

# intelligence in public media

## *Four Shots in the Night: A True Story of Espionage, Murder, and Justice in Northern Ireland*

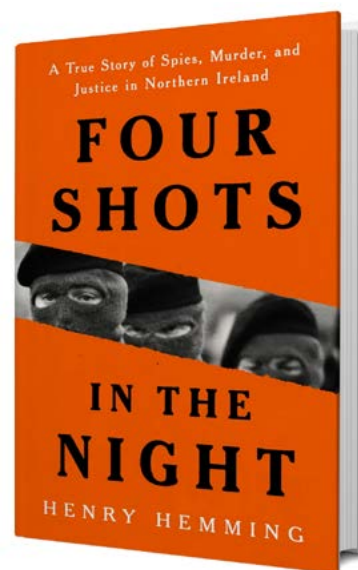
Reviewed by Aaron Edwards, PhD

**Author:** Henry Hemming

**Published By:** Quercus Books/Public Affairs, 2024

**Print Pages:** 368

**Reviewer:** The reviewer is a senior lecturer in defense and international affairs at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and author of *Agents of Influence: Britain's Secret War Against the IRA* (Merrion Press, 2021).



**I**n *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903) by Erskine Childers, his two principal characters, Carruthers and Davies, ostensibly enjoying a sailing expedition to Germany, discuss the best way to preserve the secrecy surrounding their unfolding covert spying mission. “The English charts, being relatively useless, though more suitable to our role as English yachtsmen, were to be left in evidence, as shining proofs of our innocence. It was all delightfully casual, I could not help thinking.” *The Riddle of the Sands* highlights how improvisation of clandestine tradecraft can pay strategic dividends. If done right, true intentions can be hidden in plain sight among the paraphernalia of everyday life. This is an idea explored in Henry Hemming’s fascinating new book, *Four Shots in the Night*, which tells the story of one Irish Republican Army member’s bid to hide in plain sight while he spied on behalf of the British Army.

The IRA split in 1969, with the Official IRA remaining true to the left-leaning cause its leadership had begun to espouse in the early 1960s, and the Provisional IRA wishing to pursue a more militant nationalist agenda. Both IRAs grew out of the same parent organization that claimed lineage to the early 20th century, a time of revolutionary turbulence in Ireland. While both IRAs disagreed on whether fighting the British necessarily meant fighting the Ulster Protestants who wished to retain the link with Great Britain, they nonetheless shared much the same organizational DNA. Both groups enforced a strict code of conduct on their members, which stipulated that they should never engage in “loose talk,” which could lead to dismissal from the IRA and, if treason was proven in a “court martial” process, summary execution.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

## *Four Shots in the Night*

It is no surprise, therefore, that informers have been considered “folk devils” by Irish republicans and their supporters. For the British, however, spies were essential; the secret information they provided was seen as critical to shaping and influencing the government’s assessments of IRA policy, plans, and psychology. How that information was collected took many forms, including interrogating terrorist suspects, recruiting known IRA members as informers, or, at the apex of what was known colloquially as “the intelligence pyramid,” two-legged agents who could be infiltrated into terrorist organizations. Known as human intelligence (HUMINT) within the British Army, this was information gathered from people to help decisionmakers apply the state’s finite resources more effectively to defeat terrorism.

The collection of HUMINT was not without its challenges. Over many generations Irish nationalists had come together in close-knit communities, often related by blood. They were unlikely to give up information about the IRA easily for fear of betraying their own people or inviting violent retribution for even the allegation of indulging in such transgressions. In psychological terms, IRA members and supporters became increasingly paranoid as information did frequently leak out. While this paranoia reinforced the corrosive effect of trust between IRA volunteers and their communities, it also aided the British state in pilfering the organizational cohesion and morale of its terrorist opposition. In a strategic sense, it also presented opportunities to Britain’s Intelligence Community who could fish in a pool of individuals, as Hemming suggests, with “knowledge that could be turned into intelligence and then used to prevent future attacks.”

One of those people was an IRA member from Derry/Londonderry in the northwest of Northern Ireland, Frank Hegarty. He had become involved in the IRA at the outset of the Troubles and was particularly active in the 1970s. As Hemming notes early on, the deterioration in the security situation meant “ordinary people like Frank Hegarty, with no history of violence, were becoming involved” in terrorism and could bring reports from inside the heart of the biggest terrorist threat to British security in a generation.

Hegarty routinely walked his greyhound, Blue, on the same stretch of road near the Creggan estate in Derry. He cut a solitary figure amidst a bleak windswept park adjacent to a lonely reservoir, a mere stone’s throw from the Irish border. It was on one of these daily rituals in 1980 that he was approached by a man who he had seen on several occasions walking his own dog. “Jack” had been working toward speaking to Hegarty for some time. He disguised his real intent beneath the facade of “dog talk.” Jack was really an agent runner with the British Army’s clandestine Force Research Unit (FRU) and he had a job offer to make: would Hegarty like to do his part for the greater good by informing on the IRA? After thinking it over Hegarty duly accepted, thus beginning a close relationship with Britain’s intelligence services.

