

Reviews

James Monaghan's *Colombia Jail Journal*

By Peter Hart



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This is the story of three Irishmen arrested in Colombia in August 2001 and tried in 2002 and 2003 on charges of training FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrillas and entering the country with false documents. They were acquitted of the former but convicted of the latter in 2004. The Colombian Government appealed the verdict, but they were released on bail in the meantime and escaped to Ireland, where they re-emerged publicly in 2005. The author, James Monaghan, was the leader of this group. He is a veteran of the Irish Republican Army and a former member of the executive of Sinn Féin, the formerly revolutionary Republican party allied to the IRA (Irish Republican Army). The other two men, Martin McCauley and Niall Connolly, were/are self-avowed supporters of Sinn Féin. Connolly was also some sort of Sinn Féin representative in Cuba, although the party denied it at first.

These facts are probably already familiar to many of the readers of this journal but, because of the mystery and controversy surrounding these very public events, much curiosity remains about what really happened and why. Sadly, satisfying such curiosity is not the purpose of this book. In fact, despite the inherently exciting subject, I suspect most unpartisan readers will find it a most unsatisfying story, lacking as it does both a believable beginning and a proper ending.

The book begins with the Colombia Three (as they inevitably became known) being arrested on their way out of the country, after spending a month in FARC-controlled territory. The overriding question of the whole episode is, of course: what were they doing there? They were using fake passports and identities and their cover story was that they were journalists but, once this was blown, they claimed to be merely interested in observing the then-still-operative peace process, apparently on behalf of Coiste na n-Iarchimi, the Irish organisation for Republican ex-prisoners that employed Monaghan. Indeed, according to him, this project was funded by the Irish Government. It was not to be all work, however, as they were also going for what Monaghan called 'a holiday of a lifetime' (9), which apparently explains the length of their stay.

The Colombian Government's version was that they were teaching FARC to make and use home-made mortars, something of an IRA speciality. The British and American governments repeated the same accusations, and Monaghan – formerly a metal worker by trade – was widely described as a senior IRA engineer. For what it is worth, McCauley was both shot and charged as an IRA member in Northern Ireland but never convicted, and denied being one (as of 2003). He did describe himself as rebuilding cars for a living, so presumably he had a skill set related to

Monaghan's. Connolly seems to have been along at least in part as an interpreter. When the evidence was put to trial, however, there was a failure to convict.

Simple denials and denunciations of the prosecution make sense in a courtroom or a press conference, but they are not going to convince many open-minded readers. Apart from anything else, spending the middle of Summer in the backwoods of a very hot country hardly sounds like much of a holiday – especially for Connolly, who was already in Cuba. If it was all about peace and suntans, why travel under false identities? Because, Monaghan says, given their legal and political histories, their real identities might get them barred, or might put them in danger. McCauley had once been illegally ambushed by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (former police service) in Northern Ireland, and two of his lawyers had been killed by pro-state paramilitaries (with possible official collusion), so he had little reason to trust governments or policemen. This does not explain why Connolly had to disguise himself, and it also raises the question of where they got such documents, if not from the IRA. Also, Monaghan and Connolly had previously travelled to Nicaragua (which had its own peace process): did they use their real names on this occasion?

An investigative journalist (someone who seems badly needed here) might also connect the prior trip to Nicaragua, and a Sinn Féin representative in Cuba, to possible prior meetings with FARC representatives – although it would seem that accusations of prior visits to Colombia itself did not always stand up to alibi evidence. Monaghan describes their experiences with the rebels with extreme and odd brevity: they were impressed by FARC rule, talked a lot with FARC officials, and explored the forest. If they were not official representatives of Sinn Féin or the IRA, why would these people bother with them? How could they speak with such apparent authority and intimate knowledge of the Irish peace process? Certainly, this book adds nothing to the credibility of their claims.

As for the ending – their release and escape home – it too is notable for its omissions:

We had a long journey home, and needed the help of many good people. The story of that journey cannot be told for many years because that might endanger those people. There are intelligence services who would dearly love to know how it was done, and to punish those who helped us escape from tyranny. (273)

While that is certainly understandable, it again leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Who, if not FARC and the IRA, had the motive and resources to pull this off? Their bail was paid by Gerry Kelly and Caitríona Ruane, both Sinn Féin members of the Northern Ireland Assembly (parliament). Kelly also has a long history as a member of the IRA. Surely they knew about the presumably planned escape? Why would they go to such expense and effort (illegal not just in Colombia but also Ireland, since they had to enter that country – as they presumably had left it – fraudulently) if the Three had no official connection to the Republican movement?

