

William Melville – Spymaster. An Exhibition at Kerry County Museum 2007

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William Melville was born in Sneem Co. Kerry on the 25th of April 1850, the son of James and Catherine Melville (her maiden name was Connor), who owned a pub and a bakery. William attended the local national school, and in his teens was considered one of the best hurlers in the area. He helped out in the family business, and every week travelled by pony and cart to Killarney railway station to collect supplies.

The exact circumstances of Melville's departure from Sneem are unclear: the story goes that one week on the weekly run to Killarney, the pony and cart were found patiently waiting outside the station but there was no sign of William. He eventually reappeared in London in 1872, working as a baker in Lambeth in London.

Melville joined the Metropolitan Police in September 1872 and for the first six months he was stationed at Bow St in the heart of London, patrolling an area from Covent Garden to Holborn. By 1879 Melville had been promoted from Constable to Detective Sergeant in the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), stationed in south London. In February of that year also he married Kate Reilly from Co. Mayo in St. George's Catholic Church in Southwark. In March 1883 he was recruited into a new section, known as the Special Irish Branch.

Fenian Fire

Between 1883 and 1885 London was terrorised by teams of Irish American Fenian bombers, who were financed from the United States. They used bombs made either with gunpowder or the recently invented dynamite, and their campaign of terror was known as the 'Dynamite War'. To combat this new threat, in March 1883 Scotland Yard set up an "Irish Bureau" known as the Special Irish Branch. Of the twelve Special Branch members, several were Irish, including William Melville.

It was very difficult to keep track of the bombers, who regularly travelled back and forth between Britain and the U.S. A strenuous effort was made to keep a watch at all of the ports in Britain. This watch was extended to the Channel ports in France, and in 1884, Melville was posted to Le Havre as part of the port surveillance effort. He stayed in France for the next four years and became fluent in French.

Although the Dynamite War subsided from 1886 onwards, another Fenian plot emerged in 1887. The "Jubilee Plot", aimed at bombing Queen Victoria's golden jubilee celebrations, was foiled because Scotland Yard had been tipped off two months earlier. Melville and the Special Irish Branch watched the bombers around the clock, forcing them to abandon their plan.

There was much more to the Jubilee Plot than met the eye at the time. Millen, the ringleader of the plot, was in fact a British agent, and the real target was not the Queen but Charles Stuart Parnell, the democratically elected Irish Parliamentary Party, and the Home Rule campaign. The British Prime Minister, Salisbury, had approved a very secret plan whereby Millen and his co-conspirators would introduce themselves to Irish MPs in London. Then, the fake Jubilee Plot would be “exposed,” the Irish MPs would be tarnished by their link with the terrorists, and Parnell’s Home Rule campaign would be derailed.

The plan contained far too many secret elements, so much so that for quite a while the SIB believed that the Plot was real, because nobody tipped them off or kept them in the loop. By the time they did find out the Plot had developed a momentum all of its own, and the plan to expose it in such a way as to damage Parnell had become out of the question.

Jack the Ripper

Before Melville left France, he became involved in the Jack the Ripper case, one of the most baffling cases the Metropolitan Police ever faced. Jack the Ripper was the name given to a vicious killer who murdered and mutilated five women in Whitechapel, in London’s East End, in 1888.

One of the suspects was an American named Francis Tumblety. He fled London in November 1888 and arrived in France en route to America. Melville was still stationed in France at this stage and he helped to pursue Tumblety but did not catch him. Tumblety, a quack doctor of Irish descent, with a known hatred towards women, kept female body parts in specimen jars. He was in London at the time of the murders and the murders stopped after he fled in November 1888.

Anarchy

The Melville family returned to London from the posting in France in December 1888. William and Kate by now had four children, and shortly after their return, Kate caught pneumonia and died in March 1889, leaving William with four children under the age of seven. This was a terrible dilemma, which he solved by getting married again as quickly as possible in 1891 to Amelia Foy, the widow of one of his colleagues in the SIB.

The Special Irish Branch was re-organised, and Melville was moved to a new, very small and secret section, called simply the Special Branch and he was also promoted to Inspector. This new Special Branch had a brief that included social revolutionaries and anarchists as well as Fenians.

At this period Britain was the only European country that did not restrict immigration, and it had become a refuge for many foreign anarchists. Anarchist violence was not an issue in Britain, but Britain was becoming very unpopular with her neighbours as a result of sheltering anarchist refugees. At this point, and very conveniently, Melville uncovered an anarchist bomb plot in the midland’s town of Walsall.

All of the evidence points to the conclusion that the plot was in fact engineered by Melville through Auguste Coulon, one of his agents. The design of the bomb was poor, and it was not likely to have worked. The would-be bombers were also incompetent and disorganised and did not present any real danger to Britain. Six anarchists were arrested in early 1892 and were charged with the manufacture of bombs to be used against the Russian regime. Three of them were given ten years each, and a fourth was given five years. This was one of Melville's first big cases and the one that made his reputation.

