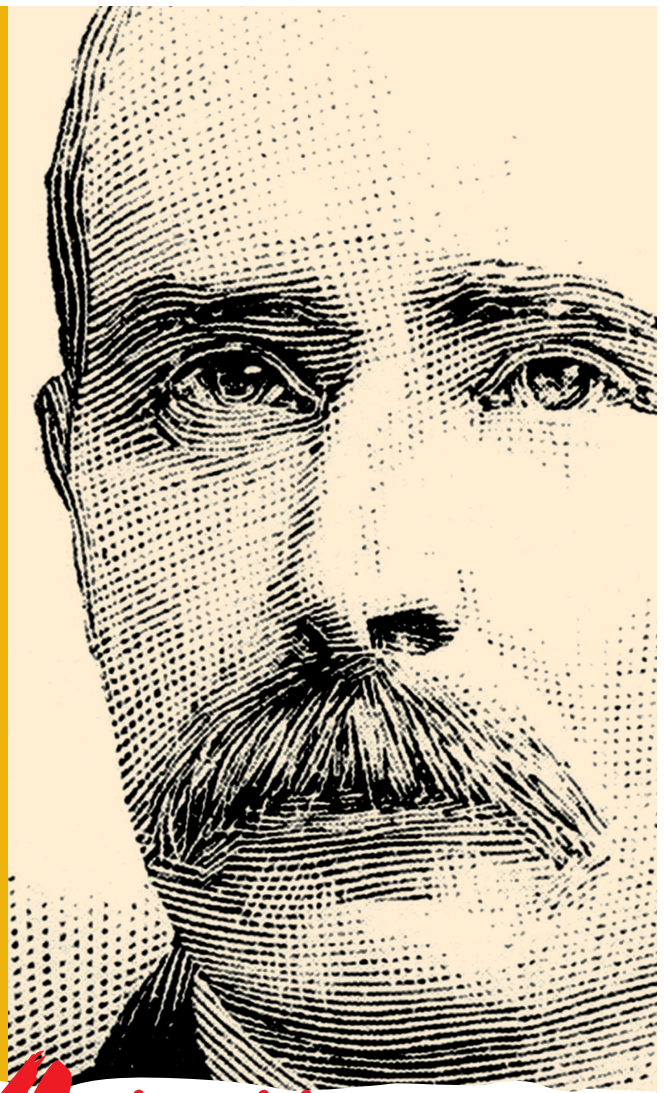
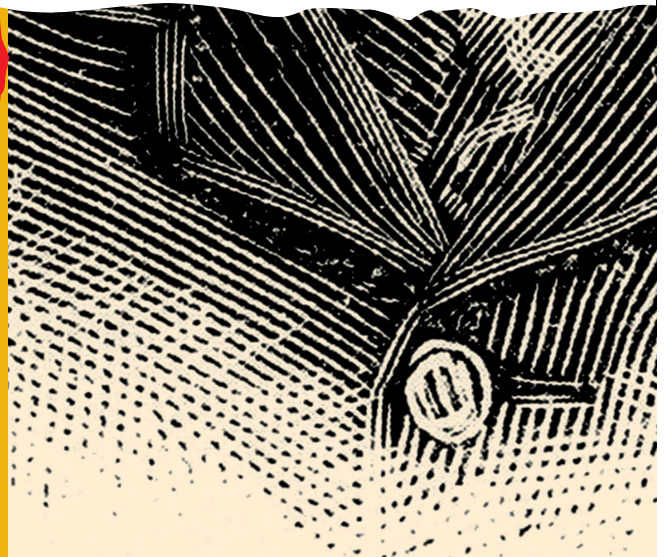


From **SNEEM** to
SCOTLAND YARD,
from the
SECRET SERVICE
to **MI5**; the
life and
extraordinary
times of...



William Melville SPY MASTER

The amazing story
of the real 'M'



Helen O'Carroll, Museum Curator, outlines the background to the major new exhibition...

What is the exhibition *Spymaster* about?

The exhibition is about William Melville who was born in 1850 in Sneem Co Kerry, and became a policeman in London in the 1870s. He rose fairly rapidly through the ranks to become the head of Scotland Yard's Special Branch and one of the most famous police detectives of the age. He slipped from public view at the height of his fame into the shadowy world of espionage, operating as the spymaster known as 'M' (later immortalised as James Bond's boss).

Why stage the exhibition now?

Well, Melville's story is an extraordinary one, and one that is not well known. Although a Kerryman born and bred, he has been a forgotten figure, and we now have an opportunity to illuminate a fascinating hidden history.



What are the main themes in the exhibition?

Melville had a fascinating life of adventure and intrigue and he rubbed shoulders with Fenian bombers, anarchist assassins, Jack the Ripper, kings, queens, German spies and Harry Houdini. The exhibition traces his career from his early days as a policeman on the beat to the Fenian dynamite campaign of the 1880s, the anarchist threat in the 1890s, the development of his public persona as Melville of the Yard; and the last part of his career as a spymaster.

Who will the exhibition appeal to?

Well, we're hoping it will have broad appeal because there are so many facets to the story. There is plenty of family entertainment because we have built in some interactive elements: you can build up a criminal profile using some of the techniques available to Melville and his colleagues, including fingerprint inking and dusting; you can crack spy codes; and you can play the Jack the Ripper Wheel of Fortune to find out the identity of the famously unknown criminal.

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April – May:

Tues – Sat, 9.30am to 5.30pm

June – August:

Open daily, 9.30am to 5.30pm

September – December:

Tues – Sat, 9.30am to 5.00pm

Bank Holiday weekends:

Sun & Mon, 10.00am to 5.00pm

A teenage Melville turns his back on the family business and absconds to London

Melville is not a common Kerry name – what was his background?

William Melville was born in Sneem Co. Kerry on the 25th of April 1850, the eldest of three boys. He was the son of James and Catherine Melville (her maiden name was Connor), and he had two brothers: Richard, born in 1859, and George, born in 1868. Sneem, like everywhere else in Ireland, was recovering from the effects of



Sneem, Co. Kerry in the late 19th century. The Melville's pub and bakery is third from the top right corner. William was the eldest of three boys.

a famine that left over one million dead and another million scattered abroad. In 1850 it had a population of 360. The Melville family owned a pub and a bakery and were very much a part of the community. William was baptised in the local Catholic Church, attended the 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.

