

## Intelligence in Public Media

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### ***The Padre: The True Story of the Irish Priest Who Armed the IRA with Gaddafi's Money***

Jennifer O'Leary (Merrion Press, 2023), 254 pages, photos, epilogue, endnotes, acknowledgments.

### ***Stakeknife's Dirty War: The Inside Story of Scappaticci, the IRA's Nutting Squad, and the British Spooks Who Ran the War***

Richard O'Rawe (Merrion Press, 2023), 253 pages, epilogue, endnotes, acknowledgments.

### ***There Will Be Fire: Margaret Thatcher, the IRA, and the Two Minutes That Changed History***

Rory Carroll (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2023), 397 pages, prologue, photos, epilogue, endnotes, acknowledgments.

## Reviewed by Joseph Gartin

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*Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining  
exclamation marks,  
Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type.  
And the explosion  
Itself—an asterisk on the map.*

—*Belfast Confetti*, Ciaran Carson

Twenty-five years since the Good Friday Agreement drew an uneasy close to the Troubles, new scholarship, memoirs, oral histories, and documentaries are shedding light on the war that wracked Northern Ireland from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s. The additions to the literature are welcome because the Troubles defy simple explanation, and intelligence in its myriad forms played important roles that are only now coming into view. Three recent books focus on different aspects of the conflict, but in the claustrophobic world of the Troubles these stories inevitably intersect.

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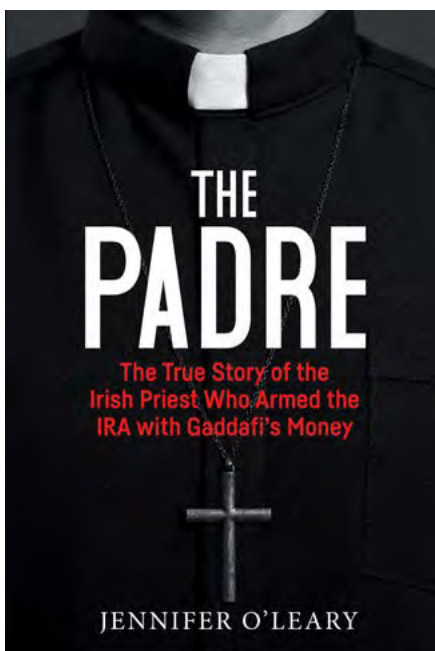
### ***The Padre*, by Jennifer O'Leary**

In *The Padre*, Jennifer O'Leary, an investigative journalist for BBC Northern Ireland, tells one part of the Troubles story in her fascinating account of Patrick Joseph Ryan, an Irish Catholic priest whose true devotion, it turned out, would be to the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA, more commonly the IRA or the Provos). Ryan was educated as a child in the 1940s at a Christian Brothers school in Thurles, County

Tipperary, in the Republic of Ireland. Catholicism and Irish nationalism ran deep in Thurles in those days, but O'Leary's account makes clear that after ordination in June 1954, Fr. Ryan set his sights on adventure in Africa, not saving souls in Ireland. Assigned to a diocese in British-ruled central Tanganyika (now part of Tanzania), Ryan busied himself building schools, digging wells, and becoming a pilot. The catechism came second.

This pattern repeated itself when Ryan returned to Tipperary in 1964, seemingly unaware of an emerging civil rights movement to confront omnipresent, systemic anti-Catholic discrimination in Northern Ireland. "Whatever was going on in the North at the time was not something I was aware of," he told O'Leary. (55) A brief return to Africa was followed by an unloved posting

to Barking Parish in East London, where there were no clinics to build or planes to fly. By 1969, he was back in Ireland, an itinerant priest traveling the countryside collecting money from Catholic donation boxes—diverting much of it to IRA bank accounts. In the North, meanwhile, "the Troubles were set alight" by a volatile mix of activists, paramilitaries, police, soldiers, and spies. (64) Ryan's access to untraceable cash, ability as a clergyman to move unhindered across borders, unwavering commitment to the Republican movement, and technical bent combined to make him a formidable supporter of the IRA's armed struggle. It also eventually put him on British intelligence's most-wanted list.



