

Slander vs. biography: Aidan Beatty's falsification of Gerry Healy's family and childhood in a decade of rebellion and civil war

Thomas Scripps
28 November 2024

Aidan Beatty's demonisation of Gerry Healy, *The Party is Always Right*, begins with the statement: "Gerry Healy was born in Ireland in 1913 and became a Trotskyist in Britain just over 20 years later. Almost all the other important details that he would later recall about his childhood and early life were exaggerated, if not fabricated wholesale ... Most egregiously, Gerry Healy's well-repeated claim that he saw the Black and Tans shoot and kill his father during the War of Independence was an outright lie."

Countering this alleged lie, Beatty proclaims that Healy's father, Michael, is "not on the full list of Galway casualties" provided by a historian of the War of Independence. Moreover, according to Beatty, the region where Healy was born and raised was largely spared the violence of early twentieth century Ireland. He claims that Galway—after a "tradition of rural agitation and even militancy in the later nineteenth century"—had "become quieter by the early decades of the twentieth."

That is not all: Beatty claims that Healy "grew up in relative comfort with his family owning a 109-acre farm ... a land-owning Catholic bourgeoisie had been crystallising in Ireland since the Famine of the 1840s and the Healys were a product of that long-term development."

The purpose of the damning "exposures" with which Beatty opens his biography is to frame Gerry Healy as a liar and political conman, a fabulist who was so devoid of scruples that he even fabricated a story about his father's murder. Beatty intended his readers to conclude, by the time they had reached the end of the first page of his book, that Healy's entire political career was grounded on a false narrative, and that a man who would tell such lies about his own origins and early life would stoop to anything.

If true, this would certainly amount to a devastating exposure of the biography's subject. But, in fact, Beatty's allegations consist entirely of distortions, fabrications and outright lies. The claims he makes about Healy's alleged misrepresentation of his life are based not on what Healy wrote or said, but, rather, on the wholly undocumented and unsubstantiated stories told by his political enemies.

The primal lie that Beatty attributes to Healy—that he had witnessed the murder of his father by the Black and Tans—was *never* told. In fact, Healy rarely said anything about his youth. In researching this essay, we have brought to light the one story, recalled by trustworthy witnesses in Ireland, that Healy told about his childhood. He made no mention of his father and the circumstances of his death.

Beatty's claim that Healy enjoyed a bucolic bourgeois childhood in a part of Ireland that was spared the violence of revolution and civil war is an incredible falsification of the well-documented historical reality.

Advertising his own Irish identity and academic credentials, Beatty

markets his book as a scholarly biography that is the product of scrupulous and exhaustive research. In fact, Beatty conducted virtually no research, aside from glancing through Ancestry.com, into either the social and political conditions that prevailed in the area where Healy was born or into the circumstances of his family. For a man who is soon to be president of the American Conference for Irish Studies, the scale of his negligence and dishonesty is staggering. The pages dealing with Healy's background contain no archival references, and only one to secondary historical literature—which is misused.

Having blackguarded Healy in this way, Beatty has since sought to defend his account by the same scurrilous means. Challenged at an online event on November 23 by Chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* David North over his presentation of the area where Gerry Healy grew up as "relatively quiet," Beatty was unable to control himself, interrupting, "You have no idea what you're talking about. You're an uninformed clown." Other interventions by historian Tom Mackaman and Socialist Equality Party National Secretary Joseph Kishore drew similar remarks.

Beatty claims that Healy was able to falsify his personal history "because of the British's left [sic] general lack of knowledge about Ireland." Healy, according to Beatty, believed that he could get away with lies. But this is precisely what Beatty has believed about his own work. He assumed that his exercise in slander would not be seriously investigated. The degree of his miscalculation has already been made clear by the two devastating exposures of his pseudo-biography by North and Andrea Peters, posted on the WSWs.

This third essay is devoted to a detailed exposure of Beatty's misrepresentation of Healy's family background and youth, following on from an earlier essay by Mackaman. It is based on research I conducted in Ireland on behalf of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which included visiting the relevant archives in Dublin and in Galway where the Healy family lived.

This research establishes: 1) that Healy was not one of the "sons of the bourgeoisie" as Beatty claims, but came from a family of recent tenant farmers who were able to purchase their land as a result of the decades of struggle waged against the landlord class by the Irish tenantry; 2) that Healy grew up in an area of Ireland that suffered extreme violence during the revolution and civil war; and 3) that while Healy never claimed his father was murdered, or that he witnessed such a traumatic event, his childhood was scarred by the violence that took place in the neighbourhood where he spent the first 13 years of his life.

Tenant farmers in Killrerin

Gerry Healy's family's ownership of a 109-acre farm did not place it in the ranks of the "bourgeoisie," as Beatty absurdly claims. The Healys were members of the expanding class of middling farmers whose acquisition of land was inextricably bound to the great political and economic struggle of the Irish peasantry against landlordism, the bulwark of British imperialism on the island.

According to the *Griffith's Valuation*—a land valuation survey of Ireland commissioned by the British government—Gerry's grandfather, Thomas Healy, was farming in Galway in the mid-1850s. He was a tenant, renting a small 18-acre holding in the townland of Barnaderg South, in the parish of Killrerin, a few kilometres southeast of the town of Tuam.

