

The Miami Herald

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The Miami Herald

April 30, 2000 Sunday FINAL EDITION

SOUTH FLORIDA TRIAL TARGETS IRA 'AGENTS' THREE ACCUSED OF GUNRUNNING

BY DANIEL DE VISE

In dimly lit Irish pubs across South Florida, passionate partisans are selling raffle tickets to pay court costs for the "political prisoners" they call the "Florida Four." Federal prosecutors take a less romantic view of the Florida Four, a quartet they accuse of running guns from Florida to the Irish Republican Army.

Trial begins Monday in Fort Lauderdale for three natives of Belfast, Northern Ireland, charged with shipping more than 100 guns to the IRA from post offices in Boca Raton and Deerfield Beach in boxes disguised as baby clothes and toy firetrucks. A Boca Raton woman, Siobhan Browne, who rounds out the Florida Four, will not go to trial.

The former stockbroker from Cork, Ireland, pleaded guilty last month as part of a bargain that will likely see her take the stand to testify against the others.

All of Great Britain will be watching the case, which threatened to derail a delicate peace in Northern Ireland when it broke last summer. The 2-year-old Good Friday agreement, a bid to end seven centuries of conflict, calls for the disarmament of the IRA.

Few could have expected the battle for Northern Ireland to spill over into Broward County, a place unaccustomed to criminal defendants with brogues.

"We will demonstrate at trial that this was an official operation of the Provisional Irish Republican Army," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Richard Scruggs, referring to the branch of the IRA linked to a trail of political bombings and assassinations over the past 30 years.

A more colorful cast of characters couldn't be found at the movies.

The accused: Conor Claxton, 27, described by prosecutors as an IRA soldier who came to Florida to arm his countrymen; Martin Mullan, 30, allegedly flown in by the IRA to help Claxton; Anthony Smyth, 43, who led a quiet life in Weston but may have been an IRA agent all along; and Smyth's girlfriend, Browne, 35, a tall redhead the British tabloids have dubbed "the IRA Mata Hari."

Investigators say Claxton and Mullan flew to South Florida last year, met up with local man Smyth and plotted to buy guns and ammunition from stores up and down the coast. Browne, they say, was lured in as a "straw buyer," an innocent face to broker the deals.

ATF MOVES IN

The group succeeded in shipping at least 46 handguns to Ireland before federal agents caught up with them in July, according to prosecutors. They contend that Browne, inexperienced in the ways of crime, spoiled the operation by

using two identification cards with different first names and Social Security numbers to buy guns.

The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms keeps tabs on anyone who buys two or more guns within five days. When ATF agents spotted Browne's conflicting personal data on multiple purchases, they swooped in.

A small but devoted community of Irish-American defenders contends that the four are victims of a campaign of intimidation by the U.S. and British governments.

"This has been a political persecution from the beginning," said John Panaro, local chairman of the Irish Northern Aid Committee, speaking over a Harp beer at Dicey Riley's pub in Fort Lauderdale.

Friends and lawyers are lining up to defend the Florida Four.

Attorneys for Browne and Smyth, the South Florida couple, contend that neither one ever belonged to the IRA. Smyth's lawyer suggests the two bought the guns to sell to regular civilians for reasons of simple profit.

NOT A GUN RING

Lawyers for all four say the government has little evidence to support its story of an international IRA gun ring. They point out that most of the weapons seized were garden-variety handguns, not military rifles. Prosecutors counter that the arsenal also included armor-piercing bullets and an order for a James Bond-style machine gun camouflaged as a briefcase.

"They say there's evidence of murder and mayhem. Who? What? Where? There's nothing there," said Frederick "Fritz" Mann, attorney for Smyth. "Nobody's charged with having shot anybody in this case."

Panaro oversees the Florida Four Defense Fund, which has raised more than \$100,000 to pay the defendants' legal fees. Much of the money has come from raffle tickets sold by bartenders and regular customers within the confines of sympathetic Irish pubs that are a gathering place for expatriates.

Prosecutors say the plot began in January 1999, when Claxton arrived in South Florida as an IRA soldier on a mission. Irish newspapers have speculated that he was part of a much larger operation that brought 20 tons of guns and heavy weapons into Ireland during the summer amid sensitive peace talks.

Florida is a comparatively easy place to buy weapons, according to the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, a gun-control advocacy group in Washington D.C. Buyers don't need a firearms license to buy guns and may purchase as many as they wish. The state has no ban on assault weapons.

TEAMING UP

Claxton teamed up with Smyth, a 10-year Florida resident with Belfast roots. Prosecutors say Smyth had been with the IRA as a young man and probably came to Broward as a "sleeper," an idle agent awaiting orders to be reactivated.

Smyth's life was in flux. The longtime Weston resident had just left his American wife for Browne, a stockbroker living in Boca Raton.

The three wound up as roommates, prosecutors say, in Browne's Boca apartment. Prosecutors say Mullan, another IRA agent, arrived in Florida on April 5, 1999, to help in the gun-running plan that was taking shape.

Investigators initially tagged Browne herself as an IRA agent, noting the several aliases, anonymous post office boxes and multiple IDs that appear on her record in nearly two decades in the United States.

But prosecutors now say she was simply a girlfriend drawn into the cause.

Browne cemented that view last month with a startling confession in federal court. She admitted to her role as front woman for an operation that would send arms to the IRA.

"I was the straw purchaser for Anthony Smyth," she told the judge. "I knew he was going to give the weapons to Conor Claxton, and I knew the weapons were going to Northern Ireland."

PURCHASING GUNS

Smyth and Browne bought at least 47 guns in April and May at gun shows and gun stores in South Florida, according to court records, a flurry of activity that drew the attention of investigators.

Their favorite seller was Ed Bluestein, owner of Big Shot firearms in Boynton Beach. Bluestein has admitted that he agreed not to file the required federal paperwork on the gun purchases for an extra \$50 per gun.

A handwritten shopping list sent by Smyth and Browne to one gun dealer asked for "Anything silenced, 25 [caliber] and up" and for "any full auto submachine gun . . . the smaller the better."

In all, the couple bought or ordered at least 79 guns - prosecutors believe there are dozens more that they never found - along with 1,066 rounds of ammunition and 133 magazines, mostly for AK-47 assault rifles, according to prosecutors. They bought the hardware with money wired by the IRA from bank accounts in Northern Ireland, prosecutors say.

ON HER TRAIL

But agents soon were on Browne's trail, alerted by the conflicting IDs. They traced her to a post office box on Las Olas Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale. Inside the box, they found mail addressed to Claxton. Interpol, the international police organization, identified Claxton as an IRA agent.

Unaware they were being watched, Browne and Smyth turned over the weapons to the two men. Mullan and Claxton mailed them at local post offices. Federal agents say they videotaped some of the transactions.

Irish authorities say they intercepted many of the guns in packages that arrived at the homes of IRA supporters. They say they found 300 of Claxton's fingerprints on the firearms - the smoking gun, so to speak, in the case against the Florida Four.

On July 26, federal agents arrested Claxton in a room at the Buccaneer Hotel in Deerfield Beach. In the room, they found a shredder, weapons and videotapes on assassination. Agents also closed in on Smyth and Browne at Smyth's Weston home.

Investigators found Mullan in Philadelphia, where he had fled.

FLORIDA'S 'EASY'

FBI agents say they coaxed Claxton into a partial confession by goading him about harming innocent Irish children. Claxton replied that the guns were to be used against British soldiers, not children.

He said he had been sent to Florida on the common knowledge that getting guns there is "easy."

He left the investigators with a hint of the larger gun-buying operation suggested by the British press: "You didn't get all of us."