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**Secrets And Lies**

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**[**[**Angus Mitchell**](http://www.drb.ie/contribute.aspx?id=572e4155-4f1e-4c48-bb63-2d7cc40d6397)**is currently curating an exhibition entitled 'Rubber, Rights and the Atlantic World 1880-1916', which is touring different South American countries.]**

***The Defence of the Realm: The Authorised History of MI5*, by Christopher Andrew, Allen Lane, 1,032 pp, £30, ISBN: 978-0713998856**

***MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service 1909-1949*, by Keith Jeffery, Bloomsbury, 832 pp, £30, ISBN: 978-0747591832**

“Truth-telling is not compatible with the defence of the realm,’ commented George Bernard Shaw in the preface to *Heartbreak House*, a play about British society drifting blithely towards destruction on the eve of the First World War. For most of the twentieth century, public knowledge of the role of secret service has persisted as the missing dimension of British history. Over the last three decades however, there has been a melting of the icecap regulating the climate of government secrecy. Intelligence history has appeared in many different shapes and guises: official and unofficial, informative and disinformative, conspiratorial and counter-conspiratorial accounts have been variously published, broadcast, leaked, rumoured, accepted and denied. Intelligence history is now a rich and provocative sub-discipline in the study of the contemporary world. On another level, it provides a platform for myth-making and fantasising among a largely uncritical public and an acquiescent press.

The two authoritative volumes under review select and synthesise much of the new research into polished narratives. Their publication celebrates the foundation of the modern security services in 1909 and their continuing activities, in the case of MI5 to the present; the history of MI6 cuts out in 1949. Copyright of both volumes is not vested in the respective authors but in “the Crown”. Forewords to the volumes by John Sawers, the serving chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS/MI6), and Jonathan Evans, the director general of the Security Service (MI5) state the need for modern security services to be as “open and transparent as possible, within the constraints of what the law allows”. They are written in their own internal language of political correctness, protecting past agents in the interest of the somewhat nebulous concepts of “national security” and the “realm”.

Reading these two volumes in late 2010, as news about the unauthorised release of an archive of documents by WikiLeaks began to reverberate within the inner circles of international relations, it was hard not to ponder and compare the wider considerations and some of the ethical issues behind state secrecy, then and now. In his letter to the US ambassador in London, the editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, concluded that the failure of the US to identify the specific instances where national security had been breached was an act intended to “suppress evidence of human rights abuse and other criminal behaviour”. US secretary of state Hillary Clinton immediately defended diplomatic secrecy, claiming that Wikileaks was “an attack on the international community, the alliances and partnerships, the conversations and negotiations that safeguard global security and advance economic prosperity”.

WikiLeaks is exposing the enduring tension at the heart of state secrecy: the right to know and the need of governments to strike a balance between transparency, privacy and security. What can be legitimately carried out in the name of national security and vested interest? Too often, secrecy becomes a convenient blind for acting in ways which contravene any number of codes defining human rights, natural rights, privacy rights and constitutional rights. As both these books confirm, intelligence agencies are a law unto themselves. They are unaccountable to normal democratic processes and their activities are neither confirmed nor denied (NCND). Their operational histories are also hard to pin down.

No doubt both these volumes already discreetly adorn library bookshelves reaching from baronial turrets in the Highlands of Scotland to idyllic sandstone cottages in the byways of Gloucestershire. They will be a comforting read for insiders, who want to understand their role in broader contexts. To those who have followed the gradual revelation of intelligence history over the last decades with a healthy dose of scepticism the seamless narrative is not quite so easy to accept. The discussion on British intelligence may have excited more conversation, more cigar smoke, more conspiracy and hush-hush than any topic in the contemporary world, but secret service is too often the stuff of legend and fantasy. Over many decades of silent fermentation, the cocktail of mythology and deception is both shaken and stirred.

But do these books leave us any the wiser? Are they, like so many official histories, mere exercises in self-justification? Whose interests do the intelligence services serve?

