

The Opening Hand: British Intelligence, Archives, and the End of the Cold War

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The Hidden Hand: Britain, America and Cold War Secret Intelligence. RICHARD J. ALDRICH. New York: Overlook Press, 2002. 733 p. ISBN 1-5886-7274-2.

Open Secret: The Autobiography of the Former Director-General of MI5. STELLA RIMINGTON. London: Hutchinson, 2001. 288 p. ISBN 0-0917-9360-2.

RÉSUMÉ L'auteur fait la critique des ouvrages *Open Secret: The Autobiography of the Former Director-General of MI5*, de Stella Rimington et de *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America and Cold War Secret Intelligence*, de Richard J. Aldrich. Après avoir sans succès essayé d'empêcher la publication de *Spycatcher*, les mémoires de l'agent secret Peter Wright en 1987, le gouvernement britannique a été de plus en plus tolérant quant aux révélations au sujet de ses services secrets. La fin de la guerre froide a encouragé ce climat d'ouverture officielle et permis, en 1997, le début du transfert des dossiers historiques de l'agence secrète britannique MI5 au Public Record Office de Londres. Les mémoires de Rimington et l'histoire de Aldrich, basés en partie sur des documents nouvellement disponibles, sont des exemples de la frontière entre ce que le gouvernement britannique veut bien transmettre aux archives et ce qu'il préfère garder secret.

ABSTRACT This essay reviews Stella Rimington's *Open Secret: The Autobiography of the Former Director-General of MI5*, and Richard J. Aldrich's *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America and Cold War Secret Intelligence*. Since unsuccessfully trying in 1987 to block the publication of *Spycatcher*, Peter Wright's memoirs of his career in British intelligence, the British government has been increasingly tolerant towards revelations about its secret services. The end of the Cold War has fostered this climate of official openness. As a result, in 1997, the British intelligence agency MI5 began transferring historic files to the Public Record Office in London. Rimington's memoirs and Aldrich's history, based in part on newly available documents, are examples of the boundary between what the British government is willing to release to archives, and the information that it feels must still remain secret.

These two books address the issue of how governments, in this case represented by the secret intelligence community, compile, keep, and release information.

Stella Rimington was the first publicly-named Director-General of the British Security Service MI5; she was the first woman to hold the post, the first to have her photograph printed in a newspaper and, with the publication of this book, the first to write a detailed account of her secret career. Until very recently such a book would have been inconceivable. In 1987, Peter Wright, an embittered former assistant director of MI5 who had been in charge of hunting the double-agents or “moles” who had allegedly infiltrated the secret services, wrote a memoir entitled *Spycatcher* from his Tasmanian retirement.¹ A frightened British government sought an Australian court injunction to prevent its publication. Peter Wright won the case and *Spycatcher* was published, but it was immediately banned in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, massive numbers of copies found their furtive way into the British Isles, where the ban was eventually rescinded in a tacit acknowledgement that the book had done little to harm the secret services. An increasingly liberal view of such revelatory works has prevailed over the past decade, which has seen a number of books, most notably by members of the Special Air Service, Britain’s secretive special forces unit, become best sellers in the United Kingdom.² The authors of these works were far more likely to be ostracized socially than to face court actions. This is due in part to the anti-climactic nature of Peter Wright’s disclosures, greater media scrutiny of the intelligence community, the lessening of world tension with the end of the Cold War, and a desire to publicize “our” side of the story in the face of the official and unofficial opening of the Soviet archives.³

Of these two books, Stella Rimington’s is most directly indebted to Peter Wright. The publicity surrounding Rimington’s appointment in 1991 and ongoing interest in her career created an audience for her life story. However, as she tells us in the preface, she had not kept a diary during her career, nor had she used MI5 files when preparing her book. Hoping to prevent official furore, Rimington submitted her manuscript to senior British government officials who vetted it thoroughly, leaving the author to marvel that despite her circumspection, she could not have predicted the extent of the changes and deletions demanded by British authorities. This is the reader’s first warning sign.