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O’Leary does a good job situating Ryan on the arc of the Troubles, based on her interviews with him and other key actors along with considerable research. It was Ryan who, while in Geneva (where he was stashing money that Muammar Gaddafi’s regime was funneling to the IRA), happened across a device in 1975 that would vastly improve the IRA’s bombmaking abilities. Ryan would eventually buy hundreds of Memo Park timers, a simple mechanical gadget that in the pre-cell-phone era helped drivers remember when parking meters would expire. The IRA would adapt them as time power units (TPUs), allowing it to more safely build and plant bombs that would explode hours or even days later. In 1976, with British intelligence closing in, Ryan was arrested and expelled from Switzerland. O’Leary observes that Europe’s

poor intelligence sharing and weak counterterrorism laws at the time helped him avoid permanent detention. (156) Politics, too, would help; various European capitals viewed Britain’s tactics in Northern Ireland with disdain and refused to cooperate in extraditions or arrests.

Despite O’Leary’s laudable efforts to wring the most from her subject, Ryan dissembles and conceals, government sources are contradictory and often self-aggrandizing, and the reader is left with the sense some secrets will remain hidden for a long time to come. Others will go to the grave with Ryan. In the end, the greatest cipher might be Ryan himself: a man who turned his back on his religious vows, devoted himself to helping the IRA and its Libyan backers, and regretted only that he didn’t kill more.

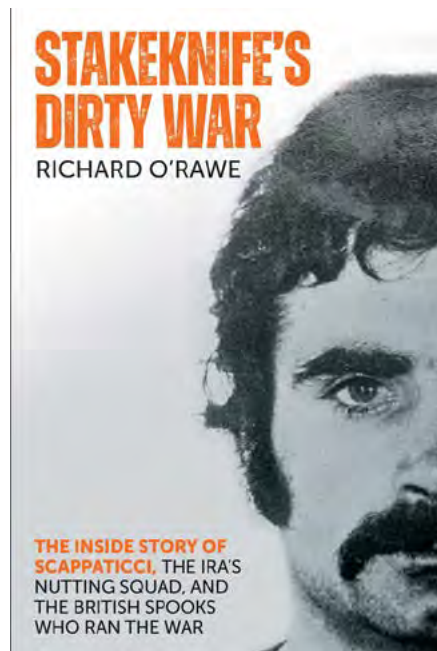


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*Stakeknife’s Dirty War*,  
by Richard O’Rawe

We can be certain that Frank Scappaticci, IRA counter-espionage enforcer and prized British intelligence penetration who died in 2023, took some of his secrets to the grave, but Richard O’Rawe’s *Stakeknife’s Dirty War* tries mightily to exhume the details. Even in broad brushstrokes, Scappaticci’s story is desultory. A Belfast tough turned IRA volunteer early in the Troubles, Scappaticci was jailed in August 1971 as part of London’s strategy of internment, was released in January 1974, and rejoined the IRA by the end of 1976. He flipped to become a British source for reasons that are murky, eventually headed the IRA’s counterintelligence Internal Security Unit (informally the Nutting Squad of the book’s subtitle), and in O’Rawe’s accounting had a hand in the torture and murder of at least 18 British citizens with the cognizance if not the direct approval of his British intelligence handlers.

O’Rawe does not approach his subject with an academic’s reserve. A former IRA volunteer and inmate of



Her Majesty’s Prison Maze (aka Long Kesh) himself in the 1970s, O’Rawe has written extensively on the Troubles, including the bestselling *Blanketmen* about his experiences in prison and *In the Name of the Son*, an account of the coerced confessions, doctored evidence, and wrongful imprisonment of four men convicted of a bombing in 1974. *Stakeknife’s Dirty War* opens dramatically:

*I knew Freddie Scappaticci. Fortunately, I didn’t know him well. I first encountered him in the early 1970s when he and I had been interned without trial in the cages of Long Kesh prison. He was housed in Cage 5 and I was in Cage 3. Occasionally, as we*

*walked around the perimeters of our respective cages, we would have nodded to each other. (xiii)*

O’Rawe draws on interviews with IRA veterans, police, and intelligence officials, along with prior reporting from James Harkin and others, to explore how such a betrayal was possible and the damage that was wrought.<sup>a</sup> The *how* boils down to two factors. One was the relentless

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a. See James Harkin, “Unmasking Stakeknife: the most notorious double agent in British history,” *British GQ*, November 1, 2020. It should

efforts by British police, army, and intelligence to penetrate and defeat the Republican paramilitary movement.<sup>a</sup> The second was the IRA's critical blindspot in its own counterintelligence efforts:

