

# Northern Ireland: More evidence of MI5's network of informers and provocateurs in the IRA

Steve James  
13 March 2008

According to the *Observer*, shortly before taking him into “protective custody,” it was MI5 itself that warned Roy McShane that he was in danger of being exposed as another British spy close to leadership of the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

MI5 apparently knew of an internal IRA investigation that had revealed McShane's affiliations. How it knew the article did not say, but McShane's exposure in February this year sheds further light on the criminal and murderous operation mounted by British intelligence against the IRA and Sinn Fein.

Alongside the more well-known British state collusion with loyalist paramilitary gangs, state infiltration and manipulation of the IRA, particularly its security unit, was a vital component of the dirty war in Northern Ireland.

McShane was one of a pool of drivers for Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams, from 1994 onwards. He was apparently always vociferous in denouncing informers and would inevitably have been privy to many crucial conversations. The drivers' pool was headed by a close ally of Adams, Terence Clarke. In 1998 the Labour government's then Northern Ireland Secretary, Mo Mowlam, authorised the bugging of a car used to transport Ireland's present Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness to and from negotiations to set up devolved government in Northern Ireland.

Greater significance should be attached to McShane's previous role. He would appear to have links to the IRA's former internal security unit, the so-called “nutting squad.” It emerged in 2003 that this internal security unit, established by Adams in the 1970s in response to a number of security disasters, was rapidly subverted by the British Army. The security unit's deputy leader, Freddie Scappaticci, was exposed as the British agent “Stakeknife.”

Scappaticci was the focal point of an entire operation run by the British Army's Force Research Unit (FRU). McShane, according to the *Irish News*, used to work with Scappaticci in the “nutting squad,” only being moved to the drivers' pool when the IRA leadership came to have concerns about the security unit itself.

According to British Irish Rights Watch, an NGO, the IRA

reportedly killed around 50 individuals accused of being informers. Of these, any number of those targeted by the “nutting squad” could have been entirely innocent and the victims of real informers such as Scappaticchi and McShane, because they either had suspicions about the unit's real agenda or were becoming an obstacle to the FRU operation.

When British agent Kevin Fulton came under suspicion within the IRA, he considered his life was about to be sacrificed in order to protect “Stakeknife.” Fulton bailed out and has since sought to embarrass his former handlers into providing him with a decent pension.

The “Stakeknife” operation also coincided with some of the IRA's worst operational disasters, including the Loughall and Gibraltar massacres where IRA members were killed by British forces through what appeared to be serious security breaches.

At the time “Stakeknife” was exposed, British Irish Rights Watch made the point that the operation around Scappaticci, run with Whitehall approval, had also provided the British government with accusations that one “leading high-profile republican” had shot an informer in the head. The operation undoubtedly provided a rich supply of valuable compromising information to the British government and intelligence services with which to apply pressure to the Sinn Fein leadership.

The “Stakeknife” revelations were followed in 2006 by the exposure of Denis Donaldson, the former head of the IRA's international relations. As an agent, Donaldson, who was said to have distanced himself from his security handlers, was assassinated later in 2006 in an isolated border cottage. No one has ever been charged with his murder.

There were perhaps hundreds of state informers in both republican and loyalist paramilitary groups. Many of these people are undoubtedly still operating, in the pay of MI5 or the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Many more will have been stood down, hoping that details of their role will remain buried.

On January 21, the inquiry into the killing of Billy Wright, reputed loyalist killer and opponent of power-sharing with Sinn Fein, issued a 75-page statement accusing the PSNI of refusing to provide it with relevant information on Wright's killing.

Many documents had been destroyed or gone missing, including thousands of security files relating to prisoners held in the Maze prison, where Wright was murdered. However, the inquiry stated that it was in possession of a file making clear that it was a Special Branch informer amongst the Maze prisoners who smuggled a gun into the hands of Wright's killers, Irish National Liberation Army members John Glennon and Christopher McWilliams. The PSNI says this informer, whose name has not been released, is now dead.

