

## LSD-IRA?

**David Solomon, James Joseph McCann and Operation Julie**

**David Black**

(This is based on a chapter from the author's new book, *LSD Underground: Operation Julie, the Microdot Gang and the Brotherhood of Eternal Love.*)

### **1 – An Island Mystery**

In his book, *Undercover: Operation Julie - The Inside Story*,<sup>1</sup> Stephen Bentley writes of his role in the elite police squad which in 1977 took down the British LSD production and distribution networks in 'the biggest drugs bust in history'. More recently Mr Bentley has been writing 'true crime and crime fiction' and he has a blog which is mostly used to promote his books. In 2016, a reader of Bentley's blog<sup>2</sup> wrote to him about an encounter in 1972 between his late father and leading LSD conspirator, David Solomon, who received a ten-year prison sentence in the 1978 'Julie' trial.

Bentley's unnamed reader said that, when his father put his house in Anglesey up for sale, Solomon turned up as a potential buyer. Solomon, who had the public face of a successful American author and journalist, also introduced the reader's father to Richard Kemp, who was the chief chemist of the LSD ring, and his partner, Christine Bott, a medical doctor. Bentley says that although his reader was a child at the time, he 'distinctly recalled' that Solomon was accompanied on occasion by an Irishman, who later turned out to be James McCann, 'IRA volunteer'. The reader 'described and witnessed this volunteer as "going mental" at his father . . . Solomon calmed the Irishman down and they left'. Bentley wrote:

David Solomon, for me, was always a dark character. I always felt there was something sinister about him . . . . He had approached [Richard] Kemp to manufacture both LSD and a synthesised form of cannabis. It turns out he also associated with IRA terrorists. He also had links to other terrorists. These links were never followed up.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Bentley, *Undercover: Operation Julie - The Inside Story* (London: Hendry Publishing, 2017)

<sup>2</sup> Bentley's blog is at <[www.expatinbacolod.com/](http://www.expatinbacolod.com/)>.

<sup>3</sup> *Undercover: Operation Julie* (see footnote 1) pp. 209-210

This is unprecedented. No previous account has claimed that in 1972 Solomon and McCann were conspiring together in Anglesey, or that the British LSD underground (AKA the Microdot Gang) had any connection with the Irish Republican Army. In my previous book, *Psychedelic Tricksters*,<sup>4</sup> I noted that the description in Bentley's book of McCann 'going mental' at someone for no apparent reason would not surprise those who knew him, such as his partner in hash-smuggling, Howard Marks. However, it seemed evident that whatever interests David Solomon and James McCann shared, it wouldn't have been LSD since, as far as is known, McCann was never interested in it, either for personal use or commercial gain. They did, however, have interests in common, not least smuggling shipments of cannabis – and more, as we shall see. My attitude then was sceptical, if not entirely dismissive.

In June 2020, Bentley's correspondent wrote to me from Anglesey. He is Harvey Mason, son of the late John and Cynthia Mason. Harvey told me he thought Bentley's interpretation of their correspondence was not entirely accurate. As regards McCann 'going mental' at his father:

At that time in 1972 I was 4 years old. I only have vague recollections of things that happened like my father fixing a broken table the following morning and not understanding why he was angry. Other than that, it's what my parents have told me about the events that transpired. James McCann did not visit the house. Solomon did . . . .<sup>5</sup>

Harvey went on to say that Bentley's account of the affair was by no means the whole story. Harvey sent me copies of contemporaneous notes he had taken of his parents' recollections, plus various relevant documents he had inherited. Harvey's father believed he had been 'subject to a dirty tricks campaign to keep him quiet'. Convinced that there was more to be discovered, Harvey suggested that I might like to dig into it. He was also keen to do some digging himself.

## **2 – Smugglers Creek**

John Mason was a civil engineer who worked on several construction projects for the nuclear and defence industries. His family home, *Saith Mor*, was an old cottage in Amlwch, on the northern coast of the island of Anglesey. It had a small chalet attached, which was occasionally rented out. The property went all the way down to the shore, and a path led to a secluded creek, which would, Harvey says, have been 'perfect for smuggling'. The Masons also ran a small

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<sup>4</sup> David Black, *Psychedelic Tricksters: a True Secret History of LSD* (London: BPC, 2020) p. 180)

<sup>5</sup> Harvey Mason to author.

restaurant, named the *Seven Seas*, on Mona Street, in Amlwch. A few doors down the street stood a jewellery workshop owned by one Derek Francis Donovan. When the Masons decided to sell *Saith Mor*, Donovan offered to find a buyer in return for a commission on the sale. Derek Donovan was the person who introduced David Solomon to John Mason.

Solomon stayed at Amlwch for a few days, lodging at the Bull Bay Hotel and visiting the Masons' restaurant several times. During this visit, Mason took Solomon on a crabbing expedition along the coast. In conversation, Mason recalled, Solomon talked about the pleasures of taking certain drugs and hinted, half-jokingly, that he was or had been connected to the CIA (in World War Two he had served in military intelligence). Mason also recalled that Solomon 'became nervy' when someone present casually mentioned that Mason was friendly with the local police: he had been reporting suspicious night-time activities at Bull Bay, such as lights flashing on and off at sea, and boats loading and unloading.

