

Spookaroonie!

Inside British Intelligence

100 years of MI5 and MI6

Gordon Thomas

London: JR books, 2009, £20

Spooks

The Unofficial History of MI5

Thomas Hennessy and Claire Thomas

Stroud (Glos.): Amberley, 2009, £30

Robin Ramsay

I haven't properly read either of these books and cannot really review them. However, there are some things I can say about them.

I'm not quite sure why but I have never taken Gordon Thomas's books on espionage and parapolitics seriously. Partly, it is just that he writes a lot, and I don't trust people who are prolific in these fields because this material is so difficult to write about that it is impossible to be both prolific and reliable; and partly it is just that his documentation is so patchy. The last one of his I looked at, *The Assassination of Robert Maxwell, Israel's Superspy*, was impossible to evaluate – all/some/none of it might have been true – and thus impossible to take seriously. So when I saw the news story about this book, claiming that the British government tried to stop it being published – what the publisher of every book about intelligence hopes for – I didn't pay any attention: even if it contained something new it wouldn't be reliable enough to be of use, so why bother? But there it was in my local library and as I flipped through the index I saw a name that surprised me, Fred Holroyd, to whom Thomas devotes a page. Alas, Thomas has confused Holroyd with someone else and the page is entirely false. (He has him as the MI6 no. 2 in the Republic of Ireland in the early 1970s at the time of the Littlejohn affair.) Thomas's error is ironic as Fred is one of the tiny handful of British ex-intelligence whistle-blowers who will talk on the record. Thomas didn't talk to Fred and presumably hasn't read his memoir, the now hard to find *War Without Honour*. See what I mean about reliability?

I sent a copy of the page to Fred, who contacted the publisher. Eventually Fred met Thomas and the publisher's md. *Inter alia*, Thomas told Fred that Steve Dorril, co-founder of this magazine, pretended to be an academic at the University of Huddersfield but really was an MI6 officer. See what I mean about reliability? Donations to a couple of military charities will be made by the publisher and the offending material will be removed from any further editions. Fred, the gent as always, let them off lightly.

The Hennessy and Thomas book on MI5 is enormous. It's 'only' 660 pages but this has been achieved by dint of squeezing the margins and the line-spacing. Thus an 800-900 page book has been crammed into 'only' 660 pages. The result is a very ugly, uncomfortable read. (The text is so wide it requires the eyes to make at least five shifts across each line.) This would not matter if the content was interesting; but it isn't. The authors have diligently worked their way through the official files that are available (with the occasional other book cited). So, of the 660 pages, the first 530 are devoted to MI5 up to Klaus Fuchs in 1950. After that, no official papers being available (except to the 'official' historian Andrew), the next 45 years are done in 130 pages. The first 33 chapters based on the official paper record are what they are and I am in no position to evaluate them (even if I was interested). The last 4 are based on the kinds of public sources available to all of us and they are poor; and in the case of the material covering the 1970s and 80s, very poor indeed. None of the insiders who have talked critically about MI5 in the post 1964 era – Massiter, Shayler, Machon, Holroyd, Wallace, to name just the obvious examples – are quoted or cited. The official version is always treated as if it were unchallenged. This is thus less an unofficial history of MI5 than an unauthorised official history of MI5.

The Defence of the Realm
The Authorised History of MI5
Christopher Andrew
London: Allen Lane, 2009, £30

Robin Ramsay

Covering the same area as the Hennessy/Thomas book but with access to more recent MI5 documents, Andrew does at least refer to the dissenters named in the preceding paragraph. This is a thousand pages long and will be of

major interest to academic students of British intelligence and political history for years to come. Discounted from sellers like Amazon, this is a seriously good buy. But I'm not an academic and my interests are political. I looked initially at two areas: what it said about MI5's relationship with the British left since WW2, and particularly the role of the CPGB in British politics; and the so-called Wilson plots.

Let's take the left first. Elsewhere in this issue is my contribution to the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom's book on the 1984 miners' strike. In that I repeat for the umpteenth time Peter Wright's story in *Spycatcher* that MI5 knew about the covert Soviet funding of the CPGB in the 1950s and neither exposed it nor tried to stop it. Wright is rubbished repeatedly by Andrew and he does not refer to this claim of Wright's. However on p. 403 he writes this:

'The Security Service had "good coverage" of the secret Soviet funding of the CPGB, monitoring by surveillance and telecheck the regular collection of Moscow's cash subsidies by two members of the Party's International Department, Eileen Palmer and Bob Stewart, from the north London address of two ex-trainees of the Moscow Radio School.'