Why did he leave home?

The exact circumstances of Melville's departure

from Sneem are unclear – we don't know what age he was when he left or why he left. 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. If Melville's motive for leaving was to seek adventure then London would have been able to provide it for him. In the 1870s, London was one of the biggest and most important cities in the world. Sneem might as well have been on the dark side of the moon in comparison.

Melville became a bobby in London – what was his life on the beat like?

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 armed with a truncheon and a whistle. His beat took him through the Strand, with its restaurants and theatres; Covent Garden with its markets, and also the slums and alleyways of St. Giles, known as 'rookeries' and often called 'Little Dublin' because of the Irish population there.

Constables were expected to patrol their beat at a pace of two and a half miles per hour. They worked seven days a week and had only one day off per fortnight, with one week's holidays per year. They were paid between 16 and 18 shillings per week. As an Irishman in the Metropolitan Police Melville was far from unique as 6% of the force was Irish.

He didn't stay on the beat for too long, though, did he?

Yes, 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. For the next four years Melville was a busy Detective Sergeant in the CID in south London. But in March 1883 he was recruited into a small special branch, known as the Special Irish Branch.

Melville's career takes off as Fenian bombing campaign threatens London

Why was the Special Irish Branch set up?

It was set up to combat the Fenian dynamite campaign of the 1880s. Of the twelve original members, several were Irish. The Dynamite War, as it became known, lasted throughout most of the 1880s, and it was led, financed and manned by two Irish American organisations in the US – Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa's Skirmishers and Clan na Gael.

What were the main targets of the Fenian bombers?

In 1882 there was one bomb attempt in London, but then, from January 1883 until January 1885, there were over 19 bombing incidents, nearly all centred on London, and most of them carried out by the Clan na Gael bombers. They struck against key London landmarks such as the Palace

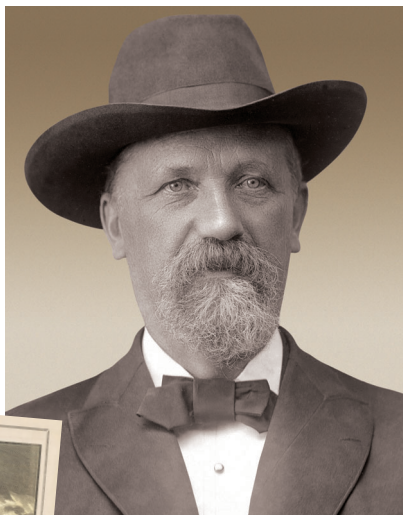
of Westminster, Whitehall, the offices of *The Times*, the Tower of London, and embarrassingly for the police, Scotland Yard itself. The bombers also targeted mainline and underground railway stations, such as Victoria, Charing Cross and Paddington. Over 100 people were injured in the Dynamite War, and three bombers were killed when they accidentally detonated their own bomb.

How successful was the Special Irish Branch in dealing with the bombing campaign?

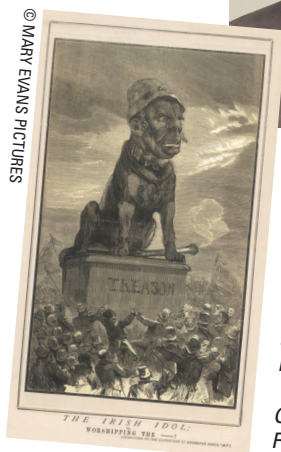
The Special Irish Branch had some initial successes and Melville was almost immediately involved in the arrest of five men in Birmingham and London, including Tom Clarke (later one of the leaders of the 1916 Rising in Dublin). It was extremely difficult, however, to keep track of the bombers, who regularly travelled back and forth between Britain and the U.S. They sometimes seemed to operate at will. Part of the problem was keeping track of their comings and goings across the Atlantic, and 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.

How coherent was the British Government's response to the Dynamite War?

While we may look at the history of Fenian plots as being riddled by informers all directed by an omniscient British secret service, the truth is rather different. Yes, the Fenian movement certainly did have some highly placed informers but on the other side, the politicking and jostling for position that went on had at times a paralysing effect on the Special Irish Branch's activities. Quite often the left hand did not know what the right hand was doing; that is if the left hand even knew of the existence of the right hand, which it frequently did not. This was to have major repercussions in 1887 with the Jubilee Plot.



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Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa (1831-1915). Both before and during the Dynamite War, O'Donovan Rossa was the most prominent advocate of Fenian terrorism. He launched a 'Skirmishing Fund' in 1876 to finance rescue and terrorist attempts. Many within the Fenian movement disavowed his tactics.

Cartoon depicting O'Donovan Rossa as a traitorous idol being worshipped by the Irish.

FENIAN FIRE

What was the Jubilee Plot?

Although the Dynamite War subsided from 1886 onwards, another Fenian plot emerged in 1887. An American-based Fenian originally from County Tyrone, FF Millen, plotted to bomb Queen Victoria's golden jubilee celebrations. The "Jubilee Plot" was foiled, however, because Scotland Yard had been tipped off two months earlier. Melville and the Special Irish Branch watched Millen and his co-conspirators around the clock, forcing them to abandon their plan.

Two of the conspirators were arrested, tried and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Millen escaped arrest and returned to the United States – rather conveniently for all concerned, he was found dead in his study in 1889. Melville was one of those rewarded and singled out for his role in preventing the Jubilee bombing by watching Millen *"with the greatest tact at Boulogne and Paris, and conducting numerous inquiries in London"*.

Another success for the Special Irish Branch then?

On the contrary, the true story of the Jubilee

Plot occasionally seems like an episode from the Keystone Kops. There was much more to the Jubilee Plot than met the eye at the time. Millen was in fact a British agent and the real target of the plot 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.

It sounds pretty complicated

Yes, that was the problem. It 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. It really was a "black operation" carried too far.

Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891). Leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, Parnell held together an uneasy alliance of land reformers, constitutional reformers and armed republicans throughout the 1880s. Parnell was targeted by the conservative Tory government, who feared his Home Rule aspirations for Ireland. In 1888, the British government set up a Special Commission to investigate allegations by The Times that Parnell and his party supported republican terrorism. The government also secretly provided evidence to support those claims. A key government witness revealed that he had forged incriminating letters attributed to Parnell. In the end, the Tory government lost face and The Times had to pay £250,000 in costs.



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Melville stalks a prime suspect through France

Melville was a London policeman during the 1880s: did he have any involvement in the most famous case of the time in London, the Jack the Ripper case?

Yes, he did because it was the most baffling case the Metropolitan Police ever faced and it affected every officer in the force. 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. All were prostitutes whose desperate lives mired in poverty and alcoholism attracted the prurient interest of sensation seekers.

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.



© ANDREW COOK

*Francis Tumblety (1833-1933),
Ripper suspect*

First suspected:

In 1913 by Inspector John Littlechild, head of Special Branch 1883-93, but not made public until 1993.

Why:

Tumblety, an American 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 killings stopped after he fled (pursued by Melville) in November 1888.

Why not:

Witnesses who claimed to have seen the Ripper described him as 'shabby genteel', and Tumblety was a flamboyant show-off.

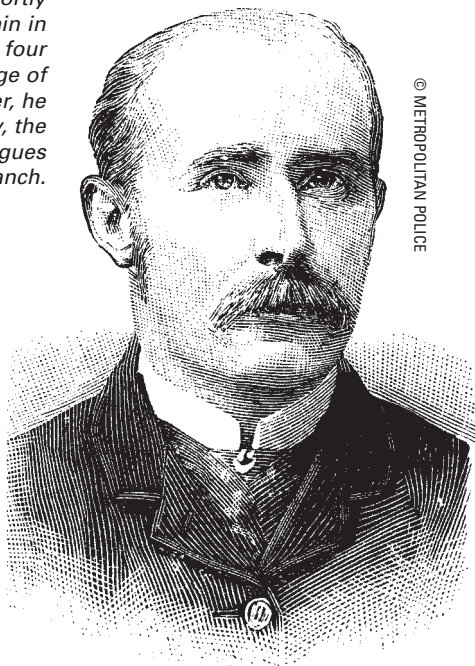
ANARCHY IN THE UK

Melville establishes himself as a hard-line foe of anarchists

You've said a lot about Melville's career – what was going on in his personal life?

Unfortunately his life was touched by tragedy at this stage. 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.

William Melville in 1892. His wife Kate had died shortly after their return to Britain in 1888, leaving William with four children under the age of seven. In 1891, however, he married Amelia Foy, the widow of one of his colleagues in the Special Irish Branch.



© METROPOLITAN POLICE

There were some changes in his work as well around this time?

Yes; 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.

So Melville was now chasing anarchists instead of Fenians?

Well the Dynamite War had effectively ended by the end of the 1880s so the focus shifted to anarchists. Anarchism existed at one end of the spectrum of social revolutionary movements in the 19th century. The aim of anarchism was to achieve a social system in which there were no laws imposed from above. A small proportion of anarchists believed that the only way to achieve this was through violence.

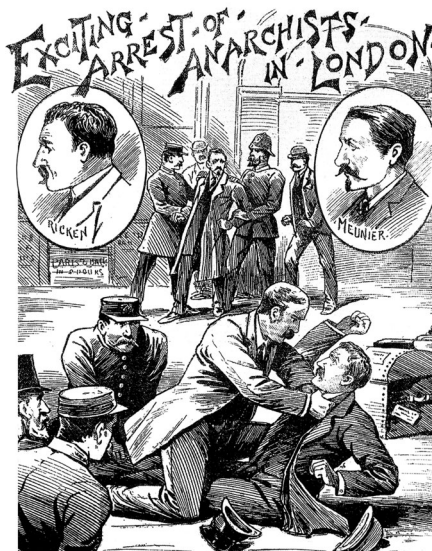
So was there much anarchist violence in Britain?

No, not in Britain but there was a lot of anarchist activity on the Continent. The worst years of anarchist violence were the mid 1890s. Paris was terrorised by an anarchist known as 'Ravachol', and, when he was arrested outside the Café Very in 1892, it was later bombed by two of his successors, Jean-Pierre Francois and Théodule Meunier. The café at the Gare St-Lazare was bombed by Emile Henry in 1894, killing one person and injuring twenty. Bombs exploded in magistrate's houses, police stations, cafés, and even in the Chamber of Deputies.

So how did this affect Britain?

At this period Britain was the only European country that did not restrict immigration, and it had become a refuge for many foreign anarchists. Trouble arose when foreign governments came looking for extradition, or at the very least, information. Britain was under pressure to be seen to be doing something about the anarchist threat, even though the vast majority of British people did not feel threatened by anarchism. Anarchist violence was not an issue in Britain, but Britain was becoming very unpopular with

ANARCHY IN THE UK



Melville's arrest of the French anarchist Meunier at Victoria Station in April 1894. Meunier desperately resisted arrest, and reportedly tried to drag Melville under the wheels of a train. Journalists conveniently on the scene recorded both the arrest and the trial, further boosting Melville's reputation.

her neighbours as a result of sheltering anarchist refugees.

But very conveniently Melville uncovered an anarchist bomb plot in the midlands town of Walsall?

Yes, this bomb plot arrived at a very opportune moment to demonstrate to the world that Britain was tough on anarchists.

So are you saying that Melville used some dodgy methods to get a result?

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, two in London and four in Walsall, 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.

Was there any suspicion at the time that it was a set-up?

Yes; most of the comment was in the socialist

press. David Nicholl, the editor of one small left-wing journal, *Commonweal*, suggested that the men had been framed by Melville's informer Auguste Coulon. Nicholl and the journal's publisher, CJ Mowbray, were arrested; Mowbray only two hours after his wife had died, leaving the children alone with their dead mother. Mowbray was released but Nicholl served 18 months.

Melville was helped by the fact that the reign of terror of the French terrorist Ravachol in Paris was front page news at the time of the Walsall trial. This had a very strong effect on British public opinion. The case seemed to be a graphic illustration that the anarchist threat was not just confined to the continent. 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 Melville had set up the Walsall bombers, Melville's reputation was at that stage unassailable.

