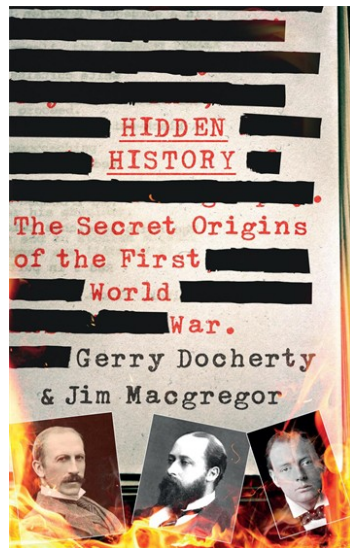


# Review: Gerry Docherty & Jim Macgregor, *Hidden History: the Secret Origins of the First World War*

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Gerry Docherty & Jim Macgregor, *Hidden History: the Secret Origins of the First World War* Mainstream, Edinburgh, 2003 £20

A contribution to the debate on the origins of World War One

I came across this book by chance in a context where I had been struggling with writing an essay on the origins of WW1 and its relevance to Ireland, arising from some reminiscences of my father Joe Johnston (1890-1972). He had told me that the Larne and Howth gun-runnings in 1914<sup>1</sup> were used as a device to deceive the Germans about the British likelihood of entering the war, should they attack France via Belgium.

This at the time did not register, but I picked up on it when I wrote the introduction to the 1998 re-publication by UCD Press of

<sup>1</sup>A substantial shipment of guns for the Ulster Volunteer Force, bought in Austria and shipped from Hamburg, was landed at Larne in April 1914. A smaller quantity was landed at Howth in July. There is evidence that both events were with the connivance of the British imperial elite. See *Hidden History*, especially p.316.

<sup>2</sup>This was an attempt to build support for all-Ireland Home Rule among northern Protestants. An annotated version of this historic book was published in 1998 by UCD Press and is still in print. For an e-version contact [roy@rjtechne.org](mailto:roy@rjtechne.org).

<sup>3</sup>For these notes see <http://www.rjtechne.org/polit/irlww1.htm>

<sup>4</sup>HH Asquith, *The Genesis of the War*, Casell 1923, Theodor Wolff, *The Eve of 1914*, Gollancz, 1935.

my father's 1913 book *Civil War in Ulster: its Probable Consequences*<sup>2</sup>. This suggested some research trails to follow, but these however lapsed, until they became somewhat urgent, now that the centenary of these events is nearly upon us.

I wrote some critical draft notes<sup>3</sup>, based on some initial research. I have to thank David Burke for drawing the above book to my attention; it turns out that my draft notes are pointing in the same direction as Chapter 25 of *Hidden History* where the Irish dimension is analysed.

I have since read the book, and done some initial comparative study with other sources, including some relating to Sir Henry Wilson and the Imperial General Staff, as well as the 1923 Asquith work on the origins of WW1 and that of Wolff (1934) giving the German experience.<sup>4</sup>

Much remains to be done, and I hope to publish an in-depth study in due course. However I have delved enough into related publications to be convinced that *Hidden History* is **not** simply a conspiracy-theory jaunt, but a serious attempt to uncover how British imperial strategy really developed, in the aftermath of the negative experience of the Boer War, in the direction of instigating a war to destroy Germany while making it look like Germany initiated it.

So I am presenting what follows as a sort of brief abstract of my future in-depth review, in the hopes that it will be seen by at least some historians and critical scholars in time to

influence any seminars relating to the Larne and Howth gun-runnings. The Howth guns were transported in a yacht owned and captained by Erskine Childers, then working for the Admiralty.

Howth occurred about 10 days before August 4 1914 when war was declared, by a Liberal-Tory majority supported by Carson and Redmond, to the cheers of the assembled MPs.

The decision to go to war did not originate from the Cabinet; it came as a result of a 'secret elite' via the War Office and the Entente, and was open to constitutional question. The King was included in this 'secret elite' group. So we have King and colonial bureaucracy bypassing the Cabinet, and managing to achieve a Parliamentary majority, as a result of informal Entente agreements with the French.

The references to Erskine Childers in *Hidden History* will add to controversy about this episode; he is presented basically as a British agent; the truth, I suggest, is more complex. Erskine Childers' motivation in the Howth episode I think was to arm Redmond's Volunteers to be a Home Guard for Ireland in the coming war, in an all-Ireland Home Rule politically reformed situation.