Secrecy and revelation have always been uneasy partners. Writing history about secret service was something largely undertaken in the world of the para-political. The tension separating articulation and silence has often resulted in vicious entanglements. Only in 1994, following the Intelligence Services Act and Britain’s Open Government initiative, did the barriers of secrecy start to break down. Well in advance of the lifting of the portcullis protecting the secret services, a great deal of time and thought had been expended on preparing the ground. The historian of GCHQ, Richard J Aldrich, has perceptively analysed the policing of the past of British intelligence in the post-1945 period and demonstrated how governments “expended considerable resources in offering their own carefully packaged versions of the past in order to maintain secrecy”.

History enjoys a special relationship with the world of intelligence, not least because many distinguished historians were embedded in quite senior posts within the service. Winston Churchill, the godfather of British intelligence, had a love affair with secrecy lasting to the day of his funeral in 1965. Basil Thomson, assistant commissioner of London’s Metropolitan Police and the head of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) at New Scotland Yard during the First World War, was responsible for arresting many of the spies and traitors investigated by the intelligence services. After his murky dismissal from his post, Thomson was one of the first insiders to start revealing the inner workings of secret services during the war, often in quite exaggerated and untrustworthy ways. Thomson was himself a historian of some ability, evident in his publication of *Alvaro de Mendaña, The Discovery of the Solomon Islands*.

The Oxford historian John Masterman, the chair of the Twenty [XX] Committee, which controlled double agents during the Second World War and perfected the art of disinformation and strategic deception, was initially prevented from publishing his history *The Double-Cross system in the War of 1939-45* under the Official Secrets Act. After the war, HH Montgomery Hyde, the Unionist MP and barrister wrote an agenda-driven history, extending from his time working for both MI6 and the Ministry of Information. FH Hinsley, the official historian of British Intelligence during the Second World War, served at Bletchley Park as a cryptanalyst. At least two Regius Professors of Modern History at Oxford and one at Cambridge were also active in MI6 and went on to write some of the finest modern history of their time. The official history of GCHQ is still unrecognised, but it has its own tenured internal historians.

This collaboration also reached into the realms of Irish university history departments. Both T Desmond Williams and Esmonde M Robertson worked in the Historical Section of the Cabinet Office, founded in 1906 as part of the Committee for Imperial Defence, and closed down in 1982. Historians have valiantly guarded the gateway into the underworld of secret service history and the intriguing overlap between intelligence, deception and history-writing begs for investigation and deconstruction to see just how far verisimilitude, obfuscation and strategic revisionism have been carried out at a policy level within some academic circles.

Christopher Andrew is the doyen of British intelligence historians and the scripting of the history of intelligence services has been his life’s work. His thesis on the *entente cordiale*, which emerged out of Europe’s late nineteenth century culture of secret diplomacy, exposed him to the undisclosed ties between secrecy and international relations. In the 1980s, he produced a series of histories which defined the field of intelligence studies. His 1985 collection on the missing dimension led on to his pioneering work on *Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community*, a benchmark study. This was followed by work on the CIA and the Anglo-American “special relationship”. With the collapse of communism, Andrew spent many months leafing his way through the KGB files and the Mitrokhin Archive. He has helped make intelligence history sexy. His style is both confident and engaging, mixing populism with academic precision. His skill at weaving amusing anecdotes with rigorous analysis makes his books readable at both a general and academic level. Given his extensive knowledge of MI6, some assumed he would be the obvious choice to write that history. Instead he accepted MI5, and as part of his contract he was initiated into the Security Service. Controversy surrounded the appointment. Richard Aldrich wondered if a team of historians might have been more appropriate.

Keith Jeffery – another Cambridge man – is the Professor of British History at Queen’s University Belfast. His work has concerned the relationship of Ireland to the British Empire and the First World War. His choice was more surprising. On publication of his book Jeffery spoke of how he had made “a Faustian pact” and “overridden the imperatives of historical scholarship”. But what he meant precisely by these comments was unclear. In advance of publication both MI5 and MI6 published separate policies on disclosure. Protection of the identities of agents was strictly controlled.