Two of the other LSD conspirators, Richard Kemp and Christine Bott, turned up at *Saith Mor* along with Gerald Lyn Thomas, an American chemical engineer. They presented themselves to John Mason as working for Thomas' company, Pollution Control Associates, and left a business card. After viewing the house, Kemp, Bott and Thomas headed off to Trearddur Bay, to look at other properties on the island. Solomon left Amlwch without clinching a deal to buy the Masons' property. On 8 June 1972, Solomon wrote a friendly, apologetic letter to John Mason to say the deal was off:

Just a note in line with my promise to get in touch with you as soon as I could gather my 'clan' together for a group decision regarding your house and property. I deeply regret that I was unable to get my people together on this . . . to swing all the money . . . I have been in many parts of this world and have known people both high and low: you are an original and I do not rate you below any man I have ever met. So I do hope that my inability to swing this thing does not alter my having found a friend, a fellow poacher of the wilds of the universe.

The Masons never heard from any of them again. Kemp and Bott were travelling around in a caravan at the time. Later, with financial help from others in the Microdot Gang, they bought a house to live in near Tregaron, Ceredigion. With another American, Paul Arnaboldi, they also bought an old mansion at Plas Llysyn, near Carno, to house their lab for producing the drugs.

The Masons' house in Amlwch, following Solomon's withdrawal, was eventually bought by the Derek Donovan, who used it as his family home. The Masons moved to a smaller property, having also sold their restaurant. The

meeting in 1972 with David Solomon, however, would come back to haunt them.

### **3 – Operation Julie**

**I**n March 1977, five years after meeting Solomon, John Mason read the press coverage of the Operation Julie arrests. He immediately recognised the names of some of the defendants and contacted the police to tell them what he knew. As well as Solomon's letter, Mason showed the police the business card Gerald Thomas had given him: 'Pollution Control Associates: Water Pollution Specialists, BCM Pulocon, WCI V6XX. Tel 01 405 0463/4.' The company turned out to be largely a front for Thomas's endeavours with Solomon to make synthetic cocaine and THC in a laboratory.

Neither Mason's statement to the police on meeting Solomon and friends, nor the business card, figured at the Operation Julie trial, in early 1978. But the reference to 'water pollution' may well have been the basis for an allegation that the defendants had planned to pollute the water supply with LSD. Days after the trial ended, on 9 March 1978, the *Daily Mirror* ran a front-page story which claimed:

Top chemist Richard Kemp and his mistress . . . planned to blow a million minds simultaneously by pouring pure LSD into the reservoirs serving Birmingham. Detectives were horrified when they heard what the drug barons had in mind.

The story, which was police-sourced, was written by Ed Laxton, the ghost writer for Operation Julie undercover officer Martyn Pritchard's book, *Busted! The Sensational Life-Story of an Undercover Hippie* (London: Mirror Books, 1978). The prosecutors in the trial had known better than to run the 'acid in the water supply' allegation past a jury; if they had, the defence would simply have got a qualified scientist to testify that LSD would have been quite ineffective in a reservoir because dilution and the chlorine content would have neutralised it. The *Mirror* story was perhaps intended to quell any sympathy the public might have had for the hippie defendants.

If the police did make use of the business card for such PR purposes, they didn't pay much attention to Mason's most startling contention: that he hadn't just met the Operation Julie defendants, but also an Irishman the police now knew as James Joseph McCann, IRA associate and fugitive. Cynthia Mason told the police that Solomon, as well as visiting the house, dined at the *Seven Seas* accompanied by the Irishman; twice when she was serving and the last time when John Mason was front of house. After the incident of the Irishman 'going mental' at John Mason, Solomon returned to the restaurant to say that McCann

had mistaken Mason for someone else he disliked.

Several months earlier, in 1971, James McCann had escaped from Crumlin Road Prison in Belfast and fled to the Irish Republic, after which his whereabouts remained unknown for six years. But at the very time the Masons were talking to the police, McCann was suddenly back in the papers – this time with his photograph accompanying the news story. He had been arrested in Canada in July 1977 and deported. He landed in France, where he was arrested at the request of the West German police to face extradition for his alleged part in the bombing of a British Army base in 1973. The French court rejected the extradition application on the grounds that the alleged offence was political. But the French authorities wanted McCann off their hands and deported him to Ireland, where he once again disappeared.<sup>6</sup>

The Masons identified McCann from photographs shown to them by the police. As McCann was still at large, they feared for their safety because they believed they had witnessed a connection between the LSD conspiracy and Irish republican terrorism. The only other witness to this connection was Derek Donovan, who had introduced Solomon (and, via Solomon, the LSD cohorts and the fugitive, table-breaking McCann) to John Mason. Yet, as far as the police were concerned, Donovan was not a part of the Julie investigation. John Mason wondered why.