This isn't dated but from the context it is the early 1950s. Thus it can be restated: perhaps with the knowledge of the wider British security establishment, MI5 allowed the CPGB to be funded by that establishment's apparent deadliest enemy, when it could have exposed the Soviet funding and dealt the CPGB a blow from which, in my estimation, it would never have recovered. In effect MI5 ran the CPGB as a honeytrap for the wider British left. Because of the Soviet link to the CPGB, anyone who made contact with it became a legitimate target, the proper subject of investigation if required. The Soviet money contaminated the CPGB and by extension potentially contaminated everyone else who had contact with Party members; which, given the loose nature of the British left outside party/union branch meetings, meant a great many people. Given the importance of the CPGB on the British left, in the trade unions and as a source of both policy for the Labour Party and problems for Labour governments, it would be difficult to overstate the political significance of this. One of the reasons the UK did not become a European-style social democracy was the role of the CPGB on the British left.

As for the post 1964 sections – over 350 pages – on a first whizz through them I noticed the following:

* Events in Northern Ireland are strikingly under represented. The Stalker affair, for example, is dismissed in a few lines.

* Peter Wright is regularly rubbished; the only claim of his given any credence is his statement to the BBC's John Ware that the so-called 'plot' against Wilson consisted of one person – himself.

* There are some spectacular omissions. Andrew quotes this from an MI5 assessment of the subversive influence in the media in the 1970s:

'There have been virtually no instances of subversion in the presentation of new bulletins by the BBC or the I[ndependent] B[roadcasting] A[uthority] companies. The reasons no doubt lies in the *careful selection of key personnel by management....*' (p. 663, emphasis added)

But he omits the fact that MI5 had an office in the BBC vetting its staff, helping with the 'careful selection of key personnel'. Did he think we wouldn't remember?

Despite – or because of – Cecil King being referred to by Wright as an agent of MI5, he and the murky events of 1968 (Mountbatten, *The Times et al*) are missing.

As this book has taken five years to write and has been vetted and edited by MI5, we may presume that the language used was chosen carefully. So what are we to make of the section about Roger Windsor, the NUM official widely accused of being an MI5 agent in the union during the 1984 miners' strike? Andrew writes:

'After the allegation had been denied by both Rimington and the Prime Minister, John Major, Windsor won substantial damages from the *Sunday Express* for repeating the claim that he had been an MI5 "mole" during the miners' strike.' (p. 678)

Yes, there is a denial implicit here but there is no actual denial. Major's denial is worthless: he read someone else's script. And the denial by Rimington was this:

'It would be correct to say that he, Roger Windsor, was never an agent in any sense of the word that you can possibly imagine.'

Which is not a denial at all.

And what about the section on the late Jack Jones, qua KGB agent. Andrew writes:

'Oleg Gordievsky later reported that Jones had been regarded by the KGB as an agent from 1964 to 1968.' (p. 536)

'Regarded as an agent?' Is that the same as 'was an agent'? Clearly not. What did the KGB get from their 'agent' Jack Jones?

'Confidential Labour Party documents which he obtained as a member of the NEC and the Party's international committee as well as information on colleagues and contacts.' (p. 536)

Such documents, as well as being utterly uninformative for the most part, were about as confidential as the previous week's *Labour News*. Indeed, if you look at the 'agents' the Soviet and Czech agencies had in the Labour Party in this period, discussed by Andrew, all they gave to their Soviet/Czech connections were Labour Party or parliamentary documents which were of no consequence and not secret. ¹

And what of the events of 1974-76, the so-called 'Wilson plots'?

