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John Ardagh (1840-1907): The Irish Intelligence Scapegoat for Britain's Anglo-Boer War Debacles

Donal P. McCracken
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Abstract

This paper looks at the fate of an Anglo-Irish officer in the British army during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). Having noted the extent to which the Irish were represented in the British army, the paper tracks the career of Major-General Sir John Ardagh, director of British Military Intelligence during the greatest of Britain's imperial wars. The paper examines the way in which the British establishment used Ardagh as a scapegoat for the early reverses in the war, and how the later disclosure of evidence vindicated Ardagh, but effectively ended his career.

Keywords: Irish soldiers, Military Intelligence, Anglo-Boer War.

Résumé

Cet article interroge le sort d'un officier anglo-irlandais dans l'armée britannique lors de la guerre anglo-boer (1899-1902). Après avoir fait état de la présence des Irlandais dans l'armée britannique, l'article rend compte de la carrière du Général Sir John Ardagh, chef des Services de Renseignements militaires pendant la plus importante des guerres impériales britanniques. L'article étudie la façon dont le Royaume-Uni a utilisé Ardagh comme bouc émissaire après les premières défaites de la guerre, et comment les témoignages révélés ultérieurement disculpaient Ardagh, tout en mettant fin à sa carrière.

Mots clés : soldats irlandais, renseignement militaire, guerre des Boers.

■ The Irish in the British army

In terms of manpower, expense, munitions and duration, the Anglo-Boer war (October 1899 to May 1902) was the greatest imperial war the British empire ever fought. It involved troops from India, Canada, the Australian colonies, New Zealand, the Cape and Natal, as well as hundreds of thousands of troops from the British army, the militia regiments and the reservists. But by the time the war concluded, with a British victory and the annexation of the Transvaal and Orange Free State, the casualty list was the highest for any colonial war in the history of the British empire before or after. The table shows that by May 1902 British mili-

tary casualties stood at 51,000¹. This should be judged against a total British force which, over the 32 months, was to number about 450,000 men².

British military casualties in the Anglo-Boer War

Casualties	Officers	NCOs and ranks	Total
Killed and died of wounds	716	7,010	7,726
Died of disease	408	12,669	13,077
Wounded	1,696	19,447	21,143
Missing and Prisoners-of-War	318	9,519	9,837
Total	3,138	48,645	51,783

While this is a modest number of casualties by First World War standards twelve years later, it was not so by contemporary imperial standards. The casualty lists in the campaigns in Zululand, West Africa, Afghanistan and the Sudan were nowhere near as high and consequently had not caused much concern in Britain. Nor indeed, up till the South African war, had the occasional imperial defeat caused such an outcry. More times than not the British press put a jingo twist on any military disaster, such as portraying “noble” General Colley at Majuba and “defiant” General Gordon at Khartoum. Any ensuing British victory, such as General Roberts’ occupation of Kabul or the destruction of the Zulu capital at Ulundi, soon soothed British public opinion and airbrushed away the memory of any defeats not yet avenged.

Ireland played an important part in the South African war³. While two Irish commandos, or Irish Transvaal Brigades, numbering no more than 500 men, gained much publicity and support in nationalist Ireland, in fact the under-researched role of the Irish on the British front was more significant. So significant indeed that Irish nationalist politicians, while denouncing the war, made capital out of “Irish valour” on the battlefield and accused the British as using Irish regi-

1. L.S. Amery, *The Times History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902*, vol. 7, London, Sampson Low, Marston and Company, 1909, p. 17-23. See also Bill Nasson, *The War for South Africa; The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2010, p. 306.

2. *Royal Commission on the war in South Africa: Report of His Majesty's Commissioners appointed to inquire into the military preparations and other matters connected with the war in South Africa*, Dd. 1789, London, HMSO, 1903, p. 35.

