

Operation Chiffon:
The Secret Story of MI5 and MI6 and the Road to Peace in Ireland
Peter Taylor
London: Bloomsbury, 2023 Hardback, £17

Nick Must

This, the most recent in a long line of Peter Taylor's works on the conflict in Northern Ireland, has been described in other reviews as 'compelling',¹ 'a gripping exploration'² and an 'exhilarating historical account'³ . . . and yet . . . well It is obvious to me that the author caters to the *popular* market, rather than a *specialist* one, and that is perhaps why I've been left feeling a little dissatisfied.

You could well describe Peter Taylor as 'the spooks favourite conduit'. It is true that he has, occasionally, given unbiased coverage to members of the IRA and other such organisations. However, when it comes to the actions of the British state, he *always* leans toward the state's version of events. (I give some examples from *Operation Chiffon* later in this review.) By making this massive compromise he gains access to the 'secret world' of intelligence, and is allowed to meet people who would not normally talk to reporters. The question of whether anything they have to say is true, seems to be ancillary.

As I've already mentioned, Taylor has a more than decent back catalogue of works on Northern Ireland. In the bibliography for *Operation Chiffon* he lists no less than eight of them. Of the references he gives throughout the text, 144 of the 378 total, almost 40% of them, are from his previous works. Which is where I think the problem lies: he's telling a story the vast majority of which he's told before. And it's not like he's been the only reporter covering politics and terrorism in Northern Ireland; much of what he describes in the book is well-charted history.

¹ Ian Cobain in *The Guardian* <<https://tinyurl.com/3z5wu7rm>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/apr/02/operation-chiffon-by-peter-taylor-review-how-they-talked-way-out-of-troubles-secret-story-of-mi5-and-mi6-and-road-to-peace-in-ireland>>.

² Christopher Andrew in *The Daily Telegraph* <<https://tinyurl.com/3btuzcm3>> or <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/operation-chiffon-peter-taylor-review-secret-talks-ended-troubles/>>.

³ Paul Winter in *The Critic* <<https://thecritic.co.uk/back-door-diplomacy/>>.

That is not to say that that Peter Taylor hasn't achieved something new with this book. He has succeeded in interviewing the final member of the intelligence community (a former MI6 officer, re-employed by MI5) who participated in the 'back channel' discussions about a ceasefire agreement with the IRA. He has previously been named as Robert McLaren but Taylor claims this is something of a misnomer because, in response to a request for his real name, 'Robert compromised and gave . . . his middle name, McLaren'. Whether or not this is true, whatever his real name might be, is really window dressing. The intelligence officer antecedents to 'Robert' have been fully identified⁴ and I would expect that, over time, the genuine name of 'Robert' will be confirmed. This will, most likely, be after his death and I suspect he's already in his 90s. (See the appendix at the end of this article.)

An atmospheric tale is told about the very first time Taylor tracked down 'Robert' and visited him at his home. Appearing 'suddenly [as] a stranger with a hood pulled over his head to ward off the rain', he stands in 'Robert's' garden and is told 'you've got the wrong man'.⁵

Later 'a friend of a friend' (spooky hint, hint) tells Taylor he had indeed been correct. A twenty year hiatus passes before 'Robert' fesses up and admits he'd lied and was the right man. The way this is framed in the book paints a picture, to my cynical mind, of Taylor being distinctly naïve:

Some years ago my agent, Annabel Merullo of Peters Fraser and Dunlop, said it was time I wrote another book. I said I needed to find a suitable subject first. Astonishingly Robert came along *completely out of the blue* and Annabel reunited me with Bloomsbury, publisher of my previous trilogy on the conflict, *Provos*, *Loyalists* and *Brits*.⁶ [Added emphasis.]

The two predecessors in the role as British intelligence's representative in the secret negotiations – Frank Steele and Michael Oatley – have both been interviewed by Peter Taylor. They were extensively quoted in *Provos*, *Loyalists* and *Brits*.⁷ He has now shown how 'Robert' was ultimately responsible for a quantum shift in the negotiations and 'against all the odds, helped bring about the ceasefire that eventually, with the Good Friday Agreement, led to the end of the conflict'. One would assume then that 'Robert' might also have

⁴ These were Frank Steele and Michael Oatley, both of MI6.

