

# uncomfortable



In his new book, *Four Shots in the Night*, **Henry Hemming** highlights the complex interplay between the IRA and British forces during the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’. He talks to **Fergus Byrne** about the moral and ethical dilemmas faced with intelligence gathering.

On a chilly day in January 1974, Corporal Willie Carlin waited to meet a man named Captain Thorpe at Clouds Hill, the former home of T.E. Lawrence near where he was billeted at Bovington in Dorset. As far as he was aware, he was there to discuss his future in the British Army.

Originally a Catholic from Northern Ireland, Carlin had joined the British Army in 1965 and worked his way through the ranks to sergeant. After the tragic loss of his second child, he had been contemplating whether he should do what his wife had hoped and move back home to Derry. It was the height of the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland and there had been more than 3,000 shootings and over 1,000 bombings. The death toll had already reached 220.

Willie Carlin needed to know if it was safe for him to bring his wife, their 4-year-old son and soon to be born daughter back home—especially as he was known to be a serving sergeant in the British Army.

The meeting with Captain Thorpe turned out to be a front to introduce him to a member of the British intelligence services. Their conversation was a bolt from the blue to Carlin, but a few months later, three days after the birth of their daughter, Willie and his wife Mary drove back to live in Waterside, in a small Catholic enclave in the predominantly Protestant area of Derry.

Now discharged from the army, they had driven into what he later described as ‘real danger’, and that danger is part of the story that Henry Hemming writes about in his latest book *Four Shots in the Night: A True Story of Espionage, Murder and Justice in Northern Ireland*.

Henry Hemming’s book is about the RUC and British intelligence service’s use of informants, and the Provisional IRA’s Internal Security Unit (ISU), also known as ‘The Nutting Squad’, whose job it was to find informants and deal with them. A brilliantly written and gripping story centered around some of the characters involved in what Henry describes as ‘the least understood’ and the ‘bloodiest and longest’ conflict in British history, *Four Shots in the Night* also delves into the belief that one particular British spy may have been responsible for the torture and murder of other British informants.

Carlin was not that spy, but he was to owe his life to him.

The story introduces us to the murder of Frank Hegarty, a man Henry Hemming describes as an “open-faced, affable man” that people would say was “decent and good natured”. Frank’s body is found with a bullet to the head and masking tape covering his eyes. He is one of the many informants who were to become victims of ‘Nutting Squad’ justice.

Using Hegarty’s story as a common thread, *Four Shots in the Night* introduces us to an extraordinary



*Peace Bridge in Derry City  
Image Alamy*

## *‘it may have been necessary to ‘turn a blind eye’ to criminal activity’*

set of events and to the characters involved, including Martin McGuinness, Gerry Adams, Willie Carlin and the person who was to become the most high-profile British informant, Freddie Scappaticci, known as ‘Stakeknife’. It also introduces the fascinating story of how individuals such as Michael Oatley, Brendan Duddy and Margaret Thatcher skirted around the “we do not negotiate with terrorists” stance, in an effort to bring peace to Northern Ireland.

The book took five years to produce, and although Henry Hemming has written about spies before, he says it came about after a conversation with someone who wondered why the biggest story in the history of British espionage over the last 70 years, ‘that of spies inside the IRA’, was being written about by very few people.

There are a number of reasons why the story of British intelligence service’s involvement in the Troubles might not receive the wider attention it deserves. One of those could be because, as highlighted in Henry’s book, it may have been necessary to ‘turn a blind eye’ to criminal activity to help achieve an outcome that benefited the wider community.

Against a backdrop of violent protest that had been met with ruthless tactics previously employed in conflicts in former British colonies like Kenya, Malaya and Cyprus, a new process had to be investigated. The Provisional IRA, who had broken away from the old guard Official IRA at the turn of the decade, were using any means possible to achieve their aims of getting the British Army out and eliminating British rule from Irish shores. At the same time brute force tactics and internment had simply boosted the IRA’s numbers.

In Henry’s book we learn how Brigadier James (Jimmy) Glover, whom Henry describes as ‘relatively

outspoken’ amongst other senior Army officers, is credited with presenting the idea of increasing the use of intelligence gathering to the then prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. Having ‘forcefully’ put his point across, Henry says an ‘extraordinary restructuring’ of the army’s presence then took place and a new initiative began to develop.

However, in the long run the new process led to a question of “at what cost”. In his book Henry asks, “What was the legal, moral and human price that might have to be paid for intelligence?” A question that was to be taken up by a major investigation many years later.

Reports suggest that by the end of the conflict more than 800 people were classed as ‘informant’. That would seem an enormous number of people in a relatively small community. But as Henry points out, ‘No two informants are the same’ and their motivation to help the British will have come from many different places. Examples that Henry cites include people who might simply have chatted to a British soldier over a cup of tea every now and then. ‘They would be marked down in a file somewhere as an informant’. Whereas, at the opposite end of the scale, someone like Freddie Scappaticci became known as a “one-man Bletchley Park”.

It’s likely that when a person accused of being an informant was questioned, tortured or even murdered by the Provisional IRA’s ‘Nutting Squad’, there is a possibility that they were in fact totally innocent. Or, they may simply have just been an old gossip. However, regardless of whether they were completely innocent, a gossip or a spy, the torture and murder of these people and the intimidation of their families were crimes that one would expect to be treated as such, and the perpetrators prosecuted. The reality appears to be very different.



