



*An occasional
column by
**Andrew
Rosthorn.***

Stan Bonnett and the Price of Admiralty

Murder in Cairo,¹ the book about the life and death of David Holden, chief foreign correspondent of the *Sunday Times*, got me thinking about one of Holden's Fleet Street contemporaries, Stanley Bonnett. In 1960, in the twilight of the colonial empires, both Holden and Bonnett worked in Africa; and both have since been described as spies.

The British prime-minister Harold Macmillan delivered his 'wind of change' speech to both houses of the South African parliament on February 3, 1960, and on June 14, 1960, Charles de Gaulle used the phrase *Algérie algérienne* for the first time on French television. De Gaulle compared nostalgia for old empires to the sweet charm of oil lamps and the vanished splendour of sailing ships.

In that year David Holden reported for *The Times* from Algeria, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, Angola and the bloody city of Léopoldville during the ten weeks of Patrice Lumumba's doomed Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Bonnett, for the *Daily Mail*, covered Harold Macmillan's 6-week tour of the African continent, opening in Ghana on January 5, where his 'wind of change' speech went almost unnoticed. Two weeks later, after touring Nigeria and Northern Rhodesia, Macmillan arrived in Nyasaland, where the British governor had jailed Dr Hastings Banda and 500 members of his banned party during a state of emergency.

The Malawi Youth League rallied demonstrators outside Macmillan's hotel in

¹ *Murder in Cairo*, by Peter Gillman and Emanuele Midolo with Leni Gillman, (London: Biteback, 2025) Reviewed at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/90/murder-in-cairo/>>.

Blantyre on January 26, and both Bonnett of the *Daily Mail* and Peregrine Worsthorne of the *Daily Telegraph* reported that colonial policemen had provoked a riot by tearing down banners, striking demonstrators with batons and making arrests.

When the *Daily Herald* in London demanded the arrest of three white European policemen, Macmillan's cunning colonial minister, the former professional bridge player Iain Macleod, arranged for Justice Frederic Southworth of the Nyasaland High Court to conduct an inquiry during which Bonnett and Worsthorne² had to give evidence and defend their stories. Southworth not only cleared the police of brutality but exceeded his brief by accusing Bonnett and Worsthorne of distortion. It was, however, too late for a cover-up.

Five days after the Blantyre riot, without any warning to the South African prime minister, Macmillan delivered his 'wind of change' speech to Hendrik Verwoerd and his *apartheid* parliament:

We have seen the awakening of national consciousness in peoples who have for centuries lived in dependence upon some other power. Fifteen years ago this movement spread through Asia. Many countries there of different races and civilisations pressed their claim to an independent national life. Today the same thing is happening in Africa, and the most striking of all the impressions I have formed since I left London a month ago is of the strength of this African national consciousness. In different places it takes different forms, but it is happening everywhere. The wind of change is blowing through this continent, and, whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact. We must all accept it as a fact, and our national policies must take account of it.

The young David Holden went up to Cambridge University from a private Quaker boarding school in September 1943. He was exempted from war service at the age of 19 due to the polio, diphtheria and scarlet fever that left him a 'perambulating museum of past ailments'. Eighty-two years later, serialised by the *Sunday Times*, Peter Gillman and Emanuele Midolo concluded:³

Whether Holden had been helping the Soviets because he had been blackmailed or because he truly believed it, he had indeed been a victim of the Great Game of espionage. None of the intelligence

² Curiously, Gillman and Midolo report that Worsthorne was described as a good contact by the KGB London *resident* and double agent Oleg Gordievsky. *Murder in Cairo* p. 371

services Gillman and Midolo had scrutinised were innocent. The KGB was exploiting Holden to penetrate the Middle East, a dangerous job that cost him his life. The Egyptians had him killed, with his murder cementing their alliance with the Saudis and the Americans. The British had tried to derail the *Sunday Times* investigation and covered everything up, to avoid yet another Cambridge spy scandal. And the CIA still pretended it knew nothing about it.⁴

Stanley Bonnett, born in London a few months after Holden, had volunteered for the Royal Navy at the age of 17; by his 19th birthday was radio operator on a British destroyer escorting an Arctic convoy to Murmansk under U-boat attack. His nemesis as a spy came on March 3, 1985, under an *Observer* headline: 'CND⁵ editor passed information to Special Branch police.'

Nick Davies reported:

The former editor of the CND magazine *Sanity* yesterday admitted having a series of meetings with Special Branch officers at which he passed on information about the politics and personal lives of CND activists.