⁵ I found it redolent of first episode of the 1985 BBC TV series 'Edge of Darkness' – a bit of a niche reference, I admit, but if you know, you know.

⁶ This is in the 'Acknowledgements' section, at the very beginning of the book.

⁷ All published by Bloomsbury in, respectively, 1997, 1999 and 2001.

something to say.

However, when in June 2021 a letter arrives in the post from 'Robert', there is a hint of Victor Meldrew: 'I don't believe it!' Taylor exclaims out loud to his partner. His use of the phrase 'Some years ago' in describing the chronology of when his agent suggested he write another book is usefully vague, because he would surely have known that the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement was approaching.⁸ Why was he so astonished that the man who eventually finished the job belatedly wanted to go on the record?⁹ This reaction – 'I was dumbfounded. [. . .] I couldn't believe it. It felt as though I had won the lottery' – seems exaggerated.

There may also be no coincidence that another book that covers much the same subject – *Deniable Contact: Back-Channel Negotiation in the Northern Ireland Conflict*, by Niall Ó Dochartaigh¹⁰ – had been published three months before 'Robert' had written his letter. Information from the archives of the late Brendan Duddy, the Irish businessman who acted as a go-between during the negotiations, was used in that publication. Brendan Duddy had also been interviewed several times by Peter Taylor – and he is quoted at length in *Operation Chiffon* as well. I would not be surprised if someone who knew of the connection between Duddy and 'Robert' had contacted the latter regarding the publishing of *Deniable Contact*, with the suggestion that he might want to speak to 'the spooks favourite conduit' and put his side of the story.

Interlaced with that, rather oddly, Taylor uses *Operation Chiffon* to give a kind-of Troubles 101 – a primer on seemingly every other major event that happened. I suspect most of Taylor's readers are at least familiar with the history. I doubt they would need the level of detail he gives on the Maze Prison 'dirty protests'. Nor how the Brighton bomb affected the UK government's public stance – including the reinforced 'obduracy' of Margaret Thatcher. Nor Taylor's take on the Miami Showband killings which, I have to say, he gets very wrong. He bizarrely states that:

The fact that Crozier and McDowell [two of the killers involved in the attack] were serving members of the British army's UDR seemed to confirm, *without concrete evidence*, the suspicions of many nationalists

⁸ This year, 2023, is the 25th anniversary.
See <<https://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item105778.html>>.

⁹ Personally, I adhere to the adage that in intelligence 'there is no such thing as coincidence' (© John le Carré, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*).

¹⁰ Oxford: OUP, 11 March 2021 <<https://tinyurl.com/dwmmmc2>> or <<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Deniable-Contact-Back-Channel-Negotiation-Northern/dp/0192894765/>>.

that collusion was involved in the attack. [Added emphasis]

What other possible evidence does Taylor think should be produced for proof of collusion, beyond the very simple fact that Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) soldiers were acting alongside Loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force terrorists? I am sure Taylor would have been aware of the UK government's compensation payout to the survivors of the attack, which was made in December of 2021.¹¹ To state that there was no 'concrete evidence', without referencing the facts that have been established – even beyond what was immediately obvious – is disingenuous at best.

In a similar manner, the way he is selectively short on the detail, provides a skewed picture when he briefly mentions the SAS killing of three IRA members on Gibraltar – the infamous 'Operation Flavius':

As Farrell, McCann and Savage crossed the Spanish border into Gibraltar, they were intercepted by the SAS, believing they were about to trigger the explosives by remote control as the parade was due to begin. All three were confronted by the SAS, wearing plain clothes, and shot dead in highly controversial circumstances.

This is wrong on at least two levels. Firstly, it was a combination of MI5 and Spanish surveillance that followed them across the border.¹² Secondly, Taylor's use of 'confronted' might imply that a clear warning had been given before each killing; but that certainly was not the case. At the inquest that followed, only one of the SAS soldiers testified that he had definitely issued a verbal warning. He claimed to have shouted, 'Stop, police! Get down. Hands above head. Stay still!'¹³ while, at the exact same time, being able to immediately assess there was a need to open fire. Peter Taylor's previous book *Brits* has a chapter on Gibraltar. Why does he now dismiss the issue in such a short manner? Bearing in mind the lengthy narrative he gives in *Operation Chiffon* for other events that are equally well recorded,¹⁴ this is once again disingenuous.