Born in roughly 1841, Thomas's early life would have been blighted by the Great Famine (or Great Hunger, *an Gorta Mór*) of 1845–52, which killed roughly 1 million people and caused millions more to flee the country. If Thomas Healy, after whom Thomas Gerry Healy was named, did not himself suffer famine, he certainly would have witnessed the effects of starvation all around him. Galway lost nearly one-third of its population owing to death and emigration aboard "coffin ships." A priest in nearby Ballinasloe described the condition of his parishioners in 1847 in the following terms:

Health, strength, youth, childhood and old age—all withering before the face of this frightful Famine. To its victims I broke "the bread of life": the bread that perisheth I could not command; and frequently, indeed, I have wept bitterly in quitting the abode of misery, unable to aid its wretched inmates ... Good heavens, can it be possible that man, created in the image of the living God, is forced to live on weeds.^[1]

Gerry's grandfather survived one of the great tragedies of modern history, but the Famine left in its wake significant change. It deepened the Irish masses' hatred of the landlords and Great Britain, a legacy passed down through the generations. By depleting the farm labour population, it created the possibility for the emergence of a new middling layer of farmers. It was to this stratum that the Healys would rise over the next two generations.

In the 1850s, Thomas Healy was still living under the sway of his landlord John A. Kirwan, one of the Kirwans of Hillsbrook, part of a branch of the Kirwans of Cregg, a great landed family in Galway owning thousands of acres. But by the time of his death in 1904, Thomas had expanded his holdings and was living in the neighbouring townland of Corralea. His will, available in the National Archives of Ireland, includes a statement from a local surveyor explaining, "amongst the assets of above deceased there is a farm of land containing 65 acres or thereabouts held as a yearly tenant at the rent of £43 ... if said farm were sold in the open market it would realise £450 or thereabouts." This comprised nearly all of his estate, with only a further £20 in household goods.

Thomas's death, coming within a few days of that of his wife Honoria 'Norah' Healy (née Donnellan), precipitated an urgent crisis for the family. Barely a month earlier, his son Michael (Gerry's father) had been enrolled at Blackrock College in Dublin to train as a priest, a record of which exists in the school's archives. He returned to care for his dying parents. Their death certificates state that he was the witness for both deaths.

Gerry Healy's grandfather, Thomas, was buried in St Mary's Graveyard. Michael, Gerry's father, never returned to Blackrock. His "matriculation" there lasted all of one month. He remained in Killrerin to

work on the family farm, where he is listed as a "farm servant" on the census of 1911.

Far from being part of a rising "Irish Catholic bourgeoisie," the 1911 Irish census also tells us that Michael Healy lived in a house with a thatch roof, and with more people than rooms. The census rated the Healy home at the bottom of the "second class" of housing structures. This means that Michael Healy resided at a home in roughly the bottom one-third of Irish housing, according to data compiled by the *Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland*.^[2]

The duplicitous way Beatty has dealt with this period is instructive. In an X/Twitter exchange with Mackaman, attempting to back up his characterisation of Gerry Healy as one of the "sons of the bourgeoisie," Beatty cited Michael's attendance at Blackrock, conveniently leaving out the fact that he was only there for one month. Exposed by Mackaman, Beatty responded by shutting down access to his X account.

Research in Ireland has further revealed that Michael's place at Blackrock college had been offered at a substantially reduced rate of £4 a term, versus the usual £21 annual fee. In presenting this document, the archivist at Blackrock College explained that this was not unusual, as the school was keen to have recruits, particularly of a pious and respectable background. The account of Thomas's funeral given in the *Western People* tells us that one of his sons was Reverend Martin Canon Healy, the author of several Bible history stories for children, who likely provided a useful reference for his younger brother Michael.^[3]

Such circumstances were not unheard of for those familiar with Irish history. Among those of relatively poor background but who nonetheless attended Blackrock College was the future president of Ireland, Éamon de Valera, who now gives the name of one of the student houses.

The Healy family and the struggle for land in Ireland

From the end of 1904, Michael Healy was back working on the family farm. According to the records of occupants kept in the land valuation books, accessible in the Valuation Office in Dublin, the household would have been headed first by his elder brother Martin—the beneficiary of Thomas's will—and later, from roughly 1910, his other older brother James. During this time, the valuation books indicate that the holdings grew to just over 100 acres—valued at £38—and were purchased freehold with financial assistance from the Land Commission.

The changes in the Healy family's circumstances were one individual outcome of a decades-long process of agrarian unrest to which Beatty makes only the most glancing and dismissive reference, but which would have had an enormous impact on the lives of Michael and his siblings. The Land Commission which aided their purchase of the land they had worked for decades was originally established by the British government in 1843 to investigate the land question in Ireland, but its scope and powers grew substantially over the decades with the passage of a flurry of Land Acts in 1870, 1880, 1881, 1882, 1885 (the "Ashbourne Act"), 1887 (the "Balfour Act"), 1896 and 1903 (the "Wyndham Act").

Westminster's successive rounds of legislation were driven by the persistent political agitation of the Irish tenantry, a class of peasants who worked and depended on the land but did not own it.

