

**Lobster 59**

**The Dr Strangeloves of the Mind**

**Anthony Frewin**

*A Terrible Mistake: The Murder of Frank  
Olson and the CIA's Secret Cold War Experiments*

H. P. Albarelli, Jr.

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Illustrations, notes, index.

**A**t 2.25am on 28 November 1953 Dr Frank R Olson, a U.S. government bacteriologist, fell or jumped to his death from a tenth floor room of the Hotel Statler in New York City. He had travelled up to New York with a colleague, Dr Robert Lashbrook, a Defense Department chemist, to see a doctor as he had been ill for several months with ulcer problems, had become despondent, and was now suffering from a severe psychosis.

That's the story as reported at the time. An open and shut case: Olson had a cocktail of medical problems, both physical and mental, so it is sort of understandable that he self-precipitated (to use the correct nomenclature). Right? There the story should have ended and there were plenty of government departments including the Army, the CIA, the FBI, and the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, who were praying that it did. Well, it did, for a while anyway. Twenty years were to pass before the story of MKULTRA and the circumstances of the death began to seep out.

Albarelli writes that 'The story of his strange death has taken up permanent residence in the modern codex of conspiracy legend and lore', and, further, his 'death has become a touchstone for the fear of shadow government, and

a focal point for justified paranoia about mad scientists running amok among innocent, unsuspecting populations.'

Following Olson's death there were several secret government investigations into what happened but these were EYES ONLY reports and their authors knew where they could and could not shine a torch. Albarelli exhaustively details these and all subsequent investigations up to and including the 'cold case' review by the New York District Attorney Robert Morgenthau in the 1990s. But he does not keep to the straight and narrow. He has explored what all the main characters and many subsidiary ones were working on and who exactly they were. This has resulted in a highly detailed study of what the US 'secret state' was doing in psycho-chemical (think LSD/'mind control') and biological weapons. This work will now become the first port of call for anyone researching this neck of the woods.

The cast list here must be as extensive as that of *War and Peace*. Here you'll find new information about James Angleton, James McCord (one of the early Olson investigators and later a Watergate burglar), William Colby, Richard Helms, William Donovan, Allen Dulles (later the intelligence community's 'minder' on the Warren Commission, who had earlier been sacked from the CIA by JFK) and many others, including Dr Harold Abramson and *the* Dr Strangelove of the whole shebang, Dr Sidney Gottlieb. Like his associates, Gottlieb saw his work – this included dosing unwitting subjects with LSD, many of whom would suffer from psychological scars for the rest of their life, and some who even died – as entirely justified in the interests of national defence.

The scientists, however, are not the only ones who should stand in the dock. How about the Department of Justice? In 1954 CIA General Counsel Lawrence Houston reached an understanding with the Department of Justice that 'allowed the Agency to determine on its own when to report

violations of criminal activities by CIA personnel.' In other words, whatever oversight may have existed before, it just left Kansas.

What *didn't* come out about Olson at the time of his death? One could say just about everything. In 1951 he was a high ranking Special Operations Division officer at Camp Detrick, a chemical and biological warfare laboratory, who held responsibility for project planning and intelligence operations and was an expert in aerosol delivery systems for chemical and biological weapons. Further, he was affiliated to the CIA on various mind control projects. In other words, he wasn't the Joe Shmoe he was painted at the time.

### **A loose cannon**

The problem with Olson, as Albarelli argues and for this writer certainly substantiates, is that he had a big mouth; and the problem began in a small village in the south of France named Pont-St-Esprit in 1951. There, late in summer, hundreds of villagers had fallen seriously ill, hallucinating, behaving in bizarre ways and suffering mental breakdowns. A number even died. The story at the time was that they were suffering either from ergot poisoning arising from contaminated baked bread, or mercury poisoning from a fungicide. In fact this appears to have been a CIA experiment to see the effects of mass-induced LSD that probably had been delivered via one of the methods that Olson had been working on (airborne aerosol most likely).<sup>1</sup>

Olson saw firsthand the effects of this mass psychosis and the question that Albarelli asks but cannot conclusively answer is: 'Was he remorseful or was he boastful?' As a result of this he became a loose cannon. His superiors soon got wind of his talking out of turn and the lid certainly had to be kept on

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<sup>1</sup> Owing to the length of this footnote it has been placed at the end of the piece.

*this* operation. If he was remorseful would this result in him telling all in the hope of expunging his guilt? Or if he was boastful was he seeking not forgiveness but credit and would he be attempting to take his expertise to an outside contractor? Either way they had to know what he had said to whom and what his plans were.

On Thursday 19 November 1953 Olson attended a meeting at Deep Creek Lake with several of his colleagues and was slipped LSD laced with a 'truth drug' before being interrogated. He began to display strange behaviour, extreme anxiety, and feelings of paranoia. The loose cannon was now ricocheting about like the ball in a pinball machine. He was taken up to New York to see the CIA-approved Dr Abramson who seems to have realised that there was going to be no easy fix here. Then it was decided that Olson should be taken away to a secure CIA-approved asylum and the forcible removal of Olson from the Hotel Statler was entrusted to two 'goons'. Things got out of hand in the hotel room and Olson was precipitated out the window with the goons probably thinking, they'll thank us for this (indeed, they might even have been instructed to do same). The two goons were Pierre Lafitte and Francois Spirito. Who they?

## **Spirio and Lafitte**

**S**pirito has been dubbed the father of modern heroin traffickers. He was born in Sicily in 1898 and spent his formative years in Marseilles. The 1970 French film *Borsalino*<sup>2</sup> was largely based on his life but left out much of his less pleasing side, such as his Nazi collaboration during the war. Just before the Olson business Spirito had been released from Atlanta's Federal Penitentiary where he had been serving a sentence for drug trafficking. Less than three weeks later he was picked up by the US Immigration and Naturalization

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<sup>2</sup> *Borsalino*, directed by Jacques Deray, with Jean-Paul Belmondo and Alain Delon. Based upon a novel by Eugene Saccomano.

