

# Narks, provocateurs and avuncular policemen

By Patrick Avaakum

**P**OLICE spying, infiltration and manipulation of opponents of the Establishment is older than Guy Fawkes, whose celebrated early 17th century "Gunpowder Plot" to blow up the Houses of Parliament was largely something manufactured, and manipulated for their own ends, by state agents. The latest example is the case of former police constable, Janet Lovelace.

Janet Lovelace, who says that she left the police force "because of things like that," has revealed that she was offered money (£200 a month for starters, plus expenses and "special help" with any pressing bills) to infiltrate and spy on the Catholic peace action group, Ploughshares, four of whose supporters were recently acquitted of damaging a British Aerospace Hawk jet, in protest at the export of lethal weapons for use by Indonesia against the people of East Timor.

The Lovelace case set me thinking about some of my own distant but not unrepresentative experiences in such matters.

I once travelled in a car over-full of Irish Trotskyists — then a rare species — going from Dublin to a fisherman's cottage outside Dundalk, to discuss politics and what should be done now that the British Army had finally been allowed into the Catholic areas of Derry and Belfast, which had barricaded themselves off, the previous August (1969). The Provisional IRA did not yet exist.

The Trotskyists in that car were members of a very small and rather sectarian group mainly confined to Dublin, and myself, a member of the British IS group (forerunner of the SWP) and *Workers Fight*. One would soon become active with a group of pseudo-Guevarists who robbed banks in the South, and be killed in an internal dispute, but that was all in the future.

Apart from the Dublin group, the only Trotskyists in Ireland were a few disoriented WRPers and some radical student leaders in Northern Ireland, independent-minded supporters of IS/SWP. (They would break with the IS/SWP and veer sharply towards nationalism, indeed Catholic chauvinism, within two years.)

One thing can be said for sure: neither Irish Trotskyism in general, nor the people in that crowded car in particular, were in a position to pose a direct threat

to the state, North or South of the partition Border.

Yet one of the people in that car turned out to be a police spy! He was exposed soon afterwards.

From what I saw of him, he was a seemingly solid working-class comrade, though of recent political vintage, who would look you candidly in the eye. I remember that he made a good joke: the wish perhaps fathering the thought, he said, "If this car were to crash it would kill at least two Trotskyist groups." All the Trotskyists in Ireland would have fitted comfortably into one small bus; but "the authorities" weren't taking any chances.

They don't just spy. Sometimes they lead you on.

**M**OVE on a few years, to a docklands club in Salford. I am drinking with prominent militants in the port.

A man known to one of them, an ex-docker turned semi-professional criminal, joins us. Though I don't know him, he says he knows me, from when I worked on the docks there, and would get up and make speeches at mass meetings.

Soon he draws me aside, away from the table. He knows people, he says, with guns and ammunition to sell. Being Irish, a "commie", and so on, am I interested? I must have contacts! Do I know anybody who would be interested? It is too good a chance to miss. And there would also be money in it for me, if I could help him out.

I have been in the Salford pubs all evening and, suffering from bad neuralgia, I have been overdosing on aspirin for a week. I don't have all my wits about me. But I'm not *that far* gone! He has to be either an idiot "cowboy" or a provocateur, and should in either case be shunned. So I am non-committal, and eventually he goes off.

I am told later that, unlikely as it might seem, he is out on bail — on a charge of armed robbery!

This is about the time the first IRA bombs went off in England. The offices of our organisation *Workers' Fight*, in Gifford Street, Islington, have been raided recently by armed police and thoroughly searched.

Some months earlier, five Irish "Republicans" — "the Hackney Five" —

have been trapped by police agents offering them guns, and charged: the frameup is exposed in the *Sunday Times* and elsewhere, and the police case falls apart. Those people do have links with a pseudo-political gangster group, but they haven't actually done anything. The proactive cops couldn't wait.

The cowboy in the nightclub is eventually jailed on the robbery charge. Before that the story of the incident in the club has gone the rounds on the Salford docks, and he is given a severe beating by some people unknown to me who don't like narks.

Those are just two incidents. There have been many others like them. Lots of political activists could tell the same stories: the people and the details would vary, but they would be pretty much the same stories.

**M**OVE on to look at the subject of the "security forces" and the left from a different angle, by way of a much earlier experience of my own which sheds light on how some narks are recruited. In this case, the person they tried to turn into a nark was me.

It is 1959. I am just 18, not very grown-up, labouring in Grant's timber yard in Salford. Though I am, in fact, a "Trot", I only half know it yet and move in political circles where "Trotskyist" is the equivalent of "fascist", and "agents of imperialism" is the routine response to my attempts to discuss Leon Trotsky and his relationship to the USSR. I take an hour off one Monday morning and go to the big union building on the Salford Crescent to join the Transport and General Workers Union.

An official shows inordinate interest and, after beating about the bush for a while, finally asks me if I'd like to hand out union membership forms and ask people working in the yard to join. The union officials have been refused when they asked permission to organise the labourers in the yard. Would I!

I spend four days in intense agitation, pestering people to join the union, talking socialism at least as much as trade unionism. I sign up half a dozen, and get a dozen promises to join if I'm not sacked.

