





William Melville

Famed detective and the first 'M' – MI5's first Spymaster

SNEEM AND BEYOND

The statue of the Egyptian goddess Isis, presented to the tiny, picturesque village of Sneem by the people of Egypt, seems a little out of place as she stares out over the village, resplendent in the warm summer light. Nestling at the head of a small inlet on the southern side of Kerry's Iveragh peninsula and almost surrounded by rugged mountains on the landward side, the village is immediately engaging, not least because of the warmth of its welcome, but also because of its vividly colourful buildings and its equally colourful inhabitants, past and present, among whom was one William Melville.

Two squares joined by a bridge over the Sneem river seem to bustle constantly during the summer months with

visitors come to admire its undeniable charms, belying the fact that its population totals just 279 people. Any of its hospitable pubs like Dan Murphy's Bar would seem at night to account for half this number. Like many of the other buildings in the village, Dan Murphy's bright pink exterior seems to have been one of the many the beneficiaries of a travelling paint salesman who unloaded all his stock of vivid, eye-popping colours at half-price.

Outside the pub sits 'The Stone Outside Dan Murphy's' worn smooth by the bottoms of countless courting couples over the decades and itself now famed in song.

*Those days in our hearts we will cherish
Contented although we were poor
And the songs that were sung
In the days we were young
On the stone outside Dan Murphy's door*

From courting couples to Egyptian goddesses, everything in Sneem seems to have some memorial or sculpture to its memory. The village actually boasts the largest display of outdoor sculpture in Ireland. One commemorates Former President Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh who lived locally prior to his death in 1978 – Sneem was the venue for his state funeral. Isis stands near a sculpture park called 'The Way of the Fairies' recalling Ireland's megalithic heritage. A large, two-ton Panda sculpture donated by the People's Republic of China vies for attention with a tall steel 'cactus' presented by the Israeli President Herzog. In the

grounds of St Michael's Church stands a large bronze statue of the risen Christ, in the north square sits a huge rock with a bronze plaque commemorating the visit of General de Gaulle in 1969 and in the south square stands the imposing figure of Sneem's Sean 'Crusher' Casey, the undefeated wrestling champion of the world, 1938 to 1947.

Yet nowhere it seems can one find any memorial to one of Sneem's most famous sons, William Melville, who would become one of the most famed and recognised detectives of his era in London's great metropolis and eventually become Britain's first spymaster and head of its secret service bureau, the first ever 'M' in fact, renowned from Ian Fleming's James Bond novels and the subsequent movies.

Melville's upbringing and family life provide few clues to the career that lay ahead. Born at Direenaclaurig Cross near Sneem on 25 April 1850, William was the eldest of three sons of James and Catherine Melville who owned a pub and bakery; the original building still operates as a popular pub, called the Blue Bull. Baptised in St Michael's Catholic Church, Melville attended the local national school and in his teenage years was reputedly one of the area's finest hurlers.

Sneem, like much of Ireland in those days, had lost many a son and daughter to emigration. And while these were enforced exiles, as he approached his twenties and despite his undoubted love of his hometown, William was

beginning to feel like a big fish in a small pond and longed to escape the limitations of a life working in his father's bakery.

His departure from Sneem and his first steps into the world of police work have an aura of mystery about them befitting his later career – the story goes that he climbed aboard his pony and cart for his weekly journey to Killarney to collect supplies, waved farewell to his family and then simply vanished. The pony and cart were eventually noticed idling outside Killarney train station some hours later, by which time William was undoubtedly many miles away, staring out at the fields as the steam train chugged towards the port of Cork or Dublin, dreaming of a life of adventure wherever the wind in the sails of his ship would take him.

BAKER TO BOBBY

William Melville would eventually resurface at the age of twenty-two working as a baker in Lambeth, which in all likelihood wasn't the fulfillment of the dreams he'd imagined. Likely though that following in his father's footsteps was initially the only work he could find to sustain himself until an opportunity presented itself for betterment. London at that time must have seemed almost overwhelming to him, a vast metropolis that was considered one of the most important in the world with an ever-

growing population of over three million people, in stark contrast to Sneem's tiny community.

London's burgeoning masses presented him with his first opportunity to make a career for himself as the growth in numbers brought with it the inevitable growth in criminality and in turn the need to combat this with a larger police force. While he'd been working as a baker, the Metropolitan Police had just endured its first ever police strike, its forces clamouring for better pay and conditions and more police – they were being overwhelmed in some areas and simply couldn't cope. Melville seized on the chance and joined up immediately after the strike's successful conclusion.