Recovering, Rimington writes – somewhat disingenuously – that her book is actually meant to encourage other women to aspire to executive level positions. This is a noble sentiment; however, if Rimington had not headed the

1 Peter Wright, *Spycatcher: The Candid Autobiography of a Senior Intelligence Officer* (New York, 1987).

2 See for instance General Sir Peter de La Billière, *Looking for Trouble: An Autobiography from SAS to the Gulf* (London, 1994); Ranulph Fiennes, *The Feather Men* (London, 1991); and Andy McNab, *Bravo Two Zero* (London, 1993).

3 Christopher Andrew, *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West* (London, 1999).

British secret service, there would have been a much smaller market for her memoirs. She would certainly not have received a one million pound advance from her publishers for such a book. Even so, the book does not do justice to a life that has been interesting at the very least.

Born in 1935, Rimington witnessed the Second World War, the widening of access to British universities, the austerity of 1950s Britain, and swinging 1960s London. Little of this is conveyed with insight. Instead, readers see a fairly mechanical career progression from archivist in a local record office to a ministerial library in Whitehall. Rimington resigned from this last post after marrying a British trade official, whom she accompanied on a number of foreign postings. She was recruited into MI5 in 1967, by an intelligence officer at the British High Commission in Delhi. This agent perceived that the expertise in recording, controlling, and interpreting information that Rimington had gained as an archivist, librarian, and historian had equipped her admirably for intelligence work, in which massive quantities of information must be gathered, stored, and retrieved. Archival training is central to Rimington's conception of intelligence work, believing as she does that the file registry is the heart of the secret service.

This conviction was deepened after Rimington returned to London in the early 1970s to work in MI5's central records registry. Archival training had first brought Rimington to the attention of the intelligence community, but she had bigger aspirations. Chauvinism was entrenched in MI5, an institution populated almost wholly by ex-military men and those recruited from the elite private schools, Oxbridge colleges, and social clubs. Women had traditionally played subordinate roles in the service, managing the information that male agents collected and used. Nevertheless, as her marriage crumbled in the early 1970s, Rimington began to rise, in the face of what at times must have been considerable resistance, to become the first female intelligence officer, administrator, and finally the head of MI5. Stella Rimington is, quite evidently, a very formidable person.

Unfortunately, that formidability prevents the introspection necessary to convey convincingly what could be the more moving parts of this book. Rimington was a single mother in a job that required absolute secrecy to protect her family from becoming the target of terrorist groups. While being publicly appointed to lead MI5 relieved some of the stress that this need for concealment carried, it placed her and her family at immediate peril. The publication of a covertly taken photograph soon after her appointment forced Rimington and her two children to go into hiding for the rest of her career, all while she struggled with the quotidian pressures and stresses faced by single parents. Unfortunately, these events are related in a fairly perfunctory manner.

Furthermore, it is easy to speculate but difficult to know what Rimington was not permitted to print about her secret career. Given what made it to the printed page, one can surmise that the excised portions were likely to have

been further anecdotal accounts of life in MI5. Whitehall allowed her to recount only well-known stories. The chapters of *Open Secret* that deal with MI5 are dominated by the hunt for the Cambridge Spies, a story that has captivated the British public for the past fifty years. During the 1930s, five upper middle-class undergraduates at Cambridge University were recruited as Soviet agents and instructed to penetrate the highest reaches of the diplomatic, political, and social establishments, which they did with extraordinary ease. Kim Philby, the most audacious of the group, was even identified as a future head of British intelligence. During the Cold War, Philby and two others defected to Moscow just as they were about to be exposed, while Peter Wright extracted a secret confession from the fourth, Sir Anthony Blunt, in 1964. Nevertheless, Blunt was permitted to carry on working as one of the foremost British art scholars and an advisor on paintings to the Queen. His treason was only revealed in 1979 when Margaret Thatcher broke the story to the British House of Commons.⁴ For decades the British press, public, and intelligence services searched for a mysterious “fifth man” who many believed had been concealed by the political and social elite.