*Beacon of Hope by Andy Scott,  
Thanksgiving Square, Belfast.*

With over a thousand unsolved murders throughout the Troubles, and growing anger at the treatment of those who lost friends or family to the activities of the 'Nutting Squad', the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) commissioned 'Operation Kenova' in 2016 to investigate allegations of murder, kidnap, and torture, with special focus on the activities of one particular IRA volunteer and British agent, Freddie Scappaticci.

Initially headed up by Chief Constable Jon Boutcher, Operation Kenova published an interim report in March this year, and having read previous reports of a similar nature, Boutcher's findings were damning. Whilst he said that "Having examined in detail what the ISU [the Nutting Squad] did to its victims, no one should be in any doubt that these crimes amount to some of the worst atrocities of the conflict." However, his report describes "a catalogue of unacceptable practices" around how the security forces used agents during the Troubles, as well as a

think it's perfectly possible that some of the impetus behind that Act came from the security service' he says. He suggests that there may be some within the security services who felt that if Scappaticci had been prosecuted before he died in April 2023, he might have taken everyone else down with him. 'I think it would be naive to imagine that they had no input, and the impetus for this Act came from somewhere else' he says. 'Because it is surprising how quickly it came about and how precisely it protected the security service in the event of Scappaticci still being alive once prosecution decisions were made on the Kenova case files.' However, Henry tempers that thought by saying he believes the unwieldy system used by the Public Prosecution Service in Northern Ireland is also partly to blame.

*Four Shots in the Night*, whilst giving an insight into the workings of the Provisional IRA and the horrific activities of some of its volunteers, as well as the intriguing story of the impact of informants on

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culture of secrecy and resistance to fair and measured scrutiny. He also accused them of "failing properly to disclose information".

"Most worryingly" he went on, the reports demonstrated "a concerted and continued absence of effort by those responsible for leading the security forces, and by successive governments, to establish the truth."

Remarkably, Jon Boutcher's report comes at a time when not only are very few of the protagonists still alive, but it is being published years after a law was passed that protects most of those involved from prosecution. The 'Covert Human Intelligence Sources Act (CHIS Act)', passed in 2021, is a UK law that allows certain public authorities to authorize criminal conduct by covert human intelligence sources. This authorization of criminal conduct was passed at great speed and with very little protest.

Henry Hemming has a slightly skeptical view of the speed with which the CHIS Act was passed. 'I

what eventually became known as the Good Friday Agreement, also highlights the ethical quandary at the centre of the Kenova debate. The question is whether the protection of intelligence tradecraft and those who practice it, is a case of 'the end justifies the means.' Would prosecuting Freddie Scappaticci have benefitted enough people to be in the public interest? Or should the impact of his activities continue to be brushed under the carpet? To answer that question, it's worth looking at some of the other stories that weave their way through Henry's book.

Researching this story not only gave Henry the opportunity to learn more about the conflict, but he also gained an insight into the minds of many of the characters he writes about. He describes Martin McGuinness as 'a fascinating and important character', yet says he was one of the hardest people to write about. 'He's someone who, at different points in his life, is both very good and very bad' says Henry. 'He was capable of extraordinary brutality and was



*People sign the Peace Wall, Cooper Way, Belfast 2023. Image Alamy*

responsible for giving the order for a large number of murders.’ These were often people he knew personally or knew their close families. But Henry says McGuinness was also responsible ‘for saving lives and securing peace in the region’ and ‘he would risk his reputation and sometimes his life in order to try and maintain the peace, or to bring the bloodshed to an end.’

Many years after his time living in Dorchester and Wareham, Willie Carlin was to become an important cog in the wheels of Northern Irish politics. Known as ‘Thatcher’s Spy’ and close to McGuinness and Adams, he is thought to have played a role in helping British intelligence services to bring a political settlement to the conflict.

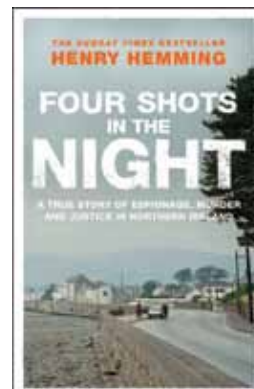
Having met Carlin before he died in 2023, Henry describes him as a ‘fascinating man’. He says Carlin was someone who had suffered a lot because of his decision to become an agent, ‘and at the same time, was motivated by, in some ways, the best of reasons, because he felt the violence was out of hand.’

In his own biography, Carlin says that his life was spared by Freddie Scappaticci who sent a warning that his cover had been blown. Did Scappaticci spare Carlin so he could carry on feeding information to British Intelligence about Sinn Féin and the Provisional IRA? And should Carlin be seen as more of a go between than a ‘snitch’? We may never know the answer to these questions; however, Henry is convinced that both McGuinness and Adams were being safeguarded. ‘We know of at least, I think, three

occasions when there were threats to Adams’s life in which the British intervened’ he tells me. ‘And there’s at least one I’ve heard of concerning McGuinness.’ He also mentions a ‘very detailed case file against McGuinness put together by the police, which was going to be used to prosecute him, and he would have spent time in jail, we think. And we know that MI5 asked for that prosecution not to go ahead.’

Jon Boutcher, when heading up Operation Kenova always stated that he was determined to get justice for the families of those who suffered at the hands of Freddie Scappaticci. But whether that will ever be a strong enough case to bypass efforts to keep the story in the past is anyone’s guess.

*Four Shots in the Night* is engaging reading. It doesn’t open a can of worms—that can is already open. But it does give a fascinating insight into how some of those worms operated.



*Henry Hemming will be coming to Bridport Literary Festival to talk about his book, as well as some of the things he has learned since its publication, on Tuesday 5th November 2024 at the Bull Hotel at 10.30 am. For tickets visit: <https://www.bridlit.com>.*