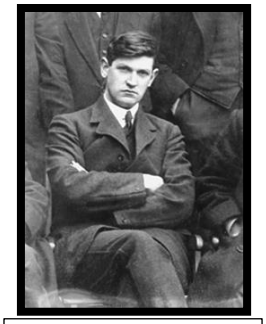
Hiding in Plain Sight- *The Intelligence War in Ireland 1918-1921 and its Importance*

Throughout history, organised methods of intelligence gathering have played prominent roles in the suppression of revolts against the British Government, such as the Fenian Rising of 1867. Therefore, it was commonly believed among the upper ranks of the IRA that the downfall of the previous attempts at rebellion came from informants and infiltration. The dire need for the organisation of systematic intelligence gathering became clear from the onset of the War of Independence. One man, a former accountant and aide to Joseph Plunkett in 1916, would lead this task- Michael Collins. Appointed as Director of Intelligence in 1919, he oversaw the establishment of the network of intelligence and working closely with those involved in maintaining its effectiveness throughout the war.

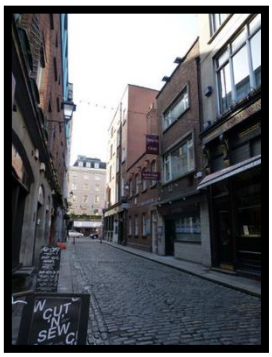


Michael Collins (1919)

From 1918 to 1921, the Intelligence Network grew exponentially and was made up of resolute men and women who risked losing their livelihoods, relationships, and even their lives to provide information on the inner workings of the British regime in Ireland. Although it is impossible to examine the work of everyone involved, studying the roles of several key individuals who worked in different areas of intelligence gathering, allows for a greater understanding of the network and its significance in the tumultuous period in the national struggle for independence.

Early Beginnings

The first intelligence office operated above an inconspicuous print shop at 3 Crow Street, Dublin. Liam Tobin, who had served at the Four Courts during the Rising, was appointed as the Chief Intelligence Officer, and along with the assistance of Tom Cullen and Frank Thornton, oversaw the workings of the small team. Thornton recounted that *"the first office opened by G.H.Q. (General Headquarters)*



Crow Street Today

Intelligence in the city was right bang up against Dublin Castle." Its proximity to Dublin Castle, the centre of the British Administration in Ireland, indicates the very nature of the intelligence department's aim: to hide in plain sight.

The office's initial task was to gather as much information as possible about the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP), especially the 'G' division, who acted as plain-clothed detectives and, as the division expanded, intelligence agents. The organisation worked in tandem with the newly formed 'Squad' -a Dublin based IRA unit tasked with carrying out assassinations- although few knew of its existence. Utilising the information gathered by the intelligence network, allowed the Squad to strategically plan their assassinations, even if they were not always efficacious. Members were also tasked with compiling the names of sympathisers in the public services, railways, mailboats, and hotels who could act as informers or couriers. They were especially interested in those who were involved in the British authorities, including typists in governmental departments and prison officers. Additionally, staff members also performed vital tasks such as decoding messages and sorting through information sent to them from other intelligence offices that had begun to operate around the country. However, as time progressed, intelligence work was no longer confined to those based at the office.

Outside of Dublin, each IRA Company appointed an Intelligence Officer for its area, who would be responsible for setting up a system to aid in the consolidating of intelligence of all kinds throughout the country. This would be carried out by agents acting both within and outside the ranks of the British forces. Information gathered by the company officers would then be passed on to the Battalion Intelligence Officer and then to his Brigade Intelligence Officer. This in turn would be forwarded to the Intelligence branch of the General Headquarters (GHQ). This system proved to be effective as almost every area was covered by a network of agents who operated under the GHQ, making it easier for the core intelligence staff to secure information.