For his first six months he was stationed at what was probably the city's most famous station, Bow Street, which was subsequently to become the site of the premier London Magistrates' Court. He was assigned to patrol an area from Covent Garden to Holborn armed only with a truncheon and a whistle. His beat took him through the more upmarket Strand, which was then (and still is today) packed with theatres, many of them long since vanished like *The Vaudeville*, *The Strand Musik Hall* with its risqué burlesque show or *The Olympic Theatre*, which in 1872 featured a performance of one of Gilbert & Sullivan's early collaborations called 'Trial by Jury'.

The strains of light opera would have long faded from his ears by the time he reached Covent Garden and its bustling markets, and then moved beyond into the alleys

of St Giles which was known then as The Rookeries, an English slang term for 'slum'. This area was a maze of narrow streets crammed with tenement buildings, drinking dens, brothels and workhouses, and at the time was just a stone's throw from the green fields that marked the city's boundary. London's 'pea-souper' fogs, evoked for atmosphere in so many a film about that era, were particularly common here as the yellowish smog was the result of burning soft coal, and such was the density of population of The Rookeries that their collective attempts to keep warm at times reduced visibility to a few yards. Perhaps Melville may have been cheered somewhat by the familiar accents he heard as this area was also called Little Dublin, it being home to 110,000 Irish people.

In fact 6 per cent of his colleagues were also Irish and they and all Metropolitan constables were paid between sixteen and eighteen shillings a week, which was a reasonable income for the time, but was thoroughly earned considering their job – they were expected to patrol their beat at an average pace of 2.5 mph, worked thirteen nights a fortnight and received just one week's leave per annum. And of course they existed in a world of considerable peril.

Melville was determined to not to walk the beat forever and indeed he took several steps up the promotional ladder over the following years and by 1879 had risen to the rank of Detective Sergeant in the Criminal Investigation Department or CID as it is still known today. The CID had been formed just a year before, replacing the

Detective Branch and was the first attempt to properly organise and co-ordinate criminal detection in the city. This was a much-sought-after posting as not only did CID detectives earn more, but the job was viewed with some glamour due mainly to the publicity they often received in the press.

1879 was also a busy year for him in another respect. In the course of his work he'd met and fallen in love with another Irish immigrant, Katherine Reilly from Co. Mayo, and that year they were married in St George's Catholic Church in Southwark on the south bank of the Thames. They moved into a relatively comfortable home in Lambeth, where newly-built houses were just beginning to sprout up from the green fields and marshlands.

He spent his next four years as an increasingly busy and successful detective and in 1883 Katherine gave birth to their first child, named Kate for her mother. It was also the year that, with his reputation and skills as an investigator garnering him a growing reputation, he was recruited into a newly-created section known as the SIB or Special Irish Branch, formed specifically to track down teams of Irish-American Fenian bombers who had been terrorising London since 1867, but whose activities peaked between 1883 and 1885 in what became known as The Dynamite War. The unit comprised twelve detectives, several of them Irish, recruited specifically because of their understanding of the Fenian way of thinking and their knowledge of the Irish language. The SIB was the

forerunner of the modern Special Branch, 'Irish' being dropped when their remit was expanded to deal with potential threats from other foreign nationals, a day that wasn't so far away.

To some Irish people at the time, this marked Melville as a traitor to the cause of Irish freedom. Yet considered in the context of the age, he simply saw himself as trying to stop terrorists from killing innocent people. He was actually a fervent supporter of Home Rule for Ireland and at the time many Irish men and women believed they could maintain their national identity within the realm of the British Empire. Added to that, even within the independence movement there was division about the methods and effectiveness of the bombing campaign in Britain.

The Dynamite War was led and financed by Clan na Gael, a sister organisation to the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and by Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa's 'Skirmishing Fund', money raised through expatriate Irishmen in New York for the purposes of bombing England. Many of the bombers themselves were Irish-Americans recently discharged from the Union Army at the end of the American Civil War and were thus skilled in the use of weapons, explosives and survival. Repeated attempts by the British Government to have O'Donovan Rossa extradited failed.

In 1882 there was just one bombing, but over the course of the following two years this escalated greatly with nineteen separate attacks. The bombings were generally not targeted at people, but rather at the symbols of British

imperialism like the Houses of Parliament, The Tower of London, Whitehall, the offices of *The Times* and Scotland Yard itself, much to the embarrassment of the force. But they didn't limit themselves to these symbolic edifices, eventually striking at targets usually crowded with civilians like Victoria, Charing Cross and Paddington train stations, killing and injuring several people. Luckily though, the casualties were relatively light considering the location of the bombs.