Both these works throw up some big questions about academic integrity and the relationship between “truth” and “secrecy” but neither author is in the least reflective about the nature of secrecy itself. What does secrecy do to a society or to the individuals involved in clandestine activity? The brilliant critique of secrecy ‑ *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (Oxford, 1982) ‑ by the ethicist Sissela Bok is missing from both bibliographies. There is the unstated assumption that secrecy is a good thing, a view not shared by, among others, John F Kennedy:

The very word “secrecy” is repugnant in a free and open society; and we are as a people inherently and historically opposed to secret societies, to secret oaths and to secret proceedings. We decided long ago that the dangers of excessive and unwarranted concealment of pertinent facts far outweighed the dangers which are cited to justify it.

Even though both these books are rooted in archival research they are remarkably indifferent about the shifts in the conceptual understanding of the archive over the last twenty years. Archives are commonly promoted as sites of knowledge, places where “truth” is “revealed” and the base material of documents alchemise into the precious metal of narrative formations. More recently, however, archives are being re-examined as sites of power, places worthy of study in their own right. As Randolph Stam has observed: “Truth-telling and fiction-making are both persistent truths about archives.” Simultaneously, they are temples of fact and prisons of deception. The assumption and expectation that the archive is a repository of unmediated truth will make the critical thinker immediately sceptical.

This is of paramount concern in the case of the histories under review because facts, references and footnotes cannot be cross-checked in conventional ways. Too often, a glance at a footnote ends with the stone wall of “Security Service Archive” or “Recollections of a former Security Service officer”. For that alone both books should have established a more rigorous approach to the apparatuses of power invested in the archive. Why should we trust these archives from the outset? In his 1985 study Andrew was very conscious of the potential for the archive to deceive:

There is no field of modern history in which the historian needs to tread more carefully than in deciding the authenticity of secret documents. An impressive list of distinguished historians … have made notable errors of judgment in these matters.

Twenty-four years on, his doubts have evaporated. No explanation is provided. Information classified as “Top Secret” or gathered by the Secret Service is invested with a certain authenticity and mystique that makes it more difficult to question.

At the outset, both books offer brief descriptions of the physical nature and predicament of the archives under investigation. For some time the extent of the MI5 archive has been estimated to be in the region of 400,000 files. In the case of MI6, the archive has been heavily weeded and large parts destroyed. Extensive silences are apparent. Jeffery refers to the “intermittent, methodical and substantial destruction of records which may, or may not, have been of historical value”, but he continues: “I have found no evidence that the destruction was carried out casually or maliciously, as some sort of cover-up to hide embarrassing facts about SIS’s past.” This is a serious assumption.

Every historian of modern diplomacy knows that governments deliberately weed and sanitise archives. Secrecy and lies are bedfellows. Jeffery’s comment, far from instilling confidence in MI6’s ahistoricism, propels the reader into the realm of George Orwell’s Bureau of Records where “[e]very record has been destroyed or falsified, every book has been rewritten, every statute and street and building has been renamed, every date has been altered”. When the Stasi destroyed tons of documents about its foreign intelligence operations it was not because they believed in recycling paper.

The archive also extends to interviews with former agents. But these testimonies are protected by anonymity and we are given no indication of the context of these debriefings. Were these conversations recorded? Will historians in the future be granted access to examine these interviews? Is this real transparency or another layer of obfuscation? Irish historians are only too well aware of the issues associated with interviews protected by anonymity, which persists at the heart of one of the most disquieting ongoing controversies interrogating the trustworthiness and rigour of academic methodology.

If security services were a product of twentieth century modernism then the scripting of their histories is really a production of twenty-first century postmodernism. Nothing in the underworld of the intelligence past can be known with complete assurance or certainty. All truths become relative and unstable. Fictions become facts imposed by factions. On entering the archive of the security service, the vigilant historian should constantly be reminded of Jacques Derrida’s observation: “There is no political power without control of the archive …” The two are inextricably linked.

According to both these accounts, the origins of the intelligence services are a product of fiction. The popular novels of William Le Queux (pronounced “Kew”) whipped up so much popular fear of the German menace that the government were forced to respond. The omission from both books of any reference to Erskine Childers’s *The Riddle of the Sands* – often cited as the first spy novel and part of a genre of “invasion literature” which stoked British anxieties about German power – is unfortunate. The novel was dependent upon intelligence gathered by Captain Blinker Hall, the future head of naval Intelligence and a figure whose shadow falls across much of the intelligence world in the First World War. Childers, of course, skippered the *Asgard* and ran guns into Ireland for the Irish Volunteers, before stepping back into a role in naval intelligence after the outbreak of war in 1914.