Additionally, the use of 'controversial' to describe the events on Gibraltar

¹¹ See, for example, 'Miami Showband massacre: UK government accused of "lies" after £1.5m payout', *The Guardian*, 14 December 2021 <<https://tinyurl.com/2st6au3t>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/dec/14/miami-showband-massacre-uk-government-accused-lies-payout-northern-ireland-troubles>>.

¹² There were actually five members in the IRA's Active Service Unit at Gibraltar and the surveillance teams lost track of two of them. Taylor knows this, he mentions it in *Brits*.

¹³ This is how Taylor has it in *Brits*.

¹⁴ An entire chapter is devoted to the Brighton bomb, which he has extensively covered before.

is putting it mildly. In 1995 The European Court of Human Rights found that the Government of the United Kingdom had breached Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights.¹⁵

Taylor is also cheap with the facts when he recounts the time that Brendan Duddy was interrogated by the IRA because they thought he was a British spy. He says:

McGuinness suspected Brendan might be playing a double game as a suspected British spy. Shortly afterwards, four senior IRA men arrived at Brendan's house, ordered him into an upstairs room and subjected him to a frightening interrogation. Brendan would not tell me who the four men were, but it's reasonable to assume McGuinness and Gerry Kelly would have been among them. Brendan feared for his life, thinking he might be about to be killed. He narrowly survived the ordeal.

It would, in fact, have been curious if Martin McGuinness had been present during any such questioning, which was the responsibility of the IRA's 'Internal Security Unit' (informally known as 'The Nutting Squad'). And Duddy might have *thought* he was lucky to survive but the British government's agent in the Internal Security Unit, the infamous Stakeknife, would have been instructed to ensure he lived.¹⁶

Appendix

There was a BBC documentary, broadcast to tie-in with the book's publication in March of this year, which featured 'Robert' with a blurred out face. In that programme, Peter Taylor solemnly intoned: 'As a former intelligence officer, we've had to maintain Robert's anonymity.' Which is rubbish, of course, because Taylor has interviewed Michael Oatley, the immediate predecessor to 'Robert', multiple times and never felt the need to obscure that particular ex-MI6 officer's face. It's simply all part of building up some kind of extra intrigue. And it's pointless really because, using open source material, I'm fairly certain I've identified the mysterious 'Robert'.

¹⁵ See <<https://tinyurl.com/bdemyhyr>> or <<https://www.asylumlawdatabase.eu/en/content/ecthr-mccann-and-others-v-united-kingdom-application-no-1898491-27-september-1995>>.

¹⁶ It is striking that Mr Taylor has never shown much interest in Stakeknife. After the death of Freddie Scappaticci earlier this year, Taylor was quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* as musing that 'Scap' had 'taken his secrets to the grave with him'. See <<https://tinyurl.com/5x8ste8s>> or <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/04/12/stakeknife-ira-who-is-freddie-scappaticci-undercover/>>. I presume he thinks there's no more need to investigate the Force Research Unit and their links to targeted killings via Stakeknife.

Robert McLaren Greenshields is listed in the *British Diplomat Directory*¹⁷ as having been born in 1933 and as serving as (i.e. with the diplomatic cover of being) an 'Economic Counsellor' in Kenya between 1981 and 1985.¹⁸ This is his only identified posting, as the directory is restricted to 'individuals who worked at Counsellor/Assistant Secretary grades and above'. All of his other postings within FCO/MI6 would therefore have come with a more junior title – such as his time as an Administrative Officer during the end of British colonial administration of Tanganyika in East Africa from 1958-61.¹⁹

¹⁷ Originally a private endeavour, the directory has more recently received the approval of (and been published by) the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and their archive department, the FCDO Historians. Copies of the directory can be downloaded from the *Issuu* feed of the FCDO Historians at <<https://issuu.com/fcohistorians>>.

¹⁸ In *Operation Chiffon*, he is quoted as saying that the head of MI5 in Northern Ireland 'came like me from the Colonial Service in Africa . . . and like me he'd been in the army'. The young cadet Robert McLaren Greenshields of the Highland Light Infantry received promotion to the rank of Second Lieutenant on 27 June 1953. See <<https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/39950/supplement/4692/data.pdf>>.

¹⁹ For his account of which, see <<https://www.britishempire.co.uk/article/tanganyikasmelleroutofwitches.htm>>.