

Michael Collins – his assassination and its effect on Ireland

Of the many books written about this period in Irish history, four stand out that I rely on for this article:

- John Feehan, well-known in Cork, founded Mercier Press there in 1944, after resigning from the Irish Army. His contacts in the Army, and in Cork, allowed him to do invaluable research, interviewing many of those who were close to Michael Collins, and some who were at Béal na mBláth. Lucky for us he met these people before they died. His book (*The Shooting of Michael Collins: Murder or Accident*) is a landmark in the Michael Collins story.
- John J Turi, ex navy and a journalist, came to Ireland to write a biography of Michael Collins and, after much research, became intrigued by Eamon deValera and how every major decision by deValera was to Britain's benefit and the detriment of Ireland. He then wrote his book (*England's Greatest Spy, Eamon deValera*) condemning deValera.
- A new reconstruction of the Collins' ambush, a 'cold-case' investigation, by S M Sigerson (*The Assassination of Michael Collins*, July 2015), the first in decades, is the most complete overview of the evidence ever published. Her experience is in security, party politics, and covert political abuses. She is a lecturer in history and social anthropology. Since the 1970s, she has devoted on-going in-depth study to the subject of secretive interference in lawful political activity, including politically-motivated killings. Her fascination with Michael Collins' story inspired eleven years' intensive research on his life and times; leading to her relocation from America to Ireland, and first-hand acquaintance with places, people and culture connected with Collins.
- The book '*Tom Clarke: The True Leader of the Easter Rising*' shows that Clarke was the man who made the Easter Rising possible. Clarke was given pride of place when signing the Proclamation, at the top, all on his own, as the others insisted. His time with Collins in the GPO was important

How come, when Michael Collins died, and people were suspicious and demanding answers, there was no inquiry or autopsy? None of the people at the ambush were questioned. Lies were told. There was a cover-up.

The ambush went like this: twenty-five professional soldiers travelled out as escort to the Commander-in-Chief, General Michael Collins. Following an encounter with a force of five men with vastly inferior arms, they brought Collins back dead. There were no other fatalities or serious injuries on either side.

The 100th anniversary of Michael Collins' death is on the 22nd August this year.

Reading about Collins' assassination, down the years, I couldn't understand why Collins, whose intelligence operation had broken the British hold on Ireland, could be so amateurish on his last trip, taking the convoy along dangerous back roads in County Cork, returning by the same route, ignoring warnings of an ambush, drinking in local pubs, and the ambush lasting more than 30 minutes with only one casualty - Collins himself. We now know that there was a lot of misinformation, a blatant cover-up.

To understand the assassination, we need to look at the main participants, the British, DeValera, Collins himself, plus events going back to John Boyle O'Reilly. There is a clear path from JB O'Reilly to John Devoy to Tom Clarke to Michael Collins.

O'Reilly was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Fenians, in Ireland. He and many others were arrested in early 1866. He was sentenced to death, later commuted to 20 years' penal servitude. In 1867 O'Reilly was transported to Western Australia and escaped to America 2 years later. He helped John Devoy plan the escape of 6 more Fenian prisoners from Western Australia. It was this escape that helped John Devoy unite the Irish across America. It was Devoy who funded the Easter Rising. (John Devoy was from my part of Co. Kildare. I played football for 'Devoys')

The British have, for centuries, operated one of the greatest espionage networks in history. As far back as 1777, they spent over £200,000, a huge sum at the time, in gathering international intelligence. Their intelligence system used "*whatever was required!*" Commonly used was a 'mole' or 'sleeper', planted, often for many years, in rival political circles. Add to this a host of spies, traitors, and informers.

Tom Clarke was the man who made the Easter Rising possible; it wouldn't have happened without him. At age 20, he got involved in the IRB, following riots in the North, fled to America, where he befriended John Devoy.

In 1883, he was sent to London to take part in a dynamite campaign. Because of informers, he was caught and served 15 years in prison in England. His time in prison was horrendous. He came out determined to fight the British by any means, but, knowing that there were spies and informers working against him, he went secret and sidelined anyone who didn't agree with him. Despite the certainty of failure, he pushed ahead with the Rising, greatly supported by John Devoy.

Michael Collins had a happy childhood, steeped in republicanism. Even though he played a minor role in the Easter Rising, in the GPO, he was making a name as a skilled organiser of considerable intelligence, highly respected in the IRB. And, in the GPO, he spent time with Tom Clarke.

By way of contrast, DeValera had a sad upbringing - an illegitimate child born in America, discarded by his mother when she sent him to Ireland, unloved by his grandparents, and bullied at school. Four times he tried to be a priest, refused because of his illegitimacy. He found a niche in the Gaelic League and was one of the leaders in the 1916 rising.

