

BOOK REVIEW

A gripping and authentic non-fiction book sheds light on 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland

By Mark W. Hansen

"Above the Ground" by Dan Lawton opened a new world for me. During the 1970s, '80s and '90s—while "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland were occurring—I was either an ignorant teenager or a young breadwinner with my nose to the grindstone trying to eke out a living as a lawyer. As a result, I never learned much about the conflict that was simmering and sometimes boiling over across the Atlantic, except what I picked up in soundbites through the American media. This left me with a grossly incomplete grasp of the horrific turmoil that rocked Northern Ireland.

"Above the Ground," published in 2023, is a terrific non-fiction book that educated me about this agonizing chapter in history and how it affected the life of a young man named Kevin Barry Artt. The

Mark W. Hansen is a former chair of the California State Bar Litigation Section and former editor-in-chief of California Litigation. He is also a San Diego lawyer with a state-wide litigation practice focused on insurance bad faith defense and coverage.



book is gripping, well-researched, authentic and powerful. On a scale of 1 to 10, it is a 10+.

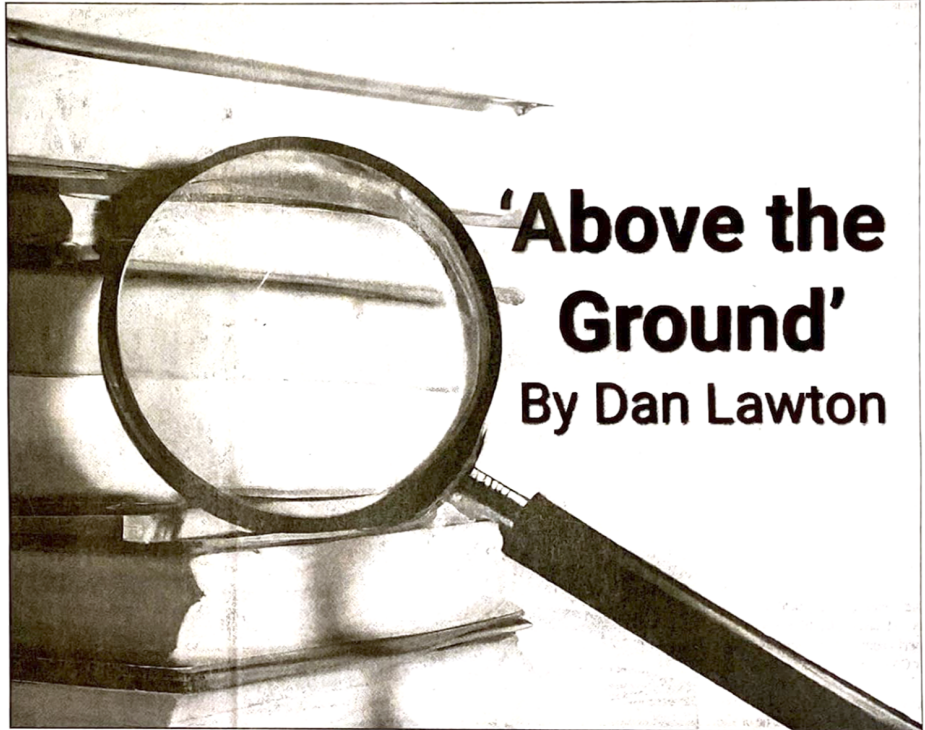
The book tells the fascinating, true story of Artt, from his teenage years into adulthood, and how his life was pummeled and turned upside down by being dragged unjustly into "the Troubles."

This book teaches a great deal. At the outset, the author provides a highly useful glossary, explaining the meaning of various terms that are foreign to most outside of the United Kingdom. The glossary teaches the meaning of words and acronyms such as Fenian, IRA, Loyalist, the Maze, the Orange Order, Republican, Screw, Sinn Féin, and UDA. This allows one's reading of the book to flow nicely, without the need for the author to pause and explain or re-explain such terms as he tells the captivating story of Artt's life.

The book also includes a brief but essential background history, without getting bogged down in details, thus providing context. This includes vignettes of fascinating characters involved in the long struggle of many—but not all—to remove British control over the six counties of Northern Ireland and make them part of the independent Republic of Ireland (the other twenty-six counties to the south). Although I have never even visited Ireland, the book often made me feel as though I were in Northern Ireland in the midst of the Struggles.