#### **4 – Derek Donovan**

**Derek Francis Donovan** (1934-2007) was born in Tooting, South London. Like others growing up in the poorer parts of London during World War Two, Donovan was drawn into petty crime. By his early teens, he was making a name for himself as a snooker player in the local halls and mixing with other young delinquents, including Charlie and Eddie Richardson from nearby Camberwell. Destined for later notoriety as ‘celebrity gangsters’, the Richardsons were already building their scrap metal empire from the ruins of the London Blitz.<sup>7</sup> In the immediate post-war years, Donovan, like Charlie Richardson, did time in reform schools and then the armed forces. But unlike Richardson, who feigned madness to get a discharge from the army, Donovan served for twelve years in the Royal Air Force, specialising in developing new technology, such as flight simulation. Military discipline did not, however, ‘straighten him out’. In 1959, when serving as an RAF Corporal at St Athans, he was prosecuted for stealing cigarettes from a vending machine by inserting metal disks (i.e. faked coins) he had made in an RAF workshop. For this he got

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Marks, *Mr Nice: an Autobiography* (Vintage, London: 1985) p. 168

<sup>7</sup> Charlie Richardson, *My Manor – an Autobiography* (Pan Books, London: 1992)

a three-month prison sentence, reduced on appeal to a fine. In January 1960, Donovan was committed for trial to Glamorgan Quarter Sessions on charges of stealing equipment from the Air Ministry, worth about £200, to sell to a scrap dealer.<sup>8</sup>

Although there is no evidence that Donovan ever did business with the Richardsons, he was selling stolen RAF material as scrap during the period the Richardsons were buying it. Charlie Richardson claimed that the Metropolitan Police were hounding him because he couldn't bribe enough of them to ignore his illegalities. After being charged with receiving stolen goods, Richardson escaped prosecution by bribing witnesses and donating to the 'police fund'. Derek Donovan, in contrast, was investigated by the RAF Special Investigations Branch, which was regarded – in comparison with the Met – as corruption-free. Donovan pleaded not guilty but was convicted and given a six months prison sentence. Surprisingly, Donovan's imprisonment did not end his RAF career, which lasted a couple of more years and saw him promoted to the rank of sergeant.

Donovan served part of his RAF service in Kenya. There, he met his future wife, Terry, who was from the mid-Wales town of Llanidloes. After leaving the RAF, Derek and Terry moved to Amlwch, Anglesey, where he opened a workshop and put his metal-working skills to good use as a jeweller, clock repairer and occasional gunsmith. In the mid-1960s he was elected as an Amlwch town councillor. After the Language Act of 1967 ended the ban on using Welsh in public administration, Donovan (who was not a Welsh speaker) frequently found that he could not contribute to the verbal exchanges at council meetings. He attempted to raise some interest in his 'plight' from the British media but was ignored. However the story did reach the *Boston Globe*, which on 9 May 1967 carried a tongue-in-cheek report that Donovan, an Englishman with an Irish name, was demanding to have a Welsh translator on hand at council meetings.

As a jeweller Donovan made regular trips to London's Hatton Garden, for meetings with dealers in side-streets to exchange envelopes of cash for pouches of diamonds. He also made jewellery from tourmaline, which he imported from Nigeria. Tourmaline, a crystalline boron silicate, is believed by some to have magical powers guarding against 'negative thought patterns'. This may well have been of interest to Terry Donovan who was a dabbler in the occult – an interest Derek did not share. Terry was a practicing witch and avid reader of the books of Aleister Crowley, the notorious English practitioner of

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<sup>8</sup> *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 28 May 1959; *Western Mail*, 11 November 1959 and 4 January 1960

'magick'.<sup>9</sup> Terry socialised with a community of hippies at Mynydd Mellech, which is near Amlwch.<sup>10</sup> The 'pagan'/hippie aspect offers another possible connection between Solomon and Donovan. The author, George Andrews, who collaborated with Solomon on the 1973 anthology, *Drugs and Sexuality*, also edited an anthology entitled *Drugs and Magic* in 1975. Andrews is also known to have been one of Solomon's LSD distributors, although he was never arrested for it.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from working as a jeweller Donovan had an important source of income from property – using a kind of commercialised squatting, where he'd take possession of a building and run a business there before actually paying for it (and sometimes he'd never pay for it). In the mid-1970s he took over the Grenville Hotel on Mona Street, Amlwch, and made money out of it for some time without paying the seller. Donovan managed to get an alcohol licence for a bar in adjoining premises, which was frequented by welders from Liverpool working on an oil pipeline. The liberties Donovan was taking with other people's property may have had awkward consequences: a regular at the Grenville recalled that one day a stranger walked in and asked, 'Who owns this bar?' On being told that Derek Donovan owned it but wasn't around, the stranger said, 'Well, we need to talk', and walked out. One of the Liverpoolians exclaimed 'Fuck me, do you know who that is?' He had recognized the stranger as an associate of Dougie Flood, property magnate and leading figure of the Manchester Quality Street Gang. According to Peter Walsh, in his book *Gang War: The Inside Story of the Manchester Gangs*, certain high-ranking police officers in the Greater Manchester Police stated that 'The Quality Street Gang is the name given to a group of criminals who are . . . the organisers of incidents of major crime in the city.'<sup>12</sup>