3. For the Irish contribution to the Boer side, see Donal P. McCracken, *MacBride's Brigade: Irish commandos in the Anglo-Boer war*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1999; *Forgotten Protest: Ireland and the Anglo-Boer war*, Belfast, Ulster Historical Foundation, 2003; and “From Paris to Paris, via Pretoria: Arthur Lynch at war”, *Études Irlandaises*, 2003, 28.1, p. 125-142. Very little has been written about the Irish contribution to the British side of the conflict. See Keith Jeffery, “The Irish soldier in the Boer War”, in John Gooch (ed.) *The Boer War: Direction, experience and image*, London, Frank Cass, 2000, p. 141-151; and Cassidy Martin, *The Inniskilling diaries, 1899-1902*, Pen and Sword, 2001.

ments such as the Dublin Fusiliers and the Connaught Rangers, as spearhead troops placed in the front line as “cannon fodder⁴”.

It is difficult to estimate numbers as many Irishmen fought in non-Irish regiments and conversely some English, Scots and Welsh men fought in Irish regiments. That said, it is probable that the number of Irishmen fighting on the British side in the Anglo-Boer War was in excess of 30,000. One is on firmer ground concerning the regiments. Eleven Irish regiments fought in the war, with the Irish Guards, who were formed during the war, making a twelfth. These included 6th (Inniskilling Dragoons); 8th (King's Royal Irish) Hussars; 5th (Royal Irish) Lancers; 1st Connaught Rangers; 1st and 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers; 1st and 2nd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers; 1st and 2nd Royal Irish Fusiliers; 1st Royal Irish Regiment; 2nd Royal Irish Rifles; 1st (Prince of Wales's) and 2nd Leinster Regiment; and 1st and 2nd Royal Munster Fusiliers⁵.

As far as militia forces were concerned there were militia battalions attached to eight Irish infantry regiments; there were eleven Irish militia artillery units and the 13th battalion of the Imperial Yeomanry was recruited in the Belfast region of Ireland⁶. Along with this array of Irish soldiery fighting in the British army was a host of Anglo-Irish officers. But even more significant was the disproportionately large number of Irish generals in the field fighting against the Boers. These included Generals Francis Clery, Fitzroy Hart, Thomas Kelly-Kenny, Herbert Kitchener, Frederick Roberts and George White. Several of these are famous historical figures. Less well known is the lanky and sometimes taciturn Major-General Sir John Ardagh, the director of British Military Intelligence during most of the war⁷.

■ British Military Intelligence

British Military Intelligence dated from 1873, but had long antecedence as generals had always found intelligence to be of value to them in the field⁸. In the British Indian empire, the political officers, usually military men seconded to the civil authority, acted in part as bureaucratic and magistrates, but also often as intelligence officers. In the British army the intelligence section tended to be connected to the Quarter-Master's or the Adjutant-General's offices, or to both.

4. See Padraic Colum, *Arthur Griffith*, Dublin, Brown and Nolan, 1959, p. 52 and *Freeman's Journal*, 8 March 1900.

5. Donal P. McCracken, *Forgotten Protest: Ireland and the Anglo-Boer war*, Belfast, Ulster Historical Foundation, 2003, p. 133.

6. *Royal Commission on the war in South Africa: Appendices of the minutes of evidence taken before the Royal Commission on the war in South Africa*, Cd. 1792, London, HMSO, 1903, appendix 14.

7. John Ardagh's papers are housed in the National Archives, Kew, London under the source reference PRO 30/40.

8. Thomas G. Fergusson, *British Military Intelligence, 1870-1914*, Maryland, University Publications of America, 1984, p. 201.

The Intelligence branch had grown out of the War Office's Topographical and Statistical Department, established after the Crimean War in 1855⁹.

Unrest in Ireland had necessitated the establishment of the Special (Irish) Branch, soon known simply as the Special Branch. This was attached to the London Metropolitan Police at Scotland Yard, which in turn fell under the British Home Office. But in the 1880s, under Major Nicholas Gosselin, ex-Irish Fusilier and an Irish magistrate, there was also a covert intelligence section in England. Between 1888 and 1901, "the Gosling" was head of the Home Office's "Secret Department"¹⁰. These covert bodies were supported by and gave support to the detective or G division of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, under the legendary Inspector John Mallon¹¹.