Melville's reputation must have been that of a 'hard man'?

Well, I suppose it was to the extent that he was now known as a tough detective who got results. In October 1892, he proved his worth to the French police when he arrested Jean-Pierre François for his role in the bombing of the Café Very in Paris.

In a dramatic incident at London's Victoria

ANARCHY IN THE UK

Station in April 1894, Melville arrested another of the Café Very bombers, Théodule Meunier, who tried to drag him under the wheels of a train. *"To fall into your hands, Melville! You, the only man I feared, and whose description was engraved on my mind!"* is what Meunier is reported to have shouted when he was arrested. Journalists conveniently on the scene recorded both the arrest and the trial, further boosting Melville's reputation.

Giuseppe Farnara, an Italian anarchist, arrested later the same month for trying to blow up the Royal Exchange, claimed that he wanted to shoot Melville as he had arrested too many of his comrades. By now, anarchists throughout Europe knew Melville's name, and knew he was a man to be reckoned with.

Melville was well known outside of Britain?

Melville had his own contacts within the police forces of Europe, built up through his time in France and through his work protecting the royal family and visiting royalty. The fact that, as a result of his years in France, he could speak French fluently, and was familiar with the French police force, meant that he had a great deal of informal contact his continental counterparts.

Melville cooperated with the Russian secret police to have Vladimir Burtsev (left) arrested in Britain. Burtsev was sentenced to eighteen months hard labour. He left Britain after his release but continued his anti-Tsarist activities, working against the Okhrana whenever possible. He became known as the 'Sherlock Holmes of the Russian Revolution' for his ability to expose Okhrana spies and informers within the revolutionary movement.



© HOVER INSTITUTE

But this contact was not always officially sanctioned or public knowledge?

No indeed, and sometimes his co-operation with other police forces could have landed him in deep trouble had it become public knowledge. For instance, in 1897 Melville was approached by Piotr Rachkovskii of the Okhrana, the Russian secret police. Although the Okhrana had a terrible reputation in Britain as an agency of tsarist oppression, this did not stop Melville helping them out.

Rachkovskii wanted Melville's help to get Vladimir Burtsev arrested. Burtsev was the editor of a revolutionary newspaper *Narodovoletz*, which was printed in London. Melville's informal advice to Rachkovskii on the best route through diplomatic channels led to Burtsev's arrest later that year. Melville happily agreed to help because, as he wrote to Rachkovskii, it gave him *"the opportunity to worry these fellows and drive them from one end of London to the other"*, something that he had done with great zeal throughout the 1890s.

It sounds like Melville was heading into some very murky territory here?

Yes; and this world is very well depicted in Joseph Conrad's novel, *The Secret Agent*, which was published in 1907. Conrad had obviously read about Melville and the novel has an Inspector Heat who is partially based on Melville. The novel was based on a real incident in which a young French anarchist, Martial Bourdin, blew himself up apparently by accident in Greenwich Park in February 1894.

It is not a very pleasant novel, and there is no suggestion that Conrad based the personality of Heat on Melville, but the methods used by Heat are not that far removed from Melville's. Conrad even has Heat make an observation that Melville himself had made in exactly the same words – *"we know the whereabouts and movements of all these fellows and we can always put our hands on them when we want them"*. The novel is dark and gloomy and nobody comes out it very well, but the point is that the world that Conrad portrays in the book did exist and was actually Melville's world at this point in his career.

MELVILLE OF THE YARD

Famed as the King's detective, Melville retires from public view at the peak of his career

Melville must have had quite a public profile in the 1890s?

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. A French journalist wrote admiringly in 1894 that, *"he did not look at all fierce or at all like a typical policeman"*. Melville was increasingly called upon to protect royalty

Melville was rewarded with many honours in the course of his career: Member of the Royal Victorian Order, Chevalier of the Order of Dannebrog, Order of Christ, Order of the Crown of Italy, Officier de la Légion d'Honneur, Commander of the Order of Isabel la Católica, Chevalier of the Order of Francis Joseph of Austria, and Knight of the Order of St Silvester of the Holy Roman Empire.



© MELVILLE FAMILY

and visiting heads of state, which greatly raised his public profile.

The intense diplomatic activity in this period meant that there was a constant flow of royalty and heads of state going to and fro in Europe. This put immense pressure on Scotland Yard to provide security for these VIPs when they visited London. Although it was considered a prestigious job within the Special Branch, it was also dangerous, given the tumultuous times. Assassins targeted numerous leaders, killing the French President in 1894, the Spanish Prime Minister in 1897, the Empress Elizabeth of

Austria in 1898, and King Humbert of Italy in 1900. During Queen Victoria's funeral in 1901, Melville and Gustav Steinhauer, head of the German secret police, foiled an assassination attempt on Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and King Leopold of Germany.

Dangerous but lucrative?

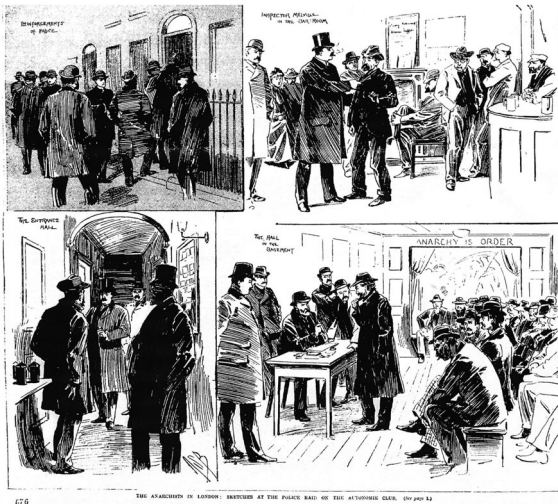
Yes; it did have its rewards and not for nothing was protecting royalty regarded within the Special Branch as a plum job. For instance, Melville was presented with gold cuff links from the King of Spain, a silver cigar case from Princess Henry of Battenberg, and a gold cigarette case made by Fabergé and two gold watches from Tsar Nicholas II. In fact Melville received this assignment so regularly that he became known as the 'King's detective'. He also received copious honours from many of the countries whose crowned heads he protected.

