



BookEnds

A weekly review of the top books as chosen by the Western People's reviewers

By James Laffey

Irish Flames

by John Waller

Yiannis Books, 200pp

Paperback, €12.99

THERE is no shortage of reading material – both fact and fiction – on Ireland's War of Independence. John Waller's *Irish Flames* is yet another addition to the canon, and it is a welcome addition.

The book is based on a true story that was narrated by John Waller's half-brother, Peter, prior to his death some years ago. Peter Waller spent his formative years in Co Offaly, the scion of an aristocratic family who owned vast tracts of land in the Offaly area. They were unlikely participants in the War of Independence yet, like many of their fellow Irishmen, they found themselves inexorably drawn into the mayhem that engulfed their native land.

Peter Waller's childhood story offers a new perspective on a period in Irish history that will continue to fascinate for years to come. It's greatest selling point is its authenticity – there is a ring of truth to this story that distinguishes it from some of the more romanticised fictional accounts of the War of Independence.

It is easy to forget the sacrifices that Irish people made in their bid for freedom. And it is equally easy to underestimate the strength of British resistance to Irish independence. Our freedom had to be won – and it was won by a small group of citizens who were poorly armed and poorly trained. Indeed, the overriding impression one gets from books like *Irish Flames* is that it was a small miracle that freedom was ever won at all. It was certainly a case of the size of the fight in the dog rather than the size of the dog in the fight.

Peter Waller's narrative is unique in that it sheds light on the support that the IRA received from a small number of aristocratic families in Ireland. While most of the land-owning classes remained loyal to the Crown others took the enormous gamble of supporting the

rebels – and they often paid the price with their stock being slaughtered or their houses being burned to the ground by enraged Black and Tans who could not understand such 'disloyalty' to the King.

Many people in positions of authority gave quiet support to the rebels. Doctors treated the wounded, shopkeepers provided food and clothing and priests administered religious rites. They did it against a backdrop of fear and intimidation that must have sent a shiver down the spine of the most ardent republican. They had little to gain and a lot to lose by their support of a small force of freedom fighters. One can only marvel at the manner in which they demonstrated the courage of their convictions; they were the silent, anonymous heroes of the War of Independence.

Apart from its historical importance, *Irish Flames* is also a thriller; a riveting narrative that races towards an emotional climax. It is the tale of one boy's adventures in a troubled land where the toy guns are replaced by real guns and every action has serious consequences.

But the most impressive aspect of *Irish Flames* is its realistic and revealing portrait of the troubled times that existed in Ireland during the War of Independence. We should never forget the sacrifices that our ancestors made to win us our freedom. In some cases, young men and women paid the ultimate price for their bravery – they paid for Ireland's independence with their own lives.

Irish Flames is an enjoyable read and is another important addition to the vast library that is the product of Ireland's fight for freedom.