Melville and his colleagues in the Special Irish Branch had a very early success when they arrested five men in Birmingham and London including Tom Clarke, who was to go on to be one of the leaders of the 1916 Rising and the first of the signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic. Clarke (operating under the alias 'Henry Wilson') had honed his skills as a bomber while working as an explosives and demolition operative on Staten Island in New York and was just about to put his skills to use in the demolition of London Bridge when the SIB swooped and arrested him along with four colleagues. He would be tried and sentenced to penal servitude for life in May 1883, eventually serving fifteen years.

Because the bombers were mainly based in the US, they regularly travelled back and forth between the two countries, making it extremely difficult to keep track of them or maintain any sort of surveillance. To avoid detection, republicans would often enter and leave Britain through European ports. It was decided to extend the

watch on points of entry to the Channel ports in France. Katherine Melville had just given birth to their second child, William, when his father was granted the assignment of organising the surveillance of the French port of Le Havre, a mission that would last four years and ultimately prove very beneficial to the Kerryman.

Down the centuries many risings, rebellions, plots and schemes to uproot the British from Irish soil have collapsed because of paid informers. And while the SIB did occasionally manage to secretly plant the informant into the ranks of the bombers, often the secrecy was so great within CID that despite the relatively small size of the unit, most detectives had little or no idea what their colleagues were up to, or in other words the left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing, seriously diminishing the effectiveness of CID. This was compounded by the fact that many of the detectives' ambitions and the associated politicking often clouded their devotion to their ultimate goal of catching bombers, so an individual detective's career often took priority over getting results. Melville was by no means immune to this as his later career would reveal. Clearly extremely ambitious, he was now about to become involved in a mind-boggling plot that would draw groans of disbelief were it a modern-day Hollywood movie. But then, truth is so often stranger than fiction.

THE JUBILEE PLOT TO ASSASSINATE
QUEEN VICTORIA

The dynamite war subsided in 1886, by which point a hundred people had been killed – including some would-be bombers who'd accidentally blown themselves up in a London park – many more injured and ten buildings demolished. But the bombings did have the effect of terrorising the British public and of generating anti-Irish feeling, fuelled also by newspapers like the avidly pro-Tory *Times*, which regularly depicted Irish people and their leaders in a less than charitable fashion. Despite the fact that Charles Stewart Parnell's Parliamentary Party had no links to militant republicans and was devoted to achieving its aims through peaceful means, they were bitterly opposed by the Tories, who were fervently against any Home Rule Bill for Ireland.

Early in 1887, *The Times* published a series of articles entitled 'Parnellism and Crime'. These were based on a number of letters that apparently revealed that Parnell himself had personally approved of the infamous 'Phoenix Park Murders', when the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Thomas Henry Burke, and Lord Frederick Cavendish had been brutally stabbed to death in Dublin's Phoenix Park by a radical Republican group called The Invincibles. The *Times*' 'source' was a man called Richard Pigott, a Dublin journalist who himself had been an Irish nationalist, but who now opposed Parnell

with something approaching hatred. Ultimately a commission of enquiry proved that Pigott had himself forged the letters. (Among the evidence was his known tendency to misspell the word 'hesitancy', an error he repeated in the letters.) The case against Parnell collapsed and *The Times* had to pay him a settlement of £5,000, a huge sum at the time. When Parnell resumed his seat in the House of Commons two years later in 1889 he would receive a standing ovation led by the then Prime Minister William Gladstone. Pigott would commit suicide in Madrid later that year.

This plot would ultimately fail, but the appetite for discrediting Irish MPs and destroying the Home Rule aspiration was clearly very real.

With the memory of the Dynamite War still fresh in the minds of the British public, in 1887 the police leaked information to the press that they had uncovered a plot to assassinate Queen Victoria on the occasion of her Golden Jubilee celebrations, which were to take place in just a few days time. 'The Jubilee Plot' had apparently been concocted by Clan na Gael and involved blowing up Westminster Abbey during Victoria's Thanksgiving Service, in one strike wiping out the monarch and the entire British Cabinet.

The main architect of the plot was General Francis Millen, a Tyrone-born republican whose funding and support was to be provided by Clan na Gael in New York. Two volunteers, Thomas Callan and Michael Harkins, would

travel by steamer a few days before the Jubilee and detonate the bomb with dynamite provided by Fenians based in Britain.

