ForeWord Reviews

BIOGRAPHY

The Committee: Political Assassination in Northern Ireland
Sean McPhilemy
Roberts Rinehart Publishers
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Sean McPhilemy has written a potentially explosive book, issued at a time when the recently signed Northern Ireland peace settlement offers a last best hope for expanded political cooperation and an end to sectarian violence. It's a fragile settlement, freighted with hope, but fraught with expressed misgivings by at least some of the signers from North and South. McPhilemy's revelations about The Committee ("the most important Loyalist terror grouping") may be continued in pending libel suits and could well prove highly embarrassing.

The Committee was born of assassination and fear and became an efficient purveyor of both. Its origins confirm how easily the best political initiatives backfire. Appalled by IRA killings of Protestants in Ulster and by a death-for-a-death response by various Ulster armed factions against Catholics in the six counties, Margaret Thatcher signed the November 1985Anglo-Irish Agreement, giving Dublin some voice in the governance of Ulster. Her attempt to strengthen the position of Catholics in Ulster enraged the diehard elements of the Protestant population. Ulster Resistance, the Movement for Self-Determination, the Ulster Loyalists, and Ulster Clubs sprang up, allying themselves to the long-established Royal Ulster Constabulary (with its hard-core "Inner Force") and the hard-line Ulster Defense Regiment.

McPhilemy provides a powerful account of how the Ulster loyalists? determination to undermine the agreement, eradicate the terrorist Provisional IRA, and return to the status ante quo coalesced into the formation of The Committee. Its most sinister role was to direct the liaison between the UDR, the RUC, and other official bodies, providing information to armed illegals. Targeted killings followed.

In 1991, McPhilemy began investigating a series of Committee-sponsored killings of IRA members, other Republicans and innocent Catholics in Ulster. Genuine inside sources provided vital information; a bogus inside source attempted to foist false information on McPhilemy. His most disturbing finding was that these were not predictable responses by Ulster Loyalists to Provisional IRA killings, but were planned assassinations, with official connivance, aborted inquiries and cover-ups. The assault on IRA terrorism had become as lawless as the

terrorism it opposed; government, including those responsible for enforcing the law, had become lawless. In October 1991, BBC TV ran McPhilemy's documentary, The Committee, which he completed in the face of difficulty and obstruction, but meeting the rigorous criteria set by BBC management. The broadcast opened floodgates. Predictably, denouncements and denials("the program is a hoax") flowed from every level of British and Ulster government; pro-government newspapers joined in condemning McPhilemy, the BBC and the program. In typical institutional fashion, the RUC saw fit to "investigate" itself. This and other investigations claimed to be stymied by McPhilemy's refusal to name a confidential source whose life would been dangered by identification. No brief review can capture the full thrust and scope of Sean McPhilemy's book. He takes the reader beyond the stark horror of the kill-and-be-killed syndrome, exploring through statement and transcript the controlling webs of complicity and of loyalty (however misplaced). He illuminates the corrosive corruption into which any governmental body sinks when it allies itself to illegal acts, whatever the lawful aim or public good it believes it is pursuing. In addition, he strikingly portrays the pressures and costs of pursuing one's convictions, including court battles against his detractors battles in which he has won some victories.

The Committee is a timely book that should lead everyone, however ideologically committed to soil or sect, to support the promising new Northern Island settlement. Perhaps the best among the participants have found conviction and the worst will lose their passionate intensity.

Peter Skinner