

# Her Majesty's secret servants

Robin Ramsay

## SIS and Libya

Henry Kissinger is widely quoted as having once said that 'America has no friends, only interests'; and when push comes to shove this is true for all states. This island has been called something like 'perfidious Albion' for almost a thousand years.<sup>1</sup> Neither proposition has ever been better illustrated than by this country's foreign policy towards Libya in the past 20 years or so.

Former MI5 officer David Shayler reported that in 1996 MI6 had paid £100,000 to a Libyan Islamist group for the assassination of Colonel Gaddafi; and, although denied by the British formal foreign policy apparatus, a great deal of evidence, including what are apparently internal FCO documents, supports the claim.<sup>2</sup>

Fast forward to 2003, and MI6 begins dealing with Libya, through ex – or 'ex'; deniable, at any rate – MI6 officer Mark Allen. This culminated publicly in the rapprochement symbolised by Gaddafi and Prime Minister Blair embracing in 2004; and privately in the British security and intelligence services helping to send back anti-Gaddafi activists (one from the 1996 group paid by MI6) to their Libyan equivalents for torture.<sup>3</sup>

As part of the fallout from the end of the Gaddafi regime

---

1 See, for examples, <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perfidious\\_Albion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perfidious_Albion)>.

2 This is discussed and the documents are reproduced at <<http://cryptome.org/shayler-gaddafi.htm>>

3 See, for example, <<http://stopwar.org.uk/index.php/tony-blair-watch/878-how-tony-blair-helped-gaddafi-torture-libyan-dissidents>>

In an interview on the Today programme Tony Blair denied knowing anything about this. Which might be true, of course. See Patrick Sawyer, 'Tony Blair denies knowing about "rendition" of Libyans on his watch', *Daily Telegraph* 10 September 2011.

some of (now Sir) Mark Allen's oleaginous correspondence with Libyan officials was made public. In response to this, Con Coughlin<sup>4</sup> in the *Telegraph* and Ian Black in the *Guardian*<sup>5</sup> immediately wrote hagiographic pieces about Allen. Coughlin's piece would have surprised no-one who has followed his writing in the *Telegraph*: he has been an outlet for the MI6 media managers for many years – a role which dropped him and the *Telegraph* in the mire in 1995 when Coughlin put his name to a story given to him by MI6 smearing one of Gaddafi's sons. This resulted in a libel case in which the MI6 role was revealed and which Coughlin's employer, the *Daily Telegraph*, lost.<sup>6</sup> I dare say an invoice winged its way from the *Telegraph* to MI6 for a sum equivalent to the fine imposed and the expenses incurred by the *Telegraph* dealing with the court case.

## **Harebrained?**

'Page 8' was a film written and directed by David Hare on BBC 2 on 28 August 2011, in which Bill Nighy played a suave, sophisticated senior MI5 officer who saves the Service from being destroyed in a Whitehall shake-up by blackmailing the government with secret information about its role in the Iraq war. And there was a pretty girl who, as in the fantasies of many ageing men, falls in love with Nighy's character.

The character played by Bill Nighy was the essence of the image of itself that MI6 (SIS) has projected over the years: smart, ruthless and morally aware. But this Nighy character was an *MI5* officer and, as a result the film felt odd to me. (Evidently I have absorbed that MI6 image of itself.)

In a profile of him published just after the broadcast, Hare said:

---

4 See his 'Should MI6 have come in from the cold?' at <[www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8742248/Should-MI6-have-come-in-from-the-cold.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8742248/Should-MI6-have-come-in-from-the-cold.html)>.

5 'MI6 man who saved Gaddafi risks being mired in an intelligence minefield' at <[www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/06/libya-mastermind-wmd-triumph-minefield](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/06/libya-mastermind-wmd-triumph-minefield)>

6 This is discussed at <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Con\\_Coughlin#Gaddafi\\_legal\\_case](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Con_Coughlin#Gaddafi_legal_case)>

'It's about how the security services were ruined by politicians. You had MI5 advising that there were no weapons of mass destruction. What did politicians do with this information? They told MI5 to go away and come back with the right information that justified invasion. My aim was to present the security services as not different from you and me. They're regular folk.'<sup>7</sup>

But it wasn't MI5 who were telling the government there were no weapons of mass destruction: that role fell to the Defence Intelligence staff, and they were ignored and eventually bypassed for their refusal to swallow the line coming from the Americans and MI6. And it wasn't MI5 who were told to go and get the intelligence to justify the war. That was MI6.<sup>8</sup>

Hare's comments seem to explain why the film felt odd: he thought he was writing about MI6 but simply muddled the names of the agency and had Nighy as MI5. And nobody in the editorial process noticed. (To most viewers it would make no difference, of course.)

## **Spy versus Spy**

**W**e have had a lot of tribunals recently. One that has received little attention in the UK is the Smithwick Tribunal in the Republic of Ireland which is enquiring 'into suggestions that members of An Garda Síochána or other employees of the State colluded in the fatal shootings of RUC Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and RUC Superintendent Robert Buchanan on the 20th March, 1989.'<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> <[www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2011/sep/03/david-hare-i-feel-insecure/print](http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2011/sep/03/david-hare-i-feel-insecure/print)>

<sup>8</sup> What MI5 *did* do was warn the government that war in Iraq would increase the domestic threat, but not loudly (or publicly). On which see former intelligence analyst Crispin Black's 'Why did all these sceptical officials go along with the Iraq invasion?' at <[www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jul/20/iraq-war-eliza-manningham-buller/print](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jul/20/iraq-war-eliza-manningham-buller/print)>.

<sup>9</sup> <[www.smithwicktribunal.ie/](http://www.smithwicktribunal.ie/)>

Among those giving evidence has been Ian Hurst,<sup>10</sup> a former member of the British Army's Force Research Unit (FRU). Hurst's affidavit is an insider's guide to the work of the FRU and other elements in the state in Northern Ireland, and contains some interesting stories. Hurst talks about the difficulties involved when loyalist and republican paramilitary members became agents of the state. Operations get complex and thus more dangerous. To illustrate this Hurst gives this quote from (Lord) John Stevens who was in charge of three inquiries into collusion between the British Army, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and loyalist paramilitaries in the war with republicans.<sup>11</sup>

'There was the RUC, MI5 and the army doing different things. When you talk about intelligence, *of the 210 people we arrested, only three were not agents*. Some of them were agents for all four of those particular organisations, fighting against each other, doing things and making a large sum of money, which was all against the public interest and creating mayhem in Northern Ireland.'

<sup>12</sup>

That 98.5% of those arrested were on the British secret state payroll is the most surprising thing I have read for a very long time. These were on the Loyalist side of the conflict – allies, essentially, of the British state – and I think we may assume that on the Republican side a lower percentage of the combatants had been recruited by the British state. (I have seen no figures, not even plausible guesses, on this.) Even so, this level of state penetration implies operations of impossible complexity as the agencies juggle their assets within the groups, standing on each other's toes every time they try to do something. At worst it implies a lethal, Clouseau-esque

---

<sup>10</sup> Also known as Martin Ingram. See, for starters, <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin\\_Ingram](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Ingram)>. The reliability of Hurst/Ingram's stories is unclear to me. Republican sources have tried to discredit Ingram, mainly because of what he has said about the British agent Steakknife. On which see, for example, <<http://cryptome.org/fru-ingram02.htm>>. Evidently the Irish government thought him worth talking to.

<sup>11</sup> See <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stevens\\_Inquiries](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stevens_Inquiries)>

<sup>12</sup> <<http://cryptome.org/0005/hurst-fru.pdf>>

farce.