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A Phoenix revealed from the ashes

Phoenix: Policing the Shadows — The Secret War against Terrorism in Northern Ireland
by Jack Holland and Susan Phoenix
Hodder & Stoughton, 287pp, £17.99 in UK

A self-styled psychologist and campaigner for the deaf, who lived for nearly a quarter of a century with the knowledge that every time her husband went to work in the morn-

ing he might be dead by nightfall. The book they have written is both a 28-year-long love story and the first credible account of the war in Northern Ireland from an RUC

man's point of view. And Ian Phoenix's extraordinary career shows that it really was a war brutal, bloody and extremely dangerous. The first attempt to murder him came in 1973 when he was a sergeant in north Belfast. When Phoenix became an IRA team leader, he stopped his wife driving the car. The number plates, in particular, were to be left dirty — "it makes it more difficult for potential murderers to identify us".

Other precautions included writing down the numbers of any cars which passed the house too often; getting the children to lie about what their father did for a living; keeping a gun under the pillow and in Susan's handbag; and dropping a bunch of keys on the ground every time the car was left anywhere in order to check for booby-trap bombs.

Phoenix was involved in a leadership role in many of the key anti-IRA actions of the 1980s and 1990s. In 1983, his men disrupted an IRA attempt to murder a judge in Belfast by first detonating a milk lorry at his home and then turning up in a nois-

ily 1985, he led the team which captured Patrick Magee, later convicted of the Brighton bombing. In 1987 he headed the RUC unit which took part in the Loughgal ambush, in which eight IRA men were killed, the largest number of republicans killed in a British military operation since the War of Independence. Following that spectacular and bloody success, the unflappable Phoenix was unusually open and reflective. At home in his converted farmhouse on the County Antrim coast he sat in a chair in front of his wife and cried at the waste of life he had witnessed: "Young Irishmen should not be throwing their lives away like that."

In many ways Ian Phoenix was the archetypal British comic-strip hero: a boy from a poor County Tyrone background who rose to become a tough, decisive and humorous anti-terrorist commander; a man who did not suffer fools gladly, especially when they were his superior officers; a lover of good company and fine wine; uncommitted in politics, and with social conscience enough to risk his career by his involvement with his wife's work for the deaf.

ist, who believed that the IRA could be defeated by good intelligence and force of arms, and was suspicious of the compromises forced on the police by the peace moves of the early 1990s. He put forward the vivid notion of a helicopter assault force equipped with heavy machine guns manned by SAS airborne troops which would sweep down on an IRA active service unit and simply obliterate it.

Phoenix makes compelling reading not only for its insider's account of the RUC's war against the IRA, but also for its insights into the republican movement. It features IRA's list of Belfast's 17 top IRA men and bluntly states RUC intelligence's belief that, as late as 1993 the three most prominent leaders of Sinn Féin were also on the IRA Army Council.

In the wake of the clamour about Neil Jordan's heroic portrayal of Michael Collins, this book is a salutary reminder that the Northern Irishness also have their war heroes — and Ian Phoenix is undoubtedly one of them.

READER'S CHOICE

Ruth Lyndon, second year student, St Brigid's School, Tuam

Nightmare and Dreamscapes, by Stephen King (Hodder & Stoughton, £5.99 in UK), is a collection of twenty-five hair-raising stories. From predator, jettis to monster and giant to swallowing deserts, this book has it all, and more. The doors, light the candles and prepare yourself for hours of reading about terrifying creatures. I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Stephen King fills pages with his unique and creative writing, which left me speechless, cautious, and in awe of the supernatural and the unknown. Anybody from a child upwards should read this book but be warned — it is a bit of a gut-buster.