

## The Travellers

During the Troubles in Northern Ireland the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin developed a programmatic system of collecting information from and about Northern Ireland, which was instrumental in keeping political leaders and civil servants informed of developments in the Province and in assisting Dublin to determine its 'reach' in pursuit of a solution to the division there.

When the Troubles started in 1969 there was no unit in the Irish civil service dealing with Northern Ireland and in the initial period, the Taoiseach was dependent on advice and information provided by the Secretary of the Department of Finance, Dr. Kenneth Whitaker, who came from Rostrevor in Co. Down. While Whitaker's advice was balanced, focused on finding a peaceful solution to division and the pursuit of civil rights, obviously his information sources were limited. Whitaker, incidentally, had arranged the meetings in the 1960s (the first in the history of the two states in Ireland) between Taoiseach, Sean Lemass, and NI Prime Minister, Terence O'Neill.

In autumn 1968 the Commercial Secretary at the Irish Embassy in Paris, Eamonn Gallagher, was recalled to the Headquarters of the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin. There, Gallagher<sup>1</sup>, whose family was from Glencar in Donegal, often visited his family home and, indeed, Belfast too, as the Troubles started. Gallagher reported his impressions to his superiors and was encouraged by them to continue his fact-finding missions, becoming the government's main source of intelligence. His sister, based in Letterkenny, not far from the border and Derry, introduced him to many of the civil rights leaders emerging in the city, including John Hume, between whom a long friendship developed.

Gallagher's reports and his arguments, like Whitaker's, supporting a negotiated settlement to Northern Ireland's divisions, were widely circulated among senior officials in his Department and he was soon reporting directly to (and writing speeches for) his Minister, Paddy Hillery, and reporting also to the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Jack Lynch. In his reporting of developments, Gallagher also urged the Irish government to disavow military intervention, moderate anti-partition rhetoric, and pose as the focus for northern nationalists' loyalty by pressing the British government to address their grievances. Lynch and Hillery concurred but their views did not prevent other, more nationalist, Cabinet colleagues from embroiling the government in a conspiracy to support northern militants, a conspiracy which led to their dismissal and to a criminal trial for attempting the illegal importation of arms for the IRA. Gallagher avoided involvement with the conspirators.

In early 1970 Gallagher was promoted to Counsellor in his Department, with responsibility for coordinating northern policy. After the dismissal of the hardliners in his Cabinet in May 1970, the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, embraced Gallagher's strategy of pursuing Irish unity peacefully but assertively and of cooperating closely with John Hume.

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<sup>1</sup> A biographical note on Eamonn Gallagher is available online in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* at: [www.dib.ie/biography/gallagher-eamonn-a9724](http://www.dib.ie/biography/gallagher-eamonn-a9724).

Gallagher encouraged Hume and other leading nationalists to create a political party, replacing the old and tired Nationalist Party and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), led by Gerry Fitt, a member of the Labour Party in Northern Ireland, was created with Hume driving party policy. The party was seen as a constitutional alternative to the IRA, and benefited from Irish government support.

Following the introduction of internment without trial in Northern Ireland in August 1971, Gallagher persuaded Hillery and Lynch to support the SDLP's civil disobedience campaign, to press the British to address the issue of the mistreatment of many of those interned and to call for a power-sharing administration between unionists and nationalists.

Moreover, he persuaded Lynch to attend two summit meetings with British Prime Minister, Ted Heath, in September 1971, believing that the meetings represented an acknowledgement by the British that the Irish republic had a legitimate interest in Northern Ireland and used the meetings to seek to have addressed its demands on mistreatment of internees and discrimination against nationalists in Northern Ireland. Britain's negative response, particularly regarding the internees, caused Dublin to decide to take a case against Britain at the European Court of Human Rights.

Gallagher, while demonstrating clear analysis and perception in his presentation of policy issues, was also prone to overstating his influence and status. Among colleagues and certain contacts, he had boasted of his dominance over Lynch. The Taoiseach on hearing of this, abruptly dropped Gallagher in mid-1972 and he was quickly transferred, on promotion, to the Economic Division of the Department, dealing with EEC matters. While shocked at his loss of position and influence, Gallagher excelled in his new position and ended his career in a senior post in the EEC Commission, heading the Directorate dealing with fisheries.