Service and deported back to France where he died in 1967. Spirito had known Lafitte since about 1939 and they had first met in Marseilles. It was Lafitte who engaged him for the job.<sup>3</sup>

Now let's turn to Lafitte. In 1952 nine large framed paintings including *The Flaying of St. Bartholomew*, believed to be by Mattis Preti, a famous Neapolitan artist, were stolen from St Joseph's Cathedral in Bardstown, Kentucky. In April 1953 FBI agents arrested three people in Chicago in connection with the theft: Norton I Kretske, an attorney, Joseph DePietro, a deputy bailiff for a Chicago court, and an individual identified as Gus Manoletti. The case went to trial in October and the government's second prosecution witness answered to the name of Jean-Pierre Lafitte but as he approached the stand he was recognised as Gus Manoletti.

Lafitte said he lived in San Diego and had been employed for the last three years as a special investigator for the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. Before that he had been employed overseas on 'special missions for the United States government.' He explained that he had been engaged by the FBI to locate the stolen paintings and had posed as a buyer in the art world and after months of undercover work had purchased the stolen paintings from Kretske and DePietro for \$35,000. They were then arrested in a sting operation.

Since Lafitte was the government's star witness, the attorneys for the defendants made strenuous efforts to find out more about his background. The prosecutors objected and the judge sustained their objections citing public interest issues and forbidding any disclosure. So, here we have a man trusted by government agencies and seemingly employed by them over many years.

It's unclear when and where Lafitte was born; possibly

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<sup>3</sup> Albarelli devotes the whole of Book 3, Chapter 4, to this character, 'Who Was Francois Spirito?' pp. 439-49. There's also much about him in Alfred W McCoy's *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991).

Corsica in the early 1900s. He certainly grew up in Marseilles and in his early teens, either having run away from home or having been abandoned by his mother, was working in restaurant kitchens where he discovered a natural aptitude for cooking, a talent that would stand him in good stead throughout his peripatetic life.

His involvement in the Marseilles underworld parallels his restaurant work. The late 1930s found Lafitte travelling back and forth between New York, Montreal, Boston, Paris and Marseilles, probably facilitating drug deals. During the 1939-45 war he is thought to have been involved in a number of OSS operations in Nazi-occupied Europe.

Sometime after the war he hooked up with George Hunter White, a buccaneering agent of the Federal Narcotics Bureau, who would provide plenty of work for him. (White had free access to LSD in the early 1950s and was dosing unwitting subjects left, right and centre in the many safe houses he ran for the FNB and other agencies).

In 1951 White enlisted Lafitte's help in a major narcotics case. A Joe Dornay, an alias of Joseph Orsini, was arrested in New York for drug trafficking. When he was placed in a cell on Ellis Island prior to deportation who was his cellmate? None other than Lafitte, put there by the FBN to gather information about Orsini's network. Orsini spilled the beans thinking that Lafitte could mind the store while he was away. As it was, Orsini effectively handed the network on a plate to the FBN and the FBI via Lafitte.

Lafitte's career as a 'non-attributable' agent for various government agencies is described in great detail by Albarelli and includes the remarkable story of Joe Valachi, the Mafia song-bird, who had murdered John Joseph Saupp in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary yard. The US Attorney there had sought the death penalty but Valachi, through a go-between, got a message concerning his predicament through to Robert

Morgenthau who was then the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York. The message was that he was prepared to tell all about the mob, as he subsequently did, in exchange for the death penalty going away.<sup>4</sup> Albarelli reveals Lafitte was that go-between.

In 1953 Lafitte had been working undercover doing lowly work in several New York hotels, probably for the FBN, certainly for George White. He was working at the Hotel Statler when Olson exited the window.

## **Shaw, Oswald, New Orleans**

**N**ow we'll go to a contemporary 'parallel' universe: Clay Shaw, Lee Harvey Oswald, and New Orleans.

In 1967 the New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison arrested Clay Shaw for conspiracy in the assassination of John F Kennedy. Shaw was a prominent New Orleans businessman and a leading director of the World Trade Center, a 'non-profit association fostering the development of international trade, tourism and cultural exchange.' In 1969 Sidney Gottlieb announced at a staff meeting that the FBI had arrested Lafitte in New Orleans where he was working as the manager-chef of the Plimsoll Club within the World Trade Center<sup>5</sup> (Shaw had praised him as 'the best chef in New Orleans' <sup>6</sup>). Richard Helms, now director of the CIA, wanted to know what was going on and ordered an inquiry.

It transpires that the Feds had little choice but to pick

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4 Regarding Valachi's testimony on the Mob, Albarelli notes that some crime authorities claim it 'was a well-concocted and coached performance based less on fact than on a law enforcement agenda.'

5 The club still describes itself as 'The Members Club of the World Trade Center of New Orleans' on its website <[www.plimsoll.com/](http://www.plimsoll.com/)>. However it has now relocated to a nearby hotel.

6 Others who sang his praises included the Louisiana Governor John McKeithen and Mrs Lyndon Baines Johnson who sent him a letter from the White House. See 'The Gourmet Pirate', *Time* magazine, 19 December 1969.

Lafitte up as six years earlier he had swindled a businessman out of \$400,000 in an elaborate scam that involved diamond mines in South Africa.

However, Lafitte's 'interfacing' with the Kennedy assassination and its aftermath do not end there. Earlier, in 1967 or 1968, with Allan Hughes, a CIA operative who had attended the Deep Creek Lake meeting where Olson had been dosed, and the reporter James Phelan,<sup>7</sup> Lafitte burgled Garrison's office to retrieve papers relating to Shaw.<sup>8</sup>

And there's an even more intriguing connection.

