H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

M. R. D. Foot. *Secret Lives: Lifting the Lid on Worlds of Secret Intelligence.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. xvii + 302 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-860637-6.

Reviewed by David Alvarez (Department of Politics, Saint Mary's College of California)

Published on H-Diplo (August, 2003)

Life in the Secret World

Life in the Secret World

In the past, autobiographies and biographies were important sources for what then passed as intelligence history. Denied access to the records of intelligence and security services, historians investigating the operations of those services often had to rely on the testimony of former practitioners of the arcane arts of espionage. In some cases (such as that of Marcel Givierge's "Au Service du Chiffre: 18 ans de souvenirs, 1907-1925") personal testimony was practically the only source for a scholar researching a particular subject.[1] Occasionally (for example, Compton Mackenzie's *Greek Memories*) the testimony proved so detailed and revealing that alarmed authorities rushed to suppress or censor publication and punish the author.[2] More often the breathless and dramatic accounts wobbled so precariously on the line between fact and fiction that the genre might be described better as folklore than history.[3]

When, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, governments began to declassify intelligence records in significant numbers, spy memoirs and biographies lost some of their appeal among professional scholars, who were inclined by training and experience to prefer documents to memories. The focus shifted from individuals and their personal experiences to organizations and their operations. The occasional biographical study might attract the attention and respect of historians (Thomas Powers' biography of Richard Helms is a case in point), but the school of "as I approached the border guard" intelligence history became distinctly unfashionable.[4]

But fashions come and go. Currently, the field of intelligence history is experiencing a renewed interest in spy memoirs and biographies. In the last few months alone, intelligence historians have welcomed the memoirs of Richard Helms, a former CIA director whose life in the secret world began in the Second World War, and Milt Beardon, a career CIA officer who held senior positions in the agency's operations directorate, as well as biographies of William Colby, another CIA director, Robert Hanssen, the FBI agent who worked for years for the Russians, and Walter Krivitsky, a senior operative in Stalin's intelligence apparatus.[5] Looking down the road, historians can anticipate the appearance of James Critchfield's memoir of the intelligence wars in early Cold War

Germany, David Kahn's biography of Herbert Yardley, the father of American communications intelligence, and Steve Budiansky's account of the life and times of Sir Francis Walsingham, the spymaster of Queen Elizabeth I.

Given the renewed interest in intelligence personalities, the appearance of *Secret Lives* is nothing if not timely. The ninety-three entries (eighty-eight men and five women) culled by M.R.D. Foot (himself an ocassional denizen of the secret world) from the multi-volume *Dictionary of National Biography* are linked by the fact that the subjects were in some way connected with espionage or secret operations. The entries are arranged in rough chronological order beginning with the clan chieftain Brian O'Connor, who died in the mid-sixteenth century, and ending with the Hungarian polemicist, Tibor Szamuely, who died in 1972.

Described by no less an authority than G. M. Trevelyan as "the best record of a nation's past that any civilization has produced" (p. v), the *Dictionary of National Biography* (*DNB*) has acquired the status of cultural icon in the United Kingdom and wherever Anglophiles reside. Frankly, the alleged merits and attractions of the *DNB* are lost on this reviewer. If the present selections are a fair indication, the entries seem no more or less pedestrian than those found in most reference volumes.

Perhaps the *DNB* does not travel well. The series, which began to appear in 1885, was addressed to a British audience and many of the entries, particularly those from the earlier volumes, reflect the cultural and social preoccupations of the class that produced most of the *DNB*'s authors, readers, and subjects. References to lineage, inheritances, gravesites, the locations of portraits or other likenesses of the subject, and (in at least one case) schoolboy achievements on the cricket pitch might well have seemed proper and informative to the original audience, but they may strike a contemporary reader as somewhat curious. As for "lifting the lid on worlds of secret intelligence," the entries (some originally published more than a hundred years ago) can hardly be expected to provide much in the way of fresh insight or new information concerning their subjects.

The selection of the entries is also puzzling. As M. R. D. Foot points out in his introduction, for most of British history the secret world was, well, secret. Individuals did not advertise their citizenship in this world and intelligence activities were not considered the proper subject of investigation and comment. An establishment icon such as the *DNB* could hardly be expected to explore and expose the secret world with the avidity of our contemporary media. Still, a reader might wonder about the criteria used to identify a "secret life." Despite the subtitle of the book, some of the personalities deemed worthy of inclusion had only a distant or very brief connection with the world of secret intelligence.

For example, Sir Hughe Montgomery Knatchbull-Hugessen, a career diplomat, seems to have been included only because, during his tenure as Britain's ambassador to Turkey during World War II, his valet purloined many of his confidential papers and sold them to the Germans. A few of the subjects, including John St. Loe Strachey, had no discernible "secret life" at all. The inclusion of individuals marginally involved in the world of intelligence is all the more curious given the absence of personalities more prominently identified with that world. Sir Francis Walsingham and John Wallis (chief cryptanalyst for both Oliver Cromwell and Charles II) are certainly more important figures in the history of British intelligence than most of the characters appearing in *Secret Lives*, but they are not represented by entries in the collection.

Espionage buffs and students of British intelligence may find *Secret Lives* a useful reference tool, but this book is not likely to find a place on the professional bookshelf of the typical H-Diplo list member.

Notes:

[1]. Marcel Givierge, "Au Service du Chiffre: 18 ans de souvenirs, 1907-1925." The French codebreaker's unpublished memoir is now preserved in the Bibliothque Nationale in Paris.

[2]. Compton Mackenzie, *Greek Memories* (London: Cassell, 1932).

[3]. Franz von Tintelen [Franz Rintelen von Kleist], *The Dark Invader: Wartime Reminiscences of a German Naval Intelligence Officer* (London: Dickson Limited, 1933); and William Stevenson, *A Man Called Intrepid* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976).

[4]. Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1979).

[5]. Richard Helms with William Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (New York: Random House, 2003); Milt Bearden and James Risen, *The Main Enemy: The Inside Story of the CIA's Final Showdown with the KGB* (New York: Ran-

dom House, 2003); John Prados, *Lost Crusader: The Secret Wars of CIA Director William Colby* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); David Wise, *Spy: The Inside Story of How the FBI's Robert Hanssen Betrayed America* (New York: Random House, 2002); and Gary Kern, *A Death in Washington: Walter G. Krivitsky and the Stalin Terror* (New York: Enigma Books, 2003).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo

Citation: David Alvarez. Review of Foot, M. R. D., *Secret Lives: Lifting the Lid on Worlds of Secret Intelligence*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. August, 2003.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8006