- * The so-called private armies episode of 1974 and 1975 gets only a paragraph on George Young's Unison.
- * The BOSS operations against Peter Hain and Jeremy Thorpe are dismissed, as is Gordon Winter. Andrew describes him, on somebody else's say-so, as unreliable, and quotes an MI5 assessment that the operation to get the Norman Scott-Jeremy Thorpe story into the media was a 'private initiative' (!) by Winter.
- * Colin Wallace and Fred Holroyd get a sentence each. Wallace is described as a former information officer; his psy-ops role, admitted by HMG, is omitted. Their claims are not stated and Andrew merely quotes the then Director General of MI5, Sir Anthony Duff, who 'assured staff in 1987 that Wallace's and Holroyd's allegations of dirty tricks were "equally baseless" '.

Andrew tells us that Duff conducted a 'stringent inquiry' into the allegations about operations against the Labour governments of Harold Wilson. Said inquiry:

'examined all relevant files and interviewed all relevant Security Service officers, both serving and retired', and it 'concluded unequivocally that no member of the Service had been involved in the surveillance of Wilson, still less in any attempt to destabilise the government.' (p. 642)

Well, at one level – gee, agency examines itself and finds itself innocent. Who

¹ In November *The Spectator* tried again to revive the notion that the Labour Party had been manipulated by the KGB, quoting extracts from the previously untranslated diary of Anatoly Chernyaev, a deputy in the Soviet International Department. Once again Jack Jones is described as a KGB 'agent'. See

<www.spectator.co.uk/essays/5504183/reaching-through-the-iron-curtain.html>.

How seriously we should take this story of *The Spectator's* can be judged by their attempt to show us how the Labour Party's general secretary in the 1970s, Ron Hayward, backed (of course) by the KGB, tried to take over the party. Uh-huh.... Only a Soviet official, looking at the UK through his own society's assumptions, could look at the Labour Party and seriously think the party's general secretary could end up telling MPs what to do.

would've thought it? An adaptation of Mandy Rice-Davis's famous remark is apposite: well it would, wouldn't it? But what precisely is being denied here? No MI5 people were involved in the surveillance of Wilson. OK, surveillance is not MI5's job: GCHQ or NSA would do that (almost certainly the latter). And no MI5 people had been involved in 'any attempt to destabilise the government'. But burglary, leaking official material, planting disinformation and other conspiracy is not denied.

At another level, was there an inquiry at all? Wallace, Holroyd and Wright were not interviewed by the Duff inquiry.² It apparently looked at the files and talked to the relevant officers. As if there would be files! As if such officers (and who would they be?) would tell the truth if asked!

In a review of Andrew in *The Guardian* (Saturday 10 October) David Leigh³ made the point (as Scott Newton did to me) that Andrew has ignored – or is unaware of; and let's not rule this possibility out entirely; this is not Andrew's field – former cabinet secretary Sir John Hunt's comments on the existence of a small group of MI5 officers

'like Peter Wright who were right-wing, malicious and had serious personal grudges – [who] gave vent to these and spread damaging malicious stories about that Labour government.'

But the point is not, as Leigh has it, that an MI5 file on Wilson existed, or that MI5 was interested in the fact that Wilson's drinking buddy Joseph Kagan hung out with fellow Lithuanian, KGB officer Vaygauskas: both are easily defensible by MI5. The point is that this material – and much more besides – was being distributed. The plot lies in the distribution of the material and the evidence from its content that MI5 were trawling widely and deeply within the British political system, far beyond the remit of its charter (to which Andrew makes regular reference). Colin Wallace received some of it in Northern Ireland.⁴ *Private Eye* got some of it. In his book on the 1970s, *Strange Days Indeed* (London: 4th Estate, 2009; reviewed below), Francis Wheen, then at *Private Eye*, writes of the *Eye* receiving:

'large packages of anonymous documents... [which] would have tested

² When the existence of the Duff inquiry was made public Paul Foot had a piece in *Private Eye* titled 'A duff inquiry'

³ Neither the David Leigh book, *The Wilson Plots*, nor my book with Steve Dorril, *Smear!*, about these events, is mentioned. Leigh is miffed at his book being ignored.

⁴ The significance of Colin Wallace's hand-written notes from the time is that they show that smear material about a wide range of British political figures in all three major parties had been collected and distributed. Which explains why the British state went to such great lengths to discredit Wallace.

the resources of a national newspaper [to check]..... Auberon Waugh sometimes dropped little hints in his *Eye* column'. (p. 264)

These 'little hints' were collected and discussed by Steve Dorril in 'Five at Eye' in *Lobster* 17 and examples of the anonymous documents were reproduced in Patrick Marnham's *Trail of Havoc* (London: Viking, 1987) pp. 96 and 7. (Marnham was on *Private Eye's* staff at the time.)