What the New York Republicans didn't know about Millen was that for twenty years he'd been working as a paid informer for British Intelligence. The most extraordinary fact, however, is that it was Melville's colleagues in the British Secret Service who had in fact dreamed up the entire pantomime and had personally received the stamp of approval of the then Tory Prime Minister Lord Salisbury. At some point during the episode, Millen and his co-conspirators would introduce themselves to members of Parnell's Irish Parliamentary Party in Westminster. Soon after the fake Jubilee Plot would be 'exposed' through press leaks and the Irish MPs would be linked in the minds of the entire British establishment with the terrorists, thus putting the final nail in the coffin of Parnell's Home Rule campaign.

The Special Branch were made aware of the 'Jubilee Plot' by the Secret Service, but not, of course, that it was fake. This was to ensure the plot didn't actually become a reality. But naturally the Secret Service couldn't reveal that the entire thing was an exercise in political chicanery that they'd dreamt up to discredit another politician. Neither could they tell the Special Branch that Millen was in fact working for them. As a result of this Melville and his colleagues expended an inordinate amount of time and energy in pursuit of Millen and his co-conspirators.

The only problem was that in Millen's enthusiasm for the project, it took on a life of its own and became a genuine threat. A team of republicans was organised in the US, money and explosives arranged for collection in Britain and the plan set in motion. Luckily for the British the bombers turned out to be somewhat less than adept and apparently missed the ship on which they'd planned to travel, only arriving in Liverpool on the actual day of the Jubilee celebrations, far too late to carry out the attack.

Undeterred they resolved to remain in Britain and carry out further missions for their cause. But from the moment they arrived they were watched by the SIB and in fact were allowed to move freely around the country for months, exposing many of their contacts along the way. The would-be bombers, Callan and Harkins, were eventually arrested and sentenced to fifteen years in prison and Melville in particular was singled out for praise in his surveillance of Millen – *'with the greatest tact at Boulogne and by conducting numerous inquiries in London'*.

This praise in itself seems strange as Millen 'escaped' back to New York. He was conveniently found dead in his study two years later 'in mysterious circumstances'. It is known that the SIB and Melville were made aware at some point that the 'Jubilee Plot' was a concoction of British Intelligence. The Official Secrets Act didn't exist at the time, so it might be presumed that either because of personal ambition or because of pressure from his peers, Melville was unwilling to blow the whistle on a

government plan to subvert the democratic process and destroy the Home Rule Bill, something he keenly supported. At best this decision, and some of those he would make later in his career, were morally ambiguous.

The real ‘Jubilee Plot’, that is, the one to discredit Parnell, would ultimately fail because of its own complexity and the straitjacket of secrecy it demanded and perhaps Melville simply decided that its failure was sufficient. Revealing its true nature would certainly not benefit him in any way, the Home Rule debate would continue and after all, he was not a politician but a policeman.

But one thing was certain, the intelligence community’s dark world of ‘Black Ops’ had begun.

MELVILLE BRIEFLY CROSSES PATHS WITH JACK THE RIPPER

By 1888, Katherine and William Melville had produced two more children, James and Celia, both born in France where he was still stationed. The preceding year, London had been horrified by the hideous murders and mutilations of at least five prostitutes in the Whitechapel area – the infamous Jack the Ripper case. One of the five principal suspects was an Irish-American quack doctor called Francis Tumblety, a man with an outspoken hatred of women who used to keep female body parts, mostly uteri, on display in jars of formaldehyde in his London apartment.

On 28 November 1888 he fled London under the alias Frank Townsend with the intention of taking a ship, *La Bretagne*, from Le Havre, where of course Melville was stationed. Various accounts, including Melville family recollections, have Melville in hot pursuit of the suspect and it has even been suggested that he all but captured Tumblety, only to be left frustrated by French bureaucrats who insisted that Melville didn't have the correct documentation to detain the man. Though much of this is speculation, and it is indeed also speculation that Tumblety was in fact the Ripper, the fact remains that the murders stopped after he had slipped through Melville's fingers and fled to New York.

'BOB'S YOUR UNCLE'

In 1887, the British Prime Minister was the aristocratic conservative Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, 3rd Marquess of Salisbury, who duly appointed his nephew Arthur James Balfour as Minister for Ireland. There was much hilarity among the press when the inexperienced Arthur referred to the Prime Minister as 'Uncle Bob', thus giving rise to the phrase 'Bob's your uncle', meaning that having the Prime Minister as one's uncle is a guarantee of success.