As had happened previously, the British knew about the rising in advance. They let it take place, and beat the Irish into submission, mainly to discredit the Irish in the eyes of the Irish-Americans - part of their efforts to get the U.S. to join The Great War, and to get more Irishmen to enlist in the war effort. They succeeded on both issues.

DeValera was the second highest ranking military officer during the Rising. Michael Malone, a subordinate, led the outstanding action of the Rising, inflicting more than half the British casualties. DeValera took the credit; Malone got a cheap headstone.

DeValera didn't stand trial. He was never convicted. He was never sentenced. He was never reprieved. This, initially, raised quite a few eyebrows. While in prison, he incited riots and general mayhem. This allayed the earlier suspicions.

After 1916, for many decades, every major decision made by DeValera benefited Britain, to Ireland's detriment.

Michael Collins and Tom Clarke spent time together in the GPO. Clarke was executed, as he knew he would be, and Collins was interred. When Collins was released, Tom Clarke's wife, Kathleen, passed all Tom's secret files to Collins; files that contained the names of spies and informers, plus details of the G Division; the secret police who handled the spies and informers.

Collins spent a night secretly in the Pearce Street police station checking this data. He then wrote to each of the G-Men, ordering them out of Ireland, under the threat of death. They laughed and tried to hunt him down. Then the Squad, a team of about 12 hit men set up by Collins, started killing the G-Men. The G-Men fled to safety, some to England, some to Dublin Castle.

"The Cairo Gang", a secret group of intelligence operators, was then set up secretly to capture or kill Collins. Collins was ahead of them. He had a cousin who worked in a senior position in Dublin Castle, passing information to him, including the names and addresses of the Cairo Gang.

On the 21st November 1920, 15 of these were killed by Collins' Squad in simultaneous early-morning strikes. Later that afternoon, the British entered Croke Park during a Gaelic football match and killed 14 spectators.

It's important to note that Collins took great steps to only kill those involved directly in the conflict. A good example is Arthur Percival. During the War of Independence Captain Percival's favourite pastime was taking potshots at farmers working in the fields in west Cork, from a moving touring car.

His favourite method of torture was to lie a prisoner on his tummy, run gunpowder down along the prisoner's spine, and set fire to it.

Collins had a hit-man follow Percival to England to kill him but Percival, probably aware of what was happening, kept himself hidden and didn't go back to Ireland.

This is the same Percival who, as a General, was in charge of British forces during the fall of Singapore in February 1942 (WWII), reckoned to be the worst ever disaster in British military history. How would history have changed if Collins' man had succeeded?

On the 22nd June 1921, King George V opened the new Ulster parliament in Belfast. On the same day, the British raided a private residence in Dublin, 'discovered' and arrested DeValera. Also, on the very same day, Lloyd George initiated a new era of conciliation.

DeValera was set free the following morning, without so much as a charge being pressed against him or subjected to interrogation of any kind. The whole event smelled.

So, the North of Ireland was set up before the British negotiated for peace.

After the treaty was signed, DeValera began his efforts to split the Irish. He walked out of the Dail, taking his supporters with him. When the people voted in favour of the treaty, he started the Civil War, demanding that his followers '*wade through Irish blood*'.

DeValera and his followers roared all over Ireland creating havoc, ignoring the fact that it was the first time in over 700 years that Ireland had a permanent representative government, with its own constitution and parliament.

At this point, Collins was striving to have the treaty accepted in the south, and to avoid a civil war, whilst supporting the IRA in the north. From the British point of view, he had to be stopped to settle the north, and let Cosgrave's government continue ruling the south. This was done in steps.

The British understood that, with the defeat of the anti-treaty forces, by peace or otherwise, Arthur Griffith and Collins would emerge as strong leaders. When it became obvious that they had defeated DeValera's anti-treaty forces, their deaths were a foregone conclusion.

On top of this, on the 22nd July 1922, Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson was assassinated, almost certainly by Collins' men, because of his work as a security adviser in the North.

Arthur Griffith was first. Michael Collins was second.

In early July 1922, for safety reasons, Free State ministers, including President Arthur Griffith, took up residence in government buildings on Merrion Street, Dublin, with accommodation in the adjoining College of Science, where the acquisition of arsenic, cyanide, or other poisons was relatively easy. They slept in the labs. Food was delivered from nearby restaurants.

Griffith soon began showing signs of illness. His condition worsened, and he was hospitalised. A little over a week after being admitted, on 11th August 1922, a party was held marking the end of his hospitalisation. He had recovered enough to return to work the following day.

On the morning of August 12th, two female visitors came to visit Griffith, bearing chocolates that were allegedly laced with poison. This time, the poison was potent enough to kill him, and he dropped dead at the top of the stairs as he waved goodbye to his visitors.

