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The Reader of Gentlemen's Mail: Herbert O. Yardley and the Birth of American Intelligence

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By David Kahn. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004. 242 pages.

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In the history of American intelligence, Herbert Osborn Yardley (1881-1958) looms large. He established the first professional codebreaking agency in America. Cryptology is one of the pillars of intelligence, and Yardley laid its foundation.

Until now, Yardley had no biographer. The person who has chosen this early icon as his subject is none other than David Kahn, author of *The Codebreakers* and the greatest living expert on the history of cryptology. So Yardley finally gets his due. He would have relished this moment. That said, reasons abound why this pioneer was long overlooked.

In life, Yardley's rival was William Friedman (1892-1969), whose biography was published in 1977. So the rivalry lives on long past their respective demises. This book is about Yardley, but Friedman lurks in the background. He was Yardley's alter ego. Friedman represents where American cryptology went; Yardley, where it did not go.

The essence of Yardley's life is quickly summed. A precocious small-town boy on the make, he joined the State Department in the years prior to the Great War as a telegrapher. Bored by the lack of challenge, he broke American diplomatic codes in his spare time. Leveraging this rather unique expertise, he fast-talked his way into an army commission, and was promptly appointed head of MI-8, the cryptologic branch of Ralph Van Deman's brand new army intelligence organization. At the end of World War I, Yardley used his promotional genius to get the army to extend the existence of MI-8 into the post-war world. Almost immediately, he came up with the singular achievement that made his lifetime reputation: breaking the Japanese diplomatic codes. Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes used the information provided by Yardley to extract from the Japanese a favorable ratio of naval capital ships at the Limitation of Armaments Conference of 1921-22. Yardley was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, and his reputation was established.

It was all downhill from there. Yardley's organization was starved for money—by 1929, the budget stood at one-third of what it had been eight years earlier. Herbert Hoover's new secretary of state, Henry Stimson, on learning of the existence of this clandestine bureau, cut off funds with the statement that "Gentlemen do not read each other's mail." The organization was closed; Yardley was out of work. Desperate for money, he became a writer. In 1931 he published *The American Black Chamber*, revealing the secrets of his defunct organization. The book became a bestseller—in Japan as well as in America. The Japanese were outraged, and set out to change their crypto systems to something more secure.

Yardley drifted from one job to another. A profligate spender, he was always looking for money. He tried writing again (capitalizing on his *Black Chamber* fame), sold his invisible ink concoctions, dabbled in real estate speculation, and became a coffee shop entrepreneur. He even tried his hand at Hollywood script writing. Nothing worked. So he returned to codebreaking, first for the Chinese, then for the Canadians. He was cryptology's hired gun, and everywhere he went his reputation as a publisher of government secrets followed him. In later years, Yardley held obscure posts in the federal government, but, try as he might, he never could get back into the American intelligence establishment. He was blacklisted for life. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1958.

Friedman, meanwhile, had acquired the mantle of leadership in army cryptology and built an organization that broke the Japanese diplomatic codes once again—only, this time, he had to work against a machine

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cipher rather than a less rigorous paper code book. His biography, *The Man Who Broke Purple*, gets it only half right: Friedman built the organization, and the organization broke Purple. The organization eventually became the National Security Agency. Yardley's MI-8 was consigned to the dustbin of history.

How should we size up Yardley today? Kahn has achieved the balance that all biographers hope for—sometimes viewing the glass as half-full, sometimes half-empty. On the positive side, Yardley's promotional skills secured America's first cryptologic organization, and his persuasiveness kept it alive into the inter-war years when it could well have expired. He had a mesmerizing personality—people followed him, and he swept them along into the world of clandestine intelligence. He sweet-talked a cable company executive out of a drop copy of diplomatic traffic. He was able to bring even the US Army into real-world intelligence. He could spin out a tale of intrigue that would beguile publishers into buying his work. He began successful cryptologic organizations in no fewer than three different countries—surely an unequaled feat. And he wrote a book that justified the existence of a Black Chamber in the face of determined opposition from American moralizers.

His flaws were a part of the times. Yardley was, at heart, a small-town promoter with big-time ambitions. Like Harold Hill of *The Music Man*, he would march into town, flags flying and microphones blaring. Tremendous excitement would accompany his arrival, but in the end he would always sneak out of town with his tail dragging, his grand schemes unfulfilled. People would feel betrayed, suspecting they had followed a charlatan.