On 9 May 1963 Lee Harvey Oswald applied for work at the William B Reily Coffee Company in New Orleans. The eponymous Reily was a rabid anti-communist who gave financial support both to Sergio Arcacha Smith's Crusade to Free Cuba Committee and Ed Butler's partially CIA-funded propaganda outfit, the Information Council of the Americas (INCA). The Reily vice-president, William Monaghan, was a former FBI agent and was a charter member of INCA. Jim Garrison believed that Reily's was part of an intelligence apparatus. A view bolstered somewhat by Gerry Patrick Hemming's claim that William Reily had worked for the CIA for years.<sup>9</sup>

Oswald worked for Reily May through July, and Albarelli notes that 'Around the time of JFK assassination' Lafitte too was working for the Reily company. The world gets smaller

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<sup>7</sup> Despite his claims to being a fearless and independent journalist, Phelan was a snitch and a shill for the Feds and the intelligence services. See, for example, Joan Mellen, *A Farewell to Justice: Jim Garrison, JFK's Assassination, and The Case That Should Have Changed History* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2005), pp. 144-5.

<sup>8</sup> Aside from the burglary, papers were being purloined from Garrison's office by, amongst others, Gordon Novel and William Gurvich. Mellen (see note 7) goes into some detail.

<sup>9</sup> Jim Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 115-6. There's also much about Reily and Oswald's time there in John Armstrong, *Harvey & Lee: How the CIA Framed Oswald* (Arlington, Texas: Quasar, 2003), p. 535 *et seq.*

and smaller.

Lafitte is unknown in the literature of the JFK assassination. I checked the indices of some ten works. He's obviously a person for whom further and better parts are needed.

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**N**ow let's go off on another tack and a little nearer home: the writer Gordon Thomas. When the New York Attorney Robert Morgenthau was investigating Olson's death, his son Eric received an affidavit from Thomas that he believed 'could blow the case wide open.' Gordon Thomas was no stranger to the government-sponsored 'mind control' experiments and had authored a book about Dr Ewen Cameron and the appalling MKULTRA experiments he had conducted in Montreal.<sup>10</sup> Eric Olson immediately passed on the affidavit to Morgenthau's office.

Thomas' affidavit recounts a series of conversations he claims he had with the British psychiatrist Dr William Sargant (1907-1988) in 1968 and 1969 when Sargant was Director of Psychological Medicine at St Thomas' Hospital in London. Some readers may recall that much publicity attended the publication of Sargant's book *Battle for the Mind*<sup>11</sup> in 1957 and in the ensuing years he was all over the media giving his views on

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<sup>10</sup> *Journey into Madness: Medical Torture and Mind Controllers* (London: Bantam Press, 1988). The subtitle for subsequent editions was changed to *The True Story of Secret CIA Mind Control and Medical Abuse*. See also footnote 13 below.

<sup>11</sup> *Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brainwashing* (London: William Heinemann, 1957). I read this back in the 1960s but couldn't locate my copy while writing this review. It's a book that's worth reading again in the light of what we now know. Does he unwittingly give anything away?

In 1976, as an expert on brainwashing and thought control, Sargant appeared for the defence in the trial of Patty Hearst alongside Drs Louis Joylon West, a CIA contract employee, and Robert Jay Lifton. They argued that Hearst had been brainwashed by the Symbionese Liberation Army.

mental illness and psychiatry. He was a rather lugubrious character and looked like Boris Karloff. His confidence in himself was unassailable.

Thomas says that Sargant was 'a consultant to the British Intelligence Service (MI5/6)' and claims that Sargant told him that he 'had visited Langley [CIA HQ] several times and had met with Dr. Sydney [*sic*] Gottlieb, Richard Helms and other senior CIA officials.' Further, during the same visits he had also met up with Dr Ewen Cameron, Dr Robert Lashbrook (who had accompanied Olson to New York and shared the hotel room with him in 1953), and Frank Olson himself.

Further in the affidavit:

Subsequently Dr. Gottlieb and Frank Olson visited London and, according to Dr. Sargant, he accompanied them to Porton Down, Britain's main research centre for biological/chemical research. Dr. Sargant's interest in the work going on there was to study the psychological implications of mind-blowing drugs such as LSD. He told me that he developed a rapport with Frank Olson during a number of subsequent visits Frank Olson made to Britain. Dr. Sargant remarked that 'he was just like any other CIA spy, using our secret airfields to come and go.'

Sargant told Thomas he could publish what he was saying, but only after his death. He went on to relate that 'in the summer of 1953 Frank Olson travelled to Britain, once again to visit Porton Down' and:

Olson said he was going to Europe to meet with a CIA team led by Dr. Gottlieb...Sargant was satisfied that the CIA team were [*sic*] doing similar work that MI6 were conducting in Europe – executing without trial known Nazis, especially SS men...Sargant saw Frank Olson after his brief visit to Norway and West Germany, including Berlin, in the summer of 1953. He said he was concerned about the psychological changes in Frank Olson.

In Sargant's view Olson, primarily a research-based scientist, had witnessed in the field how his arsenal of drugs, etc, worked with lethal effect on human beings (the 'expendable' SS men etc.). Sargant believed that for the first time Olson had come face to face with his own reality. Sargant told me he believed Frank Olson had witnessed murder being committed with the various drugs he had prepared. The shock of what he had witnessed, Sargant believed, was all the harder to cope with given that Frank Olson was a patriotic man who believed the United States would never sanction such acts.

I remember Sargant telling me that he spoke several times in 1953 with Frank Olson at Sargant's consulting rooms in Harley Street, London. These were not formal patient/doctor consultations but rather Sargant trying to establish what Frank Olson had seen and done in Europe.

[Sargant] decided that Frank Olson could pose a security risk if he continued to speak and behave as he did. He recommended to his own superiors at the SIS that Frank Olson should no longer have access to Porton Down or to any ongoing British research at the various secret establishments Olson had been allowed free access to. Sargant told me his recommendation was acted upon by his superiors. He was also certain that his superiors, by the nature of the close ties with the CIA, would have informed Richard Helms and Dr. Gottlieb of the circumstances why Frank Olson would no longer be given access to British research.