Melville clearly developed a rapport with some of his charges, among them Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. In one of the Tsar's visits to London in the mid 1890s, he decided to explore the seedy side of the city. Melville was his guide around the criminal haunts of London. More threatening than the London criminal element were the Russian secret police. Melville noted that they *"had to be taught that they could not shoot at sight and that suspects could not be carried off into the unknown without certain formalities"*.

Melville's increasing public prominence coincided with the immense popularity of the great fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes: what conclusions can we draw from this?

As well as Sherlock Holmes, there was a huge public appetite for crime reporting. Weekly publications such as the *Illustrated Police News* and *Illustrated Police Budget*, and daily newspapers like the *Daily Graphic* were filled with lurid tales of crime and were highly popular. In 1890 a new monthly magazine, *The Strand*, was introduced to the British reading public. While it did not descend to the level of sensational reporting, it did play to the popular interest in crime. The undoubted star of *The*

MELVILLE OF THE YARD



This sketch from the *Daily Graphic* tells the dramatic story of the raid on the Autonomie Club in 1894. As press photography was in its infancy, newspaper editors depicted both real detectives like Melville and fictional detectives like Sherlock Holmes in the same style.



Contrary to Holmes's flashes of genius leading to the successful conclusion of his cases, the majority of successful detective work lay in the following of procedure and the grind of paperwork, as this drawing of Melville at work at his desk in Scotland Yard illustrates.

Strand was Arthur Conan Doyle's famous fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes.

The interesting thing is that as press photography was in its infancy, a real detective like Melville was depicted in the newspapers in much the same style as a fictional detective like Holmes was depicted, most famously by Sidney Paget, in *The Strand* magazine. This led to a blurring of the lines between fact and fiction and perhaps contributed to the development of Melville's public persona

What about back home in Kerry; was Melville well known there?

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 of the Kerry papers, and a week later was considered interesting enough to print in the *Police Review* and *Parade Gossip* in London.

We're talking about a celebrity here, aren't we?

I suppose we are to some extent because another facet of what you can only call his celebrity was his endorsement of the escapologist Harry Houdini. As a way of gaining free publicity, Houdini would often turn up at police stations to demonstrate dramatic escapes from handcuffs, manacles, straitjackets and prison cells. In 1900 he came to London just as he was beginning to make his name as an escapologist, and then with the manager of the Alhambra Theatre he organised a visit to Scotland Yard to escape from handcuffs there. They were met by Melville who was initially sceptical and then amazed at the speed with which Houdini freed himself.

There have been some suggestions lately that Melville continued his association with Houdini?

Well, he apparently picked up some lock-picking techniques from Houdini and some years later he was to lecture new secret service recruits using knowledge gained from the great escapologist. There has also been a suggestion, in a recent biography of Houdini, that Melville recruited him for espionage work and that Houdini, in his subsequent tours of Europe, in particular Germany, passed weapons secrets back to Melville, although the proof of this seems to be a little tenuous.

MELVILLE OF THE YARD

But he was grooming people that he would later use as agents?

Yes; he had begun to cultivate characters that he would later use as espionage agents. One of the most important was Sigmund Rosenblum, a Russian émigré whom he recruited in 1896. Rosenblum belonged to a revolutionary movement called the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom, and he passed information about this group to Melville. At the same time, among other activities unknown to Melville, Rosenblum was involved in a rouble counterfeiting ring, which caught the attention of the Russian secret police in 1899. Fearing that the heightened scrutiny would expose Rosenblum's connection with Scotland Yard, Melville helped Rosenblum disappear, using the cover name Sidney Reilly. Melville's biographer, Andrew Cook, suggests that this was a name that Melville gave him, using his first wife's family name.

But then at the height of his fame he apparently retires?

In 1900, Melville was promoted to Superintendent. He was fifty years old and at



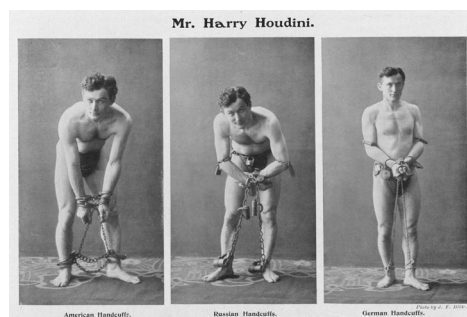
© ANDREW COOK

Sidney Reilly, also known as Sigmund Rosenblum. Melville met Reilly at the beginning of his colourful career and the two men would work together again after Reilly's disappearance from Britain.

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 wrote to the newspaper, denying the allegation. He wrote, "Like most people I am content to follow revolutionary movements through the medium of my daily paper, and I am still in London, quietly enjoying what, after thirty years of occasional excitement, I consider to be my well-earned retirement." This was very far from the truth.



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In 1900 Harry Houdini (real name Eric Weiss) had yet to make an impact in the United States as an escapologist and so came to London to make his name. The manager of the Alhambra Theatre insisted that before he could appear there, Houdini must first escape from handcuffs at Scotland Yard. The manager arranged a meeting with Melville, who was initially sceptical, then amazed at the speed with which Houdini freed himself. Years later, Melville lectured new secret service recruits on the art of quietly breaking into locked premises, using knowledge gained from Houdini.

Recruited by the British Secret Service Melville, now known as 'M', foils German spy network



Melville's business card using the name of W Morgan, General Agent.

So where did he go and what did he do?

In 1903 the War Office set up a Directorate of Military Operations and two of its divisions, MO2 and MO3, dealing specifically with intelligence gathering, needed a field operative. 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. It proved to be the perfect cover as he later wrote, "few men at this time were better known in London than I was, yet during the five years I was there I never met any person going in or coming out who knew me".

Oil, a very topical subject, was one of his first missions, wasn't it?

One of his first missions in 1904 was to help secure British access to Persian oil reserves. It had become obvious that oil rather than coal would be the main fuel supply for the navy of the future. HMS *Dreadnought* was launched in 1906 and was the first all-big-gun ship. Innovative as it was at the time, *Dreadnought* was still fuelled by coal. Providing ships with coal, especially at sea, was a major logistical headache. Getting coal on board was dirty and strenuous work that required extensive manpower. It became obvious from the early 1900s that a naval fleet with oil fuel would have an overwhelming strategic advantage over a coal fleet.