*It is indisputable that the Provisional IRA underestimated the forces arrayed against them. Many former republican activists believed that if they had grown up with and known someone all their lives, then that person could never become an informer. Even more naively, most IRA people thought that the ultimate test of loyalty was killing or executing someone for the cause: this was seen as commitment par excellence. The fatal flaw in this thinking was the erroneous, if unspoken, belief that the security forces occupied the high moral ground and would never allow one of their informers to willingly take a life. But at least one informer did. (59)*

O'Rawe shines in his sketches of Stakeknife cases, weaving together multiple sources to provide clarity

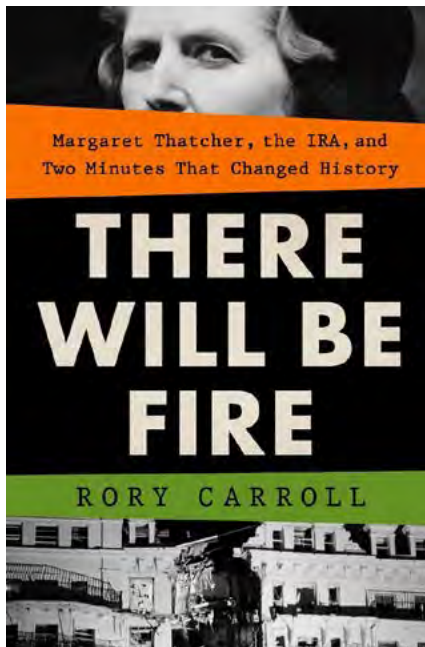
where he can about Scappaticci's collaboration with British intelligence. As often with intelligence histories, gaps and contradictions remain; the key players have scores to settle or reputations to burnish, rumors and insinuations abound, and government records have disappeared. O'Rawe fills in the gaps where he can but sometimes falls back on speculation. On the interrogation and murder of Stakeknife's first victim—suspected IRA informer Michael Kearney in 1979—for example, O'Rawe tries to untangle British culpability and IRA ruthlessness with a series of if, then, perhaps, conceivably, and could statements. (67)

*Stakeknife's Dirty War* succeeds nonetheless as an important contribution to understanding the spy-vs-spy war that played out in Northern Ireland and beyond for three decades. In the epilogue, O'Rawe ruefully concludes of Scappaticci's victims, "they were human beings who were used, abused and tortured, and each of the warring parties had dirty hands when it came to their deaths." (236)



***There Will Be Fire*,  
by Rory Carroll**

As formidable as British intelligence could be it was far from perfect, as the IRA's ability to strike in Northern Ireland, England, and continental Europe repeatedly demonstrated. Among headline-grabbing IRA attacks during the Troubles, the bombing of the Grand Hotel in Brighton during a Tory leadership conference on October 12, 1984, surely ranks very high. Journalist and Dubliner Rory Carroll has delivered a riveting account of the planning and execution of the IRA's audacious attempt to kill Prime Minister



Margaret Thatcher in *There Will Be Fire*.

At the heart of Carroll's story is IRA volunteer and expert bombmaker Joseph Patrick Magee, an intense, soft-spoken Belfast native born in 1951 to a Catholic family that felt the daily discrimination and hardship of Loyalist-ruled Northern Ireland. Like *The Padre's* Patrick Ryan or *The Dirty War's* Frank Scappaticci, Magee would be swept up into the violence that eventually engulfed the north, and yet the three men's paths differed. Carroll observes, "Some people sailed into the IRA as if born to it, bidden by fate. Patrick Joseph Magee edged in like a crab who easily could have been washed into a different shore." (47)

be noted that the subtitle is incorrect: Scappaticci was a British penetration, not a double agent.

a. Loyalist paramilitary violence was a much lesser concern to the British. See my review of Aaron Edwards' comprehensive *Agents of Influence: Britain's Secret Intelligence War against the IRA* in *Studies* 64, no. 4 (December 2021).

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An aimless teenager with a knack for petty crime, Magee may well have spent his life on the margins of Northern Irish society. But the Troubles intervened, and by 1972 he was on active duty as an IRA volunteer and eventually a skilled bombmaker. To British intelligence and police, he would become known as the Chancer for his willingness to take risks.