In fact, Yardley was, as Kahn emphasizes, only a second-rate cryptanalyst. He attacked paper codes that were on the way out and avoided the newer machine systems that Friedman tackled. He ignored the contributions that the newest generation of office machines could make to cryptanalysis, and did not understand the importance of hiring mathematicians and statisticians to unravel machine ciphers. In the most telling passage of the book, Kahn writes:

The worldwide shift from breakable codes to unbreakable cipher machines was getting under way, with Swedish, German, and American inventors offering such systems and the Reichsmarine and the US Navy adopting them. Yardley was not interested. He never cryptanalyzed them nor considered them for military or diplomatic use . . . . American cryptology stagnated. Yardley had failed to lead it energetically.[1]

The comparison with Friedman was stark. "Their motivations differed fundamentally," Kahn observes. "Yardley sought money; Friedman, knowledge. Friedman was driven not by egotism but by intellectual curiosity . . . . He loved the field work not for its rewards, but for itself."2

Yardley's character flaws were many. He was a heavy drinker, gambler (one of his most enduring books was on the art of poker playing), womanizer, and spendthrift. His objective was to maintain an elegant lifestyle, rather than to uplift his organization or his country. And it is his character that leads us inevitably to consider the final facet of this complex prism—his sale of secrets.

Yardley's pursuit of money resulted in the publication of a book that set him outside the pale of intelligence work. (And he had a sequel planned that was banned by Congress—the first and only such ban.) Yardley justified his transgression by exclaiming that since the organization had been closed down, there were no more secrets to protect. Far from traitorous, said Yardley, his book was beneficial. If the American public came to realize the terrible wrong that had been done by Secretary of State Stimson in closing down MI-8, perhaps the decision would go in the other direction next time. This argument might have been more convincing had Yardley renounced the profits from the sale of the book.

Kahn, a journalist as well as a historian, looks at this debate from a journalistic perspective. Revealing such secrets was not so bad, he suggests. In the long run, Yardley's book was indeed beneficial, but for a very different reason. Had it not been published, the Japanese might have retained their older codes a few more years. If they had not turned to machine ciphers until just prior to World War II, rather than in 1933, Friedman's team probably would not have broken their code until late in the war, if at all. He cites none other than Frank Rowlett, who headed the team that really did break Purple, as his source for this sentiment. So Yardley did the right thing, for all the wrong reasons, Kahn concludes.

This argument will not play well among intelligence professionals. What Yardley did has a name: *betrayal*. Peter Wright's publication of *Spycatcher* in 1987 is a close parallel. In giving the British establishment's nose a good tweaking, Wright did not endear himself to those who practice the arts he laid bare. Their job became more difficult because of Wright. He betrayed his trust.

Kahn's valuable account leaves one loose end untied. In his 1967 book *The*

Broken Seal, Ladislas Farago alleges that Yardley sold his secrets to the Japanese for $7,000. He found this information, he claims, in Japanese diplomatic records that were microfilmed after World War II and placed in the Library of Congress. Kahn deals with this in a curious fashion. In the text, he brushes over the allegation by stating that Yardley was a rotter, not a traitor, and that he would not have sold his secrets. Then he buries a fuller discussion in an endnote, concluding that the charge was based on a fabrication by the Japanese to save face from the anticipated embarrassment that Yardley's book would produce.

Farago is admittedly unreliable. Like Yardley, he spun a good story and was not careful with his backup documentation. Nonetheless, a CIA contractor's exhaustive search through 40,000 pages of documentation to check Farago's allegation yielded one memorandum by an official in the Japanese Foreign Office that refers to a deal between the Japanese embassy in Washington and Yardley for him to hand over the copies of decrypted messages for the price of $7,000. The amount is the same as in Farago, but the dates are different: Farago says it was 1928 (before MI-8 was closed), but the memorandum bears the date 13 June 1931 and wording implies that the events happened in 1930 (after the closure). The memorandum was written only a few days after Yardley's book appeared in print and was, evidently, intended to lessen the sting of the book. But, kept in a file that no one would have expected to become public, it is hard to discount it as a fabrication. The memorandum must be considered authentic. Do the Farago allegations fit with Yardley's character? One concludes, from the evidence presented by Kahn himself, that they track with the Yardley we know.

The Reader of Gentlemen's Mail makes a fascinating read. But does Kahn's book rehabilitate Yardley? Hardly. Kahn condemns Yardley for his character flaws, his perpetual self-promotion, and his lack of imagination. He has correctly assessed his subject.

If Yardley established the structure of American cryptology, it stands on a flawed base. Character does count. The man who created the structure had feet of clay. That is, perhaps, why William Friedman, rather than Herbert Yardley, has come down to us as the father of American cryptology.

Footnotes

1. Kahn, 91.

2. *Ibid*.

Thomas R. Johnson is a 35-year veteran of cryptologic operations and the author of a four-volume classified history of American cryptology during the Cold War. This article is unclassified in its entirety.

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