

Intelligence in Public Media

Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland

Patrick Radden Keefe (New York: Doubleday, 2019) 559 pages, source notes, photographs, index

Reviewed by Joseph Gartin

New Yorker writer Jon Lee Anderson once observed “war has a way of making all kinds of killing possible.”^a Northern Ireland’s long political-sectarian conflict known as the Troubles was no exception. Spanning the late 1960s until the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998, the Troubles left some 3,600 dead, wounded perhaps 500,000 more, and displaced untold others. What began as a civil rights movement in Protestant-controlled Northern Ireland (part of the United Kingdom) descended into a grinding deadly struggle. All kinds of killing were possible: shootings, homemade napalm, car bombs, and what Irish poet Ciaran Carson dubbed “Belfast confetti,” the detritus heaved from rooftops and across barricades.

As the conflict escalated, so did its lethality. The Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA, but also commonly known as the IRA or the Provos), upgraded its obsolescent arsenal with modern arms through a clandestine supply chain that stretched from the United States to Libya. Its bombmakers built larger, more deadly devices in a widening gyre of terrorism that would account for about two-thirds of all Troubles deaths. Protestant loyalist paramilitaries killed another 1,000, including through bombings in Dublin, the capital of the Republic of Ireland. British intelligence, police, and military added to the death toll, assassinating IRA members, funneling guns and intelligence to loyalist groups, and colluding with death squads that killed Catholics with no republican ties.

Amid such a tableau of violence, a handful of cases would come to epitomize the conflict. The subject of Patrick Radden Keefe’s *Say Nothing* is one: the kidnapping and murder of Jean McConville by the Provos in December 1972. Widow and mother of 10 children, McConville was snatched from her Belfast home, interrogated, tortured, shot, and buried along the shore, just over the border in the Republic of Ireland. Her remains were discovered by a passerby in 2003.

a. Jon Lee Anderson, “Massacre in Kandahar,” *New Yorker*, 11 March 2012 at <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/massacre-in-kandahar>

Why the IRA targeted McConville is disputed, and conflicting accounts offer little prospect of resolution. Keefe explores claims she had helped a wounded British soldier (53) or was an informant for British intelligence. (306) The truth is probably irreducible. In the charged atmosphere of 1970s Northern Ireland, on both sides suspicion alone could be enough for a death warrant.

Tragic as McConville’s death might be, it is an unlikely topic for an entire book, which makes the success of Keefe’s account all the more impressive. Keefe is an accomplished writer whose work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Slate*, and *The New York Times*, and while a student at Yale University Law School he authored a well-received book on global electronic surveillance.^b He is also a dogged researcher who pursued McConville’s story for several years from Belfast to Boston.

Caveating *Say Nothing* as narrative nonfiction rather than history, Keefe sweeps the reader along for nearly five decades of conflict and uneasy peace. He deftly places McConville’s murder within the context of Britain’s military response to the civil rights movement, the IRA’s resurgence from nostalgic irrelevance to Europe’s most lethal terrorist group, her fateful intersection with some of the IRA’s most notorious figures, and the post-Troubles search for accountability.

Despite the quality of the prose, intelligence readers might occasionally chafe at Keefe’s narrative approach. He provides an extensive index detailing his sources, including his rationale where records or memories contradict. At times, though, the storytelling flourishes—the rickety chairs in a pub (90) or the soft grass in a field (108)—take center stage. More crucially, are the thoughts and emotions ascribed to key figures products of the inevitable repackaging of memories, justification of misdeeds some nearly 50 years on, or just score-settling?

These are central questions because Keefe relies in part on the Belfast Project, a fraught oral history program

b. Chatter: Dispatches From the Secret World of Global Eavesdropping (2005)

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at Boston College that was intended to capture the experiences of key figures from the Troubles but would eventually become embroiled in trans-Atlantic police investigations. (225) In the closing pages of *Say Nothing* Keefe uses the archives and other documentary sources to conclude that McConville's killer was Marian Price, (343) an infamous IRA volunteer, on the orders of Gerry Adams. Both deny involvement, and Adams—president of the IRA's political wing Sinn Fein until 2018, pivotal figure in the peace process, and regular visitor to Washington, DC—has long denied IRA membership during the Troubles despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

The twists and turns of the McConville case are fascinating whodunit, but *Say Nothing* also succeeds as an important addition to contextualizing intelligence operations during the Troubles. Human intelligence would play a major role. The IRA's clandestine toolkit was largely an extension of republican operations during Ireland's war for independence decades before: informers, overseas fundraising, access agents, surreptitious entry, jail breaks, bank robbery, double and triple agents, and assassinations.^a British military, police, and civilian intelligence organizations recruited IRA members as informers, blocking the flow of arms and money and disrupting plots. All the while, all sides used a complex and shifting web of secret back channels to communicate throughout the Troubles.

Keefe invokes infamous CIA spy-hunter James Angleton to convey the IRA's obsession with the risk from informers (also known as touts or grasses) throughout the conflict. As with Angleton, the obsession was not without cause; Keefe asserts by the end of the Troubles the IRA was "hopelessly penetrated by double agents." (270) It is hard to know whether that is overstatement, but one thing is clear: the counter-spy battle in Northern Ireland was deadly.

Say Nothing looks in some detail at notorious IRA molehunter Freddie Scappaticci, who likely had a hand in some 50 murders of IRA touts but was himself allegedly

a. See for example Michael Foy, *Michael Collin's Intelligence War: The Struggle Between the British and the IRA, 1919–1921* (Stroud: Sutton, 2006)

controlled by British intelligence under the codename Stakeknife. Keefe notes that for years the IRA had worried about an informer within the highest levels of the organization, a so-called supergrass. The fears were well-founded; given his access to information on the most sensitive IRA operations, Scappaticci's apparent recruitment was akin to the KGB having turned Angleton. Keefe cites one British military intelligence officer's conclusion that Scappaticci's best protection against suspicion was simply "to keep killing," because IRA leaders assumed London would not permit one of its own to exhibit such "conspicuous savagery." (273)

As the Troubles dragged on, the British would increasingly turn to technical collection to supplement its HUMINT operations. The IRA and other republican groups—and to a lesser extent loyalist paramilitaries—faced airborne reconnaissance, street cameras, wiretaps, vehicle trackers, and other technical collection that all but blanketed Northern Ireland's cities. These were augmented by the UK's expansive counterterrorism authorities, including internment without charge, and extensive use of undercover police and military. Northern Ireland in effect became the distillation of Britain's colonial counter-insurgency tactics—applied inside the United Kingdom. (70)

A comprehensive intelligence history of the Troubles has yet to be written, but *Say Nothing* succeeds both as an accounting of one infamous murder and a starting point for future inquiry. Given the financial support for the IRA that flowed from Irish-American donors, the central role of the United States in the GFA negotiations, British collusion with loyalist paramilitaries, and deep ties between the US and British services now a century old,^b there are ample avenues to explore. Doing so, however, will mean navigating the culture of silence that looms over any reckoning. It is fitting that Keefe takes his title from a line by another Irish poet, Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney: "Whatever you say, say nothing."

b. Dr. Mary Samantha Barton's otherwise comprehensive article in *Studies* (Vol. 63, No. 2, Extracts, June 2019) on the origins of the special relationship in the "Red Scare" of 1919 makes no mention of Irish war of independence during this same period or the Irish civil war that followed in the early 1920s. In both periods, intelligence collection and clandestine operations would play major roles.



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