Molly O'Reilly

One example of intelligence gathering in plain sight is the work of Molly O'Reilly. O'Reilly was an active member of the Citizens Army from an early age and was involved in working in the soup kitchens during the 1913 Lock-Out. Her nationalist beliefs were fostered during her time as a member of the Republican Girl Scouts movement. At the age of fifteen, she was chosen to raise the green flag emblazoned with a golden harp above Liberty Hall on Easter [illegible]n the following years she remained passionate about Irish Independence, and it was during the War of Independence became a member of the intelligence network in Dublin. Throughout 1919, she worked as a server in the Hibernian United Services Club, near St Stephen's Green in Dublin, a popular destination for off-duty British Officers. As she served drinks and waited tables, she took note of the careless mistakes and divulgations that often took place during casual conversations with her attendee's colleagues and friends. Her position allowed her to compile the names, addresses and locations of those important to the British regime, which was vital to the work of the IRA who relied on such details to plan their operations and attacks. Those in her position could sometimes go days without gathering anything worthy of passing on to the GHQ directly. Nonetheless, she persisted in her task, awaiting just one more unfortunate off-hand remark. This was an undoubtedly difficult and potentially dangerous job, trying to subtly extract information from an obstreperous crowd who could warrant her arrest the instant her infidelity was discovered. O'Reilly was highly dedicated to her role as an agent, and when she realised that many officers now favoured the Bonne Bouche in Dawson Street, she organised to be transferred there to continue her successful intelligence work.

Molly O'Reilly

Thomas Gay

Another agent, Thomas Gay, while not actively involved in intelligence gathering, was integral to the inception of the network and maintained a position at its centre throughout the War of Independence. Gay joined the Irish Volunteers in September 1914 at the age of thirty and became a member of the 4th Dublin Battalion in 'A' Company, serving under Con Colbert during the 1916 Rising. After the surrender, he escaped arrest leaving him free to

Gay in his later years

assist his imprisoned comrades as well as securing employment as a librarian in Caple Street Library, Dublin. This enabled him to develop a network of contacts that were of critical importance to the aims of Collins' operation. This included members of the DMP, the British Civil Service, and those whom he had fought alongside during the Rising.

His position as a librarian made him an accessible connection between those providing information and the IRA, therefore allowing him to successfully pass on details to Collins without attracting great suspicion. He met informants in locations such as Webb's bookshop in Aston's Quay and outside the Tivoli Theatre, blending into crowds of theatregoers and customers to remain undetected by British authorities. He also allowed his home at 8 Haddon Road, Clontarf to function as a meeting place for Collins, his informants within the DMP, and others, thus providing a safe place to carry out meetings and briefings. Those involved in such activities were constantly under threat of the incessant raids carried out by the RIC, which not only endangered the owner of the property, but everyone associated, should evidence of illegal activity be uncovered.

Elizabeth 'Lilly' Mernin

Another key member of the network was a young woman named Lilly Mernin, who, according to Thornton, was the "*one to whom a large amount of credit for the success of intelligence must go.*" Born in 1886, she was employed as a shorthand typist in the Garrison Adjutant's office, Dublin District, Lower Castle Yard, from 1914 to 1922. Her work involved typing out reports on the activities of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), court-martial proceedings and other military-related subjects. She therefore could access much needed information on the police and British Intelligence Officers. This information was vital to the Intelligence department which required copies of official documents from Dublin Castle to verify the information they were receiving from other more causal sources.

Mernin and Béaslaí

Mernin was first introduced to the intelligence network through her cousin, Piaras Béaslaí, a friend and colleague of Collins. In 1918 he organised a meeting. Collins was introduced to her as Mr Brennan, to protect his identity should she refuse his offer of employment. He inquired if she would be willing

to supply him with any information that might be of value as she carried out her ordinary work. She agreed, and shortly afterwards began secretly making copies of documents which she would bring to an office on Clonliffe Road. There she would type out several copies and leave them on the typewriter to be collected by an unknown member of the intelligence organisation. She claimed that she never found out who collected the documents, and nor did they know of her identity as she was solely referred to by her code name, 'Little Gentleman'. Although several members of the IRA's intelligence department knew of the existence of a spy in Dublin Castle, this name mislead many into believing that she was a British intelligence officer. On the occasion that she found anything requiring urgent delivery to the intelligence staff, it was organised that she would deliver it to Vaughan's Hotel in Parnell Square -a location frequented by IRA members during the early part of the War.

