

**Complaint, *An Tost Fada* (The Long Silence), written and narrated by Eoghan Harris, produced and directed by Gerry Gregg, Praxis Films, RTÉ One, 16 April 2012, 7.30pm**

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**Eoghan Harris scripted and narrated an Irish language programme broadcast on RTÉ on 16 April 2012, produced and directed by Gerry Gregg, made by their company, Praxis Films.**

***An Tost Fada* (The Long Silence) told a compelling story of Rev'd George Salter's father, William, being forced to abandon his West Cork farm in 1922. The story was personally moving but the telling of it was historically misleading.**

The subject matter of the programme concerns matters of public controversy and debate: (a) the specific killing of 13 Protestant civilians in Ballygroman, Dunmanway, in and around Ballineen-Enniskeane and Clonakilty, between 26-9 April 1922; (b) and, generally, the treatment of the Protestant minority in Southern Ireland. The programme makers broadcast incorrect information, seemingly so as to maintain the programme's pre-selected narrative drive.

It would appear, also, the programme makers did not avail of the services of a historical adviser. Had they done so, it might have prevented obvious errors.

Here are some examples of the errors.

**THE SALTER FAMILY**

1. The programme contained the following statement:

*'George's father [William] had six sisters and two brothers. But every one of them left Ireland by April 1922. A sense of fear and series of threats forced them to leave. Only one of the family ever returned.'*

The narrator stated 'fear' and 'threats' forced the rest of the Salter family to emigrate, never to return. But on what basis are these statements made? The photograph of the family that appeared in the programme is misdated as having been taken in 1915, giving the impression that family members were forced to leave afterwards. Actually, the photograph is likely to have been taken at the wedding of Morgan Lambert and Elizabeth Salter in 1905 (standing centre), with the rest of the Salter family (also standing left to right), Catherine, Richard, Margaret ('Maggie'), William ('Bill'), and Robert ('Bob'). Sitting are (left to right) Hester, Margaret (Mother) *nee* Jagoe, Ursula, Robert (Father), Mary ('May'). Elizabeth ('Bessie') Salter was Morgan Lambert's second wife and they lived at Rea, Skibbereen, County Cork, where Morgan ran a prosperous farm and diary. In the *Southern Star* 3 February 1923, Morgan Lambert advertises fertilisers for sale and delivery. The *Southern Star* carried announcements for the sale of lands by Morgan Lambert in 1928 and 1932. Around the same time as her sister, Catherine Salter, got married to one Henry de Vere Vane in Essex/Kent, England. Richard Salter left Ireland in about 1912. It maybe was as the programme stated, that members of the Salter family were forced to leave Ireland under the duress of 'fear' and 'threats', but no evidence is offered in support of this statement. However, not all of the family left, and some of those that did leave departed before 1915 and the violence that followed during the 1919-21 War of Independence, the 1921-22 Truce and Treaty split period and the 1922-23 Civil War. The strong suggestion of the programme was that the Salters were forced to leave Ireland because of their religion by Roman Catholics in West Cork. This is a grave accusation to level at a community, and one wholly unsubstantiated by anything presented in the programme or elsewhere.

Why was the wedding photograph misdated by a period of approximately ten years and why was incorrect information about the Salter family broadcast?

### MATHEW CONNELL AND WILLIAM SWEETMAN

2. Two men, Mathew Connell and William Sweetman, reported in the script as ‘close friends of the Salter family’,<sup>1</sup> were presented as shot during April 1922 (after the War of Independence, prior to the civil war). That is false. Connell and Sweetman were shot dead during the War of Independence on 19 February 1921, over a year earlier. They had testified in court against named members of the IRA. Religion seemingly was not a factor in their deaths. These facts are verifiable and have been published previously. The details recently appeared in *Jasper Wolfe of Skibbereen*, the 2008 biography, by his grandson Jasper Ungoed Thomas, of former Crown Solicitor, Jasper Wolfe (pp. 115-6). The *Tost Fada* narrator and scriptwriter, Eoghan Harris, reviewed this book in the *Sunday Independent* on 5 October 2008. He called it ‘rigorously researched, elegantly written, and beautifully presented ... It is a classic’. Harris’s review described an event during the War of Independence,

*‘Neilus Connolly, a Roman Catholic and a republican -- who as officer commanding the area would have sanctioned the shooting of two local Protestant farmers, William Connell and Matthew Sweetman [sic], who had refused to be intimidated by the IRA when called to testify against local Sinn Fein [sic] members in a civil court case.’*

This offers plain evidence that Harris was aware of the details of this case. Yet he included factually incorrect information in *An Tost Fada*. Why?