This attribution of the origin of the security services to popular fiction is surely a fallacy, or at least only a small part of the puzzle. Twentieth century intelligence had deep military and governmental contexts. Spying, code-breaking and covert interventions are well tried weapons of war and peace. Oliver Cromwell’s spymaster John Thurloe organised a network of agents across Europe for the Protectorate. After the foundation of the Foreign Office in 1782, a matrix of informers provided “requirements”: information relating to economic, military and diplomatic matters, and a culture of deniability was sanctioned to protect identities. The scholar administrators of India and Lord Salisbury’s “man on the spot” in Africa were all part of earlier configurations of the imperial intelligence community. The war against the Fenians, the Great Game, the gathering of commercial intelligence by the Board of Trade and the work of the War Office intelligence department were each precursors of what was to come.

By 1909 bureaucratic knowledge, rather than parliamentary control, was the real currency of power. Intelligence services arose from the hegemonic conjunction of new technologies of communication, preparations for war and the need to find improved ways of defending spheres of influence. In 1993, when the Public Record Office released the first files on intelligence history, a useful in-house pamphlet *Top Secret* was produced for researchers to help explain the first tranche of releases. Four years in advance of the setting up of the security services there is a file named “Plans for the Secret Service in event of European War”.

Another discomforting reason for the reorganisation of the intelligence services might be traced to the deepening culture of secrecy and “secret diplomacy” provoked by the crisis in the Liberal party. As governments became more secretive in their dealings, they required new formations of power to protect that secrecy. The Official Secrets Act (1911) was one consequence. Some believed that decades of secret diplomacy was the reason the world was propelled into conflict in 1914. On the outbreak of war, the Union of Democratic Control, composed of a number of prominent public intellectuals, was formed with the intention to speak out forthrightly against this culture of secrecy and to make foreign powers more accountable to their people. The philosopher Bertrand Russell, the activist ED Morel and CP Trevelyan (brother of the historian GM Trevelyan) were members. This is an episode in the emergence of both services that was apparently unrecognised at the time or conveniently deleted.

The First World War became the testing ground and laboratory for finessing the work of secret service. The first director general of MI5, Vernon Kell, was tireless in the pursuit, trial and execution of German spies. Counter-espionage quickly turned to counter-subversion and political surveillance. Pacifist organisations, anti-conscription groups, left-wing pressure groups and the activities of the Independent Labour Party – in other words, those who had the temerity to question the culture of secrecy – became the next targets. MI5’s work reached across the Empire. India, in particular, was a busy part of their realm. MI6 was navigated through the war by Mansfield Cumming – the man who famously amputated his own leg with a pen-knife. Cumming was fascinated by gadgetry, code names and invisible inks. The generally harmonious collaboration between different agencies disintegrated after the war as Kell and the ubiquitous Basil Thomson engaged in turf wars. When Kell turned MI5 towards political policing, Thomson considered his territory was threatened. This was the first of several such confrontations.

Survival of the organisation was guaranteed: after the war the German menace was replaced by the red menace and the threat of international communism. By 1918 the combined security service was a well-funded arm of government collecting information on all subversives and anyone opposed to the political right. The close surveillance of Soviet trade delegations seems hardly surprising, but the war on the left in Britain raises questions about the political orientation of the security services. Understandably, the first government of the Labour Party, formed by Ramsay MacDonald, was highly suspicious of MI5. This reached a frenzy of distrust with the leaking of the forged Zinoviev letter and the disreputable defeat of Labour at the polls in the election of 1924.

MI6, under the direction of Hugh Sinclair, was also involved in combating communist subversion and responding to the Bolshevik threat. In the 1930s the Soviets managed to penetrate into the very heart of the Security Services through the recruitment by Dr Arnold Deutsch of the “Cambridge Five” (Kim Philby, Donald Maclean, Guy Burgess, Anthony Blunt and John Cairncross). By 1938 Burgess was working for Section D of SIS and devising dirty tricks, sabotage techniques and psychological warfare. This was a huge failure of protective security and the shadow of the Cambridge traitors still provokes anxieties today.

