

# The Intelligence Officer's Bookshelf

## *Intelligence in Recent Public Literature*

**Compiled and Reviewed by Hayden B. Peake**

Jennet Conant, ***The Irregulars: Roald Dahl and the British Spy Ring in Wartime Washington*** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 391 pp., endnotes, bibliography, photos, index.

During WW II, Royal Air Force (RAF) fighter pilots attributed unexpected equipment malfunctions to 6 inch tall “little men” they called gremlins. The fanciful tales told about these mischievous creatures soon spread to the public and in 1943 were collected in a 46 page book titled *The Gremlins: A Royal Air Force Story*. Published by Walt Disney Productions, the book depicted gremlins with red noses and two horns. The text describing their adventures was written by RAF fighter pilot Roald Dahl, whose second book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*,<sup>[1]</sup> made him famous as an author of children's books. In *The Irregulars*, Jennet Conant attempts to make him famous as a spy.

The book gets off to a wobbly start. In the preface, Conant portrays Dahl as “caught up in the complex web of intrigue masterminded by [William] Stephenson, the legendary Canadian spymaster, who outmaneuvered the FBI and State Department and managed to create an elaborate clandestine organization whose purpose was to weaken the isolationist forces in America and influence U.S. policy in favor of Britain.” (xv) Each of these assertions is inaccurate. Dahl had nothing to do with weakening isolationist forces in America; he didn't arrive here until 1942, by which time the isolationists were not a factor in US foreign policy. Furthermore,

he wasn't assigned to the BSC (British Security Coordination) until 1944 when its value to British intelligence was marginal, as Conant admits. As to outmaneuvering, Conant gives no examples. Stephenson did support the creation of a US foreign intelligence service, but he was not the originator of the idea, nor would it have died had the British failed to support it. While both State and the FBI initially cooperated with BSC, relations cooled in 1942, much sooner than Conant suggests. When the BSC attempted to spread propaganda in the media, contrary to its promise not to do so, it became obvious. And Conant doesn't even mention the TRICYCLE double agent case that displayed poor tradecraft by BSC and resulted in TRICYCLE's forced recall to Britain.

As to the BSC itself, there is no evidence at all that Roosevelt used Stephenson as a "back channel" source to Churchill or that Churchill had personally dispatched Stephenson on his mission to the United States. Likewise, contrary to her claims, neither Leslie Howard nor Ian Fleming were recruited by or worked for Stephenson. Perhaps the most absurd historical inaccuracy is Conant's claim that the BSC designation "was a title created arbitrarily by the American FBI director J. Edgar Hoover." (28)

Unfortunately, similar problems exist elsewhere in the book. Some of these are terminological, others are factual, and all claims are undocumented. For example, Conant calls intelligence officers "agents," states that Philby defected with Maclean in 1951 (he defected alone in 1963), and claims that Dahl had duties "along counterintelligence lines" (293) though none are specified. In short, her assessment that "spies are notoriously unreliable narrators," (xix) applies to her own research.

Is the book of any intelligence value at all? Very little. For those interested in WW II Washington society and politics, however, *The Irregulars* has much of significance and Dahl is the centerpiece of attention. Conant describes him as a dashing, sometimes charming, intensely self-centered, 6'6" former RAF fighter pilot assigned first to the British embassy in Washington as air attaché and later, after conflicts with the staff, to the BSC. Despite her endeavors to make Dahl a spy, the closest she gets is to call him an agent-of-influence and to describe his "espionage" as "stockpiling titillating gossip." (146) Here, far too much attention is devoted to Dahl's social connections with President Roosevelt, his wife Eleanor, Vice President Henry Wallace, and the latter's confidant Charles Marsh, a wealthy Texas newspaperman, and the likes of Congresswomen Clare Booth Luce. None of the anecdotes Dahl includes has anything to do with wartime intelligence in America.

Equally interesting, but irrelevant to espionage, are Dahl's literary efforts. Conant discusses them at some length but doesn't seem to find it unusual that Dahl "the spy" had so much time to spare during the war. In the dust jacket blurb for this book, author Jon Meacham notes that *The Irregulars* "is a terrific tale—and it's all true."<sup>[2]</sup> He may be right about the first part, but just a little fact checking makes it vibrantly apparent that "all true" it is not. The facts available from books in Conant's own espionage bibliography make it clear that Roald Dahl was at best only peripherally involved in the romantic world of espionage. (32)

Stephen Twigge, Edward Hampshire, Graham Macklin, ***British Intelligence: Secrets, Spies and Sources*** (London: National Archives, 2008), 248 pp., endnotes, bibliography, photos, index.