The British, unlike the Americans, Germans, Japanese and Russians, did not have access to guaranteed supplies of oil. A wealthy Englishman, William Knox D'Arcy, who had the rights to exploit oil reserves in Persia (now Iran), was in negotiation with Baron Alphonse de Rothschild of France for funding. Melville was sent to Cannes to spy on these negotiations and his reports caused considerable anxiety within government circles in Britain.

With the help of his agent, Sidney Reilly, whom he had recruited in London in the 1890s, Melville managed to derail a second round of the negotiations thus allowing a British syndicate to make a deal with Knox D'Arcy. In 1909 these oil fields began producing oil in commercial quantities and the company was then reconstituted as the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. Just before the outbreak of World War I, Anglo-Persian Oil signed a contract with the British Government to supply the British Navy with oil. This company eventually became BP, the fourth biggest multinational company in the world.

As time went on though, Melville's secret service work became more and more about the threat from Germany?

As the decade went on international tensions mounted and the threat of war loomed. In the past the main threats to Britain's security had been France and Russia. Germany now emerged as the greatest threat, however, with its

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William Knox D'Arcy and workers from his oil company operating a derrick in Persia. Although Knox D'Arcy had rights to the oil field from 1901, it wasn't until 1909 that the company could produce oil in commercial quantities. The company was then reconstituted as the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. Just before the outbreak of World War I, Anglo-Persian Oil signed a contract with the British Government to supply the British Navy with oil.



© MELVILLE FAMILY

According to Melville family tradition, this photograph of Melville was taken on board a ship during his mission to secure British access to Persian oil.

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.

But isn't true to say that some of this was fuelled by public hysteria?

I suppose there is some truth in this because 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. But it wasn't only the general public who became caught up in the spy mania; intelligence officers also took a lot of their ideas about spies and the secret service from fiction.

The publication of Erskine Childers' novel *The Riddle of the Sands* in 1903 had a major influence on military and naval officers. In the novel a German invasion plot is foiled by the enterprise of two amateur British spies. It had such an influence that the Director of Military Operations sent a couple of experts to Germany

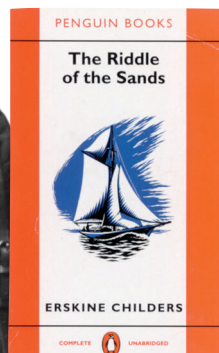
to see if a force might really be embarked from the Frisian Islands, and the Director of Naval Intelligence was also instructed to purchase the novel and have it examined by a competent officer. Despite the fact that both the military and naval officers found that the plan was impossible it didn't stop the book having a major influence on the intelligence community right up until the outbreak of war.

But did Melville have to go to the trouble of investigating all of these so-called reports?

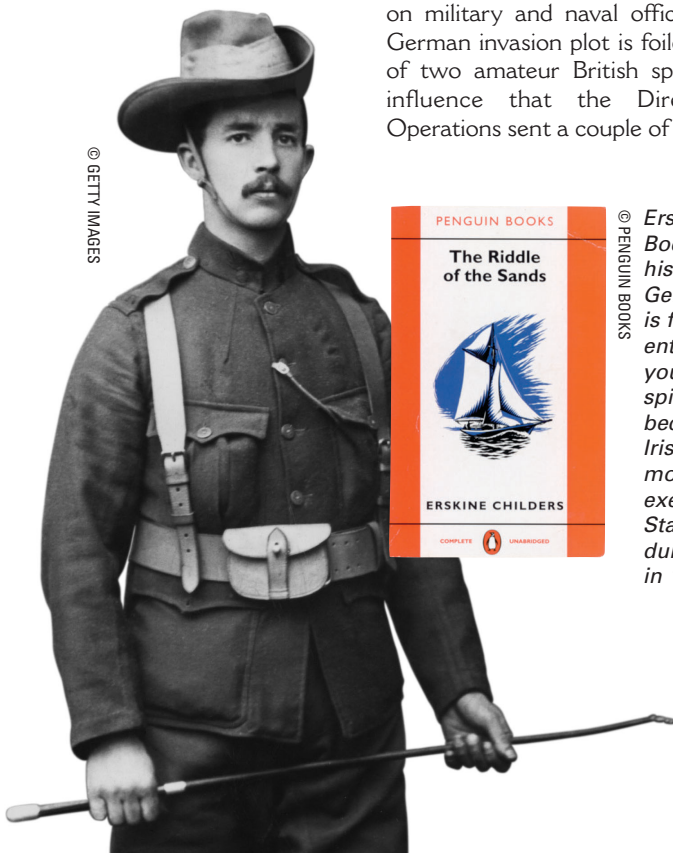
Yes; Much of his time was taken up with investigating reports of German spies who were supposedly photographing military and civil installations in preparation for a German invasion. In many cases, by the time the reports reached Melville the Germans in question were long gone and it was not always easy to decide whether the threat was real or imaginary. There were in fact some German agents at work in British ports, and the network, modest though it was, was managed by Melville's old friend Gustav Steinhauer, of the German secret police.

As time went on the Secret Service must have become more organised and professional?

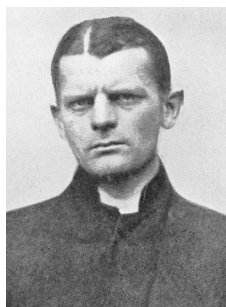
In 1909 the Secret Service Bureau was set up to co-ordinate intelligence work under two sections: the 'home' section (later known as MI5) and the 'foreign' section (later known as MI6). Colonel Vernon Kell headed the home section, charged with protecting Britain's secrets. Captain Mansfield Cumming ran the foreign section, responsible for discovering enemy secrets. As chief detective of the SSB, Melville investigated suspicious foreigners and set up a register of aliens. His investigations bore fruit in 1912, when Melville and the SSB discovered Steinhauer's network of German agents. They left the network in place, watching the agents at all times and intercepting their correspondence. 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.



© PENGUIN BOOKS
Erskine Childers in his Boer War uniform. In his novel of 1903 a German invasion plot is foiled by the enterprise of two young amateur British spies. Childers later became involved in the Irish republican movement. He was executed by the Free State Government during the Civil War, in 1922.