Michael Collins was assassinated a few days later at Beal na mBlath in West Cork.

Shortly before Collins' trip south, references to a British agent code-named 'Thorpe' was found in files left behind by the British in Dublin Castle. Thorpe's identity remains a mystery. The main suspect is Tim Healy, later Ireland's first Governor-General, and then a prominent Free State official whom Collins trusted and had allegedly sought advice from on numerous occasions.

Collins locked the file containing the proof in his private safe at Portobello Barracks. When he didn't return, it was found that his private safe had been opened and the files taken. Someone knew Collins was not coming back. The agent had to be protected.

Commander-in-Chief Michael Collins, under cover of a routine tour of inspection, was travelling on a safe-conduct guarantee for the purpose of peace negotiations i.e. no one was supposed to shoot at him! He was not careless of his personal safety, or unaware of the dangers of travelling in anti-Treaty territory. He came with a well-equipped full military convoy, well capable of protecting him.

The Brigade Officers were there to discuss peace. The soldiers were talking about peace. DeValera was discussing peace, and, reportedly, was scheduled to meet Collins there for talks. Soldiers in the convoy believed they were escorting a peace mission.

All day long, and all through this journey, Michael Collins was talking about peace. Nearly everyone in the area knew that Collins was heading to Béal na mBláth to end the civil war. However, the anti-Treaty officers who had gathered at Béal na mBláth did not know; DeValera didn't tell them.

For the trap to be successful - and trap it was - in both assassinating Collins and in placing the blame on the anti-Treaty side, only one man could set it up - DeValera.

Hardly anyone else was in a position to contact all the players involved; the players being Collins, the leaders of the anti-Treaty side, and the British secret service.

DeValera was in a position to convince Collins that he was setting up a major peace conference whilst keeping the anti-Treaty leaders ignorant of his secret invitation to Collins, and Collins' intention to make terms.

DeValera was well-positioned to co-operate with the British secret service's plans to assassinate Collins. Killing Collins ensured that the Civil War continued. Many leaders on both side were killed. The pro-treaty side won, allowing the benign Cosgrave government to continue, the situation in Northern Ireland to settle, and DeValera to remain hidden as their 'sleeper'.

Whilst DeValera did not take part in the ambush, he lured Collins into the area. He had to be there himself or Collins would have detected a trap. Likewise, the anti-Treaty commanders had to be there. But they didn't know the real reason.

As mentioned earlier, and it's worth repeating: twenty-five professional soldiers travelled out as escort to the Commander-in-Chief, General Michael Collins. Following an encounter with a force of five men with vastly inferior arms, they brought Collins back dead. There were no other fatalities or serious injuries on either side.

When the convoy came into sight, the ambushers fired a warning shot or two, most likely not aimed at the convoy and did not hit anyone.

The motorcyclist 'scout', when he encountered the barricade, didn't act as a scout. Instead of rushing back to inform his commanding officers in the rear, he got off his motorcycle and stood about, loitering. He played a key role: his failure to immediately alert those behind him resulted in more distance between Collins and most of his bodyguard.

The Crossley tender, having received no information from the 'scout', came up to the same spot and stopped. The commander of the tender did not act like a 'bodyguard'. The tender should have rushed back to protect Collins. Instead, it stayed where it was and the soldiers were ordered to get out - split into two sections: one to move the barricade, the other taking cover and returning fire. Collins was obscured from their view, over 400 metres away. No-one went to protect Collins.

A few minutes later, when the ambushers stopped firing at this forward end of the site, the soldiers from the Crossley tender could hear firing from the direction of Collins' car. They stayed where they were and waited for the shooting to stop.

It is not possible to rely on the accounts we have from the Collin's end of the ambush site.

A point on which all Free State accounts surprisingly agree, is that about the time Collins died, the firing stopped.

The Vickers .303 machine gun on the armoured car was used extensively, apparently to hide the noise of the assassin's gun.

The ambushers never claimed any intention to shoot Collins. They did not believe he fell at their hands, even accidentally. Members of Collins' escort believed that he was not killed by the ambushers, meaning they believed he was a victim of foul play by men in the convoy. Dalton was later a target of accusations that he colluded in Collins' death.

DeValera then played his favourite role - the innocent bystander - while saying he wanted peace. If it had been more generally known that Collins was lured south by the promise of talks, questions would have been asked as to who had made the promise.

The beneficiaries of Collins' assassination were DeValera and British interests in Ireland, north and south. It was necessary to keep Collins' associates permanently confused about what happened. It was necessary to completely deceive DeValera's anti-treaty comrades as to his actual role, at the same time setting them up to take the blame.