The years 1879–82 were known as the "Land War," associated with the Irish National Land League of Michael Davitt and Charles Stewart Parnell. The first major meeting of the movement was held in Irishtown, County Mayo, roughly 25 kilometres northwest of Barnaderg/Corralea, and attracted over 10,000 people from Mayo, Roscommon and Galway.^[4] Tenant farmers on estates across Ireland, especially in the West, carried out rent strikes, boycotts and attacks on property.

Attempts by the British government to suppress the movement, imprisoning many of its leading figures and emboldening the landlords into a wave of evictions, ultimately proved ineffective. Between 1886–91, the “Plan of Campaign” mobilised a new round of actions. In 1898, William O’Brien founded the United Irish League (UIL) with the motto “The Land for the People” and began organising new initiatives, including the cattle drives of the “Ranch War” in the early 1900s, centred on the west of Ireland, including Galway.^[5]

The UIL grew rapidly to a membership of over 100,000 and organised popular meetings across the country. Michael Healy and James Healy, Gerry’s father and uncle, seem to have been active in the land agitation, an important detail that Beatty might have learned had he conducted any research. A report by the *Tuam Herald* from 1906 finds the brothers from Killrerin in attendance at a UIL meeting in Cummer in 1906.^[6]

The meeting was addressed by Richard Hazleton, recently elected member of Parliament for North Galway, who had studied at Blackrock. He remarked, in the paper’s reporting, that the Land Act of 1903 had been “in operation for some time, and no doubt some of the tenant farmers had benefited by it, but it required amendment, and he (Mr Hazleton) would co-operate with the Irish Party in having it amended that the Irish peasantry would be put into possession of the soil.” The reporters notes the enthusiastic cheers in the crowd at this point.

Hazleton gave a section of his speech in Irish, announcing himself a proud member of the Gaelic League. The organisation, founded in 1893, campaigned for the revival of an Irish language increasingly confined to the rural west of the country and was an important source of the movement for national independence from Britain. All of the Healys are listed in the 1911 census as speaking Irish and English, and Martin Healy wrote his Bible stories in both. A James Healy is listed as a member of the local Tuam Gaelic League in a 1903 edition of the *Tuam Herald*.^[7]

Another article from the same newspaper lists a Michael Healy as present at a 1907 meeting of the Tuam branch of Sinn Féin, which had been founded three years prior and would soon come to represent the dominant voice of Irish nationalism.^[8] The evidence is incomplete, and it cannot be definitely stated, at this point, whether the Michael Healy referenced in the article was Gerry’s father. But the cumulative evidence suggests an active role for the Healy family in the political movements of the period.

The combined impact of nationalist and agrarian agitation in Galway and across Ireland, and the Acts passed in London in response, was substantial. Prior to 1921, more than 300,000 tenants had purchased over 11 out of 20 million acres in the country.^[9] The Commission continued its work under the new Irish Free State from 1922, with the result that, by 1929, over 97 percent of farmers owned their farms—versus less than 3 percent in 1870.^[10]

Michael Healy’s farm in Ballybane and strange disappearance

This process provided the basis for Michael Healy’s first steps in setting up his own farm and family. He left Killrerin in 1912, at the age of 27, to purchase the tenancy of a 110-acre farm at Ballybane, or Ballybaanmore, then a small hamlet with surrounding farmland just east of Galway town. The tenancy was purchased from Charles Kaine, a respected local farmer, shortly before his death, for the agreed price of £1,410. The land was owned by the Governors of the Board of Erasmus Smith Schools—a trust dating back to Cromwell’s invasion of Ireland which owned swathes of land across the country. Its archives contain the document giving the details above.

Another document in the Erasmus Smith archives, the minutes of the

Board of Governors, indicate that they agreed at the end of 1913 to sell the land in full to Michael in exchange for £975 advanced by the Land Commission. This is confirmed both by the Valuation Books held at the Valuation Office—which further indicate the land was valued at £52—and separate records held by the Registry of Deeds and Land Registry in Dublin. According to the folio at the Land Registry, Michael paid off what he owed the Commission by the early to mid-1920s.

This purchase would have placed Michael among the category commonly known as “strong farmers” in the county, though his holding was tiny relative to the landlord class owning multiple hundreds and even thousands of acres of land. It certainly did not place him in the ranks of the bourgeoisie, controllers of the means of production in society, as Beatty claims.

Questions arise from this research. The sum paid by Michael to Charles Kaine was substantial. Meanwhile, the land records indicate that the farm in Killrerin, in which the Healy family’s wealth was tied up, was in the possession of his brother James. Rather than assume the Healys were living a “comfortable” life in Ballybane, it is more likely than not that Michael took on significant debt to pay Kaine, which he would then have had to pay off alongside the Land Commission annuity—a repayment that had to come during a crisis in agricultural prices in the 1920s.

During their years in Ballybane, Michael and his wife Margaret Mary Healy (née Rabbitte) had four children: Thomas Gerard “Gerry” Healy in 1913, Mary Helena Angela (Sister Carmel) Healy in 1916, Michael Gabriel Healy in 1919 and Patrick Brendan Healy in 1923. From this point, however, the historical record of Michael’s life thins out rapidly, and no likely candidate for him appears in lists of burials, gravestone inscriptions or wills that we have been able to locate. Beatty deals with this by writing vaguely:

The family appears to have entered a financial crisis in the second half of the 1920s, possibly related to mental health problems on the part of Healy’s father, Michael. By the 1930s, Healy’s mother, Margaret Mary, was living in Tipperary Town, about 100 miles south of Galway... The family’s property in Tipperary was registered in the mother’s name only and its not clear what had become of his father; he may have died in a psychiatric hospital...