In April 1980, a boat named the *Eloise* was seized in south Anglesey near Newborough, carrying one and a half tons of cannabis. The boat had been

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<sup>9</sup> Crowley's preferred spelling, used to distinguish it from the more 'entertainment' type of magic/sleight of hand. An example of this usage is in the title of Martin Booth's biography: *A Magick Life: The Biography of Aleister Crowley* (London: Coronet Books, 2000)

<sup>10</sup> One of the hippie communes on Anglesey (Ynys Môn) was (at least temporarily, in the early 1970s) the home of a couple of musicians who went on to form the minor, yet influential, bands Aslan and The Ruts.

<sup>11</sup> Dick Lee and Colin Pratt, *Operation Julie* (London: W H Allen, 1978) p. 140; 'Transcript of taped conversation between Alexander Trocchi, William S. Burroughs, Ian Dunbar and George Andrews concerning drug addiction' at <<http://omeka.wustl.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/mlc50/item/9947>>.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Walsh, *Gang War: The Inside Story of the Manchester Gangs* (Preston: Milo Books, 2005), pp.19–20.

tracked from the Mediterranean by a multi-agency task force, codenamed 'Yashmak'. The lead agency in this operation was the British Customs special investigations unit, Alpha. Mastermind of the scheme was Arend ter Horst, a 'Mr Big' of hash-smuggling, who remained in the Netherlands, safe from extradition. Horst was a one-time associate of Howard Marks, as was Charles Radcliffe, who supervised the Anglesey shipment from his farmhouse in Devon. The boat crew and a landing party who were waiting on the beach were all arrested. Several others were arrested elsewhere, including Radcliffe. At a trial the following year, nine of those arrested got a total of 22 years imprisonment. One of the boat crew was Anglesey resident, Allan Stephen Lloyd (35), a professional yachtsman, of Tyn Llwyn, Llangristiolus. Lloyd, who had chosen the spot for the landing, got a two year sentence.<sup>13</sup>

There is no evidence that Stephen Lloyd knew Derek Donovan, but it is known that Donovan was one of several men in Anglesey who were suspected of involvement but never charged. Donovan's home and premises were raided and searched for four days. He claimed he had been raided because of a dispute with the tax authorities over his VAT bill (the Yashmak investigation was led by HM Revenue and Customs). He also claimed that the previous owner of his house had been a drug dealer. But, as we know, the previous owner had been John Mason, so this couldn't have been true. When Donovan moved out the house after his business went bankrupt in the mid-1980s, a hand grenade was discovered by the new owners during renovation. The grenade was blown up on the beach by the bomb disposal squad. Donovan claimed the house had been owned in 1950s by a retired army officer; hence the presence of the grenade. But, given that the house had been completely renovated by John Mason during his ownership, this seemed questionable.

I have been informed by a source close to Donovan that he used to be regularly visited by a 'lady from MI5' – although this source, when asked to elaborate, declined to comment any further. A tantalising, and yet inconclusive, state of affairs.

## **5 – James McCann, David Solomon, Howard Marks and Frensz**

Like Derek Francis Donovan, James Joseph McCann had an interest in jewellery. According to David Leigh's book, *High Time: the Life and Times of Howard Marks*, 'There is some concrete evidence that he [McCann] spent a period in Amsterdam selling stolen jewellery'. McCann also claimed to have been involved with the Richardson gang and he is known to have worked as an

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Walsh, *Drug War: the Secret History* (Preston: Milo Books, 2020), ch. 9 of the Kindle version, 'Last of the Gentleman Smugglers'.



enforcer for the property gangster, Nicholas Hoogstraten.<sup>14</sup>

In London in February 1971, McCann gate-crashed an editorial meeting of a left-wing underground magazine called *Friends* – later renamed *Frendz* – and, to impress them, showed off a sawn-off shotgun he pulled from inside his coat – a stunt he had perfected during his time as an enforcer. McCann told the hippie journalists that he was part of a movement called 'Free Belfast', which he claimed, represented a growing anarchist/hippie tendency within the Six Counties. McCann organised a trip to Belfast for a group of *Friends* staff and other alternative press people. In late March 1971, McCann was holding court with former *International Times* editor Felix de Mendelssohn, American photographer Joe Stevens and Irish journalist Pete McCartan in the common room of Belfast Queen's University. To everyone's horror, McCann suddenly pulled his sawn-off shotgun stunt and then threw a Molotov cocktail into the yard. This led to a chase by a plain-clothes patrol of the Royal Ulster Constabulary followed by an armed stand-off. McCann surrendered and the four of them were arrested and remanded to Crumlin Road gaol. Jill Marcuson, wife of *Friends* editor, Alan Marcuson, and other anarchists present in Belfast were also arrested.