Effectively a substantial part of Frank Olson's importance to the CIA had been cut off. When Dr. Sargant learned of Frank Olson's death...Sargant came to the immediate conclusion that Olson could only have been murdered. I recall him telling me that in many ways the staged death was almost classic.

Pretty hot stuff! Or is it?

Albarelli notes that overseas CIA experimental activities were conducted under the auspices of ARTICHOKE and not MKULTRA, therefore Gottlieb would not have travelled with, much less headed up, any team to Europe. Further, there is no evidence that Gottlieb and Olson ever went together to Europe in the 1950s, and Gottlieb never visited Europe until after 1953.

Thomas' claim that Sargant visited Gottlieb, Helms and the others 'several' times 'at Langley' during the period of 1953-55 is impossible because the CIA's Langley headquarters were built from 1959 onwards and not opened until 1961.

The allegation that a CIA team was executing without trial known Nazis is highly dubious, particularly in light of PAPERCLIP and other operations that were seeking the scientific and intelligence expertise of these very individuals.<sup>12</sup>

Albarelli states that there is no corroborating evidence that Sargant ever met Gottlieb, Helms, Lashbrook or, indeed, Frank Olson. The reader can feel confident that if there had been, he would have turned it up.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, in 1943 Nazi doctors at Dachau were giving mescaline to prisoners to see if it would be possible to 'control' their minds. These experiments were carried out under the 'aviation medicine' programme that was headed by Dr Hubertus Strughold (1893-1986). Other experiments included injecting prisoners with gasoline, crushing them to death in high pressure chambers, shooting them so blood coagulants could be tested on their wounds, immersing them in tubs of ice water to see how long it would take before they died. What happened to Dr Strughold? He was one of the PAPERCLIP scientists. He lived in Texas and worked on the US space programme. He was described by NASA as the 'father of space medicine.' See Martin A Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams: The CIA, LSD and the Sixties Rebellion* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), pp. 5-7, John Marks, *The Search for the 'Manchurian Candidate': The Story of the CIA's Secret Efforts to Control Human Behaviour* (London: Allen Lane, 1979), pp. 4-6, and Marcus Boon's *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 248-9 (this is a compelling and comprehensive study of the literary side of narcotics).

Thomas claims that Sargant handed over all his records relating to work with the CIA and Frank Olson to British intelligence (I return to Sargant's records below).

The affidavit raises other questions. If Sargant was an active intelligence officer or closely related to the intelligence services why was he talking to Thomas? And if we take at face value the claims made in the affidavit, why was Olson opening his heart and breaching security to Sargant when he knew full well who he was, who he worked for, and the likelihood that Sargant would report it upwards, if for no other reason than to keep himself in the clear?

Lastly, Olson's state of mind. There is no evidence that Olson had psychiatric problems or mental health 'issues' at this time. They would come later after the dosing at the Deep Creek Lake meeting.

Albarelli asked Steve Saracco, one of the two attorneys in MorgYnthau's office who was working on the case, what his take on the affidavit was. Saracco said, 'Number one it's hearsay, and number two, well, there is no number two. What does it really say? That one person told another person that possibly told another person that they thought Olson's death had been murder? You tell me: What do I do with that?'

One wonders what Thomas thought he was doing with this affidavit, and why hadn't he even checked some basic facts? It wasn't as if he was a stranger in these areas. Albarelli writes: 'Thomas' account of Olson's alleged disclosures to Dr. Sargant lends tremendous credence to the Agency's claim that Olson was unstable.' This, of course, was the original cover story!

Albarelli wasn't finished with Gordon Thomas yet. He details many of the major mistakes and impossibilities in Thomas' 2007 book, *Secrets and Lies*<sup>13</sup> and concludes by

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<sup>13</sup> London: JR Books. Albarelli writes, 'In many ways the book is a rehash of his earlier work, *Journey into Madness*, with the exception of its additions about Frank Olson's death.'

saying, 'But the primary reason for discounting Thomas' assertions about the death of Frank Olson is simply that they do not square with the evidence and, instead, *dovetail with official versions that were clearly intended as cover up.*' (italics added.)

Thomas asserts that George White killed Olson and with a little legerdemain says that he got this from Eric Olson; whereas Eric knew from White's date book that he, White, was not in New York on the night in question, but was 3,000 miles away in California organising his mother's funeral. To support this claim Thomas gives no further evidence beyond statements that he attributes to a dead CIA official, William Buckley, who he says was assigned by Allen Dulles in 1953 to investigate Olson's death. Alas, in 1953 Buckley was still in college and had not yet joined the CIA. Further, as Albarelli documents, Buckley was never involved with MKULTRA operations and certainly never assigned to Dr Gottlieb's TSS branch as Thomas says.

Further claims of Thomas' end up in the Sheol of misinformation. For instance, he says that Gottlieb went to Tokyo in 1950 on orders from DCI Walter Smith; but Gottlieb didn't join the CIA until the following year. Or how about this? Thomas writes, 'By 1953, the year Frank Olson died, there had been nearly 500 other deaths resulting among his fellow workers from being infected by anthrax or Bolivian hemorrhagic fever...'

500 deaths? This would have been America's greatest anthrax outbreak ever and would have been impossible to hide.

Albarelli writes in his notes at the end of the book, 'Many of Thomas' claims in this book [*Secrets and Lies*] seriously challenge the credulity of his loyal readers. Additionally, many of his claims, besides being wrong in this author's view, are

unsupported by any documentation or cited sources.<sup>14</sup>

Dr William Sargent is an intriguing figure and may well be the UK's answer to Dr Gottlieb. However, further research needs to be done on him. But what do we know?

