

## SEAN O'CALLAGHAN

### Heroes of a Dirty War

*Secret Victory: The Intelligence War That Beat the IRA*

by William Matchett

William Matchett, 2016, 272 pages, about \$30

Some might regard the title of this book as making a grandiose claim. Others may deride it, or ignore both title and book, choosing instead to believe that whatever fragile peace Northern Ireland enjoys today is a blessing bestowed by Tony Blair, Gerry Adams, Bill Clinton and an assortment of peaceniks, chancers and conflict resolution groupies. Many such people have lined their pockets by grossly inflating their influence in the “peace process” and exporting their inanities to gullible audiences worldwide.

In reality they reaped the harvest of peace that others had sown in a long intelligence war, and William Matchett's book is the perfect antidote to their delusions. The author is a former senior officer in the Special Branch of the Royal Ulster Constabulary who fought the IRA (and their loyalist counterparts) for a quarter of a century and who has gone on to advise police forces across the world on counter-terrorism. He describes with the familiar understated practicality of the North's Protestant-Unionist majority how he and his Special Branch colleagues were able to win a war of intelligence within the civil law.

One experience of mine in Crumlin Road Jail in Belfast in 1989 confirmed for me—not that I needed much convincing—the absolutely central and critical role that RUC Special Branch played in degrading the Provisional IRA, and forcing it to end its campaign of murder and intimidation against the people of Northern Ireland. I was being led, in the company of seven IRA members, through the tunnel from the jail to the courthouse, each of us handcuffed to another prisoner. I happened to be handcuffed to a senior and long-standing member of the IRA from Dungannon, County Tyrone, named Henry Louis McNally. I knew him quite well from my days as an IRA operative in the mid-1970s in County Tyrone. He was once named, by Ken Maginnis, an Ulster Unionist MP in the House of Commons, as being directly responsible for the murders of seventeen members of the security forces. He had been arrested, charged, and later convicted of the attempted murder of British soldiers travelling by bus to their base in Antrim.

McNally was a very canny, experienced and

long-term senior IRA man who followed his own timetable, operating in his native County Tyrone for going on sixteen years, interrupted only by one spell on remand. I was curious as to why this cautious man was operating far from his normal stomping ground. I asked him, and the answer I received in that tunnel was this: “Special Branch have us in a vice-like grip in Tyrone and it is just too difficult to operate, so like a fool I finished up going to Antrim to get some kills and ended up here.” Out of the mouths of babes and killers ... McNally had no love for the Special Branch, but he had good reason to be realistic about them as formidable and professional enemies forged in a very unforgiving fire.

In the introduction to his book Matchett describes his first days as an eighteen-year-old recruit in the RUC, stationed in the IRA heartland of South Armagh:

At 18 it was a rude awakening to the reality of armed conflict. I was shot at, caught in roadside bombs and mortared. I lost some good friends. I would lie if I said I was not afraid. I knew the IRA men who were doing this, we all did, but we could not *prove* it.

This was Northern Ireland in 1982, not Beirut or Afghanistan, but a part of the UK situated on the island of Ireland. It is I think worth taking a moment to ponder those lines. The border was but a stone's throw away and mostly the IRA simply scooted across the border into the Irish Republic where Matchett and his colleagues could not follow. And so it went on—year after bloody year. A police force that had been utterly demoralised and demonised by the events of 1969 took years to recover some sense of mission and purpose. It wasn't until police primacy in law enforcement and intelligence gathering was restored in 1976 that a revamped and reinvigorated RUC really took on the slow and deadly task of taking back control of IRA-controlled areas of Belfast and Derry. Slowly but surely the rule of law began to assert itself. The centre of IRA activity began to retreat more and more to the rural heartlands bordering the Irish Republic. Eventually towards the end the IRA was on its knees, its last stronghold in South Armagh on the verge of collapse.