"Above the Ground" is worth reading on many different levels.

First, the book is fun to read. If you like biographies and legal thrillers, you must read this book. It usually takes me weeks to read a book. I finished "Above the Ground" in a few days. It is hard



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to put down. In places, it is violent and raw—not in a sensational way but rather to document what really happened. I would love to see it as a movie someday (although I'm usually disappointed by movies based on great books I have previously read—"Unbroken" by Laura Hillenbrand quickly comes to mind). The description of the secret planning for and execution

of a partially successful escape of inmates from an infamous Irish prison is especially spellbinding.

Second, it is a valuable contribution to the history of Northern Ireland that tells a compelling, true story of a young Irishman who was unjustly convicted and imprisoned as a notorious IRA murderer when he was actually just a common young man who

was never part of the IRA and who had no involvement in the murder for which he was convicted. The book explains "the Troubles" and what can happen to innocent lives when the police and military go overboard in trying to squash terrorism (in this case, IRA rebels) while turning a blind eye and even supporting contra, pro-government terrorist groups—all within

the fascinating workings of a legal system from which the American legal system has its roots.

Third, the book is especially interesting to anyone who cares about systems of justice and how they function. Before reading this book, I had never heard of "the Diplock Courts." The book taught that these were special courts cre

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ated in Northern Ireland pursuant to emergency laws enacted by the British Parliament in 1973 as a means of dealing with terrorists connected with "the Troubles." Persons accused of terrorist offenses were tried in these courts, without juries. The Diplock courts functioned from 1973 until they were abolished in 2007. Learning how a judge of the Diplock courts disposed of Kevin Barry Artt as a criminal defendant deepened my appreciation for trial by jury. There is irony in the facts that in America we inherited the jury trial system from Great Britain—which abandoned juries temporarily to deal with "the Troubles," to the detriment of a criminal defendant such as Artt (and probably others)—and then American lawyers played a key role in eventually achieving justice for Artt. This book heightened my appreciation for due process and the American

system of justice, much of which we owe to Great Britain's common law heritage.

Fourth, "Above the Ground" documents the ugliness of bigotry against a religious minority in a region. Although Catholicism is a major world religion, it was distressing to learn how Catholics were treated as members of a minority religion in Northern Ireland. Until I read this book, I did not realize that "the Troubles" were not based solely on a struggle for freedom from British rule in Northern Ireland; the turmoil was also overlain by a disturbing conflict between poverty-stricken Catholics and more affluent Protestants.

Fifth, this book is worth reading because of the lessons to be learned from the life of Artt. Though far from a perfect human being (like each of us), Artt's courage, patience, fortitude, and relentless hope in the face

of extreme adversity and injustice—over a period of decades—is something worth pondering. I grew to love the protagonist, not because of some superhuman set of qualities, but because of what a simple "everyman" is capable of enduring without ever losing hope for eventual redemption.

Sixth, the book is inspiring in its portrayal of the caring and generosity of several American and Irish lawyers who were on a quest, against steep odds, to help an innocent man regain his freedom and clear his name after being either imprisoned or living underground for a very long time. With all the lawyer bashing that is popular in America, it was refreshing to read a book that gives a glimpse into the nobility of some of the profession's finest lawyers, including the author (Lawton), California's James Bronsahan, and some Irish lawyers who joined in the final stages of the fight for

Artt's redemption.

It is astonishing to me that this was the first non-fiction book written by Lawton. I hope he will write more non-fiction books—although I suspect it may be hard to find another life as interesting as the life of Artt for a sequel. I also realize that Lawton's pro bono thrust into the life of such a fascinating character as Artt—and the first-hand view that put Lawton in a position to write such a compelling and personal story—is unlikely to be repeated.

I treasure reading books that I come to realize were a labor of love by a skilled author whose motive was something higher than making money (not that it's bad to make money): to devote a sizable portion of their life to create something of lasting value to share with their fellow passengers in life. "Above the Ground" falls into that category. Kudos, and well done to its author.

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