There are no footnotes to this section—it is sheer speculation. From our own research, we have established that the Healy farm passes to a John Crowe in 1927, not long after Michael gained full ownership and paid off his annuity to the Land Commission. Significantly, this aligns with the year in which Gerry Healy is understood to have left the country.

All of this is suggestive of a serious crisis affecting the whole family. It should be emphasised that Gerry Healy was just 13 years old when he travelled, alone, to try and make a life for himself in Britain—there is no suggestion that he had family or any other connections waiting for him. The disappearance of his father should pique the interest of a historian in any circumstances, and especially so when it follows on the heels of the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921) and Civil War (1922–1923). Could Michael Healy have found himself the victim of these events in some way? A serious historian would investigate such questions.

Historical versus hack work: the Black and Tans story

Not only does Beatty fail to investigate potential connections between

the Healys in Ballybane and the tumultuous events underway around them, his substitution for doing so is the “exposure” of a lie for which there is no credible evidence of Healy ever having told. As Mackaman has already explained:

Research reveals that seven authors in eight separate sources have repeated as a fact something that Healy supposedly said about his youth—that his father had been killed by the Black and Tans. All of these sources were published *after* Healy’s death, and so cannot be verified or contradicted by Healy. None of these authors provide any documentation showing that Healy ever made the claim. No writing or speech by Healy is ever referenced.

Neither David North, who worked closely with Healy for a decade, nor Barbara Slaughter, who is, as Mackaman writes, “at 96, the oldest living British Trotskyist, and whose former husband, the late Cliff Slaughter, was for decades one of Healy’s closest collaborators,” recall any such story being told by Gerry Healy. Nor did Alex Mitchell, who also worked closely with Gerry Healy from 1971 to 1986 and served as the editor of the *News Line*, make any reference to this story in his own detailed account of his years as a leading member of the Workers Revolutionary Party. Nor did Healy’s daughter, Mary, who wrote to David North on October 9, 2024: “Unfortunately Gerry never spoke to me about his childhood or his parents.”

Gerry Healy shared a loving relationship with his daughter. After Healy’s death in December 1989, Mary wrote a sharply worded reply to a slander-filled obituary written by a political enemy that was published in the *Guardian*.

It is simply unbelievable that Gerry Healy would have failed to tell his daughter of the circumstances of her grandfather Michael’s death or anything else about his parents, while making what Beatty describes as a “well-repeated claim” to all and sundry that he witnessed the murder of his father.

Mary’s account of Gerry’s silence on the fate of his father is substantiated in an interview that I conducted in Northern Ireland. I spoke to two former members of the Socialist Labour League (forerunner to the Workers Revolutionary Party) in the 1960s, George and Manda Craig, now in their 80s. Both were based at the time in Belfast and had met with Healy. Neither heard him mention his father at all, even when speaking briefly of his childhood experience in the country. Describing the time Gerry visited their flat for a discussion, George recounted:

At no stage do I ever remember Gerry Healy talking about Ireland, his experiences, his father, or anything else to do with Ireland at all. And I would have thought that if he was going to talk about his experience in Ireland, where better to do it than Ireland itself. But he didn’t.^[11]

Manda recalled one brief occasion when he did so, when the two were in the car travelling back from a conference with other comrades to Healy’s house in London, where they were being put up for the night:

He talked about the troubles that had erupted after the war and with the separation [Partition] and the Black and Tans moving into the area where he lived, and he talked about himself being hidden in a water barrel at one time. He had been put in there, the lid had been put on, when they were coming raiding round the houses...

Subsequent to that I hear there have been rumours about his father being shot; he never mentioned that on the journey... There wasn’t any other discussion about his family.^[12]

Manda’s recollection is, to the authors’ knowledge, the most substantive and trustworthy account of any comment made by Healy about his childhood. It rubbishes both Beatty’s claims of Healy’s compulsive lying about his past, and his attempt to portray his childhood as unaffected by the revolutionary events of early 20th century Ireland.

The fact is that the first ten years of Healy’s life coincided with the most consequential decade of Irish history. He was born during the Dublin lockout, one of the decisive moments in Irish labour history, and was not even a year old with the outbreak of the First World War. He was 2½ years old at the time of the 1916 Easter Rising against British imperialism, 5 when Sinn Féin swept dramatically to power in Ireland in 1918 and when the War of Independence began and 8½ years old when the Civil War between the new Irish Free State and those opposed to the Treaty it had signed with British imperialism broke out.

Basing ourselves on this understanding and on Manda Craig’s comments, Mackaman and I began to investigate the sources for signs of Michael Healy’s direct involvement in these struggles. We were also motivated by the fact that the father of Margaret Mary’s fourth child, born in 1923, is listed as “Martin” Healy on the birth register. Given the existence of an uncle Martin Healy, who would have been roughly 60 years old at that point and who the land records indicate had resided at Thomas’s nearby farm for a period, was it not possible that Michael was for some reason related to politics away from home at this time and the family looked after by his brother?

