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In Britain, Real Spies Still a Secret

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LONDON—Besides their ability to spin a good yarn, John le Carre, Graham Greene, Ian Fleming and W. Somerset Maugham have something else in common: All were British intelligence officers.

Their books have spread through the world a pervasive fictionalized version of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, but the real SIS is still the most secretive of the world's espionage agencies.

The CIA and the KGB, for example, publish the names of their directors, but the identity of the man who heads the SIS is an official secret. So, too, is the exact location of its drab, unmarked headquarters in South London, which is known as Century House.

In fact, the SIS itself is a secret. Since World War I, it has been a part of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but spokesmen for the department are instructed to deny all knowledge of its existence.

'Don't Know the Man'

A Foreign Office spokesman, asked for personal details about Mansfield Cumming, the eccentric former naval officer who was the the service's first chief and led it through World War I and into the mid-1920s, responded with a polite but firm, "I'm afraid we don't know the man here."

Cumming is known, however, to have been as colorful as any Ian Fleming character. He liked disguises; his false mustaches are still classified as secret. After losing a leg in an automobile accident in World War I, he terrorized his staff by roaring along the office corridors on a child's scooter.

Because Cumming signed official documents with a single initial, successor chiefs have been known simply as "C" (not "M," as he is known in Fleming's James Bond stories).

Documents Secret

Historically, government documents that contain even a passing reference to the SIS, which is also known by its original military intelligence classification, MI6, are classified secret and not made available to the public. Papers that refer to the counterespionage agency, MI5, are treated with the same secrecy.

Several years ago, a parliamentary committee studying the question of academic access to important Cabinet papers was told that documents dating as far back as 1919 were still secret because they referred to intelligence activities.

After a prolonged campaign, some aging documents were finally made public in the early 1980s, and this was the first tacit admission by the government of the SIS's existence. Even then, the government referred to the documents of "certain organizations," preferring not to name either MI5 or MI6.

In most Western countries, pressure for public accountability has gradually eroded some of the secrecy that shields intelligence agencies. In the United States, congressional committees were established in the 1970s to monitor CIA activities after Congress discovered that the agency was engaged in domestic spying.

After French intelligence agents were linked to the sinking of a nuclear protest ship in New Zealand last July, France tightened parliamentary control over its clandestine activities.

But MI5 and MI6 continue to stand above any such scrutiny. Both are responsible only to a handful of Cabinet ministers and senior civil servants.

Jonathan Aitken, a Conservative member of Parliament and a campaigner for change, said the other day, "It's an almost ostrich-like attitude in the service and among those who run it on a highly personalized basis. There is strong resistence to parliamentary involvement."

Official Secrets Act

The British penchant for secrecy in this area contradicts a strong democratic tradition. Helping to preserve the secrecy is a tough Official Secrets Act that dates back to 1911 and deals sternly with anyone leaking or publishing sensitive government information.

In addition, the British press operates under a system of voluntary restraints that tends to discourage reporting on intelligence activities. And social convention has made it taboo to raise the subject in any formal setting.

"Talking about intelligence activities in this country is about as tasteful as bringing up the subject of oral sex at a Victorian dinner party," Cambridge University historian Christopher Andrew noted. "It's crude and crass."

Andrew, whose recent book "Her Majesty's Secret Service," is considered the most comprehensive history of the British intelligence establishment, believes that all these conventions have helped preserve the anonymity of the secret services.

Somerset Maugham spied for Britain during World War I.

"There have been some cracks, but the amazing thing is how long it's lasted," he said.

The British intelligence coup of breaking the German secret code in the early days of World War II was a secret kept by about 10,000 people for over 30 years. It finally came to light in the early 1970s.

Since the outbreak of World War II, British agents have been recruited for the most part from the cream of the country's youth on the campuses of Oxford and Cambridge universities. Here the SIS is known jokingly as "the funny end of the Foreign Office."