On the Friday morning, one big foreman, looking uncomfortable, and one of the Grant brothers, a chubby self-

impressed little man with glasses, a hat and a brown overall coat, come up to me in the yard where I am working. Telling me to go with them, they take a firm grip on me, one for each arm, as if they expect me to try to escape, and march me out of the gate and down the lane to the office. There, I'm kept waiting two hours before being given my cards. Either the decision to sack me was sudden and they have to catch up on the paper work, or they are putting me in my "place."

I go again to the Crescent. The union official comes back down with me to see what can be done. He is told by Grant that I've "been sent" by "the League of Young Communists" to organise the yard. He won't tolerate that! The union can do nothing.

Three weeks later, two policemen come to my father's house in Cheetham Hill. They want me to account for where I was on the Sunday evening two weeks ago. They refuse to tell me why.

Inexperienced, bloody-minded, and with a childish disregard for the relation of forces involved, I say I won't tell them until they tell me why they want to know. They sternly refuse to do that and instead pack me roughly in a car and take me to Frederick Road police station, into a small interrogation room where they immediately lay into me, very persuasively. After a while I condescend to tell them about "my movements" that Sunday night. I was at a meeting of the Cheetham Young Communist League.

All of a sudden they become friendly, solicitous even, one especially playing the role of the avuncular "soft cop." Now they tell me what it is all about. Someone has broken in and smashed windscreens on the Grant brothers' lorries. They are working through a list of people who might have a grievance against them. The reason why I've been sacked must be known to them.

They seem to have no difficulty in believing me about not having smashed the Grants' windscreens. They never check my alibi: if they had, I'd hear of it.

Now the two recently tough-talking policemen start talking, probingly, about politics. They want me to tell them *where* "the cell" holds its meetings. Demands for other information would no doubt have been made once that was out of the way. I seem a decent, sensible lad, really. I was, wasn't I? I'd tell them what they wanted to know, wouldn't I? For reasons that will become clear — my nerve is restored a bit and I've begun to get my bearings after the first shock of

the pummelling and the first feeling of panic at being trapped in that room with the two large, state-licensed thugs — I am quite willing to tell them where we meet. Indeed, I say, I'll *show them* where we met.

Eager to be shown, they drive me, at my direction, more or less home down to Cheetham Hill Road, the main thoroughfare of the area. There I take them to the local CP headquarters. This is a big old house on Cheetham Hill Road, opposite the Odeon cinema, a relic of the days 15 years earlier when the Cheetham CP was a very big movement of mainly anti-fascist Jews. Securely nailed to a railway sleeper buried deep in the soil of the little garden outside the house is a heavy wooden placard with posters on it advertising the *Daily Worker*. Deep secret!

Disappointed and annoyed, they let me out of the car with a cuff on the side of my head from the "hard cop", for being a "cheeky bastard." Once out on the pavement, the cops in the car with the window down, I ask for their names, telling them I intend to make a formal complaint against them. The sergeant, the 'hard cop', says, with a studiedly contemptuous drawl: "Crawford's my name." There is a mixture of pride and righteousness in the drawl, meaning "What the fuck can *you* do?"

And of course he is right. The idea that I can do anything against them is about as realistic as the idea I'd started out with, of giving free vent to the adolescent, "Irish" and gut-anarchist disdain I feel for police, and simply refusing to discuss my movements with them except on my own terms.

**T**HE line from such events — they are not rare — to the establishment by the police of regular narking connections with people in the labour movement is a very short one.

The stories that have occasionally come out in courts — especially in Northern Ireland — about how the police "turn" Republicans and set up spies, are often stories of raw and uncertain people being bullied, or "hooked" on petty offences, or bribed by paltry sums.

It was a very frightening experience for me. My nerves were on edge for a long time afterwards, and my sleep, never secure, was badly disturbed.

Politically, though, it was a very useful experience, helping sort out my ideas about such nonsensical Communist Party dogmas as "peaceful revolution", about which I had been in conflict with my comrades.

And, frightened as I was, once I'd

adapted a bit, been educated into guile to protect myself, I had inured political attitudes to steady me. I'd been calling myself a "communist" for the better part of three years and a "Republican" for much longer. I knew who and what the police were, and who and what I was. My commitment to certain political attitudes was fundamental to my ability to make sense of the world and my own place in it. There was no way I was going to help them.

I have no new conclusions to draw from all this, or from the latest case to surface, Janet Lovelace. It is no new revelation that there is a great deal of police spying on, and interference with, the left and with the labour movement, on every level. It would be daft to be paralysed by suspicion and spy-hunting, but equally daft to pretend that there is no problem.

### Parade of the Old New

By Bertolt Brecht

I stood on a hill and I saw the Old approaching, but it came as the New.

It hobbled upon new crutches which no one had ever seen before and stank of new smells of decay which no one had ever smelt before.

The stone that rolled past was the newest invention and the screams of the gorillas drumming on their chests set up to be the newest musical composition.

Everywhere you could see open graves standing empty as the New advanced on the capital.

Round about stood such as inspired terror, shouting: Here comes the New, it's all new, salute the New, be new like us! And those who heard, heard nothing but their shouts, but those who saw, saw such as were not shouting.

So the Old strode in disguised as the New, but it brought the New with it in its triumphal procession and presented it as the Old.

The New went fettered and in rags; they revealed its splendid limbs.

And the procession moved through the night, but what they thought was the light of dawn was the light of fires in the sky. And the cry: 'Here comes the New, it's all new, salute the New, be new like us!' would have been easier to hear if all had not been drowned in a thunder of guns.