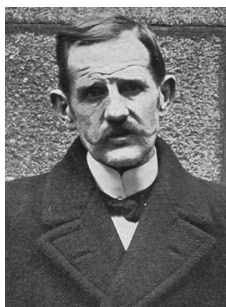


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Karl Hans Lody. Arrested in Killarney, Co. Kerry, he was the first German spy executed in Britain during World War I.



© ANDREW COOK

Karl Muller, a German spy captured in 1915. After his execution, British intelligence sent false reports to German intelligence in his name for months, faking his handwriting.



© ANDREW COOK

Willem Roos (left) and Haicke Janssen (right), two Dutchmen who spied for Germany in the UK. Posing as cigar salesmen, they used a simple code based on cigar catalogues to pass naval secrets to their controllers. They were arrested in 1915 and later executed in the Tower of London.



© ANDREW COOK



© ANDREW COOK

George Vaux Bacon. An American journalist, he was arrested in Dublin. Maps of Royal Flying Corps bases were found concealed in a novel in his possession.

Did that mean there were no German spies in Britain during the War?

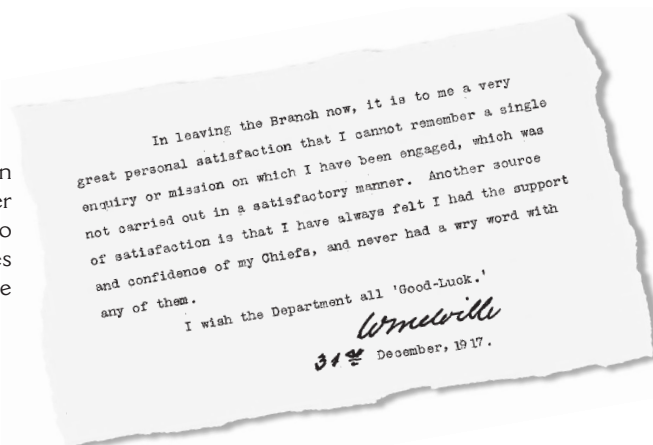
No; German spies continued to arrive in Britain after the outbreak of war, often under the cover of journalists or travelling salesmen claiming to be from neutral countries. In all thirty five spies were brought to trial during the course of the War and eleven of these were executed.

Presumably the secret service expanded hugely during the War?

Yes; the war saw the rapid expansion of the secret service and its intelligence capabilities. A 'Spy School' was set up to train new recruits. Melville lectured regularly at the school, teaching recruits the essential skills he had learned in a lifetime of dealing with criminals: picking locks, breaking into houses, lying convincingly and being willing to kill.

So Melville showed no signs of slowing down?

Melville 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.



Melville's letter of resignation, written shortly before his death

CONCLUSIONS

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

This is a fascinating story; why have we never heard of Melville before now?

Up to two years ago I had never heard of William Melville and I'm pretty confident that I'm not alone in that. There are two reasons for this. In the first place there is the fact that he spent all of his adult career in the service of the "ancient oppressor", Britain, a point I'll come back to. The second reason is because of the nature of his work in secret service. After all the best spies are the ones we don't know about. In addition, very many of the documents relating to Melville's career are still closed, and Andrew Cook so far is the only one who has seen a comprehensive selection, having received special permission to do so.

But there have been traces of Melville around for some time; I'm thinking here of the James Bond connection? Is there any basis in fact in this connection?

Oh definitely there is. For the purposes of promotional hyperbole we have played up the 'M' link with James Bond, and I don't think anyone can begrudge us that. The link, however, is a real one. Sidney Reilly, aka Sigmund

Rosenblum, the agent that Melville recruited in the late 1890s, was one of the inspirations for James Bond. In the novels and films Bond's boss is known as 'M', as Melville was known during his career in the secret service. Ian Fleming had worked in naval intelligence during World War II and became familiar with the early history of the British secret service, including the practice by which agents were referred to by the first letter of their surname. Today the head of MI6 is known as 'C' after the first head, Mansfield Cumming, who initialled documents he had seen with the letter 'C'. It is 'M', however, that has entered popular culture as the shorthand reference for a spymaster.

There are some striking parallels that can be drawn between Melville's world and our own, aren't there?

Yes, Melville's career provides the opportunity to make some illuminating connections between then and now, and this is what we aim to do in the exhibition.

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.

© ANDREW COOK



Sidney Reilly - Ace of Spies

Sidney Reilly was an international man of mystery who told many different stories about his own life. Over the years numerous writers have reinforced the myths so that fact and fiction have become intertwined. Born Sigmund Rosenblum in Russia in the early 1870s, he arrived in London in 1896 where he met William Melville. After his abrupt disappearance from London under the alias Sidney Reilly in 1899, he next appeared in Port Arthur, Manchuria during the Russo-Japanese War 1904-1905, where he spied for both the Russians and

the Japanese.

A shipping broker in St Petersburg before World War I, Reilly moved to the US in 1914 where he became a very successful arms broker. In 1917 he joined the British Royal Flying Corps and volunteered his services to MI6. He was sent on a mission to Russia, to help bring down the Bolshevik Government but the Cheka, the Bolshevik secret police, foiled the plot, and Reilly narrowly escaped. In 1925 he was lured back to Russia by the Cheka. Arrested in Moscow and imprisoned in the Lubyanka, he was executed two months later in a forest outside the city.



© LONDON EVENING STANDARD

Illustration of a very 'Bondish' looking Reilly holding a Nagant revolver, which appeared in the London Evening Standard in 1931. The drawing accompanied a serialisation of Reilly's life.

CONCLUSIONS

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.

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.

How do you respond to those who would question the value of examining the life of a man who spent all of his career working for the British security establishment?