3. There is further evidence that the filmmakers deliberately suppressed the dating error. A camera shot in the film showed the headstone of William Sweetman. Though the headstone contains the date of Sweetman’s death, that information was omitted from the image broadcast. This seems to have been a deliberate changing of important historic detail for the sake of narrative. The difference in death dates is critical, as the Sweetman and Connell deaths occurred more than a year prior to the departure of the Salter family. The dates were separated by the July 1921 Truce, the Anglo-Irish Treaty split in January 1922, and the slow descent into Civil War (that began in June 1922). Why was the actual date of death suppressed by the programme makers?
4. The film further compounds this inaccuracy. Eoghan Harris’s narration stated, immediately after depicting the Connell & Sweetman killings, ‘as dawn approached [in April 1922] Bill Salter decided he’d better flee and leave everything behind’. This is false, as the events were separated by 14 months. How was such incompetence and ineptitude possible?

### COMPENSATION FILE INFORMATION

5. The narrator asserted that Rev’d George Salter’s father, William, received £1,700 ‘compensation’ from the British government in 1922 ‘to help [the family] get settled in England’. That too is false. William Salter received £1,200 six years later in 1928, £300 of which was for settling-in expenses in England. Why was this incorrect information broadcast?
6. Contrary to the film’s description, William Salter reportedly left Ireland on 5 June (not April) 1922 with £1,900, proceeds from the sale of his farm in May to Auctioneer Henry Smith, not British government compensation. These omitted details would have undermined the narrative of the Salter’s hurried flight from the country. Why was this information omitted?
7. The following was also omitted. In September 1926 auctioneer Smith resold the Salter farm at public auction at a £300 loss, for £1605. Salter later claimed that the difference was because stock and implements were not part of 1926 sale, whereas they were in 1922. The programme omitted all of this, and an assertion in a letter from Jasper Wolfe in relation to Salter’s claim, ‘the state of the country in 1922 temporarily affected the value of all land’.
8. In his 1928 compensation claim, presented by the Southern Irish Loyalists Relief Association, William Salter claimed £2,195 from the British government’s Irish Grants Committee but was awarded £1,200. The Committee effectively refused Salter’s claim that in 1922 he lost £1,300 when he sold his farm in 1922 for £1,900 to auctioneer Henry Smith (who it appears lost out).
9. In Jasper Wolfe’s letter he further stated that it was ‘owing to [William Salter’s] loyalty’, about which there was ‘no question’, that ‘he suffered the persecution which he went through’. Wolfe,

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<sup>1</sup> This and other citations from RTE English language subtitles broadcast with the programme.

the former Crown Solicitor and often subject to IRA attack, later TD for West cork (1927-33), stated publicly on numerous occasions that there was little or no nationalist, or anti-Protestant, sectarianism in that part of southern Ireland (see, again, *Jasper Wolfe of Skibbereen*). The programme had argued that IRA sectarian sentiments were responsible for generalised anti-Protestantism. The scriptwriter was aware of this alternative Protestant view, but decided to ignore it in favour of his own beliefs. Why?

10. William Salter reported that he refused to pay an IRA arms levy during the War of Independence, a tax enforced on substantial property holders during the conflict. This began a cycle of fines and confiscation of animals. Again, *Jasper Wolfe of Skibbereen* (pp. 115-6) notes that IRA levies and fines were imposed irrespective of denomination. This authoritative observation was omitted from the programme, which implied that the IRA actions were due to the Salter's Protestant religion.
11. William Salter stated in his compensation claim that he received a letter from the IRA prior to the Civil War in April 1922 demanding that he leave and claimed that the IRA forced him to sell his farm to an unnamed individual. It is unclear if Henry Smith, auctioneer, is alleged to have been the person named. It is also unclear why this letter was not retained and offered in evidence in his claim, which would have strengthened his case. Nevertheless there is no corroboration for the programme's claim that a local man with a revolver stopped William Salter on he way home and told him, "Bill boy, you best be gone by morning". Its absence from the compensation claim raises doubts about its occurrence.
12. The programme referred to William Salter receiving 'compensation' from the British Government. It is clear, therefore, that the filmmakers were aware that Salter applied for compensation from the British Government, in this case through the Irish Grants Committee. These files are easily accessible in Kew National Archives in London. Eoghan Harris has written numerous articles on historical works that made use of these compensation files. However, the filmmakers made no effort to retrieve the Salter file, despite its obvious importance to the programme's entire premise and from which information stated above comes. Were the programme makers incompetent or disingenuous in not using and broadcasting its contents?