In 1971, a year before Gallagher fell afoul of Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, a young diplomat, Sean Donlon<sup>2</sup>, then a First Secretary, preparing to return from an assignment as Irish Consul General in Boston, was assigned to work with Gallagher. He was told by Gallagher that his sole task was to collect information from Northern Ireland to support the Irish case against Britain on the mistreatment of a number of nationalists interned without trial. This he did, travelling to Northern Ireland almost weekly, guided on people to talk to by John Hume and Paddy Devlin of the SDLP.

One important contact he was directed to was Fr. Brian Brady, a lecturer in St. Mary's Teacher Training College in Belfast, also a leading figure in the Association for Legal Justice. The Association had done much work in documenting the injuries and degrading treatment of the so-called 'Hooded Men' who, during internment, had been singled out by the British Army for in-depth interrogation. This information, at the Association's behest, had been examined and verified by medical experts.

As already mentioned, having brought the information collected to the attention of the British authorities, including in the Lynch-Heath meetings, and with no admission by Britain of mistreatment of detainees, the Irish Government decided in November 1971

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<sup>2</sup> The source for all information regarding Sean Donlon is a lengthy recorded interview with him in June 2016.

to take the case against Britain in the European Court of Human Rights. Sean Donlon was dispatched to Strasbourg with hard copies of the material collected by him from his contacts and deposited it within the deadline set for their receipt to initiate a case.

While collecting the information for the Strasbourg case, Donlon had used the fact that at one time he had been, from 1958 to 1961, a clerical student at the main Catholic seminary in Maynooth (he did not complete his studies there), to ‘cold call’ on parish priests across Northern Ireland, securing both information on events in Northern Ireland and introductions to reputable sources for information – doctors, local politicians, solicitors etc.

The result was that he had, by the end of 1972, an invaluable network across the province, in the nationalist community with many connected to the SDLP, and including a growing network of community workers/activists, which provided him with a rich flow of information on developments, information which was passed onto his Minister and the Taoiseach as well as to senior colleagues in the Department.

A key objective of his work was to establish contacts across Northern Ireland who could be approached at short notice for information on events which had just occurred. The intention was to ensure that Dublin had reliable information before some aggrieved delegation might arrive from the North (sometimes infiltrated by the IRA) to press for a particular reaction from the government in Dublin.

On 1<sup>st</sup> February 1972, a new Division, which over time became the Anglo-Irish Division, was created in the Department to manage relations with the UK and monitor developments in Northern Ireland. Initially it also had responsibility of managing relations with the US. A senior diplomat, Bob McDonagh, was appointed its head and Sean Donlon was assigned to it along with a diplomat at the same level, Joe Small.

When the government changed in 1973 and Garret FitzGerald became Foreign Minister, he toured the Department, called on Sean Donlon and questioned him about his information collection work in Northern Ireland. He queried why the work was concentrated on the nationalist community and why members of the unionist community were excluded. Donlon posited that perhaps they would not wish to talk to officials from Dublin. FitzGerald, whose mother was from a unionist background in Northern Ireland, countered that they spoke to him and queried why they should not speak to officials from his Department.

Donlon agreed to begin trying to build a network in the unionist community but, before long, reported that the volume of work was difficult to manage and that he was uneasy that being seen to call on both communities might raise suspicions about his motives.

John McColgan (1940-2020)<sup>3</sup>, a diplomat recently returned from an assignment in Brussels, was transferred to the new Anglo-Irish unit and charged with trying to build the network on the unionist side. McColgan’s subsequent work was impressive. He

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<sup>3</sup> An obituary of John McColgan is located at: [www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/john-mccolgan-obituary-diplomat-played-key-role-in-north-south-relations-in-1970s-1.4299290](http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/john-mccolgan-obituary-diplomat-played-key-role-in-north-south-relations-in-1970s-1.4299290). Many of McColgan’s reports are contained in the papers of the late Taoiseach (Irish PM), Garret FitzGerald, which are in the UCD Archives in Dublin, with details of their content in an excellent online catalogue.

met an enormous number of unionist contacts and reported in detail on his meetings. They included politicians like John Taylor, William Craig (Vanguard), Rev. Martin Smyth, John Laird, Rev. William Arlow, Harry West, Harold McCusker and Mrs. Anne Dickson, as well as with so-called community workers like Andy Tyrie (UDA), Tommy Little (UDA), Glen Barr (Vanguard Unionist), Ken Gibson (UVF) and John McKeague (Red Hand Organisation). McColgan also met frequently with British officials like James Allen and Michael Oakley (both FCO, based in Laneside) and Donald Middleton (NIO).

