

Spies, Lies and Anglo-Irish Relations

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A review of

Paul McMahon, British spies and Irish rebels: British intelligence and Ireland, 1916-1945

(Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2011) ISBN 978-1-84383-656-8, Paperback, xii + 516 pp., £19.99.

It's rare that a history book is almost as fun to read as a spy thriller. This is one of those unusual cases. McMahon's monograph uncovers Britain's intelligence relationship with Ireland during the key period between the 1916 Easter Rising and the end of the Second World War, during which southern Ireland asserted its new-found independence by maintaining a neutral position. Written with zest, the book brims with an intriguing cast of characters, including (as listed on the back cover) 'IRA gunrunners, Bolshevik agitators, Nazi saboteurs, [and] British double agents'. The telling of this tale was only made possible by the recent opening of British and Irish files on intelligence and security matters. Although some material remains classified, McMahon exercised his detective skills to piece together evidence from partial sources.

The book examines 'the early failures, uncertain development and eventual success of Britain's intelligence engagement with Ireland' (p. 2). For the purposes of this study, McMahon defines intelligence as 'the collection and processing of all information, whether open or secret, pertaining to the security of the state' (p. 2). Britain initially found it difficult to obtain good intelligence on Ireland because the country was an anomaly within the usual structures of the British intelligence community. This led to a combination of neglect and confusion in its approach to the collection and processing of information on Ireland. As a result, the British government's opinion of the country swerved between ignorance and alarm, with the former often breeding the latter. It wasn't until the middle of the Second World War that highly secret co-operation with the authorities in Dublin finally enabled Britain to develop strong intelligence on Irish affairs.

McMahon divides his analysis into three parts, each examining a specific phase in the intelligence relationship between Britain and Ireland. The first part deals with the Irish revolution of 1916-23. The second depicts southern Ireland as a restless dominion during the period between the end of the Irish Civil War in 1923 and the advent of the Second World War in 1939. The themes of war and neutrality naturally dominate the final section of the book. While McMahon's main focus is on the relationship between Britain and the Irish Free State / Éire, he also considers Northern Ireland and the wider international dimension where relevant.

The Irish revolution served as 'a template for separatist campaigns that the British state would face in many parts of the world during the twentieth century': this consisted of a two-pronged approach to revolution that included a military aspect featuring 'a guerrilla insurgency against the security forces' and a political dimension with the 'radicalisation of the general population'. For any chance of victory, the British needed a combination of tactical intelligence

– ‘information on the identity, location, strength, and intentions of the militants’
– and political or strategic intelligence – ‘information on the state of opinion in Ireland, and the overall strength of the separatist movement’. The British intelligence system’s performance in these areas was hindered by ‘its own internal weaknesses, the effectiveness of its Irish opposition and the constraints imposed by British policy and the Irish political environment’ (p. 13). In consequence, the United Kingdom lost southern Ireland, but managed to keep the reluctant dominion in its empire for a while longer.

Once the twenty-six counties of southern Ireland no longer posed a domestic security risk to Britain, the Irish Free State assumed many of the characteristics of a foreign country, from an intelligence perspective. The British government discarded its ‘extensive intelligence and counter-insurgency apparatus’ in Ireland and instead depended on ‘informal, *ad hoc* sources of information’, having ‘few official representatives in the new state’. Such information often consisted of ‘rumour, biased reporting and politicised interpretation by officials and ministers in London’ that had the potential to lead to decisions that could have scuttled the Anglo-Irish settlement (p. 96). By 1923 a degree of stability had been achieved due to the willingness of the Irish authorities to cooperate secretly with the British state in matters of intelligence and security.

McMahon asserts that ‘Britain’s traumatic experience of the Irish revolution reinforced preconceptions about Ireland that would influence British policy decisions until the 1940s’ (p. 162). Preconceptions tend to cloud the objective analysis of facts, leading to faulty decision making. Ireland’s close connection with Britain and the lengthy and emotive nature of the Irish question as a political issue meant that most British leaders held strong opinions on Ireland and its people. The informality of British intelligence on Ireland ensured that prejudices and assumptions were not methodically questioned. Functioning in an intelligence vacuum, two very different British perceptions of the Irish situation battled for supremacy in the 1920s and 1930s. Diehard unionists were deeply suspicious of the new Irish state and pessimistic regarding the influence of militant republicanism while liberal imperialists hoped ‘the Irish Free State would become stable and democratic, settle down within the empire as a loyal Dominion and perhaps one day succeed in wooing Northern Ireland into a united state’ (p. 163). Neither viewpoint proved entirely accurate.

Having neglected Irish affairs and failed to comprehend the rise of Fianna Fáil in the run-up to the 1932 election, the British government was completely unprepared to cope with the challenge of Éamon de Valera. It mistook him for a republican fanatic dominated by the IRA and ‘exaggerated the power of the subversive undercurrents that swirled beneath the political surface’ in Ireland (p. 239), leading to a period of poor policy. The worsening international situation and the approaching war finally forced British policy-makers to reconsider out-dated principles and prejudices.

The Second World War brought new challenges to the relationship. Irish neutrality not only fed British fears that Ireland might be used as a base for German covert operations or outright attacks on the UK, but also denied

British forces access to southern Irish naval and air bases. De Valera's government tempered these issues by providing operational intelligence to Britain, helping to repatriate British airmen who landed in Ireland, and clamping down on 'Axis espionage, sabotage and propaganda activities' (p. 284). What ultimately emerged from the war years was a new maturity in Anglo-Irish relations with Britain accepting that 'Ireland was neither a sister-nation nor a fanatical enemy, but an independent country ... pursuing its own interests' (p. 437). As a result, the future 'Irish declaration of a republic barely caused a ripple in Britain' (p. 438).

Overall, McMahon melds impressive research and analysis with an entertaining writing style; at over 500 pages this paperback is heftier than the average spy thriller in more ways than one.