2,000 compensation applications to the British and Irish governments, Clark identifies two such threatening letters. Supposedly sent by the untraceable "South Battalion" of the "IRA" one letter is addressed to William Roe, a Methodist grocer at Lismore, county Waterford. The second sent to Episcopalian, Ada Hunt of Longfield House in county Tipperary, does not reference the IRA, but instead a mysterious organisation known only by the acronym "IRO." Both missives are semi-literate, characterised by childlike simplicity, and their true authorship unknowable. Doubtful provenance demands Clark's equally doubtful qualification, that the letters were sent "on behalf of" the IRA, *not* "by" the IRA (Clark, 2014: 42, 199, 143, 111).

The letter sent to Ada Hunt begins, "Mrs Hunt, You bloody Protestant you needn't think the [Free] staters are going to get Longfields back for you we will put decent Catholics in your husbands place ..." <sup>8</sup> The Hunt family match Clark's profiled ethnic group: Protestant, landed, privileged, with a history of loyal service to the Crown. There was local agitation over the Longfield estate, with several IRA volunteers favouring its subdivision among the local landless. Yet nothing happened. In her compensation claim application to the IGC, according to Clark, Ada Hunt says, "rebels" forced her out of Longfield in "June 1922." From thousands of compensations files, the letter threatening the Hunts is the only evidence so far to emerge of an evicted Protestant family coming under sectarian threat from "republicans" in southern Ireland. Clark concludes, "in the Hunts ... compensation file—we get some insight into the perpetrators' motivations, as well as the convergence of land-hunger, sectarianism, and anti-British sentiment" (Clark, 2014: 111). Apparently unknown to Clark, Longfield was an IRA safe-house: its mistress an accomplished IRA spy. Ada Hunt extended Longfield's hospitality to visiting British officers, before passing their information to IRA Intelligence. Prudently, the Hunts' compensation claim says nothing about their espionage, whereas republican sources say a good deal. <sup>9</sup>

By not systematically studying her "target group," Clark cannot say how they fared in the civil war. This becomes more noticeable where Clark compares her Protestant victims with the flight of three quarters of a million Palestinian-Arabs from their homeland after 1948, writing this "controversial claim is borne out, in Ireland at least, by compensation evidence I have examined" (Clark, 2014: 100). Alternatively, in pursuit of recompense, compensation claims sometimes exaggerate suffering and loss. Ada Hunt, still happily playing both sides, duly received £2,700 in compensation from the British government in 1929.

Yet the critical components of Hart's ethnic conflict thesis are still endorsed. Published in *The English Historical Review*, Marie Coleman's (2020) county study of Protestant decline concludes "there is very little evidence of any concerted campaign against Longford's Protestants during the War of Independence." Nevertheless, statistical "evidence from Longford reinforces Hart's findings that revolutionary violence produced a significant increase in [Protestant] removals between 1920 and 1923; in Longford this appears to have reached its peak in mid-1922." Alternatively, the British withdrawal from Southern Ireland peaked in mid-1922.

Coleman writes, "Hart noted a '30 per cent drop in the number of pupils' in the Church of Ireland diocese of Cork, Cloyne and Ross between 1920 and 1922 ... identification of a similar trend in Longford adds weight to Hart's findings." A 30% decline in pupil enrolments in 1920–1922 is unremarkable, and it is not what Hart reported.

Instead, we have seen, Hart identified “a 30 per cent drop in the number of pupils *between 1911 and 1926*,” adding, “nearly three quarters of which took place in 1920–22 [my emphasis]” (Hart, 1996: 83). Later, Hart’s sentence is quoted again by Coleman to endorse a second value for the percentage of population decline in the revolutionary years: “In Clonbroney and Killoe ... attendances at [Church of Ireland] Sunday school examinations dropped by 69 per cent between 1920 (26) and 1923 (11). Once again this mirrors the situation in Cork, where ‘nearly three-quarters’ of the decline ‘took place in 1920–2.’” Percentage decrease for examination candidates between 1920 and 1923 is 58%, not as claimed by Coleman 69%, which miscalculation enhances the comparison with Hart’s “nearly” 75% decline in 1920–2 (Coleman, 2020: 972, 976, 952, 954).