Alan Marcuson, who edited *Friends* for 28 issues, from 1969-71, says that for him and Jill their involvement in the magazine ended that day, 'when everyone was in Belfast'. He had an appointment to meet John Lennon in Apple's offices to ask for finance for *Friends*, but en route he passed a newspaper headline which said 'Ten in Anarchist Bomb Gang' and he immediately knew 'It was Felix and Jim McCann, Jilly and Joe Stevens.' Though the immediate effect on him was obviously huge, he still went to the Apple offices but was almost struck dumb. 'And I walked into this meeting white as a sheet. I didn't get as far as asking him for money.'<sup>15</sup>

McCann managed to break out of the prison by sawing through the cell bars (how he got the saw is a mystery). He referred to himself from then on as the 'shamrock pimpernel'. McCann was not in the strict sense an 'IRA Volunteer', i.e. a sworn-in member. However, a profile of him in the *Irish Independent* stated that 'he was possibly the most effective arms supplier to the Provos in his time'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> David Leigh, *High Time: the Life and Times of Howard Marks* (London: Unwin, 1985) p. 45

<sup>15</sup> Jonathon Green, *Days in the Life : Voices from the English underground, 1961-1971* (London: Heinemann, 1989) p. 377

<sup>16</sup> See 'Howard Marks, Jim McCann, John McGuffin And The IRA', *The Broken Elbow*, 4 April 2016 at <<https://tinyurl.com/5bmfxwp>> or <<https://thebrokenelbow.com/2016/04/11/howardmarks-jim-mccann-john-mcguffin-and-the-ira/>>.

McCann's encounter with *Friends* magazine led to editors Alan Marcuson and Charles Radcliffe introducing him to their hash-smuggling associates, Howard Marks and Graham Plinston. Once McCann was free and in the Irish Republic he was back in business. With Marks and Plinston, McCann, using his Republican contacts at Shannon Airport, formed a syndicate for flying in Afghan and Nepalese hash.<sup>17</sup>

As a writer and researcher in drug-use, Solomon cultivated links with several London underground journals – *Friends* included. Steve Abrams (who had dealings with David Solomon and his fellow American LSD conspirator, Ronald Stark) told me of a conversation he had in 1971 with Bernie Simons, the London solicitor representing the members of the *Friends* delegation who were arrested in Belfast. Simons (who also represented Howard Marks) said that, over lunch at the Oxford and Cambridge Club, Stark had offered to help out the Belfast defendants' case financially (though this never came to anything) and 'took some interest in McCann'. At this time Solomon was distributing the LSD made in Stark's Paris laboratory; so he too may have taken 'some interest' in McCann. Solomon had been responsible for getting Richard Kemp to work for Stark in his Paris laboratory to make LSD.

By the end of 1971, the Kemp-Stark relationship had ended and Solomon's relationship with Stark had cooled. Solomon, however, had procured enough ergotamine tartrate to set up his own LSD production venture. As he needed a chemist, he turned to Dick Pountain, chemist for Abrams' Society of Mental Awareness (SOMA) and writer for *Friends*.<sup>18</sup> Pountain, in correspondence with me, confirmed this: 'I was indeed approached by Solomon to work for Julie, but I declined his kind offer once I recognised him as a foul-tempered sociopath – a couple of rungs below McCann on the ladder.' Pountain only met McCann once, 'enough to recognise him as a psychopath and avoid future contact'. Pountain never met Stark, but recalls that Alan Marcuson did meet Stark once. Marcuson also knew McCann and Solomon, though in the latter case, according to Pountain, 'not very well'. Pountain thinks it doubtful that Alan Marcuson introduced Solomon to McCann, who was at the time hiding out in the Irish Republic. On the other hand he doesn't say he couldn't have. Certainly, Marcuson knew of McCann's location in the Irish Republic. (Marcuson did not respond to enquiries on that matter.) Pountain adds that given the 'underground' was such a 'small world', Solomon and

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Radcliffe, *Don't Start Me Talking: Subculture, Situationism and the Sixties*, (Bread & Circuses Publishing, 2018 - Kindle), chapter 36, 'McCann: 1971'

<sup>18</sup> 'Voluntary Statement of Richard Hilary Kemp handed to Detective Superintendent Greenslade at Horfield Prison, Bristol on Friday, 30 December 1977' (unpublished).

McCann *could* have met 'a dozen different ways'.