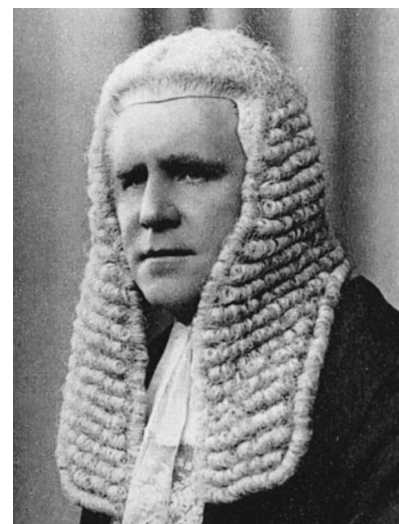
Well I think that at this stage of our maturity as a nation we should be looking at people like Melville and asking questions. What made a man like him tick? Why did someone like him emigrate to London and join the establishment and someone like Tom Clarke emigrate to America and join the Fenians, and give his whole life, literally, to the cause of Irish freedom? In joining the establishment did Melville cut himself off from his home, his roots, his Irishness? After all we would be right to look at this support of the London GAA with some suspicion. When he started as a policeman, officers were required to

wear their tunics even off duty, and this notion of always being on duty must have been ingrained in him.

So do you think Melville saw any contradiction between his Irishness and his work for the British security establishment?

Well, here are some interesting things to consider in Melville's story. The fact that he joined the Special Branch and spent much of the 1880s chasing Fenian bombers indicates that he did not approve of their bombing campaign. This hardly makes him a renegade Irishman; there were plenty in the Fenian movement who thought that the bombing campaign was an unmitigated disaster. He is reputed to have been a supporter of Home Rule, again hardly a radical position as the majority of people in Ireland, at the turn of the century, were in favour of Home Rule.

As regards the hurling there is a card that he sent to a cousin, Con Lavelle, in Kenmare,



© MELVILLE FAMILY

Sir James Melville, William's younger son. He became a successful barrister and Labour politician and served as Solicitor General under Ramsey McDonald.

CONCLUSIONS

inquiring about the development of hurling in the area. The postcard was sent from Paris, when Melville was there in the early 1900s. There is the possibility that this is a secret code but I think that it was a genuine enquiry. There is the fact that he called his house in Clapham, Kenmare.

Lastly there is his son, James Melville, who became a Labour MP and was Solicitor General in 1930 in Ramsay MacDonald's Labour Government - the first Catholic to hold that office since the Reformation. He died in 1931 and his coffin was draped with the tricolour of the Irish Free State. At the time of his death he was president of the Tyneside Irish Fellowship (his seat was in Newcastle), and active in several Irish organisations in London - the Four Provinces of Ireland Club, the Irish Literary Society, and the Gaelic League. What are we to make of this? Did James Melville embrace all things Irish because of his father or despite his father? There is no indication of any estrangement between them, nothing to suggest that James was taking up a position in direct opposition to his father.

So, any conclusions?

Well the question we have to ask ourselves is does it matter? If you were to ask why should we put a lot of time, money and energy into an exhibition on a man who spent all of his career working for the British establishment, what would the answer be? The answer is very simple and in the end very non-political - the answer is because it is a thumping good story. If you made it up you would be accused of being far fetched. In my experience, people are interested in people - in other people's lives, stories, experiences. It's why we read books, watch films, tv, plays, listen to the radio and go to museums. This is a fascinating story about what one Kerryman got up to when he left Kerry. Not only that but the resonances in the story with the world we live in today are equally fascinating. It is a great story and that is the reason we decided to stage an exhibition about William Melville.

DEATH OF A GREAT DETECTIVE

By the death at his residence at Orlando Road, Clapham, of Mr William Melville, there has passed away a detective officer of whom any police force of any country might well be proud. For many years he was superintendent of the "Special" or political branch of the Criminal Investigation Department at New Scotland Yard and on his retirement from the Metropolitan Police Force in December 1903 after thirty one years service, he left behind him a record of good work which it would be difficult to surpass. Mr. Melville, whose death followed an operation on Monday last, was a type of the straight, up-to-the date detective, employing modern methods and never afraid to adopt any new ideas that would help him in the successful carrying out of his work. He always recognised the power and usefulness of the Press in criminal investigation, and he was never "given away" by any journalist. When he retired from the yard his services to the state did not cease - they continued on the most confidential matters until almost the day of his death. It would probably surprise some people to discover that their whole history during the course of the present war had been investigated by this officer.

Probably nobody in or out of the police possessed such an intimate knowledge of the "underworld" life of London as the famous chief of the Special Branch, and

it was no doubt this fact which led to his acting cicerone to the Tsar of Russia when he came over here for a few weeks before his marriage. The Tsar under the able guidance of Mr. Melville made himself intimately acquainted with every phase of the criminal life of the worst areas of London both East and West. Night after night in company with his expert guide he threaded his way in and out of the unsavoury haunts at the criminal fraternity, particularly the political criminals of the anarchist type and never once did he suffer any bodily harm. Mr Melville's department in the early days dealt almost exclusively with the Irish American political offenders, and subsequently with the anarchists. His great proficiency as a linguist, an attainment he has acquired abroad while "keeping an eye" on the ports, was of the utmost service to him in London when he was called upon to watch the doings of the horde of foreign criminals who arrived after being driven out of their own countries. One of his most important duties was that of "shadowing" members of our Royal family and those of foreign countries when visiting these shores. He accompanied Queen Victoria and King Edward when they travelled on the continent, and attended the Kaiser, the King of Italy, and other foreign Royal personages when in London.

Mr. Melville had a number of narrow escapes from

death or injury at the hands of the desperate criminals he was successful in arresting. Probably one of his narrowest "shaves" was when he secured Meunier, who had killed several people at the café Vercy, in Paris, with a bomb. Melville recognised him at Victoria, and, though unarmed, he at once seized the armed criminal. His activities in securing the detection of anarchist crimes are too many to be detailed, but the arrest of Meunier was not the only exciting one of them. He was particularly proud of his brilliant coup in the raid on the anarchist's headquarters of the Autonomic Club. This followed on the Greenwich park bomb incident, when Melville recognised in the body of Bourdain, who was killed by the premature explosion of the infernal machine (which was to have blown up the Royal Observatory) that of a man supposed to be a peaceable tailor who was a constant visitor to the Autonomic Club.

Mr. Melville received many tokens of recognition of the value of his work. Membership of the Victorian Order was conferred on him in 1903, and only last month he was created a member of the order of the British Empire, while France, Denmark, Portugal, Italy, Spain and other countries bestowed decorations on him.

Melville's obituary which appeared in the London Times, April 1918.