The name Michael Healy is a common one in Ireland, but one document caught our attention. The 2 Brigade, 1 Western Division (South West Galway) report, held by the Military Archives, contains lists of participants in various IRA operations—compiled some years later by its officers. The list for the Castledaly Ambush of October includes the name Michael Healy, added in pencil, with no home address or any other information.

The ambush, which took place some 30 kilometres south of Ballybane, claimed the life of RIC Constable Timothy Horan. British reprisals were some of the fiercest seen in Galway. The RIC and Black and Tans burned the houses of suspected fighters and their associates in villages across the area, beat family members, and fired indiscriminately into villages. Young and pregnant mother-of-three Eileen Quinn was shot dead by Auxiliaries while sitting on the wall outside her house and cradling another child.^[13]

Enquiries with the Military Archives revealed that the name on the document is associated with an as yet undigitized application for an army pension—awarded to the Free State by those who had fought in the War of Independence—submitted by a Michael Healy of Tubber, near Gort, in the far south of County Galway. There is a close match for him in the 1911 census for the area, making it fair to conclude at this stage that the pencilled-in name may not have been Gerry’s father. More work of this kind with the historical sources—identifying and cross-referencing mentions of Michael Healy—would need to be done to draw the full picture they provide.

What the Castledaly event does point to, in any case, is that the British forces were hardly discriminating in their violence against the population—during which holding a common name like Healy, shared with several fighters in the IRA, might have caused problems—and that many would have been affected whose names were never recorded. Indeed, our brief investigation into any direct connections between Michael Healy and the war with the British turned up plenty of material to demonstrate the profound effect the revolutionary struggles in Ireland would have had on his family in Ballybane.

Gerry Healy's childhood in Ireland's revolutionary decade

Published studies like Conor McNamara's *War and Revolution in the West of Ireland*, William Henry's *Blood for Blood* and Fergus Campbell's *Land and Revolution* already show up Beatty's claim that Galway, his native county, was relatively unaffected by the War of Independence, as a lie. Even a brief walk through the permanent exhibition at Galway City Museum tells the same.

But the point can be made even more strongly. Limiting the focus to a radius of just a few kilometres around the farm in Ballybane provides ample evidence for the very local impact of not just of the War of Independence, but the Easter Rising and the Civil War. Visiting the area, one is struck by just how short the distances are between the Healys' farm and many of the incidents referenced in the sources and historical literature on this period.

Gerry Healy grew up in a war zone. There is no reason to disbelieve his story of hiding in a barrel, told to Irish comrade Manda Craig.

The Easter Rising of 1916 famously saw 1,200 members of the Irish Volunteers under Patrick Pearse and of the smaller Irish Citizen Army under James Connolly seize key buildings in Dublin and engage in fierce fighting with British forces over several days. Although the planned national uprising against British imperialism did not take place, there was significant activity in Galway, with roughly 600 Volunteers mobilised under the direction of Liam Mellows.

Attacks were staged by around 100 Volunteers on the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) barracks at Oranmore, five kilometres east of Ballybane, and another 100 on the barracks at Clarenbridge further southeast. There was a shootout the next day at Carnmore Crossroads, just to the north of Oranmore.^[14] To deter the rebels from attempting to enter Galway city, British navy ships—*HMS Guillemot*, *HMS Laburnum*, *HMS Gloucester* and *HMS Snowdrop*—were stationed in Galway Bay at the time and bombarded the countryside between Oranmore and Castlegar, which Michael Healy's farm sat in the middle of, for the best part of a week.^[15]

Mellows escaped to America but was imprisoned there until 1918 on charges of aiding the German war effort—becoming one of the more than 400 people from Galway arrested and interned after the rising.^[16] A political sea change was underway in Ireland, however, and he was one of the four representatives of Sinn Féin who took all the available seats for Galway county in the 1918 British general election. Sinn Féin's decision not to go to Parliament in Westminster but to establish an independent Irish parliament, the Dáil Éireann, prompted the outbreak of the Irish War of Independence.

Contrary to Beatty's ignorant assertion about it being "quiet," Galway was heavily involved. The Irish Bureau of Military History holds witness statements from 80 participants in the independence struggle relating events in the county. Among the nearly 200 Irish Republican Army operations listed in Galway by the Irish Military Archives are a September 1920 firefight outside Galway railway station and an August 1920 ambush near Merlin Park. The railway engagement took place just a few kilometres to the west of Ballybane, and the Merlin Park ambush barely a kilometre to the south.

The Castlegar company, with a reputation for radicalism, played a significant role in both and would have been the nearest IRA formation to the Healys' address. One of its most prominent members, blacksmith Michael Newell, a veteran of 1916 and commandant of the Mid-Galway Brigade of the IRA, lived in Briarhill, roughly one kilometre from Ballybane. Another member, John Fahy, gave his address as Ballybane itself—these details are contained in the Mid Galway Brigade, 1 Western

Division and 2 Brigade, 1 Western Division (South West Galway) reports. It is all but certain that the Black and Tans would have searched Ballybane for such freedom fighters.

