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TITLE INFORMATION

ABOVE THE GROUND

A True Story of the Troubles in Northern Ireland

Dan Lawton

WildBlue Press (506 pp.)

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BOOK REVIEW

Lawton chronicles the plight of Kevin Barry Artt, falsely convicted of murdering a prison official for the IRA, in this nonfiction work.

Kevin Barry Artt grew up in Belfast during the 1970s and 1980s, a period during which tensions between the British and those Irish who longed for independence reached their violent heights, a turbulence vividly depicted by the author. Kevin was raised a Catholic, and was accustomed to the social sanctions that religious affiliation brought—he was beaten up for being Catholic as a child, and his father’s business was bombed (“Afterward, no one was charged in the incident. John rebuilt the garage and went back to work”). The young man did his best to avoid confrontation, but that became impossible when he started working as a driver for Ace Taxi in 1976; the Royal Ulster Constabulary assumed all the company’s drivers were Irish Republican Army-affiliated men and therefore hated them, while Loyalists distrusted them as well. Kevin was harassed incessantly and assassination attempts were made on his life. When Albert Miles, a high-ranking prison official, was murdered by the IRA in 1978, Kevin was arrested for the killing, apparently on the strength of an identification made by an informant. Under extraordinary coercion, he confessed to the crime, and, despite his subsequent retraction of his confession, he was found guilty on 184 criminal counts and sentenced to life in prison. Miraculously, he was pulled into an IRA-orchestrated prison break in 1983 and made his way to San Francisco, only to be apprehended and tried yet again. The author, who served as part of Kevin’s legal team in California, paints a dramatically stunning tableau of his cinematic plight and of the grim tumult in Northern Ireland at the time. The rigor and expansiveness of Lawton’s research is simply astonishing, and his journalistic prose is exacting and powerful. This is by turns a terrifying and heartbreaking story, conveyed with impressive skill and moral clarity.

An enthralling work of history told with intelligence and urgency.

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