Each week, as part of her normal work for Collins she passed on details she had complied about the officers living in Dublin. Additionally, Mernin assisted some of Collins' principal associates in identifying British intelligence agents by accompanying them to football matches and cafes around Dublin where she would and out and give the names of any British military officers who frequented Dublin Castle or Auxiliaries she recognised. Although the information she provided was constantly utilized, her main contribution occurred in late 1921, when she helped to identify the names and addresses of suspected British intelligence agents, or members of the 'Cairo Gang', as they were known. A number of these men were later killed by Collins' squad on the morning of November 21st, 1920, a day which would later go down in history as Bloody Sunday. There is some debate as to whether the information she supplied was entirely accurate, since some of the men are now believed to be innocent, this information proved instrumental to the Squad's aim of taking down British agents. Collins explained the actions of his Squad by saying, *"Without her spies England was helpless… even when the new spy stepped into the shoes of the old one, he could not step into the old one's knowledge."* This meant that taking out individual members of the British Intelligence network would slowly diminish their overall records of knowledge, thus making their job increasingly impossible.

Nancy O'Brien

Chapel Royal, Dublin Castle (between 1908 and

Mernin was not the only female intelligence agent in the civil service. Nancy O'Brien also played a significant role in supplying information to the IRA. Due to her efficiency and dedication to her work in the GPO, she was commissioned by Sir James McMahon, the director of the Posts and Telegraphs Office, to assist with decoding messages from Dublin Castle. He seemed to be unaware that Nancy was assisting her cousin, Michael Collins in gathering information on the British administration. She was tasked with acquiring private correspondences for him, such as telegrams from detectives or even from high-ranking individuals such as the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland.

During her breaks, she made a habit of stealing away to the post office lavatory to make copies of the messages she and others had decoded before hiding them on her person so they would not be discovered. Of course, there was always the risk of being searched, however, much reluctance was shown when it came to organising facilities to search female employees in the early part of the war, as it was believed by some that it was highly unlikely that they would endeavour to spy for the IRA. O'Brien would bring these documents to allow her flat in Glasnevin to organise them and clarify the key details before bringing them to one of the many depots around the city.

Diarmuid O'Sullivan

Another key aspect of intelligence gathering was the work conducted in post offices around the country, where many of the most active informers were positioned. The witness statement given by Diarmuid O'Sullivan details the work he performed while employed in the GPO, again providing an insight into what this type of occupation would have been like for others involved. Initiated into the IRB by Cathal Brugha and a close associate of Collins, O'Sullivan acted as an Intelligence Officer from 1917 to 1921. Throughout his first year, he worked in "correspondence," collecting information that would be dispatched to several 'safe' establishments in Dublin by members of the IRA, ensuring that the Intelligence Department could access a wide range of information to successfully infiltrate and attack other areas of the British civil administration.

In early 1918, O'Sullivan helped to organise the work of the intelligence section of the Post Office on a more formal and practical basis, recruiting additional members and arranging an efficient system of accumulation and delivery. Around this time, the Telegraph Office was similarly organised and poised to intercept information to pass on to the IRA. This attempt to create a cohesive system increased the effectiveness of the branch, especially since many of the most important communications passed through the GPO. Nevertheless, it was inevitable that some essential documents would be missed or those collected were of little real use to the GHQ.

