Book Review:
The IRA by Tim Pat Coogan

John Doe

English 101
November 23, 2012
Dr. Mark Place
The Irish Republican Army (IRA) is one of the most controversial organizations of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Depending on who you ask, it might be described as the liberators of the Irish People or a murderous terrorist organization, or possibly both. Their complicated history makes them a difficult topic to write about, but Tim Pat Coogan’s \textit{The IRA} is more than up to the task. His seminal work on the IRA is a meticulous retelling of their history and presence in modern-day Ireland, but even his acclaimed work runs into trouble when trying to parse the moral implications of the Irish fight for freedom. Despite these difficulties, \textit{The IRA} is still a thorough, well-researched book that offers a definitive look at this particularly difficult period in Irish history.

Coogan brings an impressive resume and a wealth of investigative experience to his writing. The longtime editor of \textit{The Irish Press} and a respected reporter and broadcaster, he was a well-known figure before he published his first book on Irish history, \textit{Ireland Since the Rising}, in 1968. Because the topic of the IRA is so fraught, only someone with the authority and expertise Coogan brings to the table would be able to address the issue with the depth it warrants. For example, he was able to interview past and present members of the IRA who had never before spoken on the record about events such as the party schism in 1969 and the killings that occurred during The Troubles. He includes numerous first-hand accounts of party politics and actions that have not been reported elsewhere, and it’s clear that his friendship with those involved led to more thorough reporting than other journalists would have been capable of. Coogan’s reputation is a big reason why \textit{The IRA} is considered the definitive examination of the organization.
Published in 1970, the original edition of *The IRA* begins where the IRA began, in the movement of the British into the northern counties of Ireland in during the reign of James I. From there, Coogan traces the growth of the Irish Nationalist movement through the failed revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries and into the Irish War of Independence. This material is covered quickly and only occupies a small fraction of the very large text. From there, the book slow down, and Coogan explores in detail the political and moral development of the IRA. He documents the split in the IRA following the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the resulting bloody Civil War before moving into the IRA involvement in World War II and the post-war border campaign. The original edition of *The IRA* ended with the 1969 split, but in subsequent editions Coogan has added text to keep up with the continued work of the IRA. New sections cover the split as well as the Hunger Strike and the era known as The Troubles. The most current edition, published in 2002, end with the peace agreement of 1998.

The book is a mix of historical records and Coogan’s interviews and personal impressions of his subject, and while his writing can sometimes seem casual he maintains an even-handed tone. As is appropriate for a historical book, the text itself is fairly dry; there is little is the way of rhetorical flourishes or wordplay. This style serves the book well, though, since Coogan is attempting to handle an extremely flammable topic. An examination of the IRA that offered more commentary or personality would likely be seen as prejudiced toward one side of the other, so Coogan’s style, while sometimes boring or hard to read, is a necessary part of the book’s success.

That being said, there is no doubt that Coogan sides with the IRA in their struggles against the British. He makes no pretense of being a professional historian, and instead presents
the IRA’s story basically from only their point of view. As mentioned earlier, many of his sources are clearly close friends or people for whom he personally vouches, which limits the scope of his work. No doubt those allied with British interests in North Ireland find his telling of events lacking in perspective. For example, in his discussion of the attack on Loughall, Coogan takes his republican source at his word that “the object of the Loughall attack was to destroy the barracks, not to take life,” (372) despite the overwhelming military force the IRA brought to the barracks. The reader is asked to believe this version because Coogan personally vouches for the man’s character and standing. In addition, there’s a small dip in quality in the move between the original text and the newer sections, especially as Coogan relies more on information from people with whom he clearly has a personal relationship.

*The IRA*, however, is not for the faint of heart or for those whose attentions are known to wonder. While the original edition ended at nearly 300 pages, the current editions weighs in at a heavy 808. It contains hundreds of people, places, and acronyms that are likely to confuse the casual reader, especially anyone unfamiliar with the key players in Irish history, but several appendices are provided to help the reader along. However, someone looking for a general overview of the IRA would do better to look elsewhere.

Despite these issues, *The IRA* is still a fascinating and well-written book that deserves its title as one of the definitive books on Irish republicanism. Obviously, given its viewpoint, it can’t claim to be the one true account of Irish’s struggles, but when read alongside other works in the field, it builds a unique and thorough picture of the IRA and the role it played in Ireland and across the rest of the world. If you’re a history enthusiast with an interest in Irish politics, Tim Pat Coogan’s *The IRA* is a must-read.
Bibliography