First, a little detour. We know that three servicemen were given LSD at Porton Down, the UK government's chemical warfare establishment, in 1953 and 1954 after volunteering to take a drug that they were told was part of a search for a cure for the common cold.

'The research was carried out after British and American governments thought the Soviet Union had developed a "truth drug" which could compel spies and servicemen to yield up important secrets. MI6 scientists decided to test LSD, the closest thing they thought they had to a truth drug, on volunteers to see how they reacted.'<sup>15</sup>

In February 2006 MI6, through the Ministry of Defence, gave the three servicemen compensation (believed to be under £10,000 each).<sup>16</sup>

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14 Thomas' misinformation has legs and now it's all over the Net and in many books. Take, as an example, and this is one of many, David Black's *Acid: A New History of LSD* (London: Vision Paperbacks, 2001), pp. 27-34, where the gospel according to Thomas – Olson, White, Sargent, Porton Down, etc. – is retold as if it were scripture.

15 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4745748.stm>

16 LSD 'therapy' was also being strongly pursued at the Powick Hospital, a National Health Service psychiatric asylum in Worcestershire, under the aegis of Dr Ronald Sandison who had instituted the treatment in 1952 after visiting the Sandoz Laboratories in Basel where LSD had been discovered by Albert Hofmann in 1938. The treatments continued until 1972 when they were discontinued. In all, over this period, some 683 patients were dosed in some 13,785 sessions. In 1997 250 former patients launched legal action for compensation claiming that they were used as guinea pigs in LSD trials (*Worcester News*, 26 January 2004). In 2002 the National Health Service agreed to pay £195,000 in settlement with 43 of the patients (*British Medical Journal*, 2002;324:501).

According to Dominic Streatfield, *Brainwash: The Secret History of Mind Control* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2007), p. 96, 'Sandison's  
*Continues at the foot of the next page.*

## Sargant

**D**r William Sargant was born in London, studied medicine at St John's College, Cambridge, and qualified as a doctor at St Mary's Hospital in London. In 1935 he switched from general medicine to psychiatry. In 1938 he was awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship and studied for a year at the Harvard Medical School, the first of several trips to the States. During the 1939-45 war he worked at the Maudsley hospital in London treating both military 'shell shock' patients and civilians. In 1947 he spent a year in the States as Professor of Psychiatry at Duke University (where Dr J B Rhine was conducting parapsychological experiments with funding from the US Army and the CIA). He returned to England in 1948 and accepted the position as Head of the Department of Psychological Medicine at St Thomas' hospital in London, and there he stayed for the rest of his career.

What were Sargant's methods of treatment for mental illness? A fellow physician said his approach could be likened to dealing with one of those early black-and-white TV sets that malfunctioned: you just gave it a thump on the top with your fist. Sargant had no time for Freudian or any other analysis. Physical and chemical remedies were the only answer: drugs in large doses, ECT (electroconvulsive therapy), insulin coma therapy, sustained narcosis or Deep Sleep Therapy (DST, keeping the patient asleep for long periods.

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### *Note 16 continued*

research [initially] was conducted on a small scale until a friend stepped in. That friend was Professor Joel Elkes, head of the Department of Experimental Psychiatry at the University of Birmingham, at the time advising Porton Down (and thus MI6) on the interrogation possibilities of LSD. Elkes encouraged Sandison's work and eventually ensured that he received a fifty-thousand-pound grant from the regional hospital board to build a special LSD wing at Powick.'

Fifty thousand pounds? A pretty sizeable sum in the early 1950s. Was the regional hospital board really that enlightened or were they merely a conduit for the money? A question Streatfield fails to ask.

Sargant's 'best' was some three months), and leucotomy.<sup>17</sup> With that arsenal in his hands he figured if they could be cured, they would be.<sup>18</sup>

Then there was the little problem of patient consent, but Sargant didn't deem this necessary; and if the patient found out what was going to happen and objected he just dosed them up so they didn't know whether they were coming or going. In April 2009 BBC Radio 4 broadcast a documentary by James Maw entitled *Revealing the Mind Bender General*. Maw interviewed several of Sargant's patients who spoke of their lives being shattered by the treatment they received, and the programme documented the continual routine violation of patients' rights by him. In fact, some patients even died under the sleep treatment.<sup>19</sup>

A surprise in the programme was an interview with Dr David Owen (*Private Eye's* Dr Death) who had been Sargant's registrar in the 1960s and who described him as 'the sort of person of whom legends are made' (like Grendel?).

All of Sargant's patient records from this time at St Thomas' have apparently disappeared, yet his records from the 1940s are safely stored in the Wellcome Library in London, along with other papers. So why should the St Thomas' papers not be available? It could well be that some of the treatments (read 'experiments') were done at the behest of the security services. Or did Sargant dispose of them merely to cover his ass knowing that some, if not much of his behaviour might be considered unethical?

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<sup>17</sup> Leucotomy and lobotomy are essentially interchangeable terms.

<sup>18</sup> Sargant co-authored with a colleague, Eliot Slater, a clinical director at the Maudsley, a textbook extolling these methods: *An Introduction to Physical Methods of Treatment in Psychiatry* (Edinburgh: E & S Livingstone, 1944). It went through many subsequent editions and was a standard work in UK mental asylums for many years. It is now largely discredited in the US and UK.

<sup>19</sup> <[www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00jd5pw](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00jd5pw)> where Maw's documentary can be heard.

I mentioned above Sargant's 1957 book, *Battle for the Mind*, which has the sub-title of *A Physiology of Conversion and Brainwashing*. As Albarelli details it was the fear of 'mind control' and 'brainwashing' in the Cold War of the late 1940s that really got the CIA investigating LSD and other drugs. And here was Sargant an expert on those very subjects. Where did he obtain his expertise? Was he involved in the Porton Down LSD tests? It seems likely as there appears to have been no one else about with his knowledge at the time aside from Ronald Sandison and Joel Elkes. Indeed, James Maw interviewed a Don Webb who had been given LSD at Porton Down in the early 1950s and though the name Sargant meant nothing, he was shown a photo of Sargant and said it could well be him. When Maw questioned Porton Down about Sargant he was told they had never 'directly' employed him. But then they wouldn't have, would they? He would have been on secondment, just down to do a specific job.