For want of evidence, Coleman’s endorsement of Hart’s sudden demographic decline rests substantially on a misrepresented sample of 37 school children. Identified by Fitzpatrick, Hart’s misinterpretation of church records goes unacknowledged by Coleman. Nor is any evidence advanced suggesting the Protestant minority in Longford rapidly reduced to half its pre-revolutionary size.

To date, directed against southern Protestants, nobody has produced persuasive evidence of ethnic intolerance coming from within the republican movement (Regan, 2012b: n.1). This assertion might give hostages to fortune where, for example, arousing echoes of “ancient ... communal conflicts” above Foster reports another of the IRA’s many alleged threats “to exterminate.” Confusingly, in his discussion of “sectarian episodes,” the threat Foster alludes to is directed by one Tipperary republican, Tom Ryan, against the family of another republican, Denis Lacey. Everyone involved in the episode was Roman Catholic, and no one invoked the now threadbare inflexion “exterminate” (Foster, 2014: 281).

Having dropped southern Ireland for Ulster as his Irish comparator for Upper Silesia, Wilson found that even Ulster came up short: “it is the contrasts rather than the similarities between Ulster and Upper Silesia that seem most impressive ... Ulster society was more deeply divided, but its violence was more restrained” (Wilson, 2010: 213). Between 1920 and 1922, homicides in Belfast alone exceeded 465 (Lynch, 2006: 127). This is to acknowledge the forced migrations of Arabs from Palestine/Israel and the treatment of ethnic minorities in Poland belong to vastly different experiences of suffering to those witnessed anywhere in southern Ireland and even perhaps in Ulster. These observations extend to other analogies drawn with horrific ethnic conflicts of which Clark provides yet more examples:

the millions of Central and Eastern European ethnic groups murdered or made refugees by German and Soviet governments during and after the World War II, suffered an infinitely more brutal fate, during their respective periods of social and political upheaval. Yet whilst the Irish Revolution is a much scaled-down and less severe instance of the “unmixing process,” it can nonetheless be characterised as an ethnic conflict. (Clark, 2010: 35; Clark, 2014: 42).

Buried inside Clark’s passage, no matter how attenuated, is an unmistakable reference to the Jewish Holocaust, and this reveals the poverty of the ethnic conflict thesis where in the absence of evidence it must draw on absurd analogies to justify itself. If tens of thousands of native southern Protestants, or even a much small number, were forcibly removed from their homes by the IRA, might not we expect the compensation files to ring loud about this obscene terror? That this is not so is because the “unmixing process” Clark describes is a statistical invention and invented histories leave no archives. It is to an explanation of this relentless search for the agonies of the Levant and *mitteleuropa* under the cheerless steeples of Belfast and Bandon we now turn.

## 6 | CURRENT POLICY

In 1998, Bellesiles claimed, “I make no apology for being a political activist as well as a historian ... I do not expect an historian to be completely unaffected by the linkage between history and current policy” (Hoffer, 2007: 157).

Nowadays, few people do. Nevertheless, where “current policy” comes to dominate historical interpretation, the results will likely be anachronistic at best.