With the assassination of two of the three senior men in the Irish government in the Dublin Phoenix Park murders in May 1882, an Under Secretary for Police and Crime was appointed. Initially this was Henry Brackenbury, "Black Brack", whose mother family came from County Down. He was a serving army officer who had been head of British Military Intelligence between 1887 and 1891¹². Other senior civilian intelligence chiefs at the Home Office included the rather sinister Edward Jenkinson, who for a period was Brackenbury's success in Dublin Castle, and the Anglo-Irishman, Robert Anderson. This nexus of Irish Intelligence and British army is hardly surprising given the fact that Irish republican bombs were exploding periodically in London. The suppression of several Irish republican newspapers in the second half of the nineteenth century and the developing techniques employed in curbing the extremist Irish press assisted the military, not least when it came to closing Boer newspapers and censoring press reports coming out of South Africa.

■ Major-General Sir John Ardagh

John Charles Ardagh was a County Waterford man, born either in Comeragh House or the nearby Glebe House, on the slopes of the Comeragh Mountains, about 20 kilometres from Dungarvan¹³. He was the son of the local fox-hunting rector of Rosmire, Rev. William Johnson Ardagh, first curate of the parish (1822-1841) and subsequently vicar of the same parish (1841-1872) until his death on

9. Fergusson, *op. cit.*, p. 244-250 and chapter 6.

10. Christy Campbell, *Fenian Fire: The British government plot to assassinate Queen Victoria*, London, Harper Collins, 2002, p. 378.

11. Donal P. McCracken, *Inspector Mallon: Buying Irish patriotism for a five-pound note*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2009.

12. Sir Henry Brackenbury, *Some memories of my spare time*, Edinburgh/London, William Blackwood, 1909, p. 311-313.

13. Lady Ardagh in her biography of her husband mistakenly refers to the area as Comragh.

9 September 1872, aged 74. Rev. Ardagh had been educated at Trinity College, Dublin, gaining a BA in 1821 and an MA in 1832¹⁴.

About the time of John Ardagh's birth, the parish was described as "aggregately chilly in appearance and averagely poor in character"¹⁵. Before John Ardagh became famous the most notable product of the parish was John Palliser (1817-1887), the geographer and Arctic explorer¹⁶. John Ardagh's father was of the pre-disestablished Anglican cleric in Ireland mould: a gentleman farmer, sportsman and larger than life. His son was more reserved. John went to a private academy in Waterford run by a Dr Price before proceeding, at the age of 16 in July 1856, to Trinity College, Dublin. At Trinity, Ardagh was a contemporary of a glittering array of future notables, including the future eminent Irish historian W. E. H. Lecky and the classicist and future provost of Trinity, Rev. Sir John Pentland Mahaffy¹⁷. An aptitude for mathematics soon scuppered a career in the church and led Ardagh into engineering and the Royal Engineers. There followed an extraordinary career, often serving either as an military engineer or as a field intelligence officer, which took Ardagh to Iceland, the Levant, Malta, the Balkans, the congress of Berlin, demarcating the boundaries of Bulgaria and Greece, action in the Egyptian/Sudan debacle and six years in India, where he was private secretary to the viceroy. For a period he also served as a section head in the army's intelligence division in London.

But despite all his military service, Ardagh was not of the fighting soldier mould. He was quiet, polite, efficient, an excellent committee man, an organiser and a fixer – be it of military fortifications, commissions of inquiry or negotiated treaties. At the age of 55, John Ardagh married Susan Hamilton (1854-1935), the widow of the earl of Malmesbury. After his death Susan Ardagh wrote of him:

He had travelled nearly all over the world. He was reserved and silent; cold, perhaps, to strangers, but warm-hearted to his friends, and, although a man of the world and a soldier, had the guileless disposition of a child¹⁸.