Judging by Rimington’s book alone, the humiliation and betrayal that the intelligence services felt about the Cambridge spies made MI5 an introspective, distrustful, paranoid institution obsessed with ferreting out moles. The attempt to silence Peter Wright was a manifestation of this internal uneasiness. When read in concert with Richard Aldrich’s *The Hidden Hand*, Rimington’s account is seen to add little to what Peter Wright, Kim Philby, and others have already revealed about the Cambridge spies.⁵

The Hidden Hand is a very different indication of the official means by which information that was once withheld by the state is now being released. In 1997, under Sir Stephen Lander, the historian who replaced Rimington as the head of MI5, the Security Service began releasing files to the Public Record Office, in London. The initial transfer documented British intelligence activities during the First World War, while further releases have revealed more recent intelligence operations. If Aldrich’s book is any evidence, these ongoing disclosures promise to pay substantial dividends for the future. Until now, the paucity of archival documentation available in the United Kingdom has shaped British intelligence history by increasing the importance of individual agents like Philby who have taken on a legendary profile. On the other hand, official histories have been written within institutional and political parameters. More recently, historians of British intelligence have scanned American records as they became available in Washington for evidence of

4 The most balanced account of Blunt’s treason is found in Miranda Carter, *Anthony Blunt: His Lives* (London, 2001).

5 Kim Philby, *My Silent War* (New York, 1968), and Philip Knightly, *The Master Spy: The Story of Kim Philby* (London, 1989).

British activities. This transatlantic research confirms Aldrich's central tenet: that intelligence is an international, cooperative venture carried out amongst allies.

Aldrich has used British and American archives extensively, and as a result, his book is a deft and detailed account of the cooperation, competition, and suspicion between the American and British intelligence services as they redefined their roles during the two decades after the Second World War. This analysis is wedded to a nuanced account of the national and international political events through which the world descended steadily, though not inexorably, into the Cold War. Aldrich's understanding of long-term domestic and foreign policy gives a weight to this study that is often lacking in intelligence history. The value of secret intelligence lies in its ability to shape, bolster, and defend domestic and international political policies. Record transfers on both sides of the Atlantic are allowing historians to demonstrate that at times the intelligence services lead political change while at others they lag behind. Washington and London did not always agree on intelligence, foreign, or domestic policy; Britain was a power in retreat, hoping to preserve her influence in world affairs, while the United States was beginning to assert its global authority. Nevertheless, the two services had a common purpose in checking the advance of communism. As a result, cities like Vienna and Hong Kong became strategic intelligence hubs where American, British, Soviet, and Maoist agents attempted to gain the upper hand. This was Kipling's "great game" played to an evolving set of rules on a global board.

Because of this perspective, Aldrich's treatment of the Cambridge spies is much richer and more perceptive than Rimington's. Aldrich uses archival records, many of them newly released, to document how various spy scandals had a cumulative effect on the intelligence and political communities and thereby on international diplomacy and cooperation. We learn, for instance, that American intelligence, as socially elite as MI5, was unsure about how to handle traitors in the years immediately after the Second World War. The first defectors were likely to be returned to the Soviets where they undoubtedly met grisly fates. The sense that no "gentleman" would betray his country was hard to dislodge from the minds of British and American agents. This changed over time as men and women like Igor Gouzenko, a cypher clerk at the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa, defected with irrefutable proof that the Soviets had penetrated Western society. Where before the Western agents had looked down on communist regimes as technically and socially inferior – intelligence officers were often struck by Soviet agents' ignorance about indoor plumbing – they now had to admit that the enemy was formidable and determined. Once the "Red Scare" took hold in the public imagination, the intelligence communities realized that they had found their post-war niche. Evidence from human, electronic, and photographic sources around the world was brought together, analyzed, sorted, and stored. Its cumulative effect was to help split the world into

ideologically opposed camps. Rarely can records have had such power, or archivists like Rimington been so important. British and American intelligence services have been redefining their roles since the end of the Cold War. Closing this chapter of their histories lies at the heart of the culture of greater openness.

Given the intelligence and erudition with which Aldrich uses his sources, it is disappointing to see him lapse occasionally into cynical asides about the honesty of the process through which London and Washington are disclosing their intelligence records. Perhaps the shift to openness has been too abrupt, given the intense secrecy of the past decades. Aldrich's qualified, but apparent suspicions are fuelled by the absence of independent scrutiny in Britain where the Security Service itself determines how and what to release. Uncovering secrets lies at the centre of all intelligence history. Official disclosure has evidently not prevented the most capable of researchers to wonder what remains safely stored away and whether the "hidden hand" is not still at work.