Both the Galway railway station and Merlin Park attacks met with brutal reprisals by British forces, who went on the rampage in nearby Galway town and Oranmore village, dragging people into the street and burning houses and offices.^[17] Another infamous night of counterrevolutionary violence took place in July 1920 in Tuam, near where James Healy would still have been living, with the RIC burning and looting houses and businesses and razing the town hall.^[18] Houses were also burned in Castlegar in February 1921.^[19] The British terror campaign would have hung like a pall over the whole area.

As well as damage to property—with Galway the most affected county outside the heavily targeted Munster province—there was the threat of assassination.^[20] The most infamous was that of republican sympathiser Father Griffin, kidnapped and killed by British Auxiliaries in November 1920. His funeral brought some 12,000 people to the streets of Galway town.^[21]

Known or suspected activists were frequently forced into hiding, and reliance on the local community. Here again, the war visited the very town Gerry Healy lived in, Ballybane, when he would have been not quite 7 years old. William Henry notes interestingly on this score, "These were hungry days for the men on the run, and some houseowners in Ballybane would leave their doors unlocked at night and food on the table."^[22]

Come the Civil War, Galway again featured prominently, with Úna Newell's study of the county in 1922–32, *The West Must Wait*, describing the conflict as an "intimate war ... a bitter war ... a public war. Trade was disrupted, food supplies were at times limited and some areas became increasingly isolated."^[23] In one dramatic event in March 1922, anti-Treaty Irish opposed to the agreement signed by the new Irish Free State with British imperialism forced state forces out of Renmore Barracks in Galway town—once again a single kilometre from Ballybane.^[24] There was a firefight just north of nearby Castlegar in July of that year, in which anti-Treaty IRA Lieutenant John "Jack" Lohan was shot dead.^[25]

John Fahy from Ballybane and Michael Newell of neighbouring Briarhill are named in the Mid-Galway Brigade report held by the Military Archives Ireland as captured by National Forces after another firefight near Galway town in that month. The July 8, 1922, entry in the Galway Prison record of men accused of attacks on state forces that lists Newell's name includes as well those of Thomas Conroy and Edward Coyne, also of Briarhill.

To help the reader get a sense of the significance of this, there are *just seven* households listed in Ballybaanmore in 1911; the hamlet a kilometre and a half down the road that was home to Newell, Conroy and Coyne, Breanloughaun, had nine households. They and Michael, and all the local residents, would surely have been known to each other. In such a small rural society, very few families would have been more than a few acquaintances away from someone with a direct connection to the struggle against Britain or the new Free State. Their activities, and their political ideas, would have been the subject of discussion at home and in public.

Nor would this have stopped with the end of the Civil War, of which harsh memories persisted in Irish society for years afterwards. It was frequently noted that the Irish Free State had carried out 81 official executions of anti-Treaty Irishmen, whereas the British had carried out 24 state murders of Irish Volunteers. Among the former total were six anti-Treaty fighters killed in a group execution at Tuam on April 11, 1923. Another two followed the next month.^[26] Gerry Healy, then not quite ten years old, would have been aware of these gruesome events.

Intriguingly, it is also in the period following this traumatic conflict that Michael Healy disappears and Gerry in his young teenage years sets off for a new life in Britain. Personal troubles could well have upended the family: we have pointed to the possibility that Michael took on debts in

the context of sharply falling agricultural prices in the 1920s. But there is equally no reason to discount the idea that some event in the previous decade of social and political upheaval played a part.

The biography of a revolutionary

Reconstructing the life of an individual, especially of their childhood, is a complicated task for the historian, requiring careful attention to contemporary social and political developments and thoughtful reflection on how these might have intersected with the life of the subject and his or her family.

It is clear that even a brief account of Gerry Healy's background in Ireland must acknowledge the explosive political atmosphere of the time, the traditions of activism extending into the countryside and back through generations of farmers, and the long and bloody record of violence. For the biographer of a man who went on to play a leading role in revolutionary politics not to have examined in the closest detail the impact this context had on his subject is professional negligence; to have flatly denied it is malicious.

Our initial research, which goes far beyond that of the self-styled "Irish historian" Aidan Beatty, does not answer every question. Michael's fate and the specifics of Gerry's early years remain unclear. More facts will eventually be uncovered, and one day an effort will hopefully be made by an objective historian to establish in detail the family background of such a significant figure in the international Marxist movement.

But two things are already certain at this stage. First, that from the family's experiences as tenant farmers during the years of agrarian agitation and the mass transfer of land from the landlord class, to the revolutionary war and brutal counterinsurgency waged all around Gerry's home, this history cannot have failed to leave a deep impression on him. Second, that Beatty engaged in none of the research and contextualisation of evidence that characterises serious history.

North recalls of Healy in his biography *Gerry Healy and his Place in the History of the Fourth International* that he was "undoubtedly, a 'hard man'" and a "working-class communist of the 'old school,'" whose "Marxism was anchored in a burning hatred of the capitalist system, with whose brutality he was personally familiar."^[27] This is no doubt true of someone who arrived in Britain as a child in the immediate aftermath of the General Strike and on the eve of the Great Depression, who came of age in the Hungry Thirties amid the rise of fascism, and who was a young man with the outbreak of the Second World War.

Healy had been forced to grow up quickly. The account presented in this essay shows that process must have started earlier, in Ireland.