Mr Stanley Bonnett, aged 60, said he had been approached by Special Branch in March 1983 when he left *Sanity* after a dispute.

According to intelligence sources, Mr Bonnett handed the officers minutes of CND meetings and a computer print-out listing the names and addresses of 1,500 CND activists around the country.

The disclosure of Mr Bonnett's role, coming after the statement by the former MI5 officer Cathy Massiter that MI5 broke its own rules to gather intelligence about CND, will increase anxiety about the activities of domestic security forces.

Mr Bonnett, a Fleet Street reporter for 30 years before joining *Sanity* in June 1982, said: 'It didn't particularly surprise me when they got in touch. They said they wanted a yarn, and I agreed to meet them.'

A series of meetings took place at a Berkshire public house. One of the officers present was the head of the industrial section of the Metropolitan Police Special Branch, who has since joined MI5 as a police liaison officer. Mr Bonnett denies handing over documents to the officers.

⁴ *Murder in Cairo* (see note 1) p. 412.

⁵ Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

'They turned me over,' he said. 'We had several long conversations. We talked about the different groups who were lobbying for position in CND – the feminists, the Communists and so on.'

He says he told them about a woman living with a Communist;⁶ about another official who had stood as a Communist in a council election; and about the leadership style of the General Secretary, Monsignor Bruce Kent.

"They were interested in everybody. The Communists aren't running CND. There are all sorts of different groups, and I'd fallen out with most of them. They didn't like my approach to the magazine, so they squeezed me out like toothpaste."

According to the intelligence sources, Special Branch officers consulted MI5 about their dealings with Mr Bonnett and were given a number of questions to put to him at their meetings.⁷

Stephen Dorril, in *The Silent Conspiracy*, went further:

Informers are often more productive sources than telephone tapings and can be made psychologically dependent on their case officers. Bonnett, with his romantic old-style Communist views, had been out of place in the modern unilateralist movement which covered all political persuasions. His editorship had not been a success. His personal life was also in turmoil. He was easy prey for the Special Branch officers, who paid him several thousand pounds for his information, which was hardly secret. Bonnett admitted that an officer from the Metropolitan Police Special Branch's 'industrial desk' 'turned him over'. 'We had several long conversations. We talked about the different groups who were lobbying for position in CND – the feminists, the Communists and so on.' He also gave them minutes of meetings and lists of CND activists throughout the country.⁸

I worked alongside Stanley Bonnett as a reporter in Northern Ireland in 1972 when he left the relative obscurity of *Mirrorscope*, in Room 404 of the

⁶ This was Catherine Ashton, future baroness and first High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy at <<https://shorturl.at/bXiLE>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/nov/24/iran-nuclear-talks-lady-ashton-geneva-triumph>>.

⁷ <<https://shorturl.at/AtN6Q>> or <<https://www.nickdavies.net/1985/03/03/cnd-editor-passed-information-to-special-branch-police/>>

⁸ *The Silent Conspiracy* (London: Heinemann, 1993), p. 26/7.

Daily Mirror headquarters in Holborn, to take over as *Mirror* bureau chief in Belfast. Their advanced colour printing plant had been blown up in 1971 by a squad from the Official wing of the Irish Republican Army.

After four years of covering constant 'troubles', the *Mirror's* outstanding lead reporter in Belfast, Syd Young, was being rewarded with a posting to New York.

All we knew about Stanley Bonnett was that he had been a copy boy on the *Daily Worker*⁹ and had survived five arctic convoys to Soviet Russia. I imagined he must have been a young Communist who had decided to join the Merchant Navy after the Germans invaded Russia on June 22, 1941. I was quite wrong.

From late 1943 to late 1945 Bonnett was a telegraphist aboard HMS *Virago*, a new destroyer. During her five Arctic convoys she hit the battleship *Scharnhorst* with a torpedo in an icy gale during the Battle of North Cape and on January 30, 1944, rescued 78 men from the destroyer HMS *Hardy* in the Barents Sea. A German acoustic torpedo had blown *Hardy's* stern away and killed her captain and 35 men. In sub-zero conditions, *Virago* had to collide with *Hardy* to save 78 of its crew. The order given to a survivor by a wounded first lieutenant on *Hardy*, 'Jump, boy, jump', became the title of Bonnett's 1979 novel.¹⁰

An American, Douglas Hooker, serving with Bonnett aboard *Virago*, recorded the words of their captain, Lt Cdr A.J.R. White, before shelling German positions beyond Sword Beach on D-Day:

In the event of *Virago* sustaining damage enough to sink her, I will endeavour to beach her. We shall then fight our ship to the last man and the last shell.¹¹

Bonnett and Hooker served under White for two years and took part in the last naval gun battle of the Second World War, the sinking of the Japanese heavy cruiser *Haguro* in the Malacca Strait on May 16, 1945.¹² Later that day five men were killed during a Japanese air attack, the only fatalities suffered by the men of *Virago* in the two years in which she steamed a record 91,240 miles.