Preoccupations with the spread of world communism channelled attention away from the rise of Nazism. Hitler’s fascination with the strategies of British intelligence during the First World War influenced and inspired the methods used by the Nazis, especially in the field of propaganda. The Second World War proved another new beginning for both services. The work of both MI5 and SIS ranged from hours of painstaking dedication, much of it performed by women, to derring-do and high adventure across the battle zones of empire. The histories of codebreaking at Bletchley Park (Government Code & Cypher School), and the “XX [Double-Cross] System” are well known. Many cases of personal valour make of this the finest hour of both services. Jeffery firmly debunks the view, put forward by Hugh Trevor-Roper, that MI6 was largely irrelevant to the Allied victory; an argument apparently based upon the lack of evidence to support a more informed view. He shows how an underfunded and understaffed organisation at the start of the war used field stations and networks to build important liaisons across the Atlantic and made a hugely valuable contribution in countering German intelligence operations overseas through deception strategies and the provision of vital intelligence on invasion plans.

Jeffery’s history terminates in 1949, three years before the end of Stewart Menzies’s administration. Once again national security is given as the reason. The silence left by this truncation can be filled by fragments about the known unknowns. The reconfiguration of the Anglo-American special relationship and various new alliances and networks forged with other special forces around the world is still a story in a state of assembly. Some of the history of MI6 in the post-1949 era has been told. Their work in the field of propaganda, psychological operations (PSYOPS) and subterfuge can be extracted from the quite comprehensive knowledge that exists of the Information Research Department. Andrew’s history also makes reference to various collaborations between the services, but much will remain obscure and in the dark – perhaps forever.

After the war, MI5 faced a new set of tasks and challenges. Decolonisation, the Cold War and the continuing threat of communism were priorities. The diagrams at the end of Andrew’s book illustrating the regular structural reorganisations of MI5 help to explain the mutations within the administration. Stories about the bugging and surveillance of the delegations attending negotiations to discuss terms for independence make one wonder why all the fuss about Watergate. The surveillance of Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta and the overthrow of Cheddi Jagan, the Marxist leader in British Guiana, end two chapters which somehow manage to present a positive image of the unscrupulous retreat from empire.

In the 1960s the story enters the realm of sexual shenanigans mixed with acute paranoia. Speculation about “spies within” led to some demoralising internal surveillance of suspected double agents. A new turn from counter-subversion to counter-terrorism resulted from anti-colonial resistance and the emergence of threats from the PLO and IRA. The rapid rise and demise of various subversive organisations, notably the Angry Brigade, Red Army Faction, the First of May Group, Black September and the spectre of Libya produces the context for the fictional world of John Le Carré.

Two chapters try to explain away MI5 intrusion during the premiership of Harold Wilson. These are a smart exercise in narrative diplomacy. For many years allegations circulated that the security services kept a file on Wilson, documenting his links with the KGB and various shady businessmen. His travels to Moscow in the 1950s did nothing to help his case. On the surface, Andrew takes a particularly decisive line to debunk the idea of the “Wilson plot”, which brought an interesting response from the original author of the book of that name, David Leigh:

... underneath the MI5-approved bluster against “conspiracy theories”, there lurks the real story in obscure footnotes and cryptic mentions. Andrew has in fact substantiated the thesis of the “Wilson plot”, and more besides. It transpires that there is even more damning material in the MI5 files than was ever realised.

That there was concern in the Security Service over Harold Wilson’s loyalty is not so surprising in the context of belligerent surveillance and infiltration of the political left in Britain. Countless man hours were expended spying on the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and the policing of subversive elements within the trade unions. In *Secret State: preparing for the worst* (2010) Peter Hennessy argues that the Soviets did not like the Labour Party as they considered it a threat to the CPGB. Evidently, a small group within the British intelligence community was concerned about Wilson’s alleged communist sympathies. Andrew revels in mapping the defeat of the Militant Tendency and Trotskyites and the foibles and failures of Jack Jones, Mick McGahey and Bert Ramelson, leading to the final crushing of Arthur Scargill and the National Union of Miners. The ideological overlap between the CPGB, CND and the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp also attracted the attention of the service.