There's certainly circumstantial evidence pointing to connections between Sargant and the UK intelligence agencies but clearer documentation is needed. The relationship may have been informal and probably his work at St Thomas' was unconnected. However, according to Nigel West he was MI5's in-house psychiatrist while his ward sister recalls him telling tales about 'cloak-and-dagger exploits'.<sup>20</sup>

Now we do know that while Sargant was promoting and experimenting with deep sleep therapy over here, Dr Cameron was doing the same thing in Montreal, and they were in contact.<sup>21</sup> Cameron wouldn't have been talking to Sargant

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<sup>20</sup> See Dominic Streatfield, *Brainwash: The Secret History of Mind Control* (see note 16) pp. 253-4. There's also much here about Sargant in Chapter 7, 'Sleep', pp. 219-59, and a good account of Dr Ewen Cameron and his Montreal activities.

<sup>21</sup> Sargant's protégé in Australia, Dr Harry Bailey, pursued DST experiments at the Chelmsford Private Hospital in Sydney in the 1960s and 1970s. It has been established that at least twenty-six

*Continues at the foot of the next page.*

unless he knew he was trustworthy and, one suspects, cleared by the people who were funding him. The CIA, that is.

To sum up: Albarelli has produced a remarkable book that anyone with a more than passing interest in mind control and the intelligence services should have on their shelves.

It's striking that the book has not come out under the imprint of some major New York publisher, but I guess like UK publishers, they're too busy publishing celebs.

TrineDay have produced a handsome book, good typography and printing, and good paper. Three cheers for them.

### **Footnote 1**

Albarelli (pp. 356-7) notes that the Member of Parliament Dr Donald Johnson (1903-1978), a GP/MD, visited Pont-St-Esprit to study the effects firsthand, and subsequently wrote about it.

Dr Johnson was keenly interested in hallucinogenic drugs and had an *idée fixe* about marihuana and hashish and believed there was a strong connection between their use and mental illness. Why he thought this is particularly intriguing. Dr Johnson wrote:

'I was informed that experiments had been made at the Sandoz Laboratories at Basel in which similar psychological symptoms [to Pont-St-Esprit], but lasting only a few hours, had been produced by the injection of a large dose of ergot, but no record of these seems to have been published.'

For ergot read LSD. A pity he didn't follow up this lead, but he wasn't to know.

Dr Johnson writes in his book, *A Doctor Returns* (1956), pp. 116-7, that the 'highly respected German medical journal' *Klinische*

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#### *Note 21 continued*

patients died as a result. He and Sargent were swapping notes, and no doubt cc-ing to Dr Cameron. For the Chelmsford scandal see Brian Bromberger and Janet Fife-Yeomans, *Deep Sleep: Harry Bailey and the Scandal of Chelmsford* (Roseville, NSW: Simon & Schuster, 1991). For the treatment of one patient there, Barry Hart, see the Parliament of New South Wales' website: <[www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Prod/parliament/hansart.nsf/V3Key/LA19970529043](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Prod/parliament/hansart.nsf/V3Key/LA19970529043)>

Sargent distanced himself from Bailey once the scandal broke and Bailey subsequently committed suicide.

*Wochenschrift*, 1949, 27, 672, has an article entitled – and this is his translation – ‘Explanation of Strange Mass Poisoning by Contamination of Flour with Datura Stramonium’ by Paul Pulewa, the Director of the Pharmacological Section of the Refik Saydam Institute and of the Pharmacological Institute of the University of Ankara (just to let you know we’re not dealing with a weirdo). The article describes events in an unnamed Turkish village in 1949 that exactly parallel those of Pont-St-Esprit. The cause according to Pulewa was datura (see below) in the flour. It is remarkable that the only two known instances of such an mass ‘poisoning’ in modern times were in succeeding years, 1949 and 1950.

What Albarelli fails to note and is unaware of is why Dr Johnson was so keenly interested in hallucinogenic and other drugs. Had he known he would certainly have discussed it.

In October 1950 Dr Johnson and his second wife, Betty, were staying at the attractive Marlborough Arms hotel (worth a visit) in Woodstock, a small town roughly seven miles north-west of Oxford. Dr Johnson had purchased the hotel in 1936 and, after running it for a couple of years, had installed a manager and moved back to Surrey. During the stay the two Johnsons experienced an increasing sense of anxiety which soon escalated into overwhelming paranoia. Dr Johnson experienced ‘giddy turns and bouts of automatic talking.’ He and his wife believed there were microphones in the bedrooms and their every word was being listened to, and that they were in great danger. The hotel staff became concerned about their very strange behaviour and a local doctor was sent for. He examined Dr Johnson and promptly signed a certificate under the 1890 Lunacy Act that was then rubber-stamped by a magistrate, thus allowing the police to come in and cart him off to the Warneford Psychiatric Hospital in Oxford (Oxford University’s Department of Psychiatry) where he was incarcerated. Surprisingly, Mrs Johnson was released into the care of relatives though her symptoms were the same if a little less pronounced, the doctor describing her merely as ‘upset’ (despite this not being so as attested by two of her relatives and a London solicitor who saw her several days later).

Dr Johnson however was still greatly ‘excited’ and suffering from pronounced paranoid and other delusions. He spent the next six weeks in the hospital. Dr Johnson was 47 at the time and had no prior history of mental illness and, as far as I can research, *would* have no history of mental illness.

