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Permanent Under Secretary
Sir Philip Woodfield KCB CBE

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
GREAT GEORGE STREET,
LONDON SW1P 3AJ

CABINET OFFICE
A 8244
22 SEP 1983
FILING INSTRUCTIONS
FILE No. _____

RIA
Sir Robert Armstrong GCB CVO
Secretary of the Cabinet
and Permanent Secretary to MPO
Cabinet Office
70 Whitehall

22 September 1983

Mr Goodall
to see

Dear Sir Robert.

After our talk yesterday morning I found that the Foreign Office had asked for a personality note on Michael Lillis. I think you would find it helpful to see it and I enclose a copy. It confirms what we both thought about the length of spoon required, but of course the crucial thing is the substance and authoritativeness of what he has said and may have to say.

I am seeing my Secretary of State in Belfast tomorrow evening and will keep you in touch with any views he may have about handling these delicate matters.

I am sending a message to Patrick Eyers to let him know that I have taken it upon myself to send you a copy of correspondence addressed to him.

Dictated by Sir Philip Woodfield
in Belfast and signed in his absence

L. R. Armstrong
RIA

Thank you. Mr. Lillis

Phil Rundle
APS/PUS

It happens all over fairly drunk at Balliol but (as far as I was in a position to judge) remained notably calm + unprovoked. But this note strikes me as a fair portrait.

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LONDON

Your reference

Our reference

Date 15 September 1983

Mr. P. C. O.

MICHAEL LILLIS

1. We were asked to prepare a note on Michael Lillis and this I enclose. It has been seen by everyone in Chancery and includes a substantial contribution from the Ambassador.

2. I should add one gloss. For two years I have been told that Lillis becomes bitterly anti-British when drunk - the implication being that in vino veritas. It may be true, but I suspect the implication. Many Irishmen become bellicose with drink, and bellicosity here has only one direction. But decisions are generally taken in soberer moments, that is when we generally deal with people, and I have always found Lillis reasonable and - while naturally taking an Irish point of view - open-minded.

D. E. Tatham

D E Tatham

cc: S Boys Smith Esq, NIO(L)

LILLIS, MICHAEL

Head of Anglo-Irish, Information, Political and Cultural Division in the Department of Foreign Affairs since March 1983.

Michael Lillis claims to come from a fairly humble and traditional Republican Dublin background. He studied at UCD.

His appointments have been:

3rd Secretary, Madrid

Consul, Irish Consulate-General, Boston, Mass.

1st Secretary, later Counsellor (?), Washington

Counsellor, Political Division, DFA (handling US and UN matters)

1981: Promoted Assistant Secretary and seconded to Taoiseach's Department as Foreign Affairs Adviser

1982: Seconded to Cabinet of EC Commissioner Dick Burke in Brussels

March 1983: Returned to DFA as Head of Anglo-Irish Division

Michael Lillis is of smallish build with a round, boyish face and spectacles; florid pimply cheeks (especially after drink, for which he has a good capacity but which he holds well). His manner is lively, friendly and agreeable, but he makes sure he gets his point of view across; and, on occasion, he can be sharply combative: he is also an attentive listener, generally very alert to sensitive points when he knows his subject well. His colleagues consider him a "workaholic" and he can often be found at his desk at weekends.

He is ambitious and successful in reaching his present position in his mid-40s: and thus competitive. While in the Irish Embassy in Washington he had (and was proud of) a wide range of political contacts, but the use he made of them and his own views on Irish policy in the US sometimes clashed with his even more patently high-flying Ambassador, Sean Donlon. In his present job he is again in Donlon's shadow, and there is some strain for him and for the DFA in having as the Secretary of his Department someone who has already done his present job and who also has close relations with the Taoiseach. They are rivals both for Dr FitzGerald's attention and for that of Mr John Hume. Much of his success is due directly to the patronage of Dr FitzGerald and his wife Joan. His promotion in 1981 was political and he was obliged to move to Brussels when Mr Haughey returned to power in 1982. He is regarded with some suspicion by other DFA officials as too highly politicised.

He is a name-dropper, not to say bull-shitter, of the first order. He claims he has excellent sources of information by "the back way" on British politics, implying that these include people

/who

who are close to the Prime Minister. He also claims that he knows what the "real" intentions of the British establishment are. He visits Northern Ireland regularly. It is typical of him to boast of knowing the Rev. Ian Paisley well, implying that they are still in touch, while the latter says he only speaks to Irish officials in Brussels.

He is a very complex character. He attaches much importance to being Irish. He quotes regularly from Irish writers such as Joyce, Yeats, Flann O'Brien - but not from British ones. He is over-sensitive about Article 2 of the Irish Constitution and will go out of his way to distinguish between the State and its jurisdiction. He is a nationalist who repudiates any use of violence and is concerned about the threat to the stability of the Republic posed by terrorism in Northern Ireland, and in particular by Sinn Fein. He is determined to combat support for Irish extremists in the USA, while asserting that they are a small though vociferous minority. He speaks with authority, no doubt derived from his regular contacts with Dr FitzGerald, and is not afraid of bold moves or, sometimes, immoderate language. He does not appear to trust British intentions, but he clearly realises that, if he is to succeed in his present job, he has to convince British officials of his good-will, and he is willing to go to considerable lengths to do so. He is inventive in his approach to Anglo-Irish relations. But he does not, in the last analysis, seem willing to perceive the realities of the constraints on British Government policies.

His wife was born in Lincolnshire of Irish parents. She has chosen to be Irish but some of her brothers and sisters have chosen to remain British. He claims his wife's English background makes him well able to understand British values and political attitudes. They have two daughters.