Margaret Thatcher, whose interest in the intelligence community was matched only by that of Winston Churchill, proved to be a devotee of the secret services. She was an avid reader of the Box 500 situation reports, giving her intelligence updates. During her watch the world of espionage and counter-espionage in the last decade of the Cold War reached a gripping climax. By now Britain had a double agent inside the KGB. Oleg Gordievsky fed both SIS and MI5 with invaluable information over many years which contributed significantly to the collapse of the Soviet Union and communist regimes.

Several public controversies involving the intelligence services meant that the shroud of silence which had protected their activity gradually fell away. The agent of much of this was the former MI5 officer Peter Wright, who co-wrote a volume of highly revealing memoirs, *Spycatcher*, which revealed a world of fabricated and distorted evidence, internal witch-hunts and hostility between MI5 and MI6. Andrew does not for a moment underestimate the impact the book had, even though he dismisses most of what Wright has to say as “conspiracy theory”. Spilling the beans on MI5’s operational history is for Andrew as loathsome as the treason of the Cambridge Five. Efforts to block the publication of the book, however, proved to be a massive public relations defeat.

Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and of many communist one-party regimes, the world of secret service changed course. A realignment of public understanding of the role of intelligence was vital. Debate now raged about the need for a statutory basis for the services. The Security Service Act (1989) was followed by the Intelligence Services Act (1994) and the placing of the secret services on a statutory footing. Unlike his predecessor, John Major was a believer in open government and temporarily imposed severe cutbacks to the service.

Following the appointment of Stella Rimington as director general in 1992, the Security Service began to advertise for recruits. The renegade officer David Shayler was positively vetted and employed by MI5 after answering a cryptic ad in *The Observer* titled “Godot isn’t coming”. In the 1990s there were increasing demands for accountability, transparency and open government. In the post-Communist world, the priorities of the Security Service moved towards the so-called war on drugs and organised crime. A final chapter on “Holy Terror” inspired by Usama (sic) bin Laden’s call for transnational jihad has opened yet another chapter and another frontier of defence. The story is already dirty. It is clouded with accusations of torture and rendition flights. It is estimated that about seventy-five per cent of MI5’s activities is in the war against “Islamists”.

The portion of the narrative missing from this précis of the story above is, of course, Ireland. Those who try to fathom the detail of Britain’s war against Irish Republicans will find plenty of food here for controversial thought. The surveillance state, which has made London the most intensively CCTVed city in the world, is a consequence of the war between Britain and the Irish Republican Army. Thames House, the HQ of MI5, is shared with the Northern Ireland Office. The history of the intelligence services in Ireland is really the missing dimension within the missing dimension. Whatever the archive reveals about the Troubles, it will never be able to capture the emotional history of this tragic conflict. Andrew has no sympathy with any form of Irish republicanism. He treats the struggle for sovereign independence and unification with that disdain and superiority long fostered by Oxbridge historians.

The narrative is candid in explaining the tensions in the organisation competing for the intelligence advantage in Northern Ireland. Relations between the Metropolitan Police Special Branch, the Special Branch of the RUC, MI5 and SIS was never straightforward. Sharing intelligence is a risky business, especially in a world infused by rumour, doublespeak, informers and lies. After the suspension of Stormont in March 1972, intelligence-gathering was put on a new footing with the setting up of Irish Joint Service (IJS), established by MI5 and SIS, with offices in Belfast and London, and largely dealing with the surveillance of foreign arms procurement. In 1976, a new [FX] branch dealing with Irish counter-terrorism was initiated by MI5, but the long aspiration of the Security Service to take the lead intelligence role in Northern Ireland was not realised until October 2007.