Ardagh was known by his staff, who looked upon him "with a mixture of respect, curiosity, and awe" as the Marabou¹⁹. In 1896, this quietly spoken, lanky

14. Per. Comm., Dr Susan Hood (Representative Church Body, Dublin) to D.P. McCracken, 24 May 2011.

15. *The parliamentary gazetteer of Ireland*, vol. 2, Dublin/London/Edinburgh, A. Fullarton, 1846, p. 532.

16. David Murphy, "John Palliser (1817-87)", *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, vol. 7, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 1047-1048.

17. James Johnston Auchmuty, *Lecky: A biography and critical essay*, Dublin, Hodges Figgis and Company, 1945, p. 10.

18. *Sir John Ardagh*, p. vi.

19. Fergusson, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

Waterford man was made major-general and director of the British Military Intelligence Department.

■ Scapegoat

In one of his precise and well-written minutes, Ardagh once commented that, “the good Intelligence officer can seldom hope to find his work, as a whole, understood or its magnitude realised²⁰”. It is the timeless cry of the intelligence officer down the decades. And this was certainly the case in the year before and the opening months of the South African war. The link between the Intelligence Department and the War Office was not what it should have been, with the former being regarded as little more than a convenient reference library²¹. One of the problems was that Ardagh’s office was in Queen Anne’s Gate while Viscount Wolseley (1833-1913), another Irish mandarin and then British army commander-in-chief (1895-1901), was across St James’s Park in Pall Mall. An “out of sight, out of mind” mentality existed in the War Office with regard to the Intelligence Department. Major Griffiths described the War Office buildings as a “labyrinth of dark staircases and blind passages situated on the south side of Pall Mall, which is still as difficult to perambulate as when Charles Gordon refused to remain there, saying it was easier to find his way about Central Africa²²”.

This “poor cousin” status is clearly illustrated by the fact that Ardagh’s annual budget for running the seven sections of Military intelligence, including the library and mapping section was a meagre £11,000. By contrast, the annual budget of the Transvaal Republic for Intelligence was £92,000²³. Even by the end of the war, but with additional responsibilities, the annual budget for British Military Intelligence stood at only £28,000²⁴.

While Ardagh wrote one warning memorandum after another and even had his section produce a 119-page book on the military capacity of the Boer republics, his section was largely ignored. His department’s situation of near penury dictated that only twelve intelligence officers were despatched to South Africa prior to the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer war. And while General White had the good fortune to have Ardagh’s deputy, Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Althram, with him at Ladysmith, the intelligence situation when the war commenced was fairly dire. As the war correspondent for *The Times* observed several years later:

20. *Sir John Ardagh*, p. 271.

21. *Sir John Ardagh*, p. 279.

22. Major Arthur Griffiths, “The Intelligence Department”, *The Cornhill Magazine*, February 1900, p. 1.

23. Fergusson, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

24. *Royal Commission on the war in South Africa: Appendices to the minutes of evidence taken before the Royal Commission of the war in South Africa*, Cd.1792, London, HMSO, 1903, p. 41-46.

We did not spend nearly enough money, or send enough [Intelligence] officers. The eight or ten, or a dozen officers who went out did very good work, I know, but they were fewer than the men I employed myself as “Times” correspondents anywhere, or even a commercial traveller, with the sums of money they were given²⁵.

Frederick Roberts (1832-1914), while born in Cawnpore in India, was of Anglo-Irish extraction and indeed took as one of his titles the baronetcy of Waterford, where he spent his childhood. Like Ardagh, he held an honorary doctorate from Trinity College Dublin²⁶. Following a series of British defeats, Roberts arrived in South Africa to take command of the British army in the field in December 1900. With him were several Intelligence officers, including Lieutenant-Colonel George Henderson (1854-1903), the former professor of Strategy and Tactics at the British army’s Staff College, and Captain William Robertson (1860-1933), a sectional head at Queen Anne’s Gate. “Wully” Robertson, “was heartily glad to escape from the depressing and uncongenial atmosphere common to official life in London in time of war²⁷”. But it was exactly that “depressing and uncongenial atmosphere” which faced John Ardagh, left back in Britain’s capital, especially as he had lost both Altham and Robertson to the war front.