North also notes:

The experience of personal privation was not the only, or even principal, foundation of his "hardness." Healy was of a generation whose conceptions of revolutionary struggle and sacrifice were inspired by the world-shaking achievements of the Bolshevik Party. For workers such as Healy, the events of 1917 demonstrated that the socialist revolution was not an event destined to occur in the distant future. It was, rather, a practical task. Thus, until the final tragic years, Healy lived for the revolution and the revolution lived in Healy. This passion distinguished him unmistakably from all others in the workers movement. Next to him, the leaders of the opportunist organizations appeared as little more than rank amateurs or charlatans.^[28]

Besides the obvious malicious intent, what shapes Beatty's treatment of Healy is the inability of this academic—who twists history in the service of the reactionary ideology of Zionism—to understand a politician of Gerry's character. Having grown up in affluence in an Ireland supposedly beyond "the Troubles" of its colonial past and amid the capitalist triumphalism that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Beatty's biography exudes self-satisfied complacency and a congenital incapacity to imagine that the Galway of 100 years ago was so very different than that of his own time. It is unsurprising that such a figure finds his way to the cynical middle-class leadership of the Democratic Socialists of America, for whom revolution is a horror and political principle an encumbrance. This prejudice, too, blinds him to the kinds of experiences and decisions which shaped the life of a genuine revolutionary leader like Gerry Healy.

The first task of a historian is to shed, as far as possible, the prejudices and presumptions unavoidably built up over the course of one's life in a particular context. But Beatty did not approach this work as a historian; he took out a contract on a political opponent. From the very first pages of his book, he makes clear that his intention is to conjure up claims that suit his predetermined conclusion of Healy the self-aggrandising liar, monster and hypocrite, excluding any research which might genuinely have shone light on the formative experiences of Gerry's youth.

Beatty's treatment of these issues discredits not only his book, but his academic career. The Zionist and pro-Israel foundations from whom Beatty solicited financial support for this project provided him with money with the understanding that he would produce a lie-filled diatribe against a Marxist-Trotskyist defender of the struggle of the oppressed against imperialism. And the unscrupulous Aidan Beatty has given them their money's worth.

Bibliography

PRIMARY SOURCES

Archives

Testamentary Records and Landed Estates Papers, The National Archives of Ireland, Dublin.

Western Estate Papers and Minute Books, Archives of the Erasmus Smith Schools, Dublin.

Cancelled Land Valuation Books, Land Valuation Office, Dublin.

Folio Archives, Land Registry, Dublin.

Memorials, Registry of Deeds, Dublin.

Online Archives

Witness Statements and Brigade Activity Reports, Bureau of Military History (1913–1921), The Military Archives, available at <https://bmh.militaryarchives.ie/> and <https://brigade-activities.militaryarchives.ie/county/galway/>.

Census of Ireland 1901, 1911, available at <https://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/search/>.

Richard Griffith's General Valuation of Rateable Property in Ireland, available at <https://www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation/>.

Irish Newspaper Archives, available at <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>

Prison Galway General Register 1913–1923, Irish Prison Registers 1790–1924, available at <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/home>.

Ireland, Civil Registration Births Index 1864–1958, available at <https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/civil-search.jsp>.

Interviews

Interview conducted by the author with George and Manda Craig, Northern Ireland, November 3, 2024.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Conor McNamara, *War and Revolution in the West of Ireland: Galway, 1913–1922* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2018)

William Henry, *Blood for Blood: The Black and Tan War in Galway* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2012)

Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland 1891–1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

Una Newell, *The West must wait: County Galway and the Irish Free State, 1922–32* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016)

The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland, eds. Eugenio F. Biagini, Mary E. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)

“Eyewitness Accounts of the Famine”, Ireland Program at The Evergreen State College, 2006–2007, Accessed November 27, 2024, <https://archives.evergreen.edu/webpages/curricular/2006-2007/ireland0607/ireland/eyewitness-accounts-of-the-famine/index.html>.

Eugenio F. Biagini, Mary E. Daly, *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 202.

“Obituaries of Mr. Thomas Healy and Mrs. Healy, Killererin”, *Western People*, November 12, 1904. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

“Irishtown Tenants’ Defence Meeting: Grand Demonstration”, *Connaught Telegraph*, April 26, 1879. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland 1891–1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

“Meeting in Cumber”, *Tuam Herald*, March 3, 1906. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

“Tuam Gaelic League Notes”, *Tuam Herald*, June 20, 1903. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

“Tuam Branch National Council: Appeal to the Workmen of the County Galway”, *Tuam Herald*, March 16, 1907. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000*, (London: Profile Books, 2010), 63.

Paul Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity 1789–2006*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 568.

Interview with George and Manda Craig, November 3, 2024.

Ibid.

Conor McNamara, “The Castledaly Ambush and Reprisals, 30 October 1920”, *Galway Decade of Commemoration*, Accessed November 27, 2024, <https://www.galwaydecadeofcommemoration.org/content/new-contributions/the-castledaly-ambush-and-reprisals-30-october-1920>.

Mark McCarthy, Shirley Wrynn, “County Galway’s 1916 Rising: A Short History”, in *1916–2016 Centenary Programme: County Galway* (Galway: County Galway Council, 2015), 9–14.

Conor McNamara, *War and Revolution in the West of Ireland: Galway, 1913–1922* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2018), 71.

Ibid., 77.