The claims long made in Irish Republican circles of a shoot-to-kill policy are vigorously denied. Andrew states categorically: “There is no evidence in Security Service files that it countenanced or assisted a shoot-to-kill policy in Northern Ireland.” But does this mean it didn’t happen? And what if it had happened? Might a researcher expect to find a file named “Ireland: Shoot-to-Kill Policy”? No. Collusion between the security services and Loyalist paramilitaries, which was confirmed in different official reports – notably the Barron report, and the Stevens/Orde report – will remain suspended in a state of denial until Judgment Day. There are some “truths” which the secret state can never admit to, whatever evidence exists to support them. The corollary supporting the logic that it didn’t happen if there isn’t evidence to show that it did, once again reveals the shortcomings of the official archive as the repository of total knowledge.

There are other shortcomings. Recent scholarship has demonstrated how the organisation of British propaganda in Ireland after 1918 included a policy of press censorship, the placing of articles promoting an official version of events, the fabrication and forgery of incriminating material and a deliberate strategy of “verisimilitude”. This still has important consequences for the accurate writing of the history of this period. There are also some important matters which are completely excluded from the official history. No reference is made, for instance, to Michael Collins’s infiltration of the Dublin Metropolitan Police and assassination of fifteen members of the “Cairo Gang”, which included some MI5 officers. The history of the Security Service in Ireland must be read for its silences and occlusions.

**The only fragment of this history where I might claim deeper knowledge than either of the authors under review concerns the controversial and continuing controversy over Roger Casement. The four pages dedicated to the Casement saga by Andrew say nothing new about Casement and more about the methodological and political proclivities of Andrew as a historian. The MI5 files on Casement were among the first to be released back in the late 1990s and help to elucidate the collaboration between the agencies in pursuing and tracking Casement. Casement’s story is complicated by his own entanglement with covert British intelligence activities, which he would use very effectively when his loyalties turned overtly to the cause of Irish independence. In the late 1990s, as the first intelligence files were released, Casement’s name was writ large. His three days’ interrogation over the Easter weekend of 1916 involved many of the most senior intelligence chiefs: Basil Thomson, Reginald Hall, Frank Hall, Claud** Serocold and Patrick Quinn.

His treasonable activities seemed at times to deliberately incite the intelligence services. His allegiances to different Irish revolutionary organisations; his journey and sojourn in Germany; his efforts to name and shame leading British statesmen and the British Foreign Office by exposing the plot to have him assassinated; his aggressive series of essays exposing state secrets; and his plans of deception and sabotage were understandably treated as a top priority in Britain. His association with Irish nationalists was compounded by the support he received from the British left, notably George Bernard Shaw, the Fabians and the trade union leader Ben Tillett. When the attention of MI5 began to shift from counter-espionage to counter-subversion, Casement was at the top of the list.

Andrew was himself a contributor at the Royal Irish Academy Casement symposium back in May 2000 and is aware of the emerging concerns expressed by myself and some other professional historians that the so-called Black Diaries are “sexed up” narratives of original diaries. Their style, provenance and handling conform to a tradition of PSYOPS, black propaganda and smear campaigning which, as Andrews demonstrates, is part of the *modus operandi* of the secret services. The controversy over the diaries – long suspended in the bitter binaries of unionist/nationalist histories – has now entered onto a new level of interpretation. Deep textual analysis and the recontextualising of the Black Diaries illustrate how they robbed Casement of the moral high ground in his investigation of atrocities in the Congo and the Amazon.

Andrew completely ignores all recent arguments about why the diaries might have been forged. He states that “the suggestion that they were forged by British intelligence has always been implausible. Neither MI5 nor any other British intelligence agency had the capacity to produce a forgery on the scale and of the complexity that would have been required”. This is perhaps the sole point in his book where he underestimates the intelligence of British intelligence. He also overlooks the close relationship between the intelligence services and the revision of history at policy level. Carefully managed smear campaigns – or *kopromat* as the Russians call it – are a recognised strategy used to defeat dissenters and gag whistleblowers.

The diaries also configure with the institutionally ingrained homophobia that lasted within the Security Service well into the late 1960s. Analysis of the twists and turns of the story of the Black Diaries serves as a fascinating insight into how lies can be transformed into consensual truths and how, as Lord Acton once famously remarked, secrets disintegrate. Casement’s story also casts light on a couple of other important questions about the operational history of the security services in Ireland.