Childers had written a book supportive of Home Rule in 1911, and had been active with his cousin Bob Barton exploring the work of Plunkett and the co-operative movement. In the context of his Howth arms delivery, however, it seems he was 'taken for a ride' by Sir Henry Wilson and the British imperial strategic plans; the latter had been actively supportive of the earlier Larne gun-running, and the Curragh conspiracy, and was the prime mover in the context of the imperial interests in ensuring that the British Expeditionary Force existed and was ready to go in August 1914. The Howth event was to reassure the Germans that the British were prioritising the Irish problem.

It is quite impossible in a short review es-

say to summarise the complex machinations of imperial policy arising from their African experience which *Hidden History* uncovers, but I must try to list some of the key episodes. It begins with Cecil Rhodes setting up a group of executors for his will, in such a way as to ensure that his wealth, derived from his exploitation of African resources, would be used to further the influence of the British Empire. These included Lord Alfred Milner, Lord Rothschild, Lord Esher and several others who acted as a 'secret elite' in support of an imperial expansion agenda. With their resources they had an outer circle of influential people whom they were in a position to fund in such a way as to make things happen. The book goes into this in detail; it seems the 'secret group' was set up in 1902 and continued in existence until 1925.

Key events for which they defined the agenda, and in some cases implemented it, included the setting up of the 'Entente Cordiale' between Britain and France in 1904 in a form that was not a formal alliance, and did not have to refer to Cabinet. Though Britain had a treaty of alliance with Japan, the elite group managed to ensure that this did not trigger British participation in the 1905 war with Russia, despite a violent encounter with the Russian fleet in the North Sea, involving British ships. The 'secret elite' had identified Russia as a key ally of France in the future war on Germany.

Key contacts in the Franco-Russian networking were Poincare and Isvolsky<sup>5</sup>. There was an attempt by Kaiser Wilhelm to agree a pact with his cousin the Tsar which the 'secret elite' were able to kill via the Duma, with the influence of Isvolsky and Poincare.

On the home front they had Balfour and Asquith under their influence, and they managed to get control of Lloyd George, who had initially been an independent radical activist, by a trick involving a court case in which Carson had a role defending him in a context re-

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<sup>5</sup>See HH p.205 ff. Raymond Poincare was French Prime Minister from 1912; he was from Lorraine and strongly anti-German. Alexander Isvolsky had been Russian Foreign Secretary up to 1910; he subsequently became Ambassador to France. Isvolsky was in effect an agent of the secret British imperial elite group.

lating to Lloyd George's promiscuity. Milner in the Colonial Office, was one of the original 'secret elite' activists; Grey in the Foreign Office, and Haldane in the War Office became associated later. This group developed complete control of the media, via the *Times* and the elite press, as well as the 'gutter' component.

Prior to Sarajevo there were several episodes (eg Agadir) that could have led to war, but in each case war was avoided, basically because Wilhelm did his best to avoid it, and succeeded. Then came Sarajevo, but I will not attempt to summarise the detailed activity on the international 'secret elite' network which resulted in the Russian attack on the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in response to the latter's attack on Serbia. The French responded in alliance with Russia, and the Germans responded in alliance with Austria-Hungary.

The Germans counter-attacked the French via Belgium, and this brought in the British, with the Germans branded as the aggressor. The Irish dimension made this possible, be-

cause the Germans thought the British were occupied with Ireland. The Larne-Howth ploy had worked.

So, in conclusion, may I urge anyone considering writing about Larne and Howth in centenary mode not to do so without having read this book. Also may I add a further suggestion: was the 10% ratio of gun quantity between Larne and Howth a strategic decision by Sir Henry Wilson and co? He explicitly wanted to wreck the Home Rule process, and get Ireland partitioned; did he also wish to encourage a rising of the activists so as to execute the leadership? I have heard this suggested, and having read this book it seems totally plausible.

I hope this review will pose some questions in peoples minds and generate some queries to my email address. I am conscious that as an actual review of the book it is inadequate. If I am to do more however I feel I need to interact with a competent critical historian with some understanding of imperialism. Can I invite anyone interested in this subject to contact me at [roy@rjtechnie.ie](mailto:roy@rjtechnie.ie).