In late-1972, Radcliffe complained to Howard Marks that he was owed money for his 'research' role for the Shannon Airport scam. When McCann heard about this, he obtained Radcliffe's telephone number from Marks and promptly called Radcliffe, threatening to kill his family if he persisted in the claim. That was last time Radcliffe heard from McCann and it was also the end of his collaboration with Marks.<sup>19</sup>

## **6 – MI6**

The writers for *Friends/Frendz* magazine, as well as James McCann and Howard Marks, were all on the radar of the security services. A retired police Special Branch officer, who worked in Northern Ireland and Britain in the 1970s, said that he knew 'quite a lot about *Friends*', because '*Friends* was infiltrated big style'. He said that it wasn't Special Branch that monitored the magazine but the security services, who passed on to the Branch a lot of 'verifications'; for 'propaganda to be honest'. Without naming anyone, he said that a lot of people associated with the magazine were 'compromised'. He added that McCann wasn't the only person connected with *Friends* magazine who would have been of interest, because part of the remit was to investigate 'associated links' between republican terrorism in Ireland and 'other' (unspecified) terrorist organisations: 'They [Friends] were infiltrated for whatever reason and information about the IRA was part of the intelligence chain that ended up with us.'<sup>20</sup>

After Howard Marks and co met James McCann through contacts at *Friends*, the relationship attracted the attention of the security services. According to Marks' autobiography, *Mr Nice*, in late 1972 he was approached by Hamilton McMillan, an old chum from Oxford, who was now working for MI6. McMillan wanted to use Marks' Amsterdam dress shop, AnnaBelinda, as a front for MI6's monitoring of IRA activity. Marks agreed to work for MI6, but claims that when he learned the immediate target was McCann, he decided to play a double game. Marks warned McCann that MI6 had him under surveillance and therefore probably knew about his smuggling operation at Shannon Airport.<sup>21</sup>

Although it was late 1972 when Marks was recruited by MI6, the agency would have seen reports from Dutch intelligence as far back as early 1971 about Marks and his colleague Plinston linking up with McCann. They would

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<sup>19</sup> Radcliffe (see note 17) ch. 42, 'The Ego Flies: April 1970-November 1972'

<sup>20</sup> Former Special Branch officer interviewed on condition of anonymity (16 July 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Marks (see note 3) pp. 120-39

have known that in October 1971 'Dutch' Doherty of the Belfast IRA was arrested and found to have Marks' name and former address in Britain in his contact list. Doherty had been given Marks' details by McCann. The reports reached the security services but were concealed from both the Metropolitan Police Central Drugs Intelligence Unit and British Customs. One obvious reason to discount John Mason's testimony that he saw McCann in Wales in 1972 would be the unlikelihood of a wanted terrorist chancing a trip across the Irish Sea. However, according to Peter Walsh's book, *Drug War: the Secret History*, McCann's shipments of Afghan hash at Shannon Airport 'were then subdivided and ferried in cars to the UK'.<sup>22</sup> McCann was certainly reckless enough to come to Britain, possibly on a clandestine landing by boat (in the early 1970s Irish fishing boats were using ports in Anglesey). As McCann boasted to Howard Marks:

Fuck the Welsh ferry. And no fucker searches the kid. If the boys can take guns over every day for the struggle, and farmers can take their pigs over to get bigger subsidies, I'm fucking sure I can take over some fucking bananas. <sup>23</sup>

One thing he wouldn't have known was that, had he made the trip and been checked by police or Customs, he wouldn't have been arrested because MI6 wanted both him and Marks left alone. Peter Walsh in *Drug War* quotes an officer of HM Custom's Special Investigations branch, Alpha, saying that, as regards Marks, 'we had a good idea where he was but we weren't allowed to touch him'. The same must have applied to his close associate McCann.<sup>24</sup>

1972 was a bad year for MI6 in Ireland. MI6 was recruiting and running agents in the Irish Republic. Two of them, former British soldier Kenneth Littlejohn and his brother Keith, carried out a number of bank robberies which were then falsely attributed to the Official IRA. On 12 October 1972, they were caught after an armed robbery of a bank in Dublin. This led to their outing by the Irish press as MI6 assets.<sup>25</sup> In the same period MI6 was exposed for running an agent inside the Garda Special Branch after he was arrested in Dublin for passing on top-secret files to MI6.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Walsh, (see note 13) ch. 6, 'Over the Way'

<sup>23</sup> Leigh (see note 14) p. 79

<sup>24</sup> Walsh (see note 13) ch. 4, 'The Rise of the Church'; ch. 6, 'Over the Way'.

<sup>25</sup> Marks (see note 3) p. 134

<sup>26</sup> Ed Moloney and Bob Mitchell, 'MI6, The Spy In The Irish Police Force, Jack Lynch And Britain', *The Broken Elbow* at <<https://tinyurl.com/5zrnuma4>> or <<https://thebrokenelbow.com/2014/01/26/mi6-the-spy-in-the-irish-police-force-jack-lynch-and-britain-an-insight-into-ango-irish-relations-a-year-after-bloody-sunday/>>.

These scandals were exposed at the very time MI6 was monitoring Howard Marks and James McCann.