Without the declassification of intelligence collected by Hegarty and passed onto the FRU, it is impossible to know the details of the secret information he brought to his handlers. Hemming does draw some inferences, including how Hegarty stored weapons and ammunition for the IRA in Derry City Cemetery. However, Hemming lacks access to former IRA volunteers who may have commented on Hegarty’s character—beyond passing references to his nickname, “The General”—or the granular detail on how Hegarty’s information informed the intelligence and security machinery at the heart of Britain’s war against the IRA. While negotiating access is challenging, significant intelligence dossiers have since been declassified in the UK National Archives.

A casual glance at the Army’s monthly intelligence reports for Derry in the mid-1980s, for instance, reveal that the processing and dissemination was only as good as the tactical handling and exploitation of HUMINT. My own book, *Agents of Influence*, examines the efficacy of these reports, declassified after repeated requests under the UK’s Freedom of Information Act (2000). It is obvious that intelligence was critically important to British counterterrorism efforts but could also be quite underwhelming in its content. While assets like Hegarty could confirm the presence of new weapons, such as the M60 heavy machine-gun and a batch of RPG-7s, in the arsenal of the Derry IRA, they were limited in providing tactical and operational insights in other parts of the province. Only by advancing the role of agents inside the IRA could the security forces get a

more strategic-level insight into the group's activities. With greater coverage came greater responsibility for managing both the collection and management of intelligence reporting. Here there were clearly blind spots in the imaginations of those holding critical positions in each stage of the intelligence cycle.

Despite no conceptual-based assessment of how the intelligence cycle worked in driving the momentum of security forces operations, *Four Shots in the Night* is an important contribution. It details several key twists and turns in the Frank Hegarty story as he passed on regular reports about the Provisionals' military operations to his FRU handlers. Hemming is especially prodigious at working his way into the mindset of an ordinary man who was at once a secret agent while also acting as a key aide to senior IRA and Sinn Féin leader Martin McGuinness, responsible for, among other mundane tasks, driving him around the Irish countryside on IRA business. The reader is offered a rare glimpse into how mentally challenging it was for Hegarty to maintain his cover as a British agent. "The need to bottle up so much of what he is feeling adds to the mounting pressure in Frank Hegarty's life," writes Hemming. Keeping everything casual while dealing with a "carousel of meetings, conversations, and places to be," soon took its toll. Matters would come to a head when Irish police, acting on a tipoff, seized huge IRA arms dumps in Roscommon and Sligo in January 1986.

Hegarty immediately fell under suspicion. Before he could be apprehended and interrogated by the IRA's infamous Internal Security Unit (ISU, known colloquially as the "Nutting Squad"), his FRU handlers exfiltrated him to England. After suffering a bout of homesickness, Hegarty was persuaded to return to Derry by McGuinness, who allegedly gave Hegarty's mother, Rose, a personal assurance that he would be unharmed. McGuinness lied. As soon as Hegarty arrived back in Derry, he was seized by the Nutting Squad and taken away for interrogation. Hemming details the grisly torture Hegarty suffered, including apparently having his eyeballs gouged out by his captors.

Hegarty's body was discovered on a lonely border lane. His hands had been tied behind his back, black tape had been placed over his eye sockets, and his corpse bloodied by gunshot wounds. Hemming concludes how it was likely that Hegarty was shot dead by Freddie Scappaticci, a middle-ranking IRA commander from the Markets area of Belfast, who was second-in-command of the Nutting Squad. Although outwardly presenting himself as a ruthless IRA volunteer, "Scap" was not all he seemed. Like Hegarty, he too had been recruited by the British and was now being handled by the FRU detachment working out of Belfast.<sup>a</sup>

The great tragedy of the Frank Hegarty story is that, at its core, deception is more an art than a science. Not only is this confirmed by the murder of suspected agents inside the IRA but also in the fact that the British government has commissioned inquiries into the activities of those agencies it charged with protecting the UK from terrorism. It is a curious outworking of the end of the Troubles where peace may well have come to the troubled province, but truth and justice have come, to paraphrase W.B. Yeats, dropping slow. While much of the story Hemming relates is well-known to close observers of the IRA, it is his careful blending of the past, present, and future repercussions of the unpredictability of the human factor that gives us a remarkable 360-degree insight of one of the most controversial episodes of the Troubles. As with Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands*, where Carruthers observes how, all countries, "have spies in their service, dirty though necessary tools," Hemming too ponders whether a "Rubicon had been crossed" by Britain's secret agents in a bid to hide in plain sight. This book gives us at least some answers to that question. ■

---

a. See *Stakeknife's Dirty War: The Inside Story of Scappaticci, the IRA's Nutting Squad, and the British Spooks Who Ran the War*, by Richard O'Rawe, reviewed by Joseph Gartin, *Studies in Intelligence* Vol. 6, No. 1 (March 2024).