

Nairac: still a mystery 30 years on

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One of the many myths to have come out of the North's conflict is that the hapless Harry of Gerald Seymour's novel *Harry's Game* was modelled on the curious career of Captain Robert Nairac.

But it's not true. Nairac met his death sordidly and ingloriously in 1977, two years after Seymour's novel was published.

Perhaps the association comes from the superficially similar stories, one brutally true, the other fiction, and the fact that the BBC television series with its hugely popular theme by Clannad was shown in 1982, after Nairac's death.

Speculation has continued about what was done with Nairac's body after he was beaten and shot dead in a field south of the Border. By 1982, it was widely believed that Nairac's corpse had been processed in a meat factory, a fate reminiscent of Gene Hackman's victims in Michael Ritchie's 1972 gangster film *Prime Cut*.

Whether he was supplied as sausages to the RUC or eaten by family pets was then a matter for ghoulish conjecture.

As the grim little rhyme went:
*Captain Nairac was a spy
Where is Captain Nairac nye?*

False memories, then, of shadowy figures and dark deeds, done in part in drink. But Darragh Macintyre in *Spotlight* (BBC 1) took another look at the grisly events of one night in May 1977, just over 30 years ago now, in an attempt to clarify what might have become of Nairac's body.

He confronted Martin McGuinness in Stormont and was fobbed off, but on the day after the programme, the North's deputy first minister urged anyone who had any knowledge of the whereabouts of Nairac's remains to come forward.

Nairac was familiarly portrayed as an unorthodox, swashbuckling military figure, wearing his curling hair long and accompanying British army patrols carrying a double-barrel shotgun.

On the night of May 14, he went to the Three Steps Bar in South Armagh claiming to be named Danny and to be from Belfast. Nairac asked a girl how to get across the Border undetected and, bizarrely, volunteered to sing a song.

According to one of those present, Terry McCormick, who has been in the United States since 1977 and was talking about that night to a reporter for the first time, a girl prompted by suspicious republicans invited the stranger to dance to see if he was armed. He declined.

When Danny/Nairac left, McCormick followed him to the car park and challenged him. Curiously, both men had been boxers, Nairac captain of the Oxford University Team, McCormick a welterweight champ though in rather less august company.

McCormick struck first, smashing Nairac in the face. His gun fell to the ground.

That was the beginning of the end for Robert Nairac. A car drive across the border. A time being brutalised by his abductors in a field. Then the arrival of an IRA man. Most must have had drink taken.

McCormick said the new arrival, who wanted Nairac shot out of hand, was drunk. When eventually he was shot, it was by men who didn't know who he was. Nairac clung to his assumed identity to the end.

In spite of his resolve to the last, had Nairac lost self-control after several tours of duty in the North? What was he doing in the Three Steps? It's claimed he was complicit in loyalist killings and that he was the British officer reported by survivors to have been present at the Miami Showband massacre.

If any of this is true, the IRA would have had good reason for wanting him dead, beyond the simple fact that he was a British officer.

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Drinking in South Armagh was a decidedly unhealthy pastime for anyone holding the Queen's commission.

Ruthless, was he? One of those uniformed killers lionised by the media and honoured by a grateful state. They gave him the George Cross after his miserable death in that field.

The Guards Museum in Birdcage Walk preserves his service jacket, expertly tailored by Meyer & Mortimer of Sackville Street London and his bowler hat, by London's finest hatters, Lock & Co. The trappings of a Guards officer, now relics in a reliquary.

Nairac was a Catholic paragon of the establishment: Ampleforth- and Oxford-educated, commissioned in the Grenadier Guards, a regiment that won its name at Waterloo. He was later a member of the SAS, operating in the North even before that unit was officially deployed there.

I thought of Kipling's chilling accountancy of 1886 - equally valid today - in his poem Arithmetic On The Frontier in which the cheap musket of an Afghan warrior, a jezail, is capable of taking out the finest of Victoria's sons.

*A scrimmage in a border station,
A canter down some dark defile,
Two thousand pounds of education,
Drops to a ten-rupee jezail.*

Nairac probably didn't end up in a meat factory. He may have been buried, dug up by animals and reburied.

One night in May 30 years ago, two boxers from different sides of the tracks, from different worlds even, met in a pub car park. One is dead. The other has not come back to Ireland since.

McCormick is haunted by what happened that night, when, as Nairac came close to death, he briefly pretended to be a priest to get the man to reveal who he really was.

He is now, he says, "a completely different person . . . It's something that will never ever leave my mind. There's not a day goes by that I don't say a prayer for Captain Nairac."

* Another British officer considerably more eccentric than Nairac was Robert Baden-Powell, the Boer War hero of the siege of Mafeking, who founded the scout movement.