In November 1973, Marks was arrested by the Dutch police for his part in smuggling cannabis to the US, hidden in loud speakers for rock concerts. Shortly before this, (according to the prosecution at his later trial in the UK) MI6 had severed contact with him. Either MI6 strongly suspected or knew that Marks was double-crossing them, or wanted to avoid further exposure of the agency's collaboration with criminals – or both. (According to Charles Radcliffe, Marks told him and several other dope-smugglers that he was playing the 'great game' with MI6 as a double agent.) Marks jumped bail in Amsterdam, went underground and resumed smuggling. The Marks-MI6 affair was finally exposed in July 1979, when the *New Statesman* published a leaked police report.<sup>27</sup>

A month after the leaking of the report, McCann was arrested by the Garda in Naas, County Kildare for his role in a 850 pound shipment of marijuana from Thailand. McCann's cannabis smuggling apparently embarrassed and angered the IRA; he was reportedly beaten up in jail while on remand. At the trial he claimed he had been set up by a British intelligence plot involving the drug-dealer and MI6 agent, Howard Marks. As the Marks-MI6 connection had been confirmed in the public domain, the trial judge directed the jury to acquit McCann.<sup>28</sup>

In between McCann's arrest and subsequent acquittal, Marks was himself arrested. On the night of December 29 1979, the tugboat *Karob* deposited 15 tons of Columbian dope on Scotland's West Coast. The arrangements were made by Marks' American contacts in the US Brotherhood of Eternal Love. According to Marks' accomplice Patrick Lane – in his book *Recollections of a Racketeer*<sup>29</sup> – a detachment of rogue US Marines assisted the landing. The *Karob* was previously owned by the Anglesey salvaging company, Holyhead Towing, under the name *Afon Wen*. The crew were never identified. The inland distribution of the cannabis was, however, penetrated by British Customs investigators, who discovered Marks' role in the scam and arrested him. Marks admitted to doing the accounts for the operation, but claimed at his trial that

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<sup>27</sup> Tim Malyon, '15 Tons and What D'You Get?', *City Limits*, 27 November 1981. Republished by *The Generalist*, <<https://tinyurl.com/bderw4u6>> or <<https://hqinfo.blogspot.com/2016/04/marks-in-memorial-howard-making.html>>; Marks (see note 3) p. 179; Radcliffe (see note 17) Appendix 4, 'Mr Nice in Other Words'

<sup>28</sup> Malyon (see note 24)

<sup>29</sup> Patrick Lane & Patrick Alexander, *Recollections of a Racketeer: Smuggling Hash and Cash Around the World* (London: Mainstream, 2009).

he had been acting on behalf of MI6 to see if McCann was behind it. A Mexican intelligence officer appeared for the defence and claimed that Marks had been providing intelligence on right-wing narco-terrorists. The prosecution couldn't prove that the Mexican wasn't telling the truth, or that he was being bribed (which he was). After the prosecution conceded that MI6 had indeed recruited him, Marks was acquitted by the jury.<sup>30</sup> Once again MI6, the Secret Intelligence Service, was left facing embarrassing questions (which it never answered) about its illegal actions. There was then, as evidenced above, much going on in 1972 that the security services might have feared exposure of several years later when John Mason began asking the police awkward questions.

## **7 – Blacklisting**

**I**n 1980 John Mason applied for a job with the Balfour Beatty construction company to work as a joiner at Sellafield nuclear power plant. Balfour wrote to tell him that his application had been accepted and he should report for work on 6 October 1980. Then, days after he received the letter, Balfour Beatty notified him that the job offer had been withdrawn but no explanation was given. Working at Sellafield would have required a security clearance; the most likely explanation for rejecting Mason was that he did not pass it.

Mason began to suspect that he might be on some sort of MOD/Police database blacklist for MOD work. Although it wasn't public knowledge at the time, the Balfour Beatty were one of the largest subscribers to the blacklisting services of the Economic League which, with the assistance of police Special Branch, accumulated files on around 22,000 people. Names were entered into the files on the basis of trade union activities, political views or just a reputation for 'causing trouble'.<sup>31</sup>

Mason was no trade-union stalwart. In 1979, during the 'winter of discontent', John Mason had travelled to Spennymoor, County Durham for his mother's funeral, only to find that the council gravediggers were on strike. He and his brother dug the grave themselves, and were featured doing so on BBC television news. Technically he was strike-breaking; but he may also have been seen as a 'trouble maker' in the sense that he was not prepared to let anyone stop him from exercising his right, as he saw it, to give his mother a proper burial.