The process of sorting letters for intelligence purposes was often a difficult one, as there was the constant threat of being observed or of being reported. It also involved multiple people who had to be stationed in different areas of the postal sorting office, to ensure that it was carried out correctly and efficiently. Within the GPO sorting office in Rotunda, O'Sullivan secured a 'friend' to work sorting the Government letters that arrived from Dublin Castle. The postman in the State Section would then handstamp the correspondence from the Castle and cautiously put aside the letters that O'Sullivan and the other intelligence workers wanted. These would then be placed in the Dublin City box, where they would be taken by an intelligence officer and moved to where he worked in the Postmen's Office. If there was any suspicion that the Postmen's Office was under surveillance, then the letters would be placed in another box, the Belfast box, to alert the others. Additional correspondence from places such as Belfast would be taken to the dispatching table to be carefully examined for anything deemed useful to the intelligence agents. This would then be set aside to be dispatched to key locations throughout the city where their delivery to the GHQ would be guaranteed.

Many Post Offices would have been organised in a similar way, having been infiltrated by those working for the IRA. However, it was often the case that the individual agents did not know exactly what they were looking for and therefore, their work involved a lot of speculation. One anecdote displays how sometimes, at first, the information they gathered appeared to be of no consequence until delivered into the hands of someone who needed it. He said*, "On one occasion I had a bundle of letters which contained one that came by aeroplane to the Curragh and was for the Paymasters Army office."* He brought it to the hotel in which Michael Collins was staying and delivered it directly to Collins himself. Upon opening the letter, he realised that *"it was a mere form asking that the officer's salary be sent to an address in the Isle of*

Wight." He apologised profusely believing that it was insignificant and that he had wasted Collins' time. He concluded with*, "the letter was from a Captain White and Michael and his men were for three months previously trying to trace him."* This proves just how uncertain the process of information gathering could be, and in many cases, letters would contain little of note.

David Neligan

David Neligan

David Neligan, sometimes known as 'the Spy in the Castle', joined the DMP in April 1918 at the age of 18 and was transferred to the 'G' Division the next year. Although he was working for the British Government, he claimed that he did not agree with their procedures regarding their policing of separatist suspects. In March 1920, he resigned due to his dissenting opinions on the actions of the force, and moved to Tralee, Kerry, where he became acquainted with the Intelligence Officer of the 1st Kerry Brigade. Through him, he received a message stating that he was to return to Dublin at the request of Michael Collins, who wished to meet him. Collins had seen his use, and although at this time he had other men working within the police force, he did not have an insider in the 'Castle Squad.' Moreover, he strongly recommended that he re-join the police force where he would be perfectly positioned to provide information on its workings. To make his return less suspicious it was arranged that he would receive several threatening letters instructing him to leave the county. Liam Tobin awaited him in Dublin along with Collins' aide Joe O'Reilly who set about questioning him to ensure his loyalty to their cause. Shortly afterwards O'Reilly brought him to a pub on Middle Abbey Street where we would finally meet Collins. He once again expressed his wish that Neligan would reposition himself inside the 'G' Division. Neligan remembered him saying*, "We need you at the Castle. You will have to go back. You are a man they trust. We also trust you."* Within a few weeks he regained his old job and was ready to begin his intelligence work.

As a member of the IRA's intelligence network, he was put in contact with two other agents who took part in similar work in different areas of the division: Ned Broy and James MacNamara. Neligan and MacNamara secretly set about gathering every piece of information they could find to sort out what would be useful for the department. Neligan would then bring it to one of the many sympathetic pubs around the city or occasionally a dark street- corner

where he could pass it on to high-ranking men such as Frank Thornton or Tom Cullen. The information he gave was often verified by or used to verify other sources. This process of constant confirmation and search for corroborating sources was of extreme importance when it came to gathering information. Fearful of what had happened to previous physical forces nationalists, Collins and his department had to remain vigilant and partially suspicious of all their spies and informers to avoid being 'double-crossed'.