In Scouting For Boys (BBC 2), Ian Hislop looked at the life of an eminent and eccentric Victorian/Edwardian. Baden-Powell's first scout outing took place in 1907. It followed a few decades of beating up Africans and almost being beaten up by the Boers.

They sang about BP in the music halls, his face appeared on plates and cups. But with the Boer war behind him, he became a man with a new mission. Inspired by the plucky boys who had rallied to help the garrison at Mafeking, his Scouting For Boys, a title that would give rise to endless ribaldry, was published in 1908.

Like Charles Dodgson, the real Lewis Carroll, with his unsettling interest in photographing 'undraped' little girls, Baden-Powell was one of those curious characters who could only have existed within his own time.

Modern tabloids would have eaten him alive, patrol hat and all.

His intense interest in boys might today be seen as unhealthy, or at best unwise, especially taking into account his exclamation of delight ("Excellent!") at some photographs of naked boys in trees, from a collection owned by another aficionado of boyhood beauty.

Baden-Powell experts differ on the connection between the scouting hero's emotions and what, if anything, went on in his shorts.

Post-colonial scholar Dr Elleke Boehmer, who wrote an introduction to Scouting For Boys in 2004, said: "It should be possible to speak of sexual preference as non preference. I don't want to do this sex thing. I genuinely believe that Baden-Powell was the eternal Peter Pan, and that, rather than being a repressed gay man, he was in fact asexual."

His biographer Tim Jeal said: "He thought that, actually, men who did commit too early to sexual relationships with women were contaminated, which I think in a way is . . . you know you don't think that unless you're gay."

Oddly, it was at about the time Baden Powell set up the scout movement that Pádraig Pearse, against the advice of friends, published his translation of A Mhic Bhig na gCleas (Little Lad Of The Tricks) a poem easily open to interpretations of paedophilia.

Neither Powell nor Pearse (with whom the scoutmaster warmly corresponded) was ever accused of any improper conduct with the boys with whom they came in contact, unless you count what one or the other put into their heads.

The two men would have shared ideas about the natural world, upright behaviour and the moulding

of responsible citizens. Both took exemplars from the past, England's knights, the Fianna and Cuchulainn.

It's a further indication that Pearse was very much a man of his time, though with some advanced ideas, and not the one-off messianic crank his detractors have been quick to paint him as in more recent years.

The wily old chief scout eventually did marry, but when he did, his bride was the sporty 23-year-old Olave St Clair Soames. He was 55.

Though, Hislop said, neither seemed particularly interested in sex of any kind, the couple produced three children. Baden-Powell, however, later took to sleeping on the veranda of his home in all weathers.

In Ireland, of course, scouting was organised on the basis of religion, presumably because of Baden-Powell's early fertile recruiting ground among the members of the Boys' Brigade and the scout movement's royal charter.

And then there was the rather more militant republican Fianna Eireann scout movement, formed in 1909 by Constance Markievicz and Bulmer Hobson. For all it trained its members in the use of arms, it adopted much of the Baden-Powell theory and lingo.

*Baden-Powell's efforts were related to social Darwinism and the perceived degeneration of the race in a brutal industrial age.

What BP would make of modern values is not hard to guess. Suspicious of businessmen, he'd probably fume with incomprehension at programmes such as The Apprentice, Dragon's Den and the latest in the genre, Tycoon (UTV) featuring successful entrepreneur Peter Jones.

Jones, of Dragon's Den, is giving each of six would-be entrepreneurs stg»10,000 to help them launch their businesses. Each will compete for more investment from Jones as the six episodes roll on.

Was I impressed? Well, maybe the two friends Cathy and Helen planning to launch a range of colourful gardening gear for women might go somewhere.

Prompted by Jones, they changed their name from Girly Gardening to Sod, expanding the range to include men's gear too. Sod Men. What fun.

Former world karate champion Justin had an idea for a dispenser so that shoppers could conveniently reuse supermarket plastic bags (the Brits are a bit behind the times). And then there was Elizabeth - or, as she introduced herself "My name is Elizabeth "make things happen" Hackford."

It was cringe-inducing. As Jones quickly pointed out, her vodka-based fruit drink range was no different to many others. Pressed by Jones for a dramatic name for her drink, she finally came up with Fruka.

"Can you not see where this is going?" Jones asked. She couldn't. Jones tried again: "Do you want a Fruka?"

*The overused four-letter word peppered the second series of Rome (BBC 2) which opened with the assassination of Julius Caesar.

It was a dour and brutal - some might say courageous - introduction to the new series, dark, moody and visually and verbally violent.

But there was no "Friends, Romans, countrymen" brilliance, in the script. With James Purefoy portraying Mark Antony as a posh, priapic thug, it's more Jacobean Deadwood than Shakespearean Rome.

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