It suggests that from a very early stage there was collusion between loyalism and MI5. One of the senior M15 officers – or MO5(g) as it was then – who interrogated Casement was Frank Hall – a name withheld from the release of papers on Casement back in 1995. Hall was also military secretary of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and had a key role running guns into Larne for the UVF in early 1914. This link between loyalist subversion and the Security Service can also be traced into the high ranks of the British judiciary. Several leading political judges in the early twentieth century closely identified with unionism. Among them were Sir George Cave, Charles Darling, Rufus Isaacs and FE Smith, who all undertook important prosecution work of spies and subversives. This triangulated collusion between the British intelligence community, the Unionist Party and the British justice system might well disclose that MI5 is not the “politically independent national institution” it claims to be.

To be unequivocal, both these books unselfconsciously reveal the actuality that the security services are an instrument of the political right in Britain. All shades of the left receive a persistent and heavy battering from start to finish, both nationally and internationally. The realm of British economic interest and elite authority is controlled and protected by a complex and covert apparatus of authority. Britain is the most secretive of any Western power. But an answer as to either why this is, or should be, is not provided. Failing this, these books offer insight into the architecture of British influence and the “old boy network” reaching from the public school system and Oxbridge to the officer class, the city, the media and transnational corporations. This is a story of entitlement: entitlement to conquer and rule, entitlement to bug, entitlement to smear, entitlement to pry and lie, entitlement to secrecy and silence.

The last decade has seen a persistent flow of fragments to do with different intelligence activities: 9/11, the war in Iraq, the Hutton and Butler reports, the case of Richard Tomlinson and the revelations of Scott Ritter, have each and all done little to instil public confidence in intelligence communities worldwide. These authorised histories of MI5 and MI6 are part of an urgently required public relations exercise to salvage the reputation of profoundly undemocratic mechanisms of extraordinary power. In his analysis of the activities of the notorious Rockingham cell, Michael Meacher suggested:

If there is one conclusion which must flow from the Hutton revelations, it must surely be the demand for a full-scale independent inquiry into the operation of the intelligence services around the top of their command and their interface with the political system.

Any inquiry into this interface between politics and secrecy must also include interrogation of the last century of operations. This should be extracted from the hands of traditionalist historians and subjected to a far more rigorous critical examination. If lessons are to be learned, British citizens have a right to be more accurately informed about the workings of the modern colossus of power: the institutional prejudices of racism, the interdependencies between fact and fiction and the obstructions placed in the path of the right to know. The obvious counterfactual question needs to be asked: how different would Britain be without an intelligence community?

One thing history can teach us is that secret services don’t get smaller. As secrecy embeds itself ever more firmly, it demands ever greater levels of maintenance. If this reality is then applied to Michel Foucault’s chilling equation of how power and resistance are mutually reinforcing and self-perpetuating, then the prospect is profoundly dystopian. The new frontier of the Security Service is being fought in cyberspace. Intelligence services already have the capability to hack into home computers. The actions of every individual can be traced. Everything and nothing is secret.

In a recent interview, Eric Hobsbawm commented that “Wikileaks is an archive of imperial retreat”. So are these volumes. In the world of secret service, revelation is a form of surrender or, at least, a self-protective act, carried out with great reluctance and deliberate caution. As Malcolm Muggeridge commented in *Chronicles of Wasted Time*: “Secrecy is as essential to intelligence as vestments to a Mass, or darkness to a spiritualist séance, and must at all costs be maintained, quite irrespective or not of whether it serves any purpose.” To pull away at the fabric of state secrecy is akin to observing some extraordinarily ghoulish, occult act. It is hard to know what this continuing process of revelation will ultimately do to the reputation of the modern British state or, for that matter, to the long-term survival of democracy.

A decade or so ago, anyone who purchased a pencil from the Public Record Office could not help but be bemused by the riddle inscribed on the side of the implement: “He who has a secret to keep should keep it secret that he has a secret to keep.” In the inconclusive, twilight zone of both these volumes, it would be treacherous to doubt this wisdom.

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