In 1982 and 83, John Mason tried to get the press to address his concerns that his difficulties in finding employment might be linked to a cover-up

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<sup>30</sup> Marks (see note 3) p.197

<sup>31</sup> Phil Chamberlain, 'The construction industry blacklist: how the Economic League lived on', *Lobster* issue 58 at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster58/lob58-042.pdf>>.

regarding Solomon, McCann and Donovan. According to Cynthia Mason's recollection, he was in contact with the *Mail on Sunday* and the *Observer*. But, just before Mason was due to talk to the press, police officers sent up from Staffordshire to Scotland walked onto the building site where he was working and pulled him in for questioning about the murder of 11-year-old Susan Maxwell. The body of the girl, who was abducted in Cornhill-on-Tweed, was found on 12 August 1982 near Uttoxeter, 264 miles away her home. Mason, exposed to his workmates as a suspect in a horrendous child-murder case, had to leave his job and return home to north Wales, where he had a nervous breakdown. Harvey Mason recalls:

He wasn't even allowed to get his time sheets to prove his he was on site. Someone had deliberately told the workforce he had been arrested for the murder and he came within a hair's breadth of a beating. He left the site, and had what can only be described as a nervous breakdown. I remember the time well. I was sent by my mother to get our local doctor at his home just around the corner. Eventually the police said he was no longer of interest.

In late 1983, out the blue, John Mason was offered a job in Saudi Arabia by a Saudi company called KAL Enterprises which had an office in London. The owner, Saleh Abdullah Kamel, was a leading Saudi royal and businessman, and likely to have been on friendly terms with MI6 which, after all, was the foreign intelligence service of a strategic ally of the Saudi regime. Mason took the job, which involved digging wells and irrigation, and flying around the Middle East in a rickety World War Two Dakota in the company of an ex-South African mercenary. The work was very well paid, but Mason couldn't help suspecting that someone had pulled strings with the Saudis just to get him out of the way.

In wasn't until 1985 that Mason finally got confirmation from the police that he was no longer 'of interest' in the investigation of Susan Maxwell's murder. (Five years later the actual culprit, Robert Black, was caught and convicted of raping and murdering four girls aged between 5 and 11 in the years 1981 to 1986.)

Mason suspected that his wrongful arrest for murder might have been linked to the apparent black-listing and to a cover-up regarding Solomon, McCann and Donovan. In 1985 he contacted Chester Stern, the chief crime correspondent at the *Mail on Sunday*. That same year Mason was granted a meeting with Sir Philip Myers, former Chief Constable of North Wales, who was then Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary. Myers – who Mason found to be 'a real gentleman' – agreed to do some digging as to why the Staffordshire Police (who had found Susan Maxwell's body) had gone to make

the arrest in Scotland. Myers informed Mason, 'All I can tell you is the intelligence that led to your arrest came from the London Metropolitan Police.' Myers, however, did not divulge who in the London Met was responsible for the putting Mason in the frame.

Sir Philip Myers was by means innocent of covering up 'sensitive' security matters. John Stalker, Deputy Chief Constable of Greater Manchester, was sent to Belfast in 1984 to investigate the allegations of a police shoot-to-kill policy and collusion with Loyalist paramilitaries engaged in the murder of republican 'targets'. In 1986, just as he was due to present a final report, which recommended the prosecution of several RUC officers, he was accused of having criminal associations with the Manchester Quality Street Gang. Stalker was later cleared of the allegations, by which time his report had been buried. Asked years later as to who had been responsible for his downfall, Stalker said, 'I believe that essentially it was Sir Philip Myers. He was the prime mover, with various unknown people from the Northern Ireland Office with the help of [Manchester's Chief Constable] Sir James [Anderton].'<sup>32</sup>

Harvey Mason has a receipt from 1985 sent to his father to cover travel expenses for an interview. It was signed by Chester Stern of the *Mail on Sunday*. However, no article on the case was published, either by the *Mail* or any other paper.

To be clear, it has not been possible to directly corroborate the Masons' claim that David Solomon and James McCann were doing business together in Anglesey in 1972. On the other hand, the evidence doesn't refute the possibility that they were. The role of Derek Donovan remains murky. His undoubted relationship with Solomon should have been investigated by the police, but there is no evidence that it was.

John Mason, in trying to make sense of his brush with the criminal underworld, was probing an area which the forces of the state felt should be protected from public scrutiny. There are people today, on both sides of the 'divide' in Northern Ireland, who are campaigning for disclosure of information held by the state regarding their dead or still living relatives whose lives were severely impacted – and sometimes terminated – by events involving the security services. Senior police officers who often liaised with the security services were expected to maintain silence or deny any knowledge of security matters, under penalty of having their careers and pensions curtailed. Many journalists and politicians adhered to the same code of silence. Such was the

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<sup>32</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 2014, 'Sir Philip Myers – Obituary' at <<https://tinyurl.com/4e8ts3px>> or <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/10949903/Sir-Philip-Myers-obituary.html>>.



case in the 1970s; and not much has changed. Britain is still a notoriously secretive society.

In the covert wars on drugs and terrorism, John and Cynthia Mason were civilian casualties: caught up in something not of their making or understanding, asking questions that made police officers uncomfortable and suffering the consequences. John Mason died in 2013. Cynthia died in 2016. In Harvey Mason's words, 'My father died an angry man.'

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David Black's *Acid: the secret history of LSD*, was reviewed in *Lobster* 35.