In 1974, during Ireland's “green scare,” diplomat, historian and latterly government minister, Conor Cruise O'Brien, demanded Irish intellectuals support the counterinsurgency against militant Irish republicanism or face public denunciation. This call to letters describes the “O'Brien Ethic” in Irish public life—the suspension of professional values in the law, journalism, broadcasting and academia in support of the counterinsurgency (Regan, 2013a). Ireland's leading public historian, Diarmuid Ferriter, expounds on this departure saying, “Reordering the revolutionary generation as pro-State democrats or anti-State dictators was common, numerous scholars felt it vital to define the IRA in 1922 as anti-democratic to undermine the Provisional IRA” (Ferriter, 2014: 69). How rewriting history undermined the Provisionals, Ferriter cannot say. Nevertheless, the kind of “reordering” Ferriter describes finds equivalence in Hart's revision, wherein, the persecution of native Protestants in the 1920s is almost exclusively attributed to the anti-state (i.e., anti-treaty) IRA. On this reading, any commitment to ecumenism and to constitutionalism Irish republicanism might lay claim to is merely a sham masking an inherent sectarianism and authoritarianism.

Resting on Bellesiles' political convictions, *Arming America* is a thinly disguised relativist argument for gun control. Associating the old-IRA with anti-democratic and latterly with sectarian values are similarly relativist arguments, set this time to undermining the historical foundations of modern Irish republicanism. Counterintuitively, the intensity and momentum of this applied revisionism have grown since the ceasefires of the mid-1990s, and there is no disputing that its advocates succeeded in promoting a largely fictionalised account of the Irish revolutionary period. Finally, we turn to the form and function of erroneous statistical proofs as they live and breathe on the page.

## 7 | POST-DETERMINING THE EVIDENCE

Emory's Investigating Committee reported that peer review should have resolved the errors uncovered in Bellesiles' Table One. The same holds true for Hart's statistical claims too. But because Hart's revision continues to appeal to deeply embedded prejudices inside the Irish academy, his grand illusion continues to be applauded. When historians alongside journalists, broadcasters and commentators “know” they are on the “side of right” (i.e., *against* terrorism and *for* gun control), inevitably, some are tempted to endorse interpretations affirming their prior-beliefs, without that is ever scrutinising the disputed evidence. The ensuing confusion should last until the evidential anomalies are resolved. In Bellesiles' case, the confusion was cleared away inside 6 years by a new round of peer review which inevitably identified shortcomings, alongside many strengths, inside the American academy. Where Hart's research has been subjected to similar attention some historians refuse to acknowledge the emerging problems, instead vigorously arguing that Hart was engaged in scholarly historical research.

Published in *The Historical Journal*, Ian McBride's recent spirited defence of Hart's monograph neither references Hart's demographic statistics nor the peer reviewed research addressing them (McBride, 2018). Nor in his own discussion of demography does McBride's chapter “Religion” in *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland* (McBride, 2015: 292–319) mention Hart's account of the expulsion of tens of thousands of native Protestants from southern Ireland. Now faced with a Kuhnian crisis, this may be an example of expediency because what McBride calls the “dominant liberal mode of Irish historiography” cannot answer criticisms of both Hart's research and the academy which nurtured it (McBride, 2018: 262). Still protesting that Hart's research is state of the art, inside the Irish academy denying Hart's statistical errors exist looks increasingly like a form of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

Anticipating Bourke's analysis, Hart's ethnic conflict thesis provides ready examples of abstract schemes of analysis predetermining the evidence. What distinguishes Hart's methodology, and not just from Bellesiles', is that Hart post-determined his evidence too. As we know, Bellesiles' erroneous statistical proof originated in research published in 1996. Coincidentally, Hart's erroneous statistical proof was also first published in that year, but only *after* the manuscript for *The IRA and Its Enemies* was largely completed in his 1992 doctoral dissertation. Soon after defending

