



Shootout: The Battle for St. Stephen's Green, 1916 by Paul O'Brien.

Dublin: New Island, 2013. Pp. xiv, 112. ISBN 978-1-84840-211-9.

Review by Georgina Fitzpatrick, Melbourne, Australia (gjf@unimelb.edu.au).

Among the many books published for the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, *Shootout* is “dedicated to the men and women of the Irish Citizen Army” (ICA), one of the groups that took part in the Rising. Author Paul O'Brien concentrates on one location during Easter Week, charting hour-by-hour, day-by-day, the ICA's seizure of St. Stephen's Green and subsequent withdrawal to the College of Surgeons (facing the western side of the Green).

In his foreword, O'Brien asks why the Green was chosen as a location for a small unit of semi-trained men and women to take on the forces of the British Army, including troops blooded at Suvla Bay on the coast of Gallipoli a year before. He offers four reasons: the Green was large enough to serve as a depot from which men and supplies could be despatched to other places (xi); it had a fresh water supply; it was at the intersection of several roads leading to other parts of the city; and it linked two other south-side rebel positions—Jacob's Biscuit Factory, held by an Irish Volunteer unit under the command of the poet Thomas MacDonagh (one of sixteen men subsequently executed) and Boland's Flour Mill, under the command of Éamon de Valera, later President of the Republic of Ireland (xii).

However, the open spaces of the Green are surrounded on all four sides by three- or four-story buildings, making it foolish to dig in there. Although the commandant, Michael Mallin, had gained military experience in the British Army, as had his second in command, Kit Poole, it was a fundamental mistake to choose a place where the only cover from sustained machine-gun fire, not to mention heavy artillery, was some thickets and a bandstand or two. O'Brien passes over this oddity without comment, describing only its unsurprising outcome: the need to withdraw into a nearby building.

O'Brien asks a few other pertinent questions: “What were the effects of Eoin MacNeill's countermanding order on the ICA, did it make the plan to occupy the Green redundant? Why did Mallin fail to take key positions threatening his area of operations? Were his tactics in the park appropriate? And why did he adopt a defensive strategy for the rest of Easter week?” (xiv). However, the author returns to these questions only in the book's final pages (93–100), evidently expecting that the body of his text, by setting out the military actions in chronological order, would make the answers obvious.

O'Brien does not spell out the political context of the rebellion against British rule in the midst of the First World War. Rather, he describes in fine detail each deployment of named individuals, even down to the stand of trees or monument they used as cover. We learn the time and circumstances of each death or injury and even the number of children each dead combatant left behind. Such detail is possible because so few individuals were involved in the Rising. We read that forty-five were sent to Harcourt Street Railway terminus, thirty to City Hall, of whom five were detached to capture the lower gate to Dublin Castle, and so forth. In all, the four hundred or so men and women who mustered at Liberty Hall were sent in dribs and drabs to capture and defend the General Post Office (GPO) and a handful of other buildings. As the rebellion continued, however, individual volunteers who had obeyed Eoin MacNeill's countermanding order or gone home after Patrick Pearse demobilized those who had turned up the day before now drifted into Dublin to offer to man various outposts.

It is hard to know to whom this book will appeal. Proud descendants of named rebels? Students of the history of certain central Dublin buildings or streetscapes or of urban guerrilla warfare more generally? The narrow concentration on a single outpost during the Easter Week Rising is innovative but will not serve anyone wishing to grasp the nature and wider context of the Rising, the motives of its participants, the role it played in the struggle for Irish independence, or its place in the collective psyche of the nation.¹

O'Brien deserves credit, however, for weaving into his account details of the dozens of women who, besides fighting, acted as couriers, scouts, food foragers, and nurses for the wounded. Countess Markievicz (Constance Gore-Booth) was not the only such woman, even if she alone features in Irish school texts. The book also follows British units and individuals stationed in the Shelbourne Hotel and the United Services Club, within range of the ICA holding the College of Surgeons. For example, the author details how an Irishman serving in the British Army, Lt. Charles W. Grant, could use his personal knowledge of side streets to reach the Shelbourne and then make his way back to Dublin Castle undetected (36–37). However, O'Brien fails at this point (and on other occasions) to explore the irony of Irishman against Irishman in this conflict.

A distinct virtue of the book is its photographs, mainly of individuals and buildings mentioned in the text, but also of some interiors of the College of Surgeons during or soon after its occupation by the ICA. Some of these images will be new even to specialists in the subject. There is also an index and (very!) select bibliography, listing only eight books, none more recent than 1995, despite the many fine, more recent academic studies of the Rising and the broader political and social contexts of early twentieth-century Irish history. Similarly, the volume's sparse endnotes (fifty-four in all) include a handful of the 1773 witness statements collected in the late 1940s and early 1950s but suppressed until 2003.² A map of the Dublin streets near the Green shows a handful of key buildings touched on in the narrative but gives no clear indication of the various command positions held by either the rebels or the British.³

With its minute-by-minute, microscopic focus on one specific location in the midst of the rebellion, *Shootout* is a prime example of a "thick description" narrative. It is definitely not the book for readers seeking a wider view of either central Dublin as a battleground or the Rising's political context and long-term effects, but, as a small-scale study, it is an interesting addition to our knowledge of Easter Week, 1916.

1. For clear treatments of these subjects, see, e.g., Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), Fearghal McGarry, *The Rising: Ireland, Easter 1916* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2010), and Keith Jeffery, *The GPO and the Easter Rising* (Portland, OR: Irish Acad Pr, 2006).

2 See Bureau of Military History – www.miwsr.com/rd/1615.htm.

3. For such maps, see the books listed in note 1 above.