Experts who have compared the record of British intelligence with espionage agencies in other countries argue that a willingness to accommodate unusual personalities is a factor that has helped it succeed. Certainly there have been some eccentrics, especially among the code breakers.

There was, for example, Dilly Knox, one of Britain's great cryptographers, who insisted that he could do his work only in the bath—and was given a tub in his office. And there was Frank Birch, who coupled his code-breaking work with an acting career. This included a successful run as the widow Twanky in "Aladdin" at the London Palladium.

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The success of British intelligence officers as writers is a tradition that goes back as far as the court of Queen Elizabeth I in the late 16th Century. The poet Christopher Marlowe, who is regarded as Shakespeare's most important predecessor in English drama, was an English agent in France, charting the Spanish Catholic threat. Daniel Defoe, best known as the author of "Robinson Crusoe," gathered intelligence on the public mood in Scotland after political union with England in the early 18th Century.

More recently, Somerset Maugham was recruited for work in neutral Switzerland in World War I, and later in the war in Russia. A play entitled "Caroline" was written as a cover while he was in Switzerland. His short stories about the agent Ashenden, set mainly in Switzerland, are known to be partially autobiographical.

Despite the exotic travels of his leading character, James Bond, Agent 007, it is doubtful that Fleming left Britain while he was with naval intelligence in World War II. But Greene and Le Carre both served at British embassies in Africa and Europe before resigning to devote themselves to writing.

Film Company Cover

The Hungarian-born film director Alexander Korda, whose films included "The Third Man," was never a British agent, but he worked closely with MI6 for several years beginning before World War II.

Korda's film company, London Films, was used as a cover for British agents going abroad to such an extent that, according to one report, the MI6 deputy director, Sir Claude Dansey, was eventually given a seat on the company board so that he could keep track of his men.

The success of any intelligence network can be difficult to assess. Last autumn's defection of the KGB's senior operative in Britain, Oleg Gordievski, was judged a significant coup. But there have also been setbacks, only partially hidden by the restrictions on the press.

A few years ago an MI5 agent tried without success to sell secrets to the Soviets. A scandal ensued, and it led to renewed pressure to lift the secrecy from British intelligence. The agent, 36-year-old David Bettaney, was sentenced to 23 years in prison.

A former colleague of Bettaney, who left the service in 1983, blamed "an obsessive aura of secrecy" and a lack of accountability as contributing causes to the affair.

Approach to Students

The student unrest that dampened CIA recruitment on Ivy League campuses in the late 1960s and early 1970s had little impact in Britain. Promising students at Oxford and Cambridge are said to be routinely approached, either informally through the faculty or by means of direct contact at the university careers office.

A former Oxford student who became a television producer recalls being interviewed by a middle-aged man wearing a polka dot bow tie who grew lively only when the subject turned to bird-watching.

One of the greatest embarrassments to British intelligence in the postwar era stemmed from the fact that the KGB also recruited successfully from British universities in the 1930s, placing some brilliant graduates as counterspies in British intelligence.

Between the early 1950s and late 1970s a series of senior British agents, all Cambridge graduates, were found to have been working for the KGB. There have even been charges that a former head of British counterintelligence, Sir Roger Hollis, was also a Soviet agent, but this has not been proved.

Changing Attitudes

The historian Andrew recalls that it was suggested several years ago that Parliament be given at least limited control of British intelligence and that the notion was rejected "like a rude remark about the Royal Family." He says attitudes have begun to change, in part because of the scandals.

A small but growing group of influential members of Parliament are now advocating that a small bipartisan committee, consisting of respected senior members of Parliament, be set up to monitor intelligence activities.

Few expect this to come to pass as long as Margaret Thatcher is prime minister, because of her personal opposition to any such plan. But most believe it will come soon after she departs.

"The security services need to understand what democratic pressures are," Aitken, the Conservative member, said. "One of these days the logjam will be broken. I believe it's better done in an orderly fashion rather than have a leftist government come in and open the flood gates."