It would of course be wrong to downgrade the huge role and sacrifice undertaken by the British Army, particularly in the early 1970s. Without the Army holding the line in those difficult years the RUC, and Special Branch in particular, would almost certainly never have had the breathing space to re-organise. Matchett recognises the debt

of gratitude to those soldiers who served and were injured or murdered when he writes simply, "The Army prevented Ulster from unravelling." Of course one of the primary differences between the police and the Army was that police knew the ground where they were born, went to school, got married, had children and worked and socialised. They were of the soil, as their enemies in the IRA were, and they proved more resolute, determined and fearless in protecting their children, homeland and way of life than those who opposed them. They were often frustrated by having to observe the rule of law—but it proved the right way. They were determined to outwit and outlast the IRA—and they did. Matchett sets out in clear, precise words the operational strategies and tactics Special Branch adopted to defeat a well-armed and vicious terrorist group.

The IRA was far from being an unsophisticated enemy and yet it failed utterly to get any real handle on how Special Branch operated. Special Branch worked slowly and methodically, grinding through the vast amounts of information fed in by all branches of the security services and the general public. As the IRA's vaunted "Long War" ground on with little sign of victory the jails began to fill up, marriages fell apart, petty jealousies were rampant. The IRA attempted to fight its "Long War" in the belly of the "beast", in reality part of perhaps the most democratic country in the world, and the "beast" represented by Special Branch devoured it.

This was a war in which the state provided housing, welfare and education to the vast majority of its sworn enemies. Bizarre, one might say, but it allowed Special Branch an in-depth view of the IRA and its support base. The IRA believed its "Long War" would erode the will to resist its demands. In reality Special Branch were in a position to know who was pregnant, or visited the dentist, or was missing from their usual haunts, or in financial trouble, or having relationship problems, and so on. Also in pursuance of the "Long War" and to enforce control in their communities, the IRA murdered dozens, mutilated and tortured thousands. Many of those and their friends and families became more inclined to phone the confidential RUC number the longer the war continued, if they saw known IRA acting suspiciously,

in the "wrong" place and so on. The IRA stupidly, sometimes to appease the worst instincts of their supporters, gave RUC Special Branch an army of observers and potential informers, particularly in the urban centres of Belfast and Derry.

Matchett's book necessarily includes much technical, historical and operational detail. Indeed, that is one of its great strengths—it is, among other things, a manual of practical counter-terrorism. Many other police and intelligence services have since benefited from the lessons learned in the field by Matchett and his colleagues.

It was an unfair fight, of course. For the IRA it was a war to be fought and won by whatever means possible. Its terrorists could simply shoot people. RUC Special Branch, like all other branches of the security forces, had to operate under the rules of the civil law and in spite of all the provocation they behaved, mostly, with impeccable restraint.

Did they get every decision right? Hardly. Individual Special Branch officers had to make instant, terrifying and life-changing decisions in the middle of a ferocious terrorist onslaught. Yet no RUC officer ever gave an order to kidnap and force, at gunpoint, an innocent man into a car and instruct him to deliver that car, with a bomb on board, to an Army checkpoint, under the understanding that having done so he would shout a warning and be given time to escape, only for his torturers to blow him and five soldiers to pieces. That instruction was

given by the IRA's Army Council in which Adams and McGuinness were leading members.

Whatever accusations might be made against individual members of the RUC pale into insignificance when measured against the bestial thought processes that led to Enniskillen, Bloody Friday, Le Mon, Darkley, Kingsmill and hundreds of other bloodstained atrocities committed by the IRA in a degenerate attempt to enforce their will.

I write as someone who in August 1974 murdered Detective Inspector Peter Flanagan of RUC Special Branch in a County Tyrone public house. I am deeply ashamed of that act. Like many young Irish republicans before me I thought I was fighting for Irish freedom. I was not. I was fighting for an ugly and perverted form of Irish nationalism which has periodically disfigured the name of Ireland throughout the world.