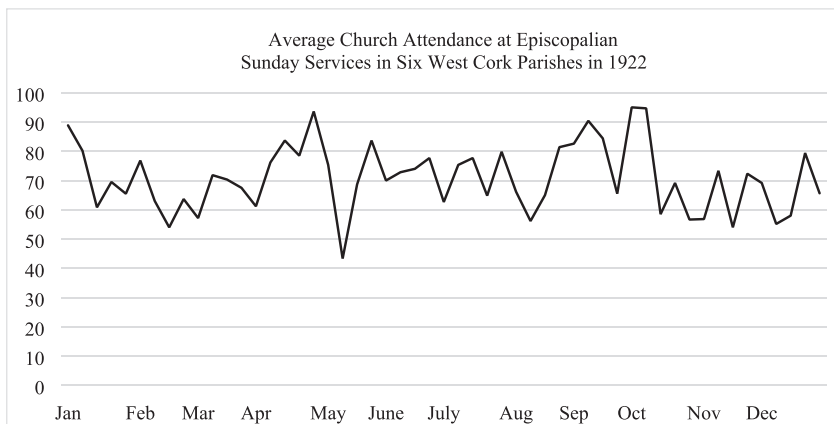


his dissertation, Hart secured a SSHRCC postdoctoral fellowship to study “Protestants in Revolutionary Cork,” and this research, notably the statistical analysis described above, framed Hart’s, 1996 essay (Hart, 1996: 98 n 80).<sup>10</sup>

Depicted in Hart’s doctoral dissertation, the ethnic flight he said was prompted by ethnic violence is nowhere evident in the new data he gathered during his postdoctoral research. As demonstrated in Figure 5, Episcopalian church attendances query Hart’s claim that following the Bandon valley massacre in late April 1922, there was a “mass exodus” of Protestants from West Cork (Hart, 1992: 136, 371). After these horrific murders, the sudden fall in church attendance in May 1922 resulted mostly from cancelled services which soon afterwards resumed. Neither, anywhere, is it apparent that Cork’s native Protestant population “halved” during the revolutionary years. Responding to his new data Hart could have revised his manuscript, but he chose instead to endorse his ethnic conflict thesis, and the new datasets were reordered and somehow made to agree with one another.

Unlike Bellesiles, Hart’s interpretative problem does not flow from anecdotal evidence slotting into a pre-existing erroneous statistical proof. Rather, Hart’s erroneous proofs confirmed conclusions drawn from the gross evidence selection bias demonstrated in his doctoral dissertation (Keane, 2014; Meehan, 2015; Regan, 2012a). Bourke makes no provision for this kind of eventuality, but his oversight only reminds us that indulging techniques not normally acceptable in historical discourses, in recent decades a few Irish historians dabbled in some highly experimental methodologies in their bid to “improve” the past (Fitzpatrick, 2007; Regan, 2013b). In his chapter “Historiography” in the *Princeton History of Modern Ireland*, Bourke has little or nothing to say about these experiments or indeed the writing of invented histories which inside the Irish academy has always been an open secret (Bourke, 2015: 271–291; Fanning, 1986; Ferriter, 2014: 69). Recognising this historiographical turn, invented history helps explain why the historian’s descriptive language is often skewed, purposefully presenting Irish political violence in the twentieth century as primordial or as sometimes genocidal. Examined, peer reviewed, critically engaged and repeatedly verified in the face of some damning criticism, Hart’s affirmation of a non-existent ethnic war says much about the dominant liberal mode of Irish historiography.

Discussed in this article, erroneous statistical poofs are not so much numbers, as they are aspirations. Aspirations deeply held within their host academies for a better past more suited to our needs in the present. In this sense,



Sample: Parish Preachers’ Books for St Coleman’s, Macroom; St Helen’s, Moviddy; St Peter’s Carrigrohane; Abbeystrewry Church; St Gobnait’s Ballyvourney held in Representative Church Body Library, Dublin. St Matthew’s Drimoleague held in the Rectory, Dunmanway, county Cork.

**FIGURE 5** Average church attendance at Episcopalian Sunday Services in Six West Cork Parishes in 1922



erroneous statistical proofs are willed into existence by a collective effort, and not by one hand alone. Conjured from statistical vapour, erroneous proofs provide historians with unrivalled opportunities to remake the past, but it should be recognised at the expense of publically compromising our discipline. When history does not add up, it cannot always be because the historians cannot count.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Introducing," *Memorial University of Newfoundland Gazette*, 34, (2002), p. 6.
- <sup>2</sup> Criostóir de Baróid's letter to the *Southern Star*, 12 January 2002.
- <sup>3</sup> "Scéal Tom Barry" (Dir. Jerry O'Callaghan, Black Rock Pictures), TG4, 19 January 2011.
- <sup>4</sup> Present author's conversation with Peter Hart, 8 September 2005.
- <sup>5</sup> Bielenberg, Borgonovo and Donnelly endorse Hart's characterisation of the Bandon Valley killings as an ethnic massacre, but their research adduces much new and contradictory evidence linking its victims including those targeted but not killed to espionage activities. Released after Bielenberg et al. published, Margaret Hyde's pension file in the Military Archives in Dublin identifies another targeted Protestant, Oscar Harbord, had previously fallen under IRA suspicion for spying. Margaret Hyde pension application, 21 Nov. 1934, Military Archives Dublin, MSP34REF27599.
- <sup>6</sup> *Record of the rebellion in Ireland in 1920–1, and the part played by the army in dealing with it (Intelligence)* (May 1922, vol. II), p. 26. Jeudwine papers 72/82/1, Imperial War Museum London.
- <sup>7</sup> Andy Bielenberg and James Donnelly Jr., "Cork spy files," <http://theirishrevolution.ie> (accessed 13 June 2017). For the original cited above, see <https://web.archive.org/web/20170613142207/http://theirishrevolution.ie/cork-spy-files/>
- <sup>8</sup> Hunt IGC file, The United Kingdom National Archives, CO 762/5.
- <sup>9</sup> Seamus Robinson, statement 1721, 35–36; Michael Davin, statement 1,348, 42 Bureau of Military History, Military Archives Dublin.
- <sup>10</sup> Information from the SSHRC, 25 August 2015.

## REFERENCES

- Augusteijn, J. (2009). Coolacrease. *History Ireland*, 17(4), 56–57.
- Bellesiles, M. A. (1996). The origins of gun culture in the United States. *Journal of American History*, 83(2), 425–455. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2944942>
- Bellesiles, M. A. (2000). *Arming America: The origins of a gun culture*. Knopf.
- Bellesiles, M. A., & Cramer, C. (1997). Letters. *Journal of American History*, 84(3), 1188–1190.
- Bell-Fialkoff, A. (1993). A brief history of ethnic cleansing. *Foreign Affairs*, 72(3), 110–121. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045626>
- Bielenberg, A. (2013). Exodus: The emigration of southern Irish Protestants during the Irish War of independence and civil war. *Past & Present*, 218, 199–233. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gts029>
- Bielenberg, A., & Borgonovo, J. (2018). Letters. *History Ireland*, 26(3), 12.
- Bielenberg, A., Borgonovo, J., & Donnelly, J. S. Jr. (2014). "Something in the nature of a massacre": The Bandon valley killings revisited. *Éire-Ireland*, 49(3–4), 7–59. <https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2014.0011>
- Bielenberg, A. & Donnelly, J. S. Jr (2017). 'Cork's war of independence fatality register', <http://theirishrevolution.ie> (accessed 1 May 2017).
- Bourke, R. (2011). Languages of conflict and the Northern Ireland troubles. *Journal of Modern History*, 83(3), 544–578. <https://doi.org/10.1086/660886>
- Bourke, R. (2015). Historiography. In R. Bourke & I. McBride (Eds.), *The Princeton history of modern Ireland*. Princeton University Press.
- Churchill, R. (2001). Guns and the politics of guns. *Reviews in American History*, 29(3), 329–337. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.2001.0043>
- Clark, G. (2010). Fire, boycott, threat and harm: A study of three Munster counties during the Irish Civil War, 1922–23. DPhil thesis, University of Oxford.
- Clark, G. (2014). *Everyday violence in the Irish civil war*. Cambridge University Press.
- Clifford, B. (2002). *Aubane versus Oxford: A response to Professor Roy Foster and Bernard O'Donoghue*. Aubane Historical Society.
- Coleman, M. (2020). Protestant depopulation in county Longford during the Irish revolution, 1911–1926. *English Historical Review*, 575, 931–977.

- Delaney, E. (2000). *Demography, state and society*. Liverpool University Press.
- Donnelly, J. Jr. (2012). Big house burnings in county Cork during the Irish revolution 1920–1. *Éire-Ireland*, 47(3), 141–197. <https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2012.0021>
- Edwards, R. D. (1999). *Faithful tribe: An intimate portrait of the loyal institutions*. Harper Press.
- Eichenberg, J. (2010). The dark side of independence: Paramilitary violence in Ireland and Poland after the First World War. *Contemporary European History*, 19(3), 231–248. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777310000147>
- Fanning, R. (1986). “The Great Enchantment”: Uses and abuses of modern Irish history. In J. Dooge (Ed.), *Ireland in the contemporary world: Essays in honour of Garret FitzGerald*. Dublin.
- Fanning, R. (2013). *Fatal path*. Faber & Faber.
- Farry, M. (2000). *The aftermath of revolution: Sligo 1921–3*. University College Dublin Press.
- Ferriter, D. (2014). *A nation not a rabble*. Profile Books.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *Theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford University Press.
- Fitzpatrick, D. (1977). *Politics and Irish life* (2nd ed.). Cork University Press.
- Fitzpatrick, D. (2007). Une histoire très catholique?. Révisionnisme et orthodoxie dans l'historiographie irlandaise. *Trans Hélène Bourguignon, Vingtième siècle: Revue d'histoire*, 94, 121–133. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ving.094.0121>
- Fitzpatrick, D. (2013). Protestant depopulation and the Irish revolution. *Irish Historical Studies*, 38(152), 643–670. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021121400001875>
- Foster, R. F. (2014). *Vivid faces: The revolutionary generation 1890–1923*. Allen Lane.
- Hart, P. (1990). Youth culture and the cork IRA. In D. Fitzpatrick (Ed.), *Revolution? Ireland 1917–1923*. Trinity Workshop Publications.
- Hart, P. (1992). The Irish republican army and its enemies: Violence and community in County Cork 1917–23. PhD thesis, University of Dublin.
- Hart, P. (1993). Class, community and the IRA in Cork, 1917–23. In P. O’Flanagan & C. G. Buttimer (Eds.), *Cork: History and society*. Geography Publications.
- Hart, P. (1996). The Protestant experience of revolution in southern Ireland. In R. English & G. Walker (Eds.), *Unionism in modern Ireland*. Dublin.
- Hart, P. (1998). *The IRA and its enemies: Violence and community in Cork 1916–23*. Oxford University Press.
- Hart, P. (2003). *The IRA at war*. Oxford University Press.
- Hart, P., & Hanley, B. (2005). Hart to heart. *History Ireland*, 13(2), 48–51.
- Hoffer, P. (2007). *Past imperfect: Facts, fictions, and fraud*. Public Affairs.
- Holmes, A. R., & Biagini, E. F. (2017). Protestants. In E. F. Biagini & M. E. Daly (Eds.), *The Cambridge social history of Ireland* (pp. 88–111). Cambridge University Press.
- Howe, S. (2000). The politics of historical ‘revisionism’: Comparing Ireland and Israel/Palestine. *Past & Present*, 168, 227–253. <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/168.1.227>
- Katz, S., Gray, H. H., & Ulrich, L. T. (2002). Report of the Investigative Committee in the Matter of Professor Michael Bellesiles, July 2002: 6: [www.emory.edu/news/Releases/Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.emory.edu/news/Releases/Final_Report.pdf) (accessed 2 October 2020).
- Keane, B. (2012). Ethnic cleansing? Protestant decline in West Cork between 1911 and 1926. *History Ireland*, 20(2), 35–38.
- Keane, B. (2014). *Massacre in West Cork*. Mercier Press.
- Kuhn, T. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago University Press.
- Lewis, B. (1975). *History, remembered, recovered, invented*. Princeton University Press.
- Lindgren, J., & Heather, J. L. (2002). Counting guns in early America. *William and Mary Law Review*, 43, 1777–1842.
- Longley, E. (1997). What do protestants want? *Irish Review*, 20, 104–120.
- Lynch, R. (2006). *The IRA and the early years of partition*. Irish Academic Press.
- Maguire, M. (1993). A socio-economic analysis of the Dublin protestant working class, 1870–1926. *Irish Economic and Social History*, 20, 35–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/033248939302000103>
- Malcolm, J. (2003). Disarming history. *Reason*, 2003, 22–29.
- Malcom, J. (2001). Concealed weapons. *Reason*, 2001, 47–49.
- McBride, I. (2015). Religion. In R. Bourke & I. McBride (Eds.), *The Princeton history of modern Ireland*. Princeton University Press.
- McBride, I. (2018). The Peter Hart affair in perspective history, ideology and the Irish revolution. *The Historical Journal*, 61(1), 249–271. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X17000139>
- Meehan, N. (2014). Examining Peter Hart. *Field Day Review*, 10, 126–133.
- Meehan, N. (2015). Turning out the troubles in southern Ireland: Revisionist history, censorship, and problematic Protestants. PhD thesis, University of Bath.
- Meehan, N., & Murphy, B. (2008). *Troubled history: A 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary critique of Peter Hart's the IRA and its enemies*. Aubane Historical Society.
- O’Leary, B. (2019). *A treaties on Northern Ireland*, 3 vols. Oxford University Press.