“Midnight Scenes: Police Run Amok in Oranmore”, *Freeman’s Journal*, August 23, 1920. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

Riona Egan, “Galway Nights of Terror”, *Galway City Museum*, Accessed November 27, 2024, <https://galwaycitymuseum.ie/blog/galway-nights-of-terror/>; “Tale of Terror: Part of Tuam in Ruins”, *Tuam Herald*, June 24, 1920. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

“Burnings at Castlegar”, *Connacht Tribune*, February 12, 1921. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

Andy Bielenberg, “The British Reprisal Strategy in Ireland in 1920 and its Impact”, *The Irish Revolution Project*, Accessed November 28, 2024, <https://www.ucc.ie/en/theirishrevolution/feature-articles/the-british-reprisal-strategy-in-ireland-in-1920-and-its-impact.html>.

William Henry, *Blood for Blood: The Black and Tan War in Galway* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2012), 137.

Ibid., 187.

The West must wait: County Galway and the Irish Free State, 1922–32 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016) 34.

Riona Egan, “IRA split in Galway, 29 March 1922”, *Galway City Museum*, Accessed November 27, 2024, <https://galwaycitymuseum.ie/blog/ira-split-in-galway-29-march-1922/>.

“Fatal Dash: Young Galway Engineering Student Shot a Few Miles from the City During Irregular Round Up”, *Connacht Tribune*, September 30, 1922. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

Breen Timothy Murphy, “The Government’s Executions Policy During the Irish Civil War 1922 – 1923”, PhD diss., (National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2010).

David North, *Gerry Healy and his Place in the History of the Fourth International*, (Detroit: Labor Publications Inc., 1991), 115.

Ibid., 116.

[1] “Eyewitness Accounts of the Famine”, Ireland Program at The Evergreen State College, 2006–2007, Accessed November 27, 2024, <https://archives.evergreen.edu/webpages/curricular/2006-2007/ireland0607/ireland/eyewitness-accounts-of-the-famine/index.html>.

[2] Eugenio F. Biagini, Mary E. Daly, *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 202.

[3] “Obituaries of Mr. Thomas Healy and Mrs. Healy, Killererin”, *Western People*, November 12, 1904. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

[4] “Irishtown Tenants’ Defence Meeting: Grand Demonstration”, *Connaught Telegraph*, April 26, 1879. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

[5] Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland 1891–1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[6] “Meeting in Cumber”, *Tuam Herald*, March 3, 1906. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

[7] “Tuam Gaelic League Notes”, *Tuam Herald*, June 20, 1903. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

[8] “Tuam Branch National Council: Appeal to the Workmen of the County Galway”, *Tuam Herald*, March 16, 1907. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

[9] Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000*, (London: Profile Books, 2010), 63.

[10] Paul Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity 1789–2006*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 568.

[11] Interview with George and Manda Craig, November 3, 2024.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Conor McNamara, “The Castledaly Ambush and Reprisals, 30 October 1920”, *Galway Decade of Commemoration*, Accessed November 27, 2024, <https://www.galwaydecadeofcommemoration.org/content/new-contributions/the-castledaly-ambush-and-reprisals-30-october-1920>.

[14] Mark McCarthy, Shirley Wrynn, “County Galway’s 1916 Rising: A Short History”, in *1916–2016 Centenary Programme: County Galway* (Galway: County Galway Council, 2015), 9–14.

[15] Conor McNamara, *War and Revolution in the West of Ireland: Galway, 1913–1922* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2018), 71.

[16] *Ibid.*, 77.

[17] “Midnight Scenes: Police Run Amok in Oranmore”, *Freeman’s Journal*, August 23, 1920. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

[18] Riona Egan, “Galway Nights of Terror”, *Galway City Museum*, Accessed November 27, 2024, <https://galwaycitymuseum.ie/blog/galway-nights-of-terror/>; “Tale of Terror: Part of Tuam in Ruins”, *Tuam Herald*, June 24, 1920. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

[19] “Burnings at Castlegar”, *Connacht Tribune*, February 12, 1921. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

[20] Andy Bielenberg, “The British Reprisal Strategy in Ireland in 1920 and its Impact”, *The Irish Revolution Project*, Accessed November 28,

2024, <https://www.ucc.ie/en/theirishrevolution/feature-articles/the-british-reprisal-strategy-in-ireland-in-1920-and-its-impact.html>.

[21] William Henry, *Blood for Blood: The Black and Tan War in Galway* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2012), 137.

[22] *Ibid.*, 187.

[23] Úna Newell, *The West must wait: County Galway and the Irish Free State, 1922–32* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016) 34.

[24] Riona Egan, “IRA split in Galway, 29 March 1922”, *Galway City Museum*, Accessed November 27, 2024, <https://galwaycitymuseum.ie/blog/ira-split-in-galway-29-march-1922/>.

[25] “Fatal Dash: Young Galway Engineering Student Shot a Few Miles from the City During Irregular Round Up”, *Connacht Tribune*, September 30, 1922. <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>.

[26] Breen Timothy Murphy, “The Government’s Executions Policy During the Irish Civil War 1922 – 1923”, PhD diss., (National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2010).

[27] David North, *Gerry Healy and his Place in the History of the Fourth International*, (Detroit: Labor Publications Inc., 1991), 115.

[28] *Ibid.*, 116.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact