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Spookaroonie!

Inside British Intelligence
100 years of MI5 and MI6
Gordon Thomas
London: JR books, 2009, £20

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Spooks

The Unofficial History of MI5

Thomas Hennessy and Claire Thomas

Stroud (Glos.): Amberley, 2009, £30

I haven't properly read either of these books and cannot really review them. However, there are some things I can say about them.

I'm not quite sure why but I have never taken Gordon Thomas's books on espionage and parapolitics seriously. Partly, it is just that he writes a lot, and I don't trust people who are prolific in these fields because this material is so difficult to write about that it is impossible to be both prolific and reliable; and partly it is just that his documentation is so patchy. The last one of his I looked at, *The Assassination of Robert Maxwell, Israel's Superspy*, was impossible to evaluate – all/some/none of it might have been true – and thus impossible to take seriously. So when I saw the news story about this book, claiming that the British government tried to stop it being published – what the publisher of every book about intelligence hopes for – I didn't pay any attention: even if it contained something new it wouldn't be reliable enough to be of use, so why bother? But there it was in my local library and as I flipped through the index I saw a name that surprised me, Fred Holroyd, to whom Thomas devotes a page. Alas, Thomas has confused Holroyd with someone else and the page is entirely false. (He has him as the MI6 no. 2 in the Republic of Ireland in the early 1970s at the time of the Littlejohn affair.) Thomas's error is ironic as Fred is one of the tiny handful of British ex-intelligence whistle-blowers who will talk on the record. Thomas didn't talk to Fred and presumably hasn't read his memoir, the now hard to find *War Without Honour*. See what I mean about reliability?

I sent a copy of the page to Fred, who contacted the publisher. Eventually Fred met Thomas and the publisher's md. *Inter alia*, Thomas told Fred that Steve Dorril, co-founder of this

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magazine, pretended to be an academic at the University of Huddersfield but really was an MI6 officer. See what I mean about reliability? Donations to a couple of military charities will be made by the publisher and the offending material will be removed from any further editions. Fred, the gent as always, let them off lightly.

The Hennessy and Thomas book on MI5 is enormous. It's 'only' 660 pages but this has been achieved by dint of squeezing the margins and the line-spacing. Thus an 800-900 page book has been crammed into 'only' 660 pages. The result is a very ugly, uncomfortable read. (The text is so wide it requires the eyes to make at least five shifts across each line.) This would not matter if the content was interesting; but it isn't. The authors have diligently worked their way through the official files that are available (with the occasional other book cited). So, of the 660 pages, the first 530 are devoted to MI5 up to Klaus Fuchs in 1950. After that, no official papers being available (except to the 'official' historian Andrew), the next 45 years are done in 130 pages. The first 33 chapters based on the official paper record are what they are and I am in no position to evaluate them (even if I was interested). The last 4 are based on the kinds of public sources available to all of us and they are poor; and in the case of the material covering the 1970s and 80s, very poor indeed. None of the insiders who have talked critically about MI5 in the post 1964 era – Massiter, Shayler, Machon, Holroyd, Wallace, to name just the obvious examples – are quoted or cited. The official version is always treated as if it were unchallenged. This is thus less an unofficial history of MI5 than an unauthorised official history of MI5.
