

The fabrication of a slander: Aidan Beatty's forgery of Gerry Healy's youth—and Irish history

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David North has already written a thorough and damning review of what is presented as a biography of longtime British Trotskyist leader Gerry Healy, *The Party is Always Right*. The book's author, Aidan Beatty, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), has so far not attempted to answer North.

This supplementary review exposes Beatty's manipulation of evidence related to Healy's youth in Ireland. Healy was born in 1913 and emigrated to Wales at the age of 12 or 13 in 1926. His childhood intersected with a crucial and explosive period of Irish history, the years encompassing World War I, the Easter Uprising, the War for Independence, and the Civil War.

Beatty's distortion and misuse of evidence from this period is aimed at portraying Healy as a liar willing to say anything, even about his childhood.

According to Beatty, the “most egregious” of Healy's “outright lies” was his claim that “he saw the [British] Black and Tans shoot and kill his father during the War of Independence.”^[1] The context, not discussed at all by Beatty, is the bloody fighting during the Irish War for Independence against British imperialism (1919-1921), also known as the Black and Tan War, so named after the khaki uniforms worn by the British imperial forces who committed brutal counter-insurgency violence on the Republican independence fighters, as well as Irish civilians. In his recent *Jacobin* interview, Beatty returns to this issue, asserting that “Healy claimed to have seen Black and Tans shoot and kill his father in 1919 (which was an outright lie).”^[2]

To proclaim the subject of one's biography a liar is a serious charge that must be supported by concrete evidence. And as would be expected, following this assertion Beatty inserts an endnote. However, this leads the reader to a reference that proves nothing of the sort. On page 161 in Beatty's “Notes” section, we find the following: “Michael Healy [Gerry Healy's father] is, of course, not on the full list of Galway casualties provided in McNamara, ‘War and Revolution.’”^[3]

Beatty is caught in two lies. First, his own assertion is not whether the name Michael Healy made a list of dead compiled by Dr. Conor McNamara in his valuable book, *War and Revolution in the West of Ireland, Galway, 1913–22*. Beatty's assertion is that Healy made an “egregious” and “outright lie” in *asserting* that his father had been killed by the Black and Tans. The reference would therefore have to lead to documentation of Healy making such a statement. It does not.

Second, Dr. McNamara's table of war dead does not even reference the year 1919. The title of the Appendix makes this clear: “Casualties of violence in County Galway, January 1920–July 1921.” McNamara's research, moreover, shows that no complete list of the dead would even be possible. As McNamara notes, an unknown number of young men fled Galway, most likely to New York, Boston and Chicago, and “in many

cases, casualties and veterans of both the War and the independence struggle were not remembered beyond their own families.”^[4] McNamara's is an important book to which we shall return, for it paints a picture of horrific violence in the Galway of Healy's childhood entirely absent from Beatty's cursory treatment.

Given Beatty's avowed hatred of Healy, this cannot be viewed as an innocent mistake. He provides no evidence for a claim that is crucial to his book and that appears on the very first page. This is an academic infraction that is tantamount to plagiarism in its seriousness. If Beatty is willing to falsify a key reference, what else is he willing to do?

And it raises another, more immediate question. Is there actually a source that documents Healy ever having said he witnessed his father being killed by the Black and Tans? Beatty provides no such citation, but one expects there must be *some* source.

Prior to Beatty's book, the most recent version of the Healy Black and Tan story appears in an online reference source called the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*. The entry “Thomas Gerard ‘Gerry’ Healy” is written by none other than ... Aidan Beatty. In this version, which was altered in 2023 according to the web page, Beatty writes:

Healy fabricated aspects of his early life story, such as his widely circulated claim that as a six-year-old he saw his father being shot by the ‘Black and Tans’. He developed a lifelong habit of exaggerating or lying about his life and political activities.^[5]

Here Beatty again reveals his deceitful method. The claim is made that Healy lied about his childhood, and that therefore all that followed in his career was a tissue of lies. Once again, however, Beatty provides no quote from Healy. Nor do the few sources listed at the entry's end lead the careful reader to evidence of Healy making any statement about the Black and Tans, or anything else for that matter. Gerry Healy is not one of Aidan Beatty's sources for an encyclopedia entry on Gerry Healy.

An earlier version of the Black and Tan story appeared in another unbalanced encyclopedia entry attacking Healy, published in 2005, this by John McIlroy, a member of various pseudo-left formations over the years. In McIlroy's rendering, “[Healy's] much publicised recollections of his father's death at the hands of the Black and Tans ... have left no trace on the historical record.”^[6] But like Beatty, McIlroy provides no evidence that Healy ever made such a claim, much less that he “publicised” it, whatever that might entail.

A still earlier version of this story appears in yet another denunciation of Healy, this by former WRP member Bob Pitt. Published after Healy's death in 1989, it predates the versions by Beatty and McIlroy but is

similar enough in its narrative structure to make it the most likely source for both. Pitt wrote that Healy's assertion that "his father was murdered by the Black and Tans" "may be just another of the myths he cultivated about his own history."^[7] Yet Pitt, like Beatty and McIlroy, shows no documentation that Healy ever said such a thing.

Beatty fails to cite either Pitt or McIlroy in this section of his book dealing with Healy's youth. But all three use remarkably similar formulations. Beatty says that the Black and Tan story was "well-repeated" and "widely circulated." McIlroy calls it "much publicised." But were it true that this "myth" were "widely circulated" and "much publicised" one would expect to find documentation of Healy having said it at some point: a speech, a letter, a newspaper article, notes from a meeting, something—*anything*. But none of these authors, who do not hide their hatred of Healy, show such a document.

It is possible that the original source of the story is Sean Matgamna, a Zionist and right-wing socialist who opposed the withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland as well as American forces from Iraq.^[8] Irish-born, Matgamna was a member of Healy's Socialist Labour League (SLL) from 1960 until 1963, when he was expelled. Matgamna has connections to two of the aforementioned authors, McIlroy and Beatty. He and McIlroy were involved in the same political formations before having a bitter and public falling out, a spat that seems to have involved no political issues.^[9] Beatty interviewed and corresponded with Matgamna in writing the book, though he does not credit the latter for any information on Healy's youth.

In a diatribe posted online in 2008 or 2009—it is not clear when it was originally written—Matgamna claims that Healy told him that his father had been killed by the Black and Tans "the first time I talked to him"—in other words, in the early 1960s.^[10] Why would Healy have shared this personal information upon *first* meeting with Matgamna, i.e., with someone he hardly knew? Moreover, putting aside the passage of time and that, once again, we have no further documentation, the rest of Matgamna's essay shows that he could hardly be considered a credible witness. There are several transparent lies. Matgamna even gives credence, for example, to a rumor circulated by Irish Stalinists that Healy was not from Ireland at all.

Versions of the Black and Tan story can be found not only from Healy's political enemies and demonologists—Beatty, Matgamna, Pitt and McIlroy—but from his hagiographers seeking to aggrandize Healy. In a chronology of Healy's life published in 1990 in *Marxist Monthly*, it is asserted as a fact that Healy's father was "killed by the Black and Tans."^[11] No year or other information is provided. A politically uncritical obituary, written by Healy allies Corrina Lotz and Paul Feldman, puts the episode in the following terms:

His father became one of the thousands of victims of the terror when the Black and Tans swept into the area and murdered Michael Healy in front of his family. Gerry's mother, Margaret Mary, was so shocked by the brutal killing of her husband, that her hair turned white within weeks.^[12]

The Lotz and Feldman obituary, yet again, provides no documentation. Still another tribute to Healy, written by Terry Burton and published in 2006, makes the same claim.^[13]

To sum up, 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.

Moreover, there are discrepancies in their formulations that reveal the absence of an archival mooring for the story. For example, Beatty puts the year of the episode as 1919, while Matgamna said it was 1920. Feldman and Lotz provide no year, but they join Beatty in claiming that Healy said he witnessed his father's shooting. Two of the sources do not include the not-minor detail that Michael Healy was shot, leaving open the possibility that Healy said his father was killed in some other way.

One source that Beatty does not reference on the Black and Tan story is David North's obituary, *Gerry Healy and His Place in the History of the Fourth International*, because it points to its likely apocryphal origin. In an essay that is both objective and critical, North makes no reference to such a story. On Healy's youth in Ireland, North, who worked closely with Healy for a number of years, concludes that "Healy never wrote any sort of autobiographical sketch."^[14] That Healy did not tell such a story was confirmed to this writer by Barbara Slaughter, who is, at 96, the oldest living British Trotskyist, and whose former husband, the late Cliff Slaughter, was for decades one of Healy's closest collaborators.

What then happened to Michael Healy? Is there possibly some kernel of truth behind the story?

Here we immediately run into more contradictions in Beatty's clumsy manipulation of Healy's biography. In his encyclopedia entry on Healy, posted in 2023, Beatty writes that Healy's "father lived at least into the 1930s."^[15] But in his book published less than a year later, he writes that Michael Healy "was certainly still alive into the 1920s and probably even into the 1930s." In fact, Aidan Beatty is not at all so "certain." In the very same paragraph he reports that "no death record seems to exist" and that "it is not clear what had become of his father." Beatty speculates, without a reference, that Michael Healy "may have died in a psychiatric hospital." And yet he reports as a certainty that "[b]y the 1930s Healy's mother, Margaret Mary, was living in Tipperary Town, about 100 miles south of Galway," and that the family's property "was registered in the mother's name only." Certainly, these are peculiar circumstances for a devout Irish Catholic family.^[16]

Beatty's lack of citations in these pages is jarring. He makes guesses about the fate of Michael Healy without providing a single reference. On the next page, he states that Gerry Healy's two younger brothers followed him in emigrating to England, where both died of tuberculosis. But he again provides no source. He writes that a sister also came to England to join a convent, and he asserts that Healy lied in claiming that she had died of tuberculosis. But yet again, if we look at Beatty's references, we find no evidence that Healy ever made such a claim about his sister.^[17]

Whatever Michael Healy's own fate, his vanishing suggests a family in dire straits. So does Healy's own emigration from Ireland for a life of wage labor as a child of 13 years. As does the emigration of his siblings and the deaths of his two brothers of tuberculosis in London, if true.

Yet Beatty is at pains to portray Healy as a child of privilege. He baldly asserts that Healy grew up "quite affluent" in "relative comfort," even part of a "land-owning Catholic bourgeoisie" and among the "sons of the bourgeoisie." Beatty's sole evidence that the Healy family was wealthy was that it owned, he says, a 109-acre farm.^[18] But once again Beatty violates the rules of scholarship, providing nothing—no endnote or internal reference or source—so that this claim might be verified.

Even if true, this would hardly raise a family to the ranks of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, as one leading Irish historian, Kerby Miller, told this author, in determining the wealth of a small landowning family, not only the quantity but the quality of the land must be known. "Much of the land in that part of the world is bog and rock," Miller said. "At the age of 13, 'sons of the bourgeoisie' went to Blackrock College or, like Joyce, to Clongowes Wood and University College Dublin, not to the London slums."^[19]

Among Beatty's first 16 references for Chapter 1, which covered

Healy's youth, *there is not a single reference* to anything that Healy himself wrote or said. Moreover, what he calls his "oral history" project was conducted with a promise that the transcripts would not be made public.^[20] There is no way for the reader to determine the credibility or veracity of statements made by interviewees.

Let us now return to the question of Irish history. The fact that Healy was born in Ireland, and that Beatty is a historian of Ireland, provides him his ostensible entrée to the subject. The very first line of the book's Preface suggests that something will be made of this connection, with Beatty telling readers, "This is a book about an authoritarian and abusive Irishman named Gerry Healy."^[21] This raises a question. What does Healy's having been an "Irishman" have to do with authoritarianism and abusiveness? We are never told. Beatty musters a mere two pages that relate only obliquely to Irish history.

A genuine history would require that the biographer provide the context of Healy's youth. Beatty provides none. As North writes,

Entirely absent from Beatty's account is any discussion, let alone analysis, of the world that created Healy. This is a book without historical context. Aside from providing a few poorly sourced details about Healy's family background, there is no overview of the Ireland of 1913, the year of his birth, and the 10 years that followed. The social conditions of Ireland, the Easter Sunday revolution and the eruption of the civil war, the years of British terror, the formation of the Republic, the politics of Irish nationalism, the partition of the country and the leading political personalities of the era are ignored. The names James Connolly, Michael Collins and Éamon de Valera never appear. All the basic questions relating to the interaction of objective conditions and the life of an individual that would preoccupy a serious biographer are ignored by Beatty, despite his own Irish origins.

In this regard, McNamara's *War and Revolution in the West of Ireland: Galway, 1913-1922* is most helpful. As we have noted, Beatty uses as "proof"—for a claim he never shows Healy to have made about 1919—a table of dead from McNamara's book for the year 1920 and the first half of 1921.

