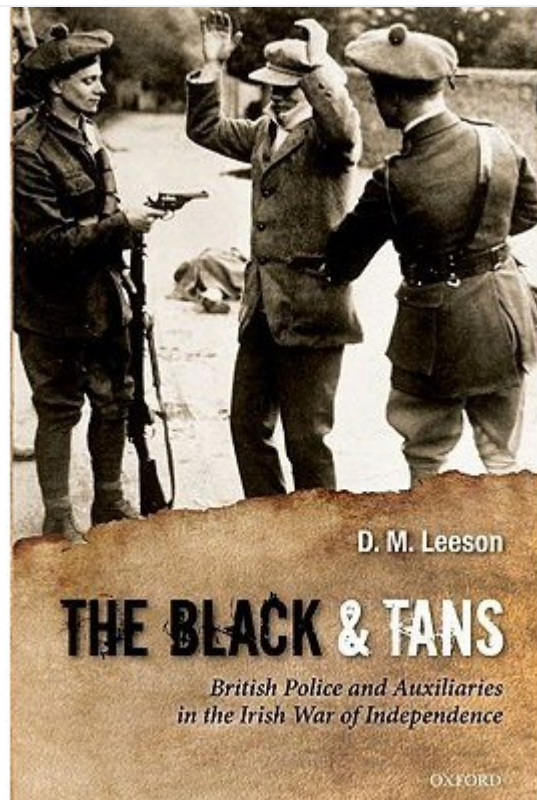


{essays in history}

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The Black and Tans: British Police and Auxiliaries in the Irish War of Independence, 1920-1921



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Reviewed Work(s)

The Black and Tans: British Police and Auxiliaries in the Irish War of Independence, 1920-1921. By David Leeson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Pp. 294. Hardcover, \$52.98.

Scholars have included the Irish War of Independence in their appraisals of modern Irish history since the war ended in the early 1920s. David M. Leeson, a historian at Laurentian University, examines the less discussed units of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) — that is the Black and Tans and the Auxiliary Division (ADRIC) — in a well-integrated mix of political and military history. In his book, the author aims to debunk the myths established by the Irish Republicans that still surround the history of the Black and Tans: for example, the notion that they were all ex-criminals and “down-and-outs.” Leeson takes a less conventional approach to the subject by arguing that it was “not character but circumstance” that caused the Black and Tans as well as the Auxiliary Division to take the law into their own hands (69).

The book is divided into seven chapters, which are also separated into subcategories. Chapter One provides a comprehensive overview of the War of Independence including the policies leading up to the conflict, while also including an introduction to the different divisions of the police forces of the Royal Irish Constabulary. Chapter Two is a case study of the War of Independence in West Galway. This chapter focuses upon a limited geographical area while skillfully applying Leeson’s conclusions to the whole of the country. This tactic is problematic in that the South experienced the war differently than the West. Chapters Four and Five systematically demystify current arguments that imply that the Black and Tans and the Auxiliary Division were simply composed of hardened ex-criminals. The British recruits were mostly unemployed ex-servicemen who rarely had a criminal record. Leeson gives a social and cultural history of these two units, which sets up the remainder of his thesis and book. The heart of his argument appears in the final three chapters, as Leeson elucidates the conditions to which the police were subjected, causing them to take reprisals. In these last chapters, especially Chapter Seven, the author directly confronts and rejects arguments that place culpability on the personal qualities of the men recruited into the RIC, men who may have been hardened by the earlier experiences in war and acted in a paramilitary fashion, or who

may have been driven to act violently by other prejudices against Irish Republicans.

The book is scattered with intriguing and illuminating anecdotes about the Irish Republican Army and the Royal Irish Constabulary, making it informative and entertaining for anyone eager to learn about the major units involved in the Irish War of Independence. Leeson makes use of a large number of statistics by placing them into easily comprehensible tables, which assist the reader in understanding the changes in recruitment and enlistment over the years. Despite an imbalance in the types of sources used by Leeson, the amount of effort that the author put into his project is evident in the clear writing style, organized structure, and in-depth material offered on reprisals carried out by the Black and Tans and the ADRIC.

Leeson's research relies heavily on documents from the United Kingdom's National Archives in addition to a variety of British newspapers. Along with the British sources, the author makes use of the National Archives of Ireland, the Irish Military Archives of Ireland, the Trinity College Archives, and the Imperial War Museum. In perusing the endnotes and bibliography, Leeson's substantial reliance on British sources, especially newspaper articles, raise questions about whether his research is extensive enough for substantive conclusions.

In a few cases, Leeson fails to qualify certain statements. Leeson draws attention to the lack of service records available on British recruits for the RIC. He states that we "do not know what kind of men they were before the war. Without this information, we can hardly make meaningful statements about the brutalizing effect of the Great War" on them (89). Although this statement is true, Leeson fails to recognize the conjecture within his own argument. If we cannot know what kind of men the recruits were before, during, or after the Great War, we certainly cannot use their character as part of the argument at all. Similarly, because Leeson argues against a current perception that the men recruited into the Black and Tans were hardened by their military experiences during the Great War, he needs to more fully address the experiences of the men who resigned because they did not like the paramilitary character of the Black and Tans or Auxiliary Division, and focus on the mentalities of the men who chose to remain in the units and in many cases lawlessly committed atrocities. Nonetheless, Leeson

concedes that just because the Black and Tans and the ADRIC were not the stereotypes that the Irish Republicans believed them to be, does not mean they were incapable of committing violent and indiscriminate acts. He merely draws attention to the conditions that caused all people involved in the Irish War of Independence to act violently and cruelly—unfortunately, the rule rather than the exception in modern warfare.

Leeson addresses the lack of scholarship on the Black and Tans and the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary. Only a few works have been previously published on the subject: Richard Bennett's book *The Black and Tans* in 1959 and Ernest McCall's *Tudor Toughs* in 2010, which focuses on the Auxiliary Division of the RIC between 1920-1922. Leeson acknowledges that this topic was underdeveloped and peripheral until recently in the historiography of the Irish War of Independence and attempts to rectify the obvious gap in scholarship with his monograph. There is no doubt that the conditions to which the Black and Tans and Auxiliary Divisions were exposed caused indiscriminate reprisals, leading to a back and forth of atrocities between the Irish Republican Army and the RIC. David M. Leeson's book *The Black and Tans: British Police and Auxiliaries in the Irish War of Independence, 1920-1921* is an innovative approach to a neglected topic that should be read by professional and burgeoning historians alike.

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