- Peters, J. (2002 1st ed. 1984). *From time immemorial: The origins of the Arab-Jewish conflict over Palestine*. JKAP Publications.
- Regan, J. M. (2012a). The “Bandon Valley massacre” revisited. *History*, 97(325), 70–98. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-229X.2011.00542.x>
- Regan, J. M. (2012b). The history of the last atrocity’. *Dublin Review of Books*, 22(1). <https://drb.ie/articles/the-history-of-the-last-atrocity/>
- Regan, J. M. (2013a). The “O'Brien ethic” as an interpretative problem. *Journal of British Studies*, 52(4), 908–939. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2013.179>
- Regan, J. M. (2013b). *Myth and the Irish state*. Irish Academic Press.
- Roth, R. (2002). Guns, gun culture, and homicide: The relationship between firearms, the uses of firearms, and interpersonal violence. *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 59(1), 223–240. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3491655>
- Roth, R., et al. (2002). Forum: Historians and guns. *The William and Mary Quarterly*., 59(1), 203–268.
- Ryan, M. (2007). The Kilmichael ambush 1920: Exploring the provocative chapters. *History*, 92(2), 235–249. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-229X.2007.00393.x>
- Said, E. (1986). The Joan Peters' case. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 15(2), 144–150. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2536835>
- Slotkin, R. (2000). ‘The fall into guns’, *The Atlantic*, 1 November 2000.
- Wills, G. (2000). ‘Spiking the gun myth’, *New York Times*, 10 September 2000.
- Wilson, T. (2002). Ghost provinces, mislaid minorities: The experience of southern Ireland and Prussian Poland compared, 1918–23. *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 13, 61–86. <https://doi.org/10.3318/ISIA.2002.13.1.61>
- Wilson, T. (2010). *Frontiers of violence: Conflict and identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia 1918–22*. Oxford University Press.

**How to cite this article:** Regan, J. M. (2021). “All the nightmare images of ethnic conflict in the twentieth century are here”: Erroneous statistical proofs and the search for ethnic violence in revolutionary Ireland, 1917–1923. *Nations and Nationalism*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12783>