On Dalton's orders, Collins' body was brought to Shanakiel Hospital in Cork, a hospital still controlled by the British. It bypassed an Irish-controlled hospital on the way.

John Feehan, in his book, reported that the head nurse, Eleanor Gordon, along with Commandant Frank Friel, cleaned the wound and bandaged Collins' head. They were certain there was an entry wound on the hairline as well as the exit wound at the back of the head. Significantly, Eleanor Gordon also stated that she saw a singed hole on the back of his tunic that looked like a bullet hole, meaning that the weapon that fired it, must have been only a few inches away. Miss Gordon had been a military nurse in the First World War and was very familiar with such matters.

Sean Hales was a Free State army officer, Dáil deputy, and long-time friend of Collins. On numerous occasions, he demanded an army inquiry or autopsy into the suspicious circumstance surrounding Collins' death. When his requests were turned down, he took his complaint to the cabinet and voiced his suspicions regarding Dalton's account of the ambush. Hales said he would leave no stone unturned until the doubts as to Collins' death were cleared up.

Whenever in Dublin, he would stay at Portobello Barracks. On his last evening there, he was told they had no accommodation available for him so he had to move to a hotel. The next day, 7th December 1922, as he travelled in a sidecar from his hotel, he was attacked and shot dead.

Dalton's activities after Collins' death raise many questions. He resigned shortly after the ambush and was given a plush position as Clerk of the Senate by the Free State authorities. He reportedly served during World War II in MI5, the British intelligence-gathering agency.

There was no inquest, and no inquiry, into Collins' death. Even in that troubled period, inquests were routinely held into the deaths of men of much less renown, and in far less questionable circumstances.

Those present at Collins' death were never formally questioned by any official authority. Even today, an examination of Collins' remains, with the benefit of modern forensics, could answer many key questions, for example, the number and location of his wounds, from which direction, at what range, and from what kind of weapon.

DeValera's Civil War immediately moved into the area of atrocities and what can only be called war crimes, by both sides. The Free State government won.

The British were the biggest winners: most of the top Irish leaders were dead; the Northern Ireland regime was secure; Anglo-American relations were never better; Irish-American relations were never worse, and international public opinion was overwhelmingly on the side of the British.

DeValera's legacy was misery and violence. He wrote the epitaphs for those who followed him into civil war, betrayers who were later betrayed by their own leader.

All Collins asked for was an "acceptance of the people's will". For more than 40 years, DeValera pushed the Irish into despair and poverty. The South was a basket case until rescued by the EEC in 1973. More than a million people, a quarter of the population, fled Ireland during DeValera's time in power, mostly to the UK, after America shut its doors because of DeValera's neutral stance during WWII.

Married men, with no work in Ireland, travelled to England to build railways, make motorways, and dig ditches; working long hours to send money home. At best, they saw their wives and children once or twice a year. They rented squalid bedsits with other married men.

When they were too old to work in England, many returned to a wife and children who had built separate lives for themselves. Some died strangers in the home they had worked for years to build and maintain. This was DeValera's Ireland.

DeValera made numerous attempts to remove Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith from Irish history. One example; in the lead-up to the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Rising, an official government guide, '*Facts about Ireland*', was reprinted after controversy broke out over the exclusion of Collins' picture; the omission occurred after consultation with DeValera.

John Turi's book gives a good account of DeValera's pro-British activities in the decades after Collins' death. It's worth reading.

History, the one subject where we were taught many lies in school in Ireland, is being corrected. With the 100th anniversary of the death of Michael Collins in August, a lot of people are looking back and re-assessing. We're now getting the truth, not DeValera's version, but the real truth – the real story of men like Michael Collins; and Arthur Griffith; and Tom Clarke.

DeValera, as quoted by author Tim Pat Coogan, once said: *It's my considered opinion that in the fullness of time history will record the greatness of Collins and it will be recorded at my expense.*

Five hundred thousand attended Collins' funeral in Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin in 1922.

On a tour of the cemetery in 2015, the guide explained that a 'plot' in the new part of the cemetery costs about AU\$6,000, one close to DeValera about AU\$22,000, and one close to Michael Collins about AU\$90,000.

He also explained that the majority of those who fill in the 'Evaluation Form', state that their main reason for visiting the cemetery was to pay homage to Michael Collins.

I noticed that, when we moved past DeValera's grave, two people hung back and spat on it.

The guide also mentioned a "mysterious French lady" who has flowers placed on Collins' grave every month. She's done so since 2001. Her name is Véronique Crombé, an art historian, lecturer, and guide at the French National Museum in Paris. She visits once a year, on the 22nd August.

Having no Irish connections that she knows of, she cannot explain why this 'draw' to mark and carry on his name has taken such a hold. And, given that there are always lots of flowers on Collins' grave, she's not alone.

Brian Corr

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