Here, I think, context is all. It is true that that the Northern Ireland peace process involved frequent trips abroad by all parties to investigate South Africa, Bosnia and other hot spots, and to bring news of the Irish miracle. However, as far as I know, these were all carried out legally, and in public. More importantly, at the time of the arrests, Sinn Féin was navigating a great deal of Unionist and British suspicion about what the IRA was up to, including accusations of arms-buying, smuggling, robbery, spying and the occasional killing. A connection with FARC would fit with these activities – especially if money was involved – but any such link, even if it was merely political, would have to be hidden from official eyes to avoid a backlash. This became about a million times more urgent after the 9/11 attacks, when Sinn Féin's invaluable Irish-American supporters would hardly be charmed by tales of their funding recipients living in Cuba or holidaying in the jungle with 'terrorists'. Hence the denials that these men had any connection with Sinn Féin. Hence also the nominally non-party status of the 'Bring

'Them Home' campaign in Ireland and of its leader, Caitríona Ruane, although she became a Sinn Féin politician in the midst of the campaign.

What the book lacks in revelations, it makes up for in the very detailed narrative of what Monaghan and his friends experienced while in jail. They were moved around a lot, met a lot of other inmates, had many visits from lawyers and the ubiquitous Ruane, went through their trial, waited for the verdict, and no doubt spent a lot of time being bored and anxious. However, *Prison Break* it was not. They seem to have been reasonably well housed, fed and clothed, they had access to telephones, TV, lawyers and other visitors, they got along well with FARC and other left-wing political prisoners, and the guards did not mistreat them. The prosecution case might well have been trumped-up but then again they were only convicted on the charge they were clearly guilty of: travelling under false passports. And they were released on bail (set fairly low) when the Government appealed. Much of this may have had to do with their citizenship and the mobilisation of public and political support in Ireland and the United States – advantages unavailable to other prisoners – but this hardly counts as 'tyranny'. In fact, it sounds a lot better than how 'terrorist' suspects get treated in many other parts of the world. Nor do the frequent statements that right-wing enemies were out to get them, that they were in constant danger of assassination, ring true, given that no actual attacks were ever made. Monaghan may be correct in his belief that US and British intelligence agencies and 'securocrats' were behind it all, but condemning imperialism and praising guerrillas does not give us much insight into what is actually happening there.

Author's Reply

The book *Colombia Jail Journal* is an account of the time I spent in prison in Colombia, with minimal reference to what happened before and after. The reader should be aware that there was (and still is) a very serious political situation in Ireland and that the book could have been used to damage the Irish Republican position by its enemies. Many Republicans would have preferred that the book was never written because of that danger.

The book's title echoes John Mitchel's classic *Jail Journal* (1854) and, by extension, the whole long tradition of Irish Republican prison writing. It does not quite belong within that genre, however, as the Three were not self-proclaimed revolutionaries and they did not really suffer. Instead, it recalls (presumably also deliberately) the memoirs of the wrongfully accused or convicted such as the Guildford Four or Birmingham Six. This was a fight for justice and human rights against a politically-motivated prosecution, with Ruane replacing heroic British lawyer Gareth Peirce in the lead role as deliverer. I am sure Ruane did play a large part in helping the Three get through their ordeal but there is also a familiar whiff of spin here on behalf of a political up-and-comer.

Monaghan is a sincere admirer of the Colombian revolution and has gone on to help publish a memoir by one of the guerrillas he met while in prison. Unfortunately, his own prose is incapable of bringing such people to life for us, to tell their stories or give much of a sense of them as individuals or as a movement. We do not really get to know the rest of the Three either. So the story ultimately lacks both drama and characters. The bottom line is that this is a matter-of-fact description of what happened to the Colombia Three from when they were arrested to when they were released, written presumably in order to give their side of the story while very carefully not saying anything that might conceivably embarrass Sinn Féin. As such, it is rather uninteresting and adds almost nothing to public knowledge of the events concerned.

Peter Hart

The reason why it was written is that the uncontested written word soon becomes the official history of what happened. Most of what was written and said in news media was 'spin' by pro-British journalists. Modern guerrilla warfare is largely about winning 'hearts and minds' and such propaganda is a key part of it.

Nations who have lived under colonialism have had their history written by the colonisers, because anyone who resisted the conquest of their people was criminalised - the occupying power makes the laws. Irish history is by and large researched from British sources. Many of the things the reviewer finds lacking in the book are not there because it would be a criminal offense to admit to them, such as membership of the IRA.

There is a cosy world inhabited by many authors in which they can write without fear of the consequences - I do not live in that world.

Jim Monaghan