It was not long before Queen Anne’s Gate came under strong criticism. The thrust of this attack on Ardagh’s department was multi-pronged: that it had failed to estimate the strength of the Boers; that it was ignorant of the armaments’ aid to the Boers; that it failed to guess the Boer’s offensive plans relating to Natal; that no warning was given to the government about the Boer plans; and that British troops in the field were left without maps and topographical information²⁸.

Matters came to a head when Wolseley, commander in chief of the army and Ardagh’s immediate superior, made a speech in which he openly criticised Military Intelligence for not giving sufficient information regarding the Boers. He claimed that, “We found that the enemy who declared war against us much more powerful than we anticipated”. This was an extraordinary attack, not least because Ardagh reported directly to Wolseley as commander in chief of the army. This attack was picked up by *The Times*, which asserted quite bluntly, “For most of our

25. *Royal Commission on the war in South Africa: Report of His Majesty’s Commissioners* p. 129, and *Royal Commission on the war in South Africa: Minutes of evidence taken before the royal commission on the war in South Africa. (Volume II.)*, Cd.1791, London, HMSO, p. 465.

26. David Murphy, “Frederick Sleigh Roberts (1832-1914)”, *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Cambridge, 2009, vol. 8, p. 513-515.

27. Sir William Robertson, *From private to field-marshal*, Boston/New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921, p. 103.

28. *Sir John Ardagh*, p. 333-334.

[recent] reverses the blame must rest with our Intelligence Department, whose information was throughout defective²⁹”.

Ardagh was greatly shocked. He had regarded his fellow Irishman in Pall Mall as a friend. But Wolseley was very sharp and ever aware of what the wider world was saying – which was that things had not gone well in South Africa. Three South African towns with British garrisons had been besieged by Boer forces and in one week alone in December 1899, Black Week, the British army had suffered humiliating defeats or setbacks at Stormberg (10 December), Magersfontein (11 December) and Colenso (15 December). Not unnaturally, the British press was asking why this and the subsequent setback at Spion Kop (24 January 1900) had happened. It was abundantly clear that the British had seriously under-estimated the Boers. All this had put Wolseley, along with the equivocal Secretary for War, the Marquis of Lansdowne – yet another Anglo-Irish grandee – in a tricky position³⁰.

Pressed by his wife, Ardagh went to see Wolseley, who feigned a misunderstanding: “Oh, my dear fellow, of course, I never meant anything of the sort. I am speaking at the Mansion House in a few days, and I will make a point of putting the matter right.” Needless to say, Wolseley did not keep his promise.

Ardagh had several reasons to feel Wolseley’s public attack was an unjust travesty of the true situation. In Ardagh’s papers, there are copies of no fewer than seven memoranda dating from June 1896 to September 1899, written either by Ardagh or his senior officials, giving the government details of the military preparations being made by the Boer republics³¹. These unambiguously set out the dangers facing the British. The October 1896 Ardagh memorandum is clearly typed and states, “As the Transvaal is almost entirely surrounded by British territory this large expenditure [£1.5 million so far that year on military preparations] can have no other explanation than an anticipation of war, or an intention of aggression against this country, and its supremacy in South Africa”. It later states that 48,000 burghers are available to fight. The cover sheet shows that the memorandum was copied to the commander in chief of the army, to the secretary of state for War and to the Colonial Office³².

29. Raymond Sibbald, *The War Correspondents: The Boer War*, Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 1993, p. 183.

30. Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, 5th marquis of Lansdowne and earl of Kerry had an extraordinary career which included being secretary for war, foreign secretary, governor-general of Canada, leader of the Conservatives in the House of Lords and later leader of the doomed southern unionists in Ireland. His family home, Dereen in County Kerry, was looted and later burnt during the Irish civil war. See Patrick M. Geoghegan, “Henry Charles Keith Petty-Fitzmaurice (1845-1927)”, *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, vol. 3, Cambridge University Press, p. 949-951.