Later he began to believe he and his wife were victims of ‘foul play’ and they had been deliberately ‘poisoned’ with a drug. He wrote: ‘I felt that I had been poisoned and continued to say so until I saw that no notice was being taken.’

The psychiatric doctors and nurses saw this claim as evidence of his paranoia and, indeed, it figured in the doctor's committal certificate:

'He was wild and excitable. He stated that all the drinks in the hotel were poisoned. He stated that all rooms in the hotel were contaminated and unfit to live in. He insisted on a guard being posted outside his bedroom door. He suddenly rushed from the room with a scream because he alleged that he was attacked.'

After two weeks in the hospital Dr Johnson writes that the period of anxiety was over and he entered a 'state of revelation': 'Some powerful secret organisation – maybe it was M.I.5, maybe it was some organisation more powerful still – had taken me in here from the ken of the world at large for some special dedicated reason.'

He saw the hospital as a gaol, as indeed it was, and saw himself as a 'prisoner in the Cold War.' Then this curious (and prescient) statement: 'I am the first example of the workings of the Russian truth drug in this country.'

Who would want to 'poison' him? Dr Johnson was a rational man and sought a rational answer. He believed that the manager of the hotel, and possibly other members of the staff were skimming the takings and pilfering, so he started visiting the hotel more regularly to keep an eye on its running. He believed that they put something in his glass of sherry to...to what? Incapacitate him? Kill him? What?

His wife had a sip of the sherry while Dr Johnson consumed the whole glass and this would explain their differing reactions.

It's a major leap from pilfering to poisoning and you wouldn't cover-up an activity like that by possibly murdering someone; but Dr Johnson was clutching at straws in his search for a rational explanation, and he could subsequently find no evidence to implicate the hotel staff or guests (though it's hard to see what evidence he was hoping to find). The local police would say later that there was nothing to investigate as no crime appeared to have been committed (they probably marked his card as a 'loony').

After reading several of Dr Johnson's books one gets a measure of the man. He's an engaging fellow, educated, literate, with an inquiring mind, and compassionate. He was an independent thinker and acted as his conscience told him. Throughout his parliamentary career he pursued the iniquity of the Mental Health laws whereby someone could be sectioned and carted off to an asylum and left to rot. This was something he brought to the forefront of public debate. He also founded a publishing company that produced many worthwhile non-fiction titles.

If it had only been Dr Johnson who had so behaved there would be the possibility that he had a 'breakdown' but his wife behaved in a

similar way. Could this have been a *folie à deux*? Could his wife have been 'infected' by his behaviour and mirrored it? There is that possibility but it seems unlikely.

Dr Johnson was subsequently released and was determined to find out if the psychosis he had suffered was drug-induced as he suspected. A visit to a 'Harley Street doctor and friend' and others convinced him that the 'episode' resulted from a combination of hemp, opium, and datura, a genus of poisonous plants native to Asia.

Datura is *D. Stramonium*, the Strammony or Thorn Apple, a powerful narcotic. It seems to have been known in the West since the first days of India's colonisation and there is a detailed account of it as early as 1886 in Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell's famous *Hobson-Jobson: Being a Glossary of Anglo-Indian Colloquial Words and Phrases* (London: John Murray), pp. 298-9. However, if word didn't get out from *Hobson-Jobson* it was surely known to the medical profession after the publication in 1924 by the great German toxicologist Louis Lewin of *Phantastica: Die betäub-enden und erregenden Genussmittel für Ärzte und Nichtärzte* (Berlin: Georg Stilke. English translation as *Phantastica: Narcotic and Stimulating Drugs, Their Use and Abuse* [London: Kegan Paul, 1931]). Here there is a full account of it.

The suggested combination of these three drugs sounds like someone was talking through ignorance and was trying to fob him off with a 'go away' answer.

After the publication in 1956 of Dr Johnson's book, *A Doctor Returns*, it was reviewed in the magazine *Twentieth Century* (August 1957) by Dr Humphry Osmond, the 'counterculture icon', who, it will be recalled, was the man who turned on Aldous Huxley with mescaline in 1953, and had coined the term *psychedelic* in 1957. In his review Osmond writes, 'In the last five years my colleagues of the Saskatchewan Schizophrenia Research Group with scientists in other centres all over the world have been pursuing substances which reproduce to a greater or lesser extent those symptoms from which the Johnsons suffered.'

Those 'substances' were LSD and Osmond was at the forefront of psychedelic research in the 1950s.

In the autumn of 1957 the Johnsons had two evening guests at their home in Sutton. They were Dr Osmond and his colleague Dr Abram Hoffer who were over from Canada. They discussed the Johnsons' case and Osmond suggested that it may have been an attempt at murder, while Hoffer thought that the most likely poison was an agricultural insecticide. It's very curious that no mention of LSD was made.

The sources for the account here of Dr Johnson are the following books that he authored, all of which were published by his own

publishing company, Christopher Johnson, in London: *Indian Hemp: A Social Menace* (1952), *Bars and Barricades: Being the Second Part of 'A Publisher Presents Himself'* (1952), *A Doctor Returns: Being the Third Part of 'A Publisher Presents Himself'* (1956), *A Doctor in Parliament* (1958). I haven't yet seen *The Hallucinogenic Drugs: The Insanity-Producing Drugs: Indian Hemp and Datura: A Neglected Aspect of Forensic Medicine* (1953) and I understand it contains little autobiographical material.

As far as I am aware the only subsequent discussion of Johnson to appear anywhere is by Antonio Melechi in his essay, 'Drugs of Liberation: From Psychiatry to Psychedelia' in Melechi, editor, *Psychedelia Britannica: Hallucinogenic Drugs in Britain* (London: Turnaround, 1997), pp. 21-52. Melechi is of incurious mind and dubious about Dr Johnson being spiked and sees this as a psychotic episode producing a genuine psychedelic experience (*Psychedelia Britannica* is a work that doesn't quite live up to its title).