Magee could not know it then, but he was on a collision course with Carroll's other protagonist: Margaret Thatcher. For the Iron Lady who came into office on May 4, 1979, looking to remake the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland was an unwelcome diversion from her economic and political agenda, but Thatcher couldn't ignore it any more than her predecessors. In late 1921, given responsibility for securing the treaty that would divide Ireland in two and end the Irish War of Independence, Winston Churchill told the House of Commons, "How is it [Ireland] has forced generation after generation to stop the whole traffic of the British Empire in order to debate her domestic affairs?" (41) Thatcher's approach was to intensify the criminalization strategy articulated by the previous Labour government. Rather than treating the IRA as enemy combatants, London would leverage its considerable law-enforcement capabilities and expansive authorities to surveil, arrest, and intern real or suspected IRA supporters.

Thatcher stuck to her guns, even when IRA prisoners turned from protests to hunger strikes in 1980–81 in an effort to reclaim their status as political prisoners. Ten men would die in 1981, beginning with Bobby Sands. Thatcher did not budge: "Crime is crime is crime. It's not political." Her hardline stance made her a hero in some quarters and a pariah in others; for the IRA, Thatcher became a prime if elusive target. The IRA's bombing of Lord Mountbatten's boat off the coast of Mullaghmore, County Sligo, in the Republic of Ireland, killing him and three others, on August 27, 1979, had shown the IRA could hit British leaders who let their guard down.

Such would be the case in Brighton. It's not as if British intelligence and police weren't focused on threats to Thatcher. In a warning that feels eerily similar to the August 6, 2001, President's Daily Briefing article warning that al-Qa'ida was determined to strike the United States, the Metropolitan Police one day before Patrick Magee's

bomb shattered the Grand Hotel warned presciently but vaguely that a "brief campaign on the mainland [by the IRA] cannot be discounted. It is our assessment that potential military and political targets should be given special attention." (194) In terms that might be drawn from many security or intelligence failures, Carroll observes:

*Britain's alphabet soup of security services had networks of informers, spies, and electronic surveillance. They had battery-pulse detectors and radios to sweep for bombs, they had files on virtually every IRA suspect, including Patrick Magee...but there were no whispers of any operation in Brighton, and nobody remembered the Ministry of Defense's prophetic 1979 assessment about long-delay timers. (196)*

The IRA's plan was audacious—hit Thatcher far from 10 Downing—and enabled by advances in IRA bomb-making (the digital progeny of Ryan's Memo Park TPUs), Magee's ability to elude British intelligence and police, and haphazard British security procedures. IRA counterintelligence practices also scored a victory; rather than warn volunteers of a coming major attack (which would have tipped off British sources like Scappaticci), the Brighton operation was tightly held.

Remarkably, even with the omnipresent risk from the IRA and others, British authorities eschewed the kind of intense Secret Service protection that had bemused them during President Ronald Reagan's visit to London a few months before. (126–7) Checking into the Grand as "Roy Walsh"—in those analog days, no identification was needed—Magee patiently built and installed a bomb in the bathroom of room 629 and set it to explode a month later. At 2:54 a.m. on October 12, the bomb shattered the facade of the Grand. Margaret Thatcher and her husband Denis improbably survived, but five were killed and three dozen were injured. By then, Magee was 600 miles away in Cork.<sup>a</sup>

Carroll does a superb job telling the story of British efforts to find the bomber through exacting and patient police work that required sifting through rubble for the smallest of clues. A separate anti-terrorist unit's seizure of IRA long-delay timers helped narrow the search window, and detectives were eventually able to connect Magee to

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a. Carroll refers to the "IRA envoy to Tripoli," presumably Fr. Ryan, and notes the attack had impressed Gaddafi, who was considering sending the IRA "enough explosives for a thousand Brightons." (250)

the fictitious Roy Walsh after finding a palm print on his hotel registration card that astonishingly had survived the bombing. The next challenge became finding Magee. “The identification of Patrick Magee became one of the government’s most closely guarded secrets,” Carroll notes, and bringing him to justice would be no simple matter. (245) The final efforts to locate and arrest Magee in a Glasgow safe house are thrillingly told, like scenes from a real-life John le Carré novel.

Compared to the tighter apertures of *The Padre* and *Stakeknife’s Dirty War*, Carroll offers the reader a more

thorough history, although none of the books makes good on their subtitles’ promises. Carroll spends a few pages at the end musing about the road from Brighton to Brexit, O’Rawe overreaches in his claim that “British spooks” were running the war, and O’Leary cannot pierce the secrecy around the IRA-Libya connection. All the books are well sourced but frustratingly none has an index. Yet with their complementary accounts and interwoven cast of characters, they deserve places on the shelf for anyone seeking to understand the role of intelligence during the Troubles. Clearly there is much more to uncover.



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