31. See National Archives, London, Ardagh papers, PRO 30/40/13. The memoranda are dated 11 June 1896; October, 1896; 15 April 1897; 21 September 1898; 3 June, 8 August and 28 September 1899.

32. National Archives, London, PRO 39/40/14.

Even more substantial was the most impressive Intelligence Department secret handbook entitled, *Military notes on the Dutch Republics of South Africa. Compiled in Section B, Intelligence Division, War Office*. This went into two editions (April 1898 and revised in June 1899) and was sent out to South Africa in large numbers. For the government to claim ignorance of the situation in South Africa was not tenable. Not only was there the material supplied from Queen Anne's Gate but, in addition, a secret War Office handwritten memorandum dated 1899 clearly lays out the number and size of artillery pieces in the possession of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State at the time. These total 237³³.

■ Vindication

A strange and ironic turn of events led to the secret *Military notes* handbook becoming public knowledge. This was to go a long way in clearing Ardagh's tarnished reputation. A copy of *Military notes* was among General Sir Penn Symons's papers (an interesting point in itself) which fell into Boer hands after the town of Dundee in Natal was overrun in October 1899, following the British defeat at the battle of Talana Hill. According to Lady Ardagh, the Boers reproduced the manual for their own officers. This is uncertain, but what is known is that a copy of the handbook found its way via the Boers to Michael Davitt, the Irish nationalist war correspondent, who was in the Transvaal from 26 March to 15 May 1900 reporting for the *Freeman's Journal*³⁴. Subsequently Davitt was to reproduce part of *Military notes* in his 1902 New York-published book, *The Boer Fight for freedom*³⁵.

Before that, however, Davitt sent a copy of the book to a New York newspaper, from which the matter was quickly picked up by the London *Standard*. The British press was not slow to realise that Military Intelligence had been made a scapegoat. One newspaper bluntly commented, "The Intelligence Department did its work faithfully and well". In late November 1900, *The Times*, realising that Ardagh had indeed produced documents relating to the strength and the nature of military preparations by the Boers, carried the following:

The War Office possesses an Intelligence Department whose duty it is to collect information as to the military organisation and armaments of other Powers; but it is nobody's business to study the requirements of "inevitable" wars, and officials absorbed in army trivial questions, which ought never to reach Pall-Mal, could not be expected to find time for the

33. National Archives, London, PRO 30/40/16.

34. Donal P. McCracken, *MacBride's Brigade*, p. 91-94.

35. Michael Davitt, *The Boer Fight for freedom*, Washington, Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1902, p. 58-65.

due consideration of matters of national importance. There is no difficulty in obtaining the fullest information, as to the resources of the Transvaal and the Free State, and we have been officially informed that “the armed strength of the Boers, the number of their guns, with their character and calibre”, as laid down in the report of the Director of Intelligence [Ardagh], “corresponds exactly with our recently ascertained knowledge of what the enemy has put into the field”. Whether or not these reports ever travelled from Queen Anne’s-Gate to Pall-mall seems uncertain, since the Commander-in-Chief publically stated that “We have found that the enemy... are much more powerful and numerous than we expected”. The report of the Intelligence Department seems, therefore, to have been as valueless for practical purposes as were those transmitted to Paris by Colonel Stoffel prior to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, and Lord Wolseley was apparently as little aware of the fighting reserves of the Boers as was Marshal Leboeuf of those of the Germans³⁶.

As the existence of *Military notes* was now public knowledge and no longer confidential, the War Office could not continue, on the grounds of secrecy, to refuse Ardagh’s renewed demand that it be republished and made public.

Ardagh now got agreement for the document to be placed before both of houses of the British parliament. In the end it was republished, but as only 50 copies were printed, it was not widely distributed. Of course, the government was now embarrassed, which did not endear Ardagh greatly to them. As Lady Ardagh noted, their subsequent half-hearted public support for Military Intelligence “made things look blacker than if they had said nothing at all³⁷”.