Dr. Stephen Twigge is the senior historian in Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office. This book's introduction explains that he and his coauthors researched the intelligence files of the British National Archives with particular attention to those recently released. They wrote *British Intelligence* "to highlight the rich and diverse collection of intelligence records" that they found there. (15) The book is needed, they argue, because the "world of secret intelligence was for decades largely neglected by historians" and public understanding of the topic was "shaped by a steady stream of lurid novels, sensationalist journalism and memoirs written by former practitioners and senior officials." (7) Straight away this criticism raises scholarly warning flags. First, it ignores the pioneering intelligence histories written by Mildred Richings, Christopher Andrew, Nigel West, Stephen Dorril, and Harry Hinsley, to name a few.<sup>[3]</sup> Second, it tips off to readers that close scrutiny of the work is warranted.

Specifically, the nine chapters of the book seek "to shed light on some of the shadowy aspects of British history, and to provide a framework and guide for all those interested in the history of intelligence." (15) The first seven chapters outline some well known domestic, international, military, naval, air, scientific, and communications intelligence cases. There is a separate chapter on the Special Operations Executive, a WW II sabotage and resistance organization, and a final one that looks at "intelligence in a changing world."

A glance at the primary sources found in the endnotes suggests that *British Intelligence* has accomplished its goal of "shedding light" by using

the National Archive's files. A closer examination, however, reveals that more than 100 facts mentioned in the narrative are either not documented at all or not supported by the sources cited. The complete list is unprintable here, but the few examples that follow should make the point.

In several cases National Archive file numbers are cited to document erroneous statements. For example, the role of the Twenty Committee in WW II was not, as claimed, made public in 1972 in the book *The Double Cross System*. (41) That distinction belongs to Ladislav Farago and his book, *The Game of the Foxes*.<sup>[4]</sup> Similarly, KGB agent and SIS officer George Blake was not an "MI6 double agent" as stated. (45) The errors concerning the "Cambridge spy ring" are particularly egregious, since no citations at all are provided and the truth has been publicly known for years. Philby did not join the Communist Party of Great Britain, nor was he, Cairncross, or Maclean, a member of the secret Apostles Society as claimed. Furthermore, Yuri Modin was not the wartime handler of Burges and Maclean (201)—he didn't arrive in London until after the war. Cairncross died in England not France. And the broken codes that revealed Maclean's treachery were the NKVD's not diplomatic. (82)

In this same undocumented category the authors write that William Stephenson was a "trusted confidant" of Churchill and that he had "the code name *Intrepid*," assertions disproved by West among others. (75) Likewise, they state that Igor Gouzenko, perhaps the most famous of the early Soviet defectors, was a diplomat handled by Zabotin, when in fact he was a code clerk handled by Motinov. (227) Even more surprising is the claim that the Rosenberg network was identified by the VENONA operation—the FBI solved that case. Also, the code name VENONA was assigned in 1954 not 1948. (258)

Regrettably, details dealing with the later periods of intelligence history also contain inaccuracies. For example, the statement that the codeword CORONA was based on "the brand of typewriter on the desk of the CIA director running the program" (163) is only one of two possible explanations for the naming of that program. The other is that it was suggested by a planner who was smoking a Corona cigar when the naming question arose.<sup>[5]</sup> Other facts about the early photo satellite programs are at variance with more reliable sources, as for example, Richelson.<sup>[6]</sup> And anyone with access to the World Wide Web can verify that the "Open Source Center," created in 2005, is not "a division of the CIA," it having been plucked, bureaucratically speaking, out of CIA and placed under the office of the Director of National Intelligence that year.

A summary assessment of *British Intelligence* is that despite the authors' access to the intelligence files in the National Archives, their contribution to intelligence history is a flawed work.

---

## Footnotes

[1] Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 163 pp. Copies of the first edition sell today for as much as \$15,000.00.

[2] Meacham is author of *Franklin and Winston: An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Relationship* (New York: Random House, 2003).

[3] M. G. Richings, *Espionage: The Story of the Secret Service of the English Crown* (London: Hutchinson, 1934); Christopher Andrew, *Her Majesty's Secret Service* (New York: Viking, 1986); Nigel West, *Counterfeit Spies* (London: St. Ermin's Press, 1998); Stephen Dorril, *MI6* (New York: The Free Press, 2000); F. H. Hinsley, et al., *British Intelligence in the Second World War* (London: HMSO, 1986-1993), 6 volumes.

[4] Ladislav Farago, *The Game of the Foxes* (New York: David McKay & Co., 1971).

[5] See Robert A. McDonald, *CORONA: Between the Sun & the Earth—The First NRO Reconnaissance Eye in Space* (Bethesda, MD: American Society for Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing, 1997), 58, fn. 51.

[6] Jeffrey T. Richelson, *America's Secret Eyes in Space* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

---

The views, opinions and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.