A number of very serious questions arise.

It now seems that for a long time, counted in decades, the British government not only had a window into the IRA's internal discussion and organisation but the means to pull levers and eliminate opponents within it.

At least from the date of Scappaticci offering his services to MI5, reportedly in 1978, and the consolidation of the security unit around him, it is difficult to see how any major IRA operation could have taken place without some level of British knowledge, conceivably before and certainly after the event. The atmosphere of internal distrust over that period is well documented in journalist Ed Moloney's *A Secret History of the IRA*.

It is also clear that the military disasters suffered served to strengthen the influence of the leadership around Adams and McGuinness, who were advocating a constitutional settlement with the British government.

However, Britain's spies would not have simply been used to thwart IRA operations. They would have colluded with many of them and allowed them to be successful if this was considered to be politically expedient.

The conflict's worst single atrocity, the Omagh bombing in 1998, left 29 dead and 220 injured. The bomb's maker is alleged to have been an intelligence asset along with the man who stole the car used for the attack. Omagh—allegedly carried out by the hard-line splinter group, the Real IRA, in an effort to sabotage the Good Friday Agreement establishing the Northern Ireland Assembly—had the opposite effect.

The horrific deaths of both Protestants and Catholics prompted even greater popular support for an end to the conflict and Sinn Féin's first-ever condemnation of republican violence. The INLA soon declared its own ceasefire, and the Real IRA suspended its operations. It subsequently issued a statement claiming that its own involvement was "minimal" and that the bombing was the work of two MI5 agents—an allegation lent credence by BBC's "Panorama," which insisted that police on both sides of the Irish border had knowledge of the bomb plot.

How many similar attacks were allowed to go ahead? What was known beforehand of Bloody Friday, July 21, 1972, when 22 bombs were exploded in central Belfast killing nine bystanders; or of the series of pub bombings in the UK in the 1970s; the 1982 Hyde Park and Regent's Park bombs; the 1987 Remembrance Day attack on Enniskillen; or the 1990s London

and Manchester bombings? How many of the countless sectarian killings in Northern Ireland were carried out with at least some level of insight, foreknowledge or even approval from the British authorities?

IRA bombings were seized on by successive British governments and the military to legitimise all manner of undemocratic measures—the maintenance of a large standing army in Northern Ireland and the creation of a special apparatus skilled in surveillance, infiltration, entrapment, assassination, and psychological operations, as well as to manipulate public opinion and justify repressive and undemocratic measures in the name of combating terrorism.

Just as fundamentally, terrorist outrages and killings served to deepen the sectarian divisions in the working class in Northern Ireland. Belfast is still divided along religious lines by concrete walls, a precursor to the policy now pursued by the UK and the United States in Iraq. Northern Ireland has thus provided British imperialism with a vital training ground in which to hone its counterinsurgency techniques.

Notwithstanding Sinn Féin's intermittent left rhetoric, the IRA complemented the loyalist gangs and death squads in dividing and terrorising ordinary working people. For decades, the IRA recruited on the most minimal basis—family ties, opposition to British rule, and the willingness to shoot soldiers. It is this that allowed the likes of British Spy Kevin Fulton, having served in the British Army, to infiltrate the organisation after mouthing a few nationalist phrases and playing on his penchant for guns and trouble.

As to the scale of such infiltration, some indication has been provided by material shown to members of the Consultative Group on the Past (CGP), established in 2007 by then Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain and claiming to be dedicated to "building a shared future that is not overshadowed by the events of the past."

The group, led by Lord Robin Eames, a former bishop and primate with the Church of Ireland, and Denis Bradley, a former priest, journalist and member of the Northern Ireland policing board, was reportedly shown 10 filing cabinets containing records relating to agents and informers in both loyalist and republican groups. Three related to informers within the IRA.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**