The reality was, as *The Times* chief correspondent noted, “the Intelligence Department got some information [about Boer military preparedness before the war], and the heads of the War Office glanced at it in their spare time, and having been in South Africa themselves 20 or 30 years before, gave their personal impressions to the Government, but the whole thing was sketchy and worthless³⁸”.

This matter placed a great strain on Ardagh. On top of the controversy and the need to direct his department in time of war, he had other responsibilities. These included working on a committee investigating trans-oceanic telegraph cables as well as the implementation of the Hague Convention of early 1899. Concerning the latter, one of the matters which Ardagh had to defend was the British insistence that it had the right to use expanding bullets, or dum-dum bullets. The British position on dum-dum bullets was what it had been in 1889,

36. *The Times*, 22 November 1900.

37. National Archives, London, PRO 30/40/16.

38. *Minutes of evidence. (Volume II)*, p. 467. See also Sibbald, *op. cit.*, p. 20-27.

that possession of these was necessary, in case “we have to deal with savages or with an enemy who is himself using an expanded bullet³⁹”. It is little wonder that Ardagh became ill and was off duty for some time, his place being taken in Military Intelligence in an acting capacity by Colonel William Everett (1844-1908).

In March 1901 Ardagh’s five-year term as director of Military Intelligence came to an end. There is no evidence that any attempt was made to renew it. Ardagh certainly had nothing lined up for himself in advance. That was not as he behaved⁴⁰. In a confidential memorandum written a few days before he left Queen Anne’s Gate Ardagh, in his succinct and clear style, laid out the history and work of the department, ending “my object is not to justify what I conceive the S. O S. [Secretary of State for War] is satisfied requires no exculpation, but rather to assure that in the future my successor as D.M.I. [Director of Military Intelligence] shall not be – as I have often been – a *vox clamantis in deserto*⁴¹”.

Ardagh’s successor was Leeds-born William Nicholson (1845-1918), one of Roberts’ “Indians”, having served many years with Roberts in India and later serving as his military secretary. He took over from Ardagh with the higher rank of lieutenant-general. But he was not quite in the same position, for in November 1901 the Mobilization Section of the British army was attached to Military Intelligence. This also meant an increase in staff and budget, as well as elevating Nicholson to the position of director-general. The ethos of Military Intelligence was to be very different under Nicholson. Things were now more bureaucratic, more regimented and less personalised. Nicholson had no dry humorous notice in his office stating that when you visit a man of business, tell him quickly your business, leave him to his business and go about your own business.

John Ardagh was awarded the Queen’s medal for the war. The reason for this was most likely because after he left Military Intelligence, and while the war was being fought, he sat on a commission established to investigate claims against Britain in relation to the hundreds of foreign “undesirables” whom the British had deported from South Africa during the war⁴². This commission brought Ardagh to South Africa for a six-month period of travelling round the region (December 1901 to June 1902).

In writing to his wife from South Africa he made an interesting observation relating to the effectiveness of British censorship:

39. National Archives, London, PRO 30/40/14; and Edward M. Spiers, “The use of the dum-dum bullet in colonial warfare”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 1975-76, vol. 4, p. 3-14.

40. *Sir John Ardagh*, p. 333.

41. National Archives, London, Ardagh papers, PRO 30/40/16, 8 March 1901.

42. These “undesirables” did not include any Irish people as they were not regarded as being foreign. Any Irishman suspected for assisting the Boers was rounded up and sent as a prisoner of war, usually to Ceylon.

I send you a Johannesburg *Star*, by glancing over which you will perceive how very little information or comment is allowed to leak out here. Not a single word has transpired in the local papers about Lord Methuen's operations of late, and I shall imitate the censor's reserve, as you will know much more than I do, long before this reaches you. We only hear (barring confidential communications) what has taken place when the English newspapers come out a month afterwards⁴³.