Andrew concludes that there was no plot, that Wilson imagined most of it because he was paranoid. Yes, Wilson attributed too much to MI5 when some of the briefings and smear stories were coming from other sources – for example former MI6 deputy chief G. K. Young (though from whom did Young get his information?). Some of those who came along a decade after Wilson had tried to get an investigation going with Penrose and Courtiour, also initially attributed too much to MI5, steered that way by Peter Wright.⁵ But Wilson was not 'paranoid' to suspect that there were plots against him: as was demonstrated in *Smear!*, there was constant plotting, not just from sections of British capital and society, influenced by the MI5 briefings against him, but also from the Gaitskellite wing of the Labour Party, which had never accepted him as leader of the party.

Andrew has adopted the fallback position of the British secret state circa 1990: ignore Wallace, Gordon Winter, the private armies episode, the Crozier operations, the forgeries and the psy-ops, and focus on the John Ware interview with Wright in which he implied that the 'plot' consisted only of himself. Thus there was no plot; thus Wilson was just a paranoid old fool, a conspiracy theorist.⁶

Andrew portrays MI5 in the post WW2 era as cautious, apolitical bureaucrats, defending democracy while trying to stay within their charter, and resisting the siren calls of 'conspiracy theorists'.

In the early 1970's MI5 had concluded that the 'threat' of the Communist Party had declined; and switched resources to what Peter Wright sneeringly called the 'far and wide left' – the Trotskyist fragments. MI5's lack of interest in the 'Soviet threat' triggered the formation of the anti-subversion lobby which gathered round Brian Crozier in the early 1970s – CIA, MI6 and IRD personnel who were not persuaded of the decline of the 'Soviet threat'. (This was part of the wider debate about the reality of détente between NATO and the Soviet

⁵ Coming to the story through Colin Wallace and thence via some of the published material – Chapman Pincher, for example, and Winter's *Inside BOSS* – Steve Dorril and I did not focus so much on MI5.

⁶ One of the recurring themes of the book is Andrew's portrayal of himself and MI5 as being in a struggle with conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists of both left and right.

bloc.) Crozier and his chums certainly did not think MI5 was on the ball where the perceived menace from the Soviets and the left was concerned; and they got access to Mrs Thatcher when she was leader of the Opposition after 1975. On p. 670 Andrew tells us that when he became Home Secretary in the first Thatcher administration, William Whitelaw

'told [DG of MI5 Howard Smith] that he wished to be sufficiently well briefed to be able to counter "some of the rather extreme advice" Mrs Thatcher had received.'

That advice had been coming from Crozier and his colleagues.⁷

A cautious, tiresomely bureaucratic MI5 is how David Shayler saw the organisation in the 1990s.

But even if we accept Andrew's sanitised version of the story, that the events of the 1974-76 period – which might be summarised as Wallace, BOSS, Wright, the private armies episode, the Crozier operations, the burglaries, forgeries, smear operations and the other psy-ops – did not involve MI5 officers, on MI5's criteria these activities were all subversive. And as far as we know – as far as Andrew tells us – apart from Young's Unison⁸ and Gordon Winter's 'private initiative' against Hain and Thorpe, MI5 took no interest in any of it. Either MI5 was part of the plot, or it tolerated the plot, or – the reality, in my view – was both.

Andrew does his best to fog the lens. But the fact remains that for a period, when Labour was in office in the sixties and seventies, parts of MI5 went off the reservation. Trying to deny this in the face of the evidence makes Andrew look incompetent, a hack, or a co-conspirator.

By the way, the index is incomplete. Somewhere Andrew refers to the forged bank statement in Edward Short's name. When I tried to look up the reference to reread that section, I found Short not indexed. Neither are Unison and John Stalker. Given how long the book took to produce and how significant an event it is, not making sure the index is accurate is odd.

⁷ See Brian Crozier, *Free Agent* (London: HarperCollins, 1993) pp. 131-133.

⁸ Andrew writes on p. 638 that MI5 was 'becoming increasingly worried about.....Unison.'