⁹ Suppressed on January 21, 1941, for following Comintern policy and 'systematic publishing of matter calculated to foment opposition to the prosecution of the war' before the German invasion of the Soviet Union.

¹⁰ *Jump, Boy, Jump* (London: Michael Joseph, 1979).

¹¹ *An American in the Royal Navy During World War II* (Texas: Southwestern University, 2011).

¹² See <https://www.royalnavyresearcharchive.org.uk/Article_HAGURO.htm>.

Stanley was older than most of us in the summer of 1972 when we were shacked up in the City Hotel in Derry during Operation Motorman. The British Army were demolishing the Catholic barricades of Belfast and Free Derry. It was their biggest military operation since the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the biggest in Ireland since the Irish War of Independence.

Stanley might not have been as agile as we were, but he had contacts and a very long memory. He warned us that Brigadier Frank Kitson,¹³ active in Northern Ireland between September 1970 and May 1972,¹⁴ had 'run his own pseudo-Mau Mau gangs in Kenya'¹⁵ and would doubtless have used in Ireland the dirty war tactics he had described in two of his books.¹⁶ The tragic outcome of that policy has been described by Paddy Hillyard, Professor of Sociology at Queen's University Belfast.¹⁷

Bonnett mentioned his days in Kenya to me on a dark, wet winter night in Belfast. We'd been out to the suburbs, talking to the Provisional IRA. One of them asked me for a lift back into the city. He was silent in the back seat of the Hillman Avenger as we cleared three British Army checkpoints, but as we were dropping him in Great Victoria Street, he said to us, 'Thanks boys . . . you never asked if I was carrying.'

As I drove on to McGlade's Tavern, Stanley muttered,

Andy. You know they won't thank you when they come to power . . . I drove Tom Mboya¹⁸ through 200 miles of roadblocks in Kenya but he cut me at the independence celebrations.

Bonnett's contacts in the North of Ireland were uncanny. One night in the lounge of the City Hotel in Derry, Willie McCourt, a night porter with his own fearsome intelligence network, complained to Stanley that two British soldiers

¹³ See his memoir reviewed by John Newsinger in this edition of *Lobster* at <<https://shorturl.at/l8aIL>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/90/intelligent-warfare-the-memoirs-of-general-sir-frank-kitson-gbe-kcb-mc-and-bar-dl/>>.

¹⁴ During which time Internment without trial was introduced in August 1971 and Bloody Sunday, in Derry, was on January 30, 1972.

¹⁵ Between 1952 and 1960 the British government detained 160,000 Kikuyu in 800 enclosed villages using systematic torture. One victim was Hussein Onyango Obama (c. 1895–1979) grandfather of the 44th president of the USA, tortured despite his war service with the King's African Rifles in Burma.

¹⁶ *Gangs and Counter-gangs* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1960) *Low Intensity Operations* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971).

¹⁷ <<https://shorturl.at/5701I>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/90/decades-of-deceit-the-stalker-affair-and-its-legacy/>>

¹⁸ Founding father of the Republic of Kenya, assassinated July 5, 1969.

were using the roof of the hotel as a sniper's nest and firing at Provos in the Bogside. With exaggerated urgency, Bonnett went to the phone cubicles in the lobby. I heard him dial a number which could only have been the British Army at Ebrington Barracks, for he shouted down the phone,

I thought that you buggers understood that this hotel is neutral territory. I'm telling you now, if you don't get those squaddies off the roof, none of you will be coming to the Thursday night disco in your brown boots and mufti.¹⁹

The firing duly ceased.

At the City Hotel, with some tuition by Stanley Bonnett, the international press had perfected a confidential system of news gathering. The Dublin papers wanted to know what the British Army were saying, whereas the London papers needed to know what the Provisional IRA were planning. We therefore devised a scheme of mutual assistance that provided us with the information we needed. Your Dubliner from the *Evening Herald* had his questions posed in the officers' mess at Ebrington Barracks, on his behalf, by a Londoner from the *Daily Telegraph*. Tit for tat, the *Telegraph* man could ask the *Derry Journal* to have a word with Martin McGuinness.