After Walsall nobody could accuse Melville of being soft on anarchists, and he was rewarded in early 1893 by being promoted to Head of the Special Branch. When some months later a disgruntled ex Special Branch officer, Sgt Patrick McIntyre, alleged publicly that Walsall was a set-up, Melville's reputation was at that stage unassailable.

Melville of the Yard

By the mid 1890s Chief Inspector Melville was very definitely a public figure. The press in both Britain and the continent reported on his activities regularly. He was increasingly called upon to protect royalty and visiting heads of state, which greatly raised his public profile.

The press interest in Melville extended even to Kerry, where the local newspapers reported extensively on his visit home in 1896. On the 19th of September, the *Kerry Weekly Reporter and Commercial Advertiser* reported,

“Chief Inspector Melville of Scotland Yard... is a native of Sneem in this county and has been there on holidays lately. He acted as one of the judges at the sports recently held in Sneem, and only left there for London on Monday week. Mr Melville was a promising athlete before he went to London many years ago and was considered one of the best hurlers in South Dunkerron at the time. He takes a great interest in athletic sports and is a prominent supporter of the Gaelic Athletic Society in London.”

This report was taken up by all the Kerry papers, and a week later was considered interesting enough to print in the *Police Review and Parade Gossip* in London.

Spymaster

In 1900, Melville was promoted to Superintendent. He was fifty years old and at the peak of his career. When he suddenly retired three years later, the press and public could not understand why. In 1906, the *Daily Express* even reported that he had gone to work for the Russian secret police. Melville denied that allegation, claiming to be quietly enjoying his well-earned retirement. This was far from the truth.

In 1903 the War Office set up a Directorate of Military Operations, which needed a field operative to deal with intelligence gathering. Melville was head-hunted for the job, and his role was to act as a general controller for War Office agents abroad as well as to undertake a number of secret missions of his own at home and abroad. Melville would report to Captain Francis Davies under the alias of 'M'. On 1st December 1903 Melville

began his new career as an espionage agent under the name of William Morgan, General Agent. His office was in Victoria St, adjacent to Scotland Yard.

As the decade went on international tensions mounted and Germany now emerged as a threat, with its aggressive programme of armament and its aim to rival Britain's naval superiority. The assumption underpinning secret service work from 1900 onwards was that Germany was preparing to invade Britain, assisted by an army of spies and saboteurs.

Britain certainly was invaded by an army of fictional spies, and it is no coincidence that in the years between 1900 and 1914 the British spy novel and the British secret service became firmly established. Spy mania began in the British press and people became convinced that German spies and spy rings were everywhere.

Much of Melville's time was taken up with investigating real and imaginary reports of German spies who were supposedly photographing military and civil installations in preparation for a German invasion. There were in fact some German agents at work in British ports, and the network, modest though it was, was managed by an old adversary, Gustav Steinhauer, of the German secret police.

In 1909 the Secret Service Bureau was set up to co-ordinate intelligence work under two sections: the 'home' section, charged with protecting Britain's secrets (later known as MI5); and the 'foreign' section responsible for discovering enemy secrets (later known as MI6). As chief detective of the SSB, Melville investigated suspicious foreigners and set up a register of aliens. His investigations bore fruit in 1912, when Steinhauer's network of German agents was discovered. The network was left in place, and when war broke out in 1914, the entire network of twenty-one agents was rounded up, crippling German secret service operations in Britain with one stroke.

The War saw the rapid expansion of the secret service and its intelligence capabilities. A 'Spy School' was set up to train new recruits, and Melville lectured regularly at the school. He was in his late sixties, but he was working as hard as when he was a young man in the Special Branch. The pace took its toll and he retired at the end of 1917 and died of kidney failure before the war ended, in February 1918.

Conclusion

One of the dominant themes in Melville's career was the fight against terrorism. The Fenian dynamite campaign in Britain in the 1880s and the increasing activity of revolutionary anarchist groups throughout Europe from the 1880s onwards, introduced a form of global terrorism that has become only too familiar today.

The state's response to terror and the complex nature of that response is another connection to be drawn between Melville's time and our own. How far will a government go to protect itself against terrorism? Do the upholders of law and order see it as a justifiable and necessary evil to occasionally go outside the law? The Jubilee Plot to blow up Queen Victoria, which was actually masterminded by agents of the British government, and the Walsall anarchist bomb threat, which was in fact orchestrated by

Melville, illustrate that those questions, so pertinent today, were relevant also in the late 19th century.

One of the striking issues in the Melville story is the irony that here is an Irish Catholic who was proud of his Irish identity, defending Britain from terrorist threats that included Irish terrorism. Melville saw himself as Irish, he was an enthusiastic supporter of the GAA in London and brought his children up to take pride in their Irish heritage. As a Kerryman born and bred Melville is part of our story, and to fit him in, we must acknowledge that Irish identity encompassed a broader spectrum in the past as indeed we are beginning to recognise that it does in the present.