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What struck me most about Matchett's book on first reading was the sheer modesty and humility of the man. There is also a mainly suppressed rage and frustration at the calculated vitriol and lies, sometimes spurred on by unthinking ignorance, that he and his colleagues, living and murdered, have been subjected to by the terrorists' fellow travellers in the media and the human rights industry. The British, Irish and US governments and their intelligence agencies are only too well aware of the superb, professional and extraordinarily courageous work undertaken by Special Branch day in, day out, year after year while all the time being prime targets for the IRA. Yet they remain mealy-mouthed, at best, in the face of an orchestrated campaign of lies and slander—led by Sinn Féin and its fellow travellers in the media and politics—against a force that won the peace by careful detective work.

I make absolutely no apology for saluting the brave men and women of RUC Special Branch. It was they who, more than any politician, forced the IRA to stop killing and bombing. They provided the opportunity for glory-hunting politicians to feel the hand of history on their shoulder and to conclude a squalid deal.

William Matchett has written a moving, brave and not uncritical testimony about how a band of largely unsung heroes defeated a brutal terrorist assault on democracy and the rule of law. We owe them and him huge gratitude. More than that, we owe it to them to speak out clearly and loudly in their defence when we hear them traduced. Yet Matchett could not find one publisher to accept his informative and brave account of how—in a world of crises and terrorism—one terrorist group was well and truly beaten. So he published it himself (it is available from internet booksellers). Shame on all those publishers, who inhabit a safe and comfortable world because of men and women like William Matchett yet who refuse to pay for their sacrifice when the bill falls due.

We may yet have to call men like Matchett into the field again. Bombs continue to explode near schools in Northern Ireland and the latest elections there suggest the Good Friday Agreement is fragile and the myth of an undefeated IRA may tempt more young fools to pick up the Armalite. Know your enemies. Spread the word. Read the book.

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*Sean O'Callaghan's memoir *The Informer: The True Life Story of One Man's War on Terrorism* was published in 1999.*

## DOUGLAS HASSALL

### Lord Clark of *Civilisation*

*Kenneth Clark: Life, Art and Civilisation*  
by James Stourton  
Knopf, 2016, 478 pages, \$65

This new and detailed biography is unlikely to be surpassed by any further single work on Kenneth Clark. That is the case despite Stourton's own modest averral that his book should be seen as "notes towards a definition". Whilst others (and particularly art historians) may well produce further studies on Clark and his major achievement on the cultural history of the West, the BBC series *Civilisation*, they are likely to be studies of a much more specialised nature. What Stourton gives us is not the first biography of Clark; that was provided by Meryle Secrest's book of 1984. Instead, Stourton gives us the first really detailed study of Clark's life and work, and it is one based on extensive access to primary archival materials and with the benefit of the passage of the decades.

We are now at nearly fifty years' remove from 1968, the year in which Clark's *Civilisation* series was completed for broadcast in February 1969. We are all familiar with the cultural discontents and direnesses that focused themselves into the *evenements* of 1968 and have persisted since; Clark's *Civilisation* of that year gave us something entirely different.

Stourton has now given us a much more careful study of Clark, his family background, his youth and upbringing and his education than we have had before. This is important, because Clark came from a fairly "privileged" background, and he himself quipped that his parents were part of what used to be called the "idle rich", adding that "whilst many were richer, few can have been idler". Even so, Clark's particular circumstances enabled the early sowing of a deep interest in art and the emergence of a real connoisseur. This was coupled with very good educational opportunities (he attended Winchester, followed by Oxford University) such that there was never any risk that the young Clark would disappear and sink into a miasma of philistinism of the kind all too common at that period. Clark's early encounters with Bernard Berenson in Florence were of signal importance for his own development and indeed, that experience may be seen as the *fons et origo* of *Civilisation*. Stourton tells us much about the influences on Clark, especially the works of John Ruskin, Walter Pater and Jacob Burckhardt.