However, Beatty's misuse of McNamara's book goes beyond this simple "error." Beatty diminishes the ferocity of the fighting in Galway, writing that "the political violence ... was mainly centred in Dublin on the east coast in the southern province of Munster. ... Galway and the surrounding western province of Connacht saw less of this." The violence in Galway had been in the 19th century, Beatty suggests, the city becoming "*quieter* by the early decades of the twentieth" (emphasis added).^[22]

This assertion is linked, without a page number, to McNamara's study. Unfortunately for Beatty, McNamara's work shows just the opposite: Galway was awash in bloody fighting. The author concludes that the "experience of rural communities at the hands of the Crown Forces in Galway matches that of some of the most active areas in Ireland, in terms of the extreme nature of the violence perpetrated on civilians and members of the Volunteers," and further that Galway city "witnessed a sustained period of violent reprisals between September and November 1920," so much so that the "period became known locally as 'the terror.'"^[23]

Those wishing to gain an understanding of the brutality of this period of Ireland's history would do well to read McNamara's study. It is harrowing. His research reveals instances of men abducted in public or from their homes; men imprisoned, stripped naked and publicly whipped; men tortured and executed; women raped; and forms of collective

punishment such as home burnings. What emerges from the pages of McNamara's book is a Galway that, along with Ireland as a whole, passed through an enormous trauma in the years when Gerry Healy was a small child.

Returning to Healy's alleged Black and Tan story, given the scale of the violence in Galway, is it possible that the young Healy actually witnessed one or even several killings? Or that a relative, family acquaintance, or neighbor was killed? Is it possible that Healy—who, by all accounts, spoke very rarely about his youth—may have referred to such events on some occasion? And that in the retelling by others, not by Healy, the story was altered and took on a life of its own? Certainly, the trauma inflicted on children in such events as Ireland's revolution and civil war will leave difficult and repressed memories, a fact well-studied by psychologists. One wonders, for example, what memories will be left among the children of Gaza who manage to survive Israel's genocide.

To summarize, Healy was born in 1913. When he was one year old, the Great War began, with about 35,000 Irish men departing for France never to return. The child's first memories might have involved the Easter Uprising, when he was but 3 years old. He likely would have had conscious memories of the Spanish Influenza pandemic, which hit when he was 5, infecting a staggering one-quarter of Ireland's population and killing 23,000. He surely would have remembered the War for Independence, which began when he was 6, and the vicious civil war, which was on by the time he was 9. At some point when he was a small child, he lost his father—how, we do not know. Healy was still but a child when he left Ireland never to return.

Given the experiences of his generation of poor Irish youth, it is not surprising that Healy was, as David North has written, a "hard man."

His character was shaped by the experiences of a poverty-stricken youth in Ireland and then by the difficult life of a revolutionary in the 1930s. Like Cannon, whom he admired, Healy was a working class communist "of the old school." His Marxism was anchored in a burning hatred of the capitalist system, with whose brutality he was personally familiar. He knew what it was to sleep in public shelters for the poor with one's shoes on (so that they would not be stolen); to stand on line day after day for months on end outside the labor exchanges; to face the charges of mounted police against demonstrations of the unemployed; and to go for several days without food.

However, as North further explained:

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.^[24]

This review has invited the reader into a close reading of just a few pages of Aidan Beatty's biography of Gerry Healy. It has demonstrated

that Beatty intentionally misused evidence—a very serious offense among professional historians—and that he carried out no original research into Healy’s youth. His “research” involved nothing more than stitching together factionally motivated attacks on Healy, without attribution.

Most important, the review shows Beatty’s utter indifference to historical context—in this case what is likely the most turbulent period of modern Irish history outside of the Famine of the 1840s. The result is a history without history and a biography without a real, as opposed to fabricated and maligned, subject.

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[15] “Healy,” *Dictionary of Irish Biography*.

[16] Beatty, *The Party Is Always Right*: 2.

[17] Ibid: 3.

[18] Ibid: 1-2; “The Damage Gerry Healy Wrought.”

[19] Correspondence with Kerby Miller, October, 2024.

[20] Aidan Beatty, X post, May 4, 2022.

[21] Beatty, *The Party Is Always Right*: 1.

[22] Ibid: 1.

[23] McNamara, *War and Revolution*: 189, 193.

[24] North, *Gerry Healy*: 115-116.



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[1] Beatty, Aidan. *The Party Is Always Right: The Untold Story of Gerry Healy and British Trotskyism*. London: Pluto Press, 2024. <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=31500361>.