After the 1922-23 Civil War, William Salter returned and bought a farm in Castletownshend in 1924, where George was born in 1925. The programme did not mention there was a Civil War in the intervening period. The programme makers also did not broadcast the fact that the period January to June 1922 (the period between Treaty split and Civil War) was one of increasing turmoil and disorder in which legitimate authority was contested and eroded.

The 1922 April killings have been the subject of much partisan commentary from Eoghan Harris in his newspaper column. They are a matter of debate. This debate was not reflected in any way on the programme that could not broadcast simple factual information correctly. The programme was a continuation of Eoghan Harris's one-sided column in the *Sunday Independent* and he has used it for these purposes in subsequent columns. It may be that the short programme format did not allow for alternative viewpoints differing from those of programme makers. That being so, balance was not achieved in that programme. Will RTE broadcast a balancing programme that, at least, may get its facts straight and might be objective and fair to all interests?

The programme used dramatised re-enactments of the April killings from (and also claimed continuity with) the documentary *Cork's Bloody Secret* (broadcast 5 Oct 2009). That far superior programme articulated differing viewpoints, one of which belonged to Eoghan Harris. Eoghan Harris differed with Professor John A Murphy afterwards in the *Irish Times* over Harris's claims on the number of Protestants driven from Ireland. It is a pity that RTE has now allowed a partisan figure like Harris to dictate understanding of this contested issue. While the programme presented itself as Rev'd Salter's view, his voice was often drowned out by that of the programme makers.

After the April 1922 killings a Protestant Convention, fully representative of southern Protestantism, met in the Mansion House. On 11 May 1922 they resolved,

**‘that until the recent tragedies in the County Cork, hostility to Protestants by reason of their religion, has been almost if not wholly, unknown in the twenty six counties in which Protestants are in a minority.’**

In other words, Protestants generally regarded the April killings as exceptional. The programme ignored facts such as these in favour of accusations of long term generalised anti-Protestantism.

I am disturbed that Eoghan Harris was given public money to promote partisan politics in defiance of rules regarding objectivity and fairness. I am also troubled that narrow-minded sectarian propaganda was broadcast uncritically by RTE, ironically in the name of tolerance and remembrance. I am concerned that RTE broadcast a programme alleging that Roman Catholics felt such hatred for their Protestant neighbours, purely on the basis of religious belief, that they harassed and persecuted them generally and then set out to kill and threaten them in a haphazard sectarian manner. I am concerned because the argument is highly contestable, but was not tested in a programme that appeared to deliberately broadcast misleading and wrong information in order to get its sectarian point across. I am also disturbed that Rev'd Salter was exploited for the purpose of broadcasting factually incorrect statements, derived from memory, based on oral tradition. The programme makers knew some statements were untrue and compounded them. They broadcast other factually incorrect assertions that a competent programme maker would have properly checked. Failure to cite the 1928 compensation claim of William Salter is incredible and, at the very least, incompetent.

I am complaining that the programme breached the following part of the Broadcasting Act and such parts of the BAI Code currently in force in RTÉ that are relevant to the points I have made:

<p>The broadcast treatment of current affairs, including matters which are either of public controversy or the subject of current public debate is fair to all interests concerned and that the broadcast matter is presented in an objective and impartial manner and without any</p>	<p>expression of his or her own views, except that should it prove impracticable in relation to a single broadcast to apply this paragraph, two or more related broadcasts may be considered as a whole, if the broadcasts are transmitted within a reasonable period of each other.</p>
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I would appreciate being made aware of RTÉ's response to these points.

I also would be grateful for answers to three questions: (1.) will RTE correct mistakes broadcast in *An Tost Fada*? (2.) when will a balancing programme be broadcast? (3.) will RTÉ reinstate the once official practice, that appears to have been abandoned, of insisting that programmes dealing with contentious historical material employ the services of a historical adviser?