There was always a concern that these two ‘Travellers’, as they were called – officers who went frequently to Northern Ireland – might occasionally be putting themselves in harm’s way. According to Sean Donlon, the British side was not pleased with their forays into Northern Ireland and the issue was raised a number of times with the Irish authorities by the British Ambassador in Dublin.

Donlon himself was conscious of the dangers and avoided visits to areas which might be described as loyalist. When stopped at roadblocks he posed and dressed as a postgraduate student at Queens University Belfast (QUB) and at one stage even rented a flat in the vicinity of QUB. However, in all his years as a ‘Traveller’, he could not get a car with a Northern Ireland registration – because of the use of cars by the PIRA for bombs, it was not possible at the time to rent a car in Northern Ireland. Donlon did not discover until after his retirement, when he visited the British National Archives in Kew, that he had been described by James Allan, an FCO official (and possibly MI5) stationed at Laneside<sup>4</sup> in Holywood, as the Head of Irish Intelligence, something which, given Donlon’s strong beliefs on there having been collusion between security sources and loyalist paramilitaries, he would have found unsettling and threatening had he been aware of it when working as a ‘Traveller’.

As mentioned above, the British became aware of Donlon’s travels and work in Northern Ireland and, through the British Ambassador in Dublin, in meetings with Foreign Minister, Dr. Garret FitzGerald, objected to his visits. Both he and FitzGerald stated that constitutionally he was fully within his rights to travel there and, on one of the final occasions on which the matter was raised, the Ambassador suggested that, at least, Donlon might occasionally visit Laneside on his travels. This, Donlon accepted and developed a working relationship with James Allan whose information he, Donlon, found useful. He also reported that on one occasion, as he was arriving at Laneside, a number of prominent Irish republicans were leaving.

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<sup>4</sup> Regarding Laneside and according to the journalist, Ed Moloney, “Dealings between the IRA and MI6 go back to the early 1970s when the intelligence agency operated out of a house in Holywood (sic), Co Down known as Laneside.

In 1974 and 1975 a Foreign Office diplomat, James Allan and a senior MI6 man, Michael Oatley regularly met IRA leaders there during what became known as “the Feakle ceasefire”. Sean Donlon described Laneside as a stylish amalgamation of three large houses, on the road from Holywood to Bangor, done in the upmarket style of a British Embassy and intended as a place where solid information on Northern Ireland could be gathered. Officers assigned there included Howard Smith, Frank Steele, James Allan (later British High Commissioner in Mozambique) and Michael Oatley (who negotiated with the PIRA through Brendan Duddy). Peter Taylor’s book *Behind the Mask: The IRA and Sinn Féin*, describes Oatley as the most important British agent to have worked in Northern Ireland. See also *Laneside, Then Left a Bit? Britain’s Secret Political Talks with Loyalist Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland 1973-1976*, by Tony Craig, Irish Political Studies, 2012.

Sean Donlon was informed, as early as September 1971, by Fr. Brady that the Provisional IRA were aware of his visits to Belfast, especially West Belfast, and were demanding to know to what use the information collected would be put. He responded that it was being used in bilateral exchanges with the British and possibly in a case against Britain in the human rights court in Strasbourg. Brady advised that he had been told by the Provisionals (and he presumed others had been similarly ‘advised’) not to give any further information to Donlon until the PIRA leadership had considered the matter. According to Donlon there was tension for a week or so until Brady made contact with him and advised that the republicans and their contacts had decided to allow cooperation with him, Donlon, to proceed, but asked if they could meet directly with him. Donlon replied strongly in the negative regarding direct contact with the PIRA (he advises that he never met any members or associates of the PIRA) and a week later there was a message through Fr. Brady that Donlon could continue his work without contact or interference from the Provisionals. Donlon understood that Fr. Brady’s republican contacts were Seamus Twomey and Gerry Adams. He also acknowledged that, following this event, he felt generally safe when visiting West Belfast.

Donlon, who was promoted to Assistant Secretary, in charge of Anglo-Irish Division, remained engaged as a ‘Traveller’ on Northern Ireland duties from 1971 to 1978, when he was made Irish Ambassador to the United States. Donlon advises that, by the time he left for the US, he had built up an excellent network of contacts in Northern Ireland, the most important of which, in his view, was his relationship with John Hume, with whom he continued to work in the US in building a lobby in support of the Irish approach on Northern Ireland. He mentioned that, from about 1973 onwards he rented a house for his family every summer in the holiday town of Bunbeg in Donegal where also holidaying there were the leading lights of what became the SDLP, people like Hume, Gerry Fitt, Paddy Devlin and Bríd Rodgers, as well as many others who later became prominent in the party.

