



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Honigsbaum, M. ORCID: 0000-0002-1891-8763 (2020). Stacking the Coffins: Influenza, War and Revolution in Ireland, 1918-19. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 94(1), pp. 168-170. doi: 10.1353/bhm.2020.0027

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/24226/>

Link to published version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2020.0027>

Copyright and reuse: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

City Research Online:

<http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/>

publications@city.ac.uk

Ida Milne. *Stacking the Coffins: Influenza, War and Revolution in Ireland, 1918–19*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018. xii + 263 pp. Ill. \$35.00 (978-1-5261-2269-8).

Influenza, it seems, is the microbe that keeps on giving. When in 1998 Howard Phillips and David Killingray convened a conference in Cape Town to open up new perspectives on the 1918 influenza pandemic, the number of books and articles devoted to this “neglected” historical event already numbered 600. Since then at least 250 more have been added to the historiography.¹

Perhaps the most notable contributions to this second wave of flu scholarship have come from social and cultural historians interested in the local iterations of the pandemic; Milne’s sweeping new Irish history of the pandemic is in very much in this tradition.

Focusing on the intersection of the pandemic with war and revolution, Milne demonstrates how the flu’s arrival was closely monitored by Irish newspapers and drew on local political events. This was particularly true of the deadly second wave of the pandemic, which sickened several prominent Irish nationalists interned by the British for their supposed involvement in the “German plot.” The authorities’ lack of compassion gifted Sinn Fein a propaganda coup, one which Milne convincingly argues contributed to the republican landslide in the December 1918 general election. Yet despite killing 23,000 people—4,000 more than the 1832 cholera—and sickening a fifth of Ireland’s population, the pandemic was ignored by Irish historians for more than ninety years. Indeed, Milne’s monograph is only the second substantive history since Catriona Kelley’s *The Last Irish Plague* in 2011.²

In search of an explanation for this “curious lacuna in Irish history” (p. 3) Milne explores the pandemic from a variety of perspectives, but perhaps her most significant contribution comes in Chapter 7 where she presents the testimony of some twenty-five Irish survivors. For these oral histories, it seems, we must thank her supervisor, Professor David Dickson, who when Milne began her researches in 2006 convinced her there was “still a narrow window to collect living memory” (p. 164). Some, such as Catherine Doyle—aged 104 when Milne interviewed her in 2007—are rendered speechless by the pandemic’s failure to register in public memory. R. B. McDowell, a historian and former junior dean at Trinity College, Dublin, is similarly baffled, telling Milne the “flu made a bigger impression on me than any other incident since” (p. 171). In an echo of Sandra Tomkin’s verdict that the pandemic represented a “failure of expertise” for the British medical profession, Dr James Walsh, the former deputy chief medical officer of Ireland, suspects the reason might have been Irish doctors’ similar inability to offer treatments or succour to patients (p. 182).³

But perhaps the most interesting theory is that offered by Stella Larkin, whose mother Anna was one of ten children raised in the tenements of Dublin to have survived beyond the age of five. Sleuthing in Glasnevin Cemetery, Milne discovers that the majority of her children died not of influenza but of syndemic conditions such as diarrhea and measles. But while this prompts the insight that the ubiquity of childhood diseases in Dublin might have made the flu seem trifling by comparison, frustratingly Milne does not explore the insight. Instead, beside the survivors’ accounts, we are presented with chapters on the press, the Poor Law dispensary service and hospitals, and the medical profession. This makes for a comprehensive but sometimes disjointed narrative, one in which it is not always possible to discern a

consistent argument. In places, the text is also under-referenced. But these are minor quibbles.

Milne's real subject is the confluence of the pandemic with war and revolution, and in Chapter 8 she makes deft use of prisoners' letters and the diaries of Kathleen Lynn, Sinn Fein's director of public health, to show how Republicans attempted to exploit the Spanish flu as a "political tool" (p.198). While this may have gifted them a short-term electoral advantage, however, Milne concludes that the flu's most enduring impact was not on politics or medicine "but on private lives." (p. 237).

Given that 2018 marked the 100th anniversary of the pandemic, the window for collecting the testimony of survivors has now surely closed. If for nothing else, Milne's book will be a valuable resource for future historians interested in the patients' view of what she calls the "largest acute epidemic disease in Ireland in the twentieth century" (p. 81).

Mark Honigsbaum

City University of London

<NOTES>

1. Howard Phillips, "The Recent Wave of 'Spanish' Flu Historiography," *Soc. Hist. Med.* 27, no. 4 (2014): 789–808.

2. Caitriona Foley, *The Last Irish Plague: The Great Flu Epidemic in Ireland, 1918–19* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011).

3. Sandra M. Tomkins, "The Failure of Expertise: Public Health Policy in Britain during the 1918–19 Influenza Epidemic," *Soc. Hist. Med.* 5, no. 3 (Dec. 1992): 435–54.