Neligan's usual tasks involved watching and reporting on the movements of those who were deemed as threats to the IRA. This was similar to the work he assigned to do in the 'G' Division. He noted that "*Every 'G' man kept a journal in which he entered the names of political suspects he had seen that day and other relevant data in connection with his work of watching the revolutionaries."* Every night either he or MacNamara would examine these diaries and copy down the details they held. This work was highly valuable because it allowed those under surveillance to be warned of forthcoming raids or arrests. He also used his position within the 'G' Division to occasionally aid those who had been arrested and brought in for questioning. One such incident involved the identification of Rory O'Connor who was the Director of Engineering of the IRA and would go on to become a key figure in the Anti-Treaty IRA during the subsequent Civil War. When asked if he recognised O'Connor after his arrest, Nelligan responded, *"I know him about the town for years. He is a harmless crank and has nothing to do with Sinn Fein."* Although O'Connor was interned in the Curragh, the wardens remained unaware of who it was they had caught, thus potentially saving him from a harsher sentence, and he escaped shortly afterwards.

In November 1920, he was one of a group tasked with collecting information concerning members of the British Secret Service, who Collins was planning to attack. He recalled how a considerable number of these men were found with the assistance of ordinary citizens. *"Friendly police who were on duty at night helped (Collins) taking a note of their addresses and supplying the details to him… Maids, boarders and messengers also noted English accents and West-end suits of clothes. Fellow lodgers reported nocturnal wanderings. Suspicious enquiries by strangers and persona frequenting houses of the Volunteers were reported to the Squad."* He regraded some of the sources as *"passively friendly*" nevertheless, their assistance often proved instrumental to the aims of the Squad. On the 20th of November, Neligan and some of his colleagues in the organisation spent the evening at Dublin's Gaiety Theatre

where they encountered several men whose names they had recorded. After the last details regarding addresses were finalised, he was informed that *"known Secret Service men and certain British Army Officers would be shot in their lodgings the next day."* The next morning, the Chief Inspector arrived at Dublin Castle relaying the news of the murders.

In 1921, both Broy and MacNamara were dismissed from the 'G' Division after documents that proved the existence of IRA spies were captured. This limited the IRA's intelligence gathering capacity within the Castle, thus suggesting that, while at its peak it was a valuable asset, the network's serviceability could not be entirely relied upon during the final months of the War. The dismissal of these members, coupled with the several successful raids of IRA property, led to the decline in the network's overall effectiveness. The British had started to flood Ireland with their soldiers, turning the tide in their favour. These dismissals left Neligan as Collins' most important informer within the castle. Due to the relegation of the 'G' Division's role in the British war effort and their decreased involvement in political investigation, he applied to the British Secret Service so he could continue his work for the IRA. In his new position he gained access to many of the private residences of the Servicemen which enabled him to easily provide much sought-after information. He was also instructed to attempt to join the IRA as a spy for the British as his superiors would be glad of his help to infiltrate them. Each week, he was instructed to write an intelligence report, although he was often not without assistance in compiling these reports. He recalled*, "Collins often helped me to write these reports; in fact, he wrote them himself. Many a good laugh we had over them!"* He continued his work until the Truce in July 1921 and subsequently joined the National Army during the Civil War.

In conclusion, the work of those within the Intelligence Network around the country greatly impacted the events of the war. Without the information they provided, it could be argued that the guerrilla warfare tactics alone would not have been enough to put serious pressure on the British military and eventually bring about the truce period. Even if the IRA's targets were not always reached – and when the system lost its effectiveness in the later period of the war – the propaganda value of these attacks provided the illusion of the IRA's omnipresence, thus forcing the British Government to re-evaluate their previous assertion that the IRA was simply a 'murder gang' and was not serious about their aim of achieving independence. It is also important to note that the network sprawled across the country, and these accounts reflect the work of

many who will unfortunately remain unknown, partially due to the devastating civil war which followed in 1922. It is evident that the commemoration of those involved in the War of Independence should not be confined to the soldiers but should include everyone who assisted the national struggle, including those who were hiding in plain sight.

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