In contrast to Sean Donlon, John McColgan’s experience as a ‘Traveller’ came to a difficult end<sup>5</sup>. He had very quickly built up a broad and very valuable network on the unionist side. One of his pathfinders in the community was a Protestant clergyman originally from Dublin. Over time, the clergyman began to direct John to community workers, some of whom had strong links to loyalist paramilitaries. About a year after he began his work, he attended a meeting, in the summer of 1976, in a hotel in Lisburn which was attended by a number of contacts with dubious associations, including, it is believed, John McKeague<sup>6</sup>, who, it emerged later, had carried out a number of sectarian murders. The meeting was not long after the assassination in Dublin by the PIRA of the British Ambassador, Christopher Ewart Biggs, and it was believed a retaliatory killing was being planned by loyalists. At the Lisburn meeting, it became clear to McColgan that his life was in danger (McKeague may have been armed) and his salvation came when he was led out of the meeting by Andy Tyrie of the UDA. McColgan had met a

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<sup>5</sup> The best source for copies of McColgan’s reports of his meetings in Northern Ireland is the Garret FitzGerald papers in the archives of University College Dublin.

<sup>6</sup> An obituary of McKeague is available in the Dictionary of Irish Biography at: [www.dib.ie/biography/mckeague-john-dunlop-a5713](http://www.dib.ie/biography/mckeague-john-dunlop-a5713).

number of times with and was liked by Tyrie, who did not want a representative from Dublin to be killed. However, the experience had a profound effect on McColgan, who, after the event, needed medical counselling and, on return to duty, sought and was given a transfer to other work.

Another new ‘Traveller’ appointed to Anglo-Irish Division in the summer of 1972, was Michael Lillis<sup>7</sup>, who was transferred back to Dublin after an assignment in Madrid. In an article after retirement in the Dublin Review of Books<sup>8</sup>, he describes his job at the time as helping ‘the Irish legal team in Strasbourg by collecting further evidence of ill-treatment and torture across Northern Ireland, but especially in the ghettoised communities in the cities and towns from the victims themselves and from secondary witnesses such as doctors, lawyers, family members and other witnesses’. In his visits to Northern Ireland both in pursuit of material for the Strasbourg case and more generally, he too was assisted by Fr. Brian Brady and The Association for Legal Justice, and was directed to many quality observers of events and developments in Northern Ireland.

Lillis states that ‘For about eighteen months I travelled in a modest car (what we used to call in those days a ‘banger’) to every Catholic corner of Northern Ireland to collect further evidence of British security service abuse. At this stage the Provisional IRA campaign of permanent violence was well launched and the Provisionals and the Irish government had identified each other as irreconcilable antagonists; the Irish state used emergency measures to try to counteract, imprison and neutralise the IRA, while the IRA denied the legitimacy and even the existence of the Irish state, even though they depended on its sovereignty for the pursuit of many of their objectives.’

Lillis advises that most of his weekdays and nights and many weekends were spent in Northern Ireland. Because of the nature of his work, he made many friends among the Catholic community. He described them as a people who, since the foundation of Northern Ireland in 1920, had known only oppression and systematic discrimination.

Lillis continued as a ‘Traveller’ until the summer of 1975 when he was assigned as Press Officer to the Irish Consulate General in New York. A year later he was transferred as Deputy Head of Mission to the Embassy in Washington. In the two assignments, in partnership with John Hume, who visited both cities frequently, he put together the so-called Four Horsemen – Tip O’Neill, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Senator Ted Kennedy, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and New York Governor, Hugh Carey – in support of Irish government policy on Northern Ireland. In August 1977 Lillis and Hume, with assistance from Bob Hunter of the US National Security Agency, persuaded President Jimmy Carter to issue a statement on Northern Ireland, pledging US support for any peace agreement. Sean Donlon, who arrived in Washington in 1978, helped establish the Congressional Friends of Ireland, which, at its height, had over 80 members. Moreover, he secured the assistance on the new US National Security

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Lillis was appointed diplomatic adviser to the taoiseach, Garret FitzGerald, in 1981 and was one of the negotiators of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. From 1985-87 he was first Dublin-based head of the Anglo-Irish Secretariat in Maryfield, Belfast (the ‘Bunker’) set up under that Agreement. From 1990 until recently he was involved in leasing aircraft, mainly in Latin America.