Ardagh was back in South Africa later in the year, ironically now with the temporary rank of lieutenant-general, to revisit sentences imposed because of martial law. But in August 1902, Ardagh formally retired from the army and in December was appropriately appointed a Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George (KCMG)⁴⁴. He did not, however, receive a peerage.

So controversial had the war been at home in Britain, and so expensive in money and in casualties, that parliament established a Royal Commission to "inquire into military preparations and other matters connected with war". The commission sat for fifty-five days and heard 144 witnesses, who answered 22,200 questions⁴⁵. The chair was the earl of Elgin. The first four days were dominated by Intelligence officers giving evidence. Only on day 13 was Ardagh called. His evidence took over twelve foolscap papers of small print to record and he answered 280 questions⁴⁶. In his quiet Anglo-Irish accent, Ardagh meticulously went through what his department had done and how it had operated, mentioning in passing that his request for £18,000 for his mapping section had been met with a War Office offer of £100, a sum which subsequently did not materialise. The saga of *Military notes* was dealt with as was the paucity of the grant allocated to Military Intelligence in comparison to what continental powers allocated to their respective intelligence networks. Ardagh concluded on a rather incongruous note:

I think the Boers, no doubt, are not anything as good as the average Australian shot. I called attention in a Report which I wrote in 1896 to their decay of shooting power, because up to 1870, or even up to 1880, the Boers were in constant war with the natives, and had the practice which game shooting afforded⁴⁷.

The Intelligence men convinced the Royal Commission. The commission laid no blame on the Military Intelligence Department for the lack of British pre-

43. *Sir John Ardagh*, p. 389.

44. Edward M. Spiers, "Sir John Ardagh (1840-1907)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 2, p. 360.

45. *Report of His Majesty's Commissioners*, p. 3.

46. Minutes 1, questions 4964 to 5244, p. 209-220.

47. *Royal Commission on the war in South Africa: Minutes of evidence taken before the royal commission on the war in South Africa. (Volume 1.)*, Cd.1790, London, HMSO, 1903, p. 220.

paredness for the war. Moreover, the commission relied heavily on information supplied to it by the Intelligence Department. The report stated of the Intelligence Department, "that it was undermanned for the work of preparing for a great war will scarcely be denied. But a considerable measure of success must be admitted". Regarding the major criticism of Intelligence that it failed to supply adequate maps for use in the field, the report observed, "the outcry therefore in regard to the absence of good maps was not altogether well-informed⁴⁸". The 1903 Royal Commission had, if not directly, then certainly by implication, vindicated Aradagh.

Ardagh retired and lived at his country home at Glynllifon Park in south Wales, giving support to the Red Cross and serving as a British government director of the Suez Canal Company. After he died in September 1907, Lady Ardagh started writing what proved to be a very readable life of her husband. In chapter 18, she sets out to vindicate the Irish intelligence chief. It is significant that she clearly thought that that was still necessary. The 479-page biography was published by John Murray in 1909 under the title, *The life of Major-General Sir John Ardagh by his wife Susan Countess of Malmesbury (Lady Ardagh) with portraits; and illustrations from drawings by Sir John Ardagh*.

In 1908, while collecting material for this biography, Susan Ardagh wrote down an account of a conversation she had had in 1903 when taken into dinner by the former Secretary for War, St John Brodrick. This she did not include in the book, but she placed it carefully with Sir John's papers which she bequeathed to the Public Record Office in 1936. According to the note, at this dinner Brodrick fully admitted that when under-secretary for War, prior to the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer war, he had seen the Intelligence Department's book *Military notes on the Dutch Republics of South Africa*. However, he frankly stated to her, "if I had admitted that Sir John Ardagh told us the truth, people would naturally say: If you were told told [*sic*] the truth, why did you not act upon it, and they would think it was my fault⁴⁹".

48. *Report of His Majesty's Commissioners*, p. 128 and 131.

49. National Archives, London, Ardagh papers, PRO 30/40/16, confidential note by Lady Ardagh, 16 January 1908.