The Official IRA in Derry were on a ceasefire when Stanley and I went to report on their scheme for delivering fresh Donegal salmon to the embattled people of the Shantallow housing estate. Johnnie White,²⁰ OC [Officer in Command] of the Officials in the city, decided to let us glimpse a new weapon in their armour. They had a Vickers .303 medium machine gun, fired by a 3-man team and probably stolen in a raid on the Irish Reserve Army barracks at Midleton, Co Cork in 1970.

This deadly water-cooled weapon was partly hidden under an old sack. Stanley moved the sack, laid out his handkerchief and expertly stripped the weapon into its parts. It looked as though he could have done the job in the dark. The Derry lads were silent as he re-assembled their machine gun: 'Johnnie. This weapon was filthy. A complete disgrace. You can't keep it under an old sack.'

As we walked down the hill into the city on that fine summer morning, Stanley said to me, 'You know I'm not sure, as the representative of the British soldier's morning newspaper, that I ought to be coaching his potential opponents.'

¹⁹ Civilian clothes, from the Arabic word for a religious scholar.

²⁰ Former chairman of the James Connolly Republican Club and a founder of Free Derry, died 2007.

One night, back in those days, he told us about his book, *The Price of Admiralty*.²¹ 'I promised myself I would write it if I survived the Arctic.' The research into 'the most appalling incompetence, stupidity and sadism' that lay behind 'a century and a half of public adoration' of the Royal Navy took six years. It was written up in Nigeria and Kenya when he was senior lecturer in mass communications for the International Press Institute at the universities of Lagos and Nairobi. His introduction, with a quotation from Rudyard Kipling's *The Seven Seas*, does not sound like the work of a Communist.

The Price of Admiralty is an account of the cost of the Royal Navy during the past 150 years in terms of men, their achievements, their health and their dignity. It is therefore largely a social history, concerned with conditions within the Service. It is no way intended to be a chronicle of battle heroism, either by individuals or the Navy as a whole.

Stanley Bonnett died aged 60 in 1985, the year CND named him as an informer in the case they brought against the Thatcher government at the European Court of Human Rights.²² CND dropped the case in 1988.

From Stanley's possessions his daughter Joanna, 21, produced for his funeral the huge battle ensign of HMS *Virago*. *Navy News* reported.

It remains a mystery as to how Stanley acquired the flag worn by the *Virago* during her exploits which included the despatch of the German battle-cruiser *Scharnhorst*.²³

The battle ensign flew at sea for the last time when Stanley's ashes were committed to the deep. Joanna then presented the ensign to the National Museum of the Royal Navy in the historic dockyard at Portsmouth. It is therefore now housed close to Nelson's flagship *Victory*, memorably described by her father as 'a Tower of Babel below decks' at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

Press gangs worked the ports of the growing empire and the world. Neutrality, independence and the national sovereignty of others all were meaningless to a naval captain who wanted men. He just took them and argued afterwards

There were Americans – Nelson's barge crew was entirely American

²¹ Stanley Bonnett, *The Price of Admiralty, An Indictment of the Royal Navy 1805-1966* (London: Robert Hale, 1968),

²² <<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-990>>

²³ <https://archive.org/stream/NavyNews1985Collection/198509_djvu.txt>

– Swedes, Swiss, Germans, Italians, Portuguese, Dutch, Danes, Indians, Negroes and Frenchmen. The *Victory* went into action at Trafalgar with seventy-one foreigners aboard. Often she had far more.²⁴

Many years later, at the graveside of another old reporter, I asked Leo White, the retired northern news editor of the *Daily Mirror*, if he thought that Bonnett could possibly have been inserted into Belfast in the crisis of 1972 at the request or even command of MI5 or MI6. News gathering in Ireland was traditionally handled from the Manchester offices of the nationals. I put it to Leo that a reporter sometimes needs trade in facts. There has to be some give and take.

He agreed and left me no more than a scintilla of doubt about the ethics of Stan Bonnett:

I'm bound to say that in all my time handling Irish news, he was the only reporter imposed on me, against my advice, by London. And there's something else. I was over in Belfast when Stanley took me to a very fine dinner in a suburban hotel with a group of apparently important people that I'd never seen before. The conversation was unfamiliar but the dinner and the wine were very generous. In the end I had to ask him, 'Who are these people, Stanley?'

'Spooks, Leo, spooks.'

²⁴ *The Price of Admiralty* (see note 20) p.19