<sup>8</sup> See Dublin Review of Books at: [drb.ie/the-strasbourg-case/](http://drb.ie/the-strasbourg-case/)

Advisor, Judge William Clark, and through him, President Ronald Reagan, in support of a negotiated settlement on Northern Ireland. At a summit at Camp David in December 1984, Reagan put pressure on British PM Margaret Thatcher to engage more fully on the Northern Ireland issue with the Irish Taoiseach (PM) Garret FitzGerald.

John McColgan was not the only Traveller to find himself at risk while visiting his contacts in Northern Ireland. Michael Lillis, writing in June 2024 in the Dublin Review of Books, recounts the following about a visit to Northern Ireland in November 1973:

"I was driving through a narrow country road from Dungannon, having left the flat of my friend Fr. Faul<sup>9</sup>. I was waved down by a group of soldiers and quickly realised from their accents that they were UDR. As directed, I stepped out of my car and saw them searching the boot and discussing together some documents which, of course, were complaints against the security forces, many of them precisely against the UDR. Moments later I was bundled into an armoured car and driven to a nearby military barracks, which I later learned to be Drummad, the headquarters in Northern Ireland of the UDR. I was placed in a holding room and some moments later two burly soldiers began to beat me. I am no hero and was screaming that I was a Dublin official and needed to speak to a senior officer. This did not mollify my abusers; on the contrary. But they did finally desist and one of them left the room while his companion continued to berate me orally in choice Loyalist epithets. Some minutes later a senior officer, an Englishman, entered. In a moment's inspiration I told him that I had been visiting Fr. Denis Faul, the well-known human rights activist, that they should check with Faul (whom the officers knew of – and probably detested) and that Fr. Faul would raise the alarm if I failed to appear in Dublin later that night. It worked. Very much the worse for wear, another English officer drove me in my own car back to St. Patrick's College in Dungannon, accompanied by two Army vehicles. Fr. Faul called a doctor (it must have been 2 a.m.) who patched me up. No bones were broken. I resolved with Faul to say nothing in Dublin. At this stage the secret talks preparatory to the Sunningdale Agreement, in which Donlon was heavily involved, were moving forward and I had no desire to be the *cause célèbre* who destabilised them."

In the years that followed, the number of 'Travellers' increased and, after the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, Sean Donlon, then Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs, restructured the 'Travellers', arranging for particular individuals to cover certain areas and groups, providing improved insurance for those visiting Northern Ireland and better travel allowances.

There were many 'Travellers' doing outstanding work and it would be invidious to name only a few but one or two were exceptional. Daithí Ó Ceallaigh worked as a 'Traveller' for many years and developed a close relationship with the SDLP deputy leader, Seamus Mallon, sufficient that, when Mallon was considering withholding support for the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement because of unhappiness with, as he saw it, the weakness of measures to reform the Ulster Defence Regiment (the militia drawn from the unionist community), Ó Ceallaigh was able to persuade him to support the Agreement. David

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<sup>9</sup> Fr. Denis Faul was a Catholic priest, teacher at St. Patrick's Academy, Dungannon (a grammar school for boys) and a human rights activist. His biography is available at the Dictionary of Irish Biography at: [www.dib.ie/biography/faul-denis-obeirne-a9416](http://www.dib.ie/biography/faul-denis-obeirne-a9416).



Donoghue<sup>10</sup>, who worked as a ‘Traveller’ for many years, produced a huge number of influential reports and, when appointed Irish head of the Anglo-Irish Secretariat at Maryfield, reported daily on the lengthy multi-talks taking place under the chair of Senator George Mitchell.

It is unclear exactly when it began but at some stage, probably in the early 1980s, all of the reports from ‘Travellers’, as well as all reports on Anglo-Irish matters from the Embassies in London and Washington and reports from the Irish side of the Anglo-Irish Secretariat at Maryfield in Belfast, began to be assembled every Friday in a brief distributed to members of Cabinet involved in Dublin-London affairs and to senior officials in the Departments of Foreign Affairs and of the Taoiseach (Irish PM). A clear advantage of this development was that the politicians involved all had the same information and dealt with issues publicly in a similar, disciplined fashion, that both politicians and officials all had up-to-date information which could assist in reactions to any sudden developments and, thirdly, that all had a shared sense of the objectives of Irish policy.

Frank Sheridan

9<sup>th</sup> October, 2024.

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<sup>10</sup> David Donoghue has written a book on the Belfast Good Friday Agreement, published by Gill Books and entitled *One Good Day, My Journey to the Good Friday Agreement*.