Was Dr Johnson dosed or did he have an actual psychotic episode? Let's go over the ground once more and conjugate the possibilities:

- 1) Run-of-the-mill food poisoning.
- 2) 'Poisoning' by the staff of the hotel.
- 3) An actual 'psychotic' episode.
- 4) Targeted dosing by person or persons known or unknown to Dr Johnson for a specific reason other than hotel staff.

No.1 can probably be dismissed as restaurant food poisoning invariably effects a number of diners (and staff) and not just one person (*vide* Heston Blumenthal's recent 'little mishap' at his restaurant where up to 400 customers were affected). No.2, 'poisoning' by the staff can be dismissed for reasons already given. This leaves Nos. 3 and 4. An actual 'psychotic' episode? Well, the terminology of psychiatry is pretty much always in a state of flux and a 1950s psychosis may not be recognised as such today. Let's term it a 'severe breakdown' and leave it that, and yes, people can have one off episodes. So, there is a possibility here were it not for the fact that Mrs Johnson showed the same symptoms. To accept it was a one off breakdown one must also accept that the two of them constituted a *folie à deux*. How likely is this? Here's what Humphry Osmond wrote in his review in *Twentieth Century*:

'Another possibility is that Mrs. Johnson suffered what is called a *folie à deux*—though not herself mentally ill, she became influenced to act as she did because she was disturbed by her husband's behaviour.

It is unusual for such *folies* to develop as rapidly as this one is said to have done, though I have once seen one occur extremely quickly in identical twins, but what to my mind goes

strongly against this is that Mrs. Johnson seems to have remained seriously ill several days after her husband had been taken to hospital. I feel that the *folie à deux* theory is difficult to support.'

This leaves us with the final possibility, that Dr Johnson was targeted by a person or persons unknown. Let's ignore the idea that the spiking was done as a lark or by some stranger just passing through the area. Could he have been dosed for a specific purpose? To quote Osmond again: 'Now there are poisonings and poisonings. Dr. Johnson's choice is for a deliberate, malicious and highly sophisticated attempt on his sanity and well-being.'

So, we are left with another theory: could it be that he had information and it was felt that the only way to wrest it from him was through drugs? This, of course, would point to the security services, and there is no evidence to support this line of argument.

Nevertheless, there are some curious questions hovering over the affair as discussed, not least of which is the alacrity with which the local doctor sectioned Dr Johnson while ignoring his wife. Why?

Then we have Dr Johnson in the psychiatric hospital for six weeks and there is no independent account of exactly what happened to him, who attended him, and what drugs and treatments he was given (the Dr's own account is limited and confusing as one would expect, certainly for the initial period).

What do we know of Dr Johnson? He was born into a middle class family in Bury, just outside Manchester, where his father was a GP. By his own account he had strong leanings towards libertarian socialism in his youth and early adult life. He found bourgeois life limiting and claustrophobic and when he qualified as a doctor he purchased a practice (these were pre-NHS days) in the working class district of Thornton Heath near Croydon. He stood for parliament as a Liberal candidate unsuccessfully on two occasions (once as an unofficial Liberal candidate), later switched to the Conservatives and was elected MP for Carlisle in 1954, a seat he retained in the 1959 general election. He stood again in 1964 as a 'Conservative and Independent' but lost.

In 1936 Dr Johnson and his first wife, Christiane (subsequently killed in the wartime bombing of London), travelled to Russia. He wanted to see how socialism was working. While in Moscow they attended several functions at the American embassy and Dr Johnson got to know Lieut-Colonel Philip Faymonville (1888-1962) and Tyler Kent (1911-1988) who both worked there. Faymonville was the first US military attaché to the Soviet Union and by all accounts had a very fine understanding of the Russians who considered him a friend. This did not sit well with the State Department and in 1943 Harry Hopkins

recalled and demoted him. Kent was then a cipher clerk and was later transferred to the London embassy where in 1940 he was convicted of spying for the Germans after a trial held in camera and given a seven year prison sentence.

A trip to Russia in 1936 might not be given a second thought by the secret state but by 1950 at the height of the Cold War it would be regarded in a very different light.

Dr Johnson was a strong and vociferous opponent of Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy and was known in Oxford as a 'Red' at the time.

During the war Dr Johnson knew the Marxist and former member of the Communist Party, Tom Wintringham (1898-1949), who had commanded the British Battalion of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. Wintringham at the time was running his Common Wealth Party.

Is there anything in this brief known history that would be of interest to the security services? Who knows?

Who was at the Marlborough Arms when this breakdown occurred? The only person Dr Johnson mentions by name is an Ivor who turns out to be Ivor Davies (1915-1986), an active member of the Liberal Party and, later, in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. There may have been other friends there who Dr Johnson chose not to name for fear of involving them in the episode. It would have been useful to see the hotel's Guest Book for the time but Ann McEwen, who has owned the hotel since 1956, says that it disappeared long ago.

More research needs to be done before a conclusion can be reached about this strange episode. I had hoped his records were still at the Warneford Hospital but the policy there is to destroy records if a patient is not re-admitted after twenty years.

However, there was someone who had his drink spiked by an unknown individual in 1950. It's the more widely known case of Frank Bigelow at a bar in San Francisco. Frank Bigelow? Yes, the character played by Edmond O'Brien in that acclaimed noir film, *D.O.A.* (directed by Rudolph Maté). Unlike Bigelow, Johnson survived.

### Postscript

Since writing the above I've had several conversations with Christopher Johnson, Donald Johnson's son, who confirmed that his father had no history of mental illness either before or after the 'episode' in 1950. He is as puzzled by the incident as his father was and has no idea who spiked him.

I've also had a chance of reading Donald Johnson's 1953 book, *The Hallucinogenic Drugs*. It does contain a detailed account of his

episode, pp. 27-32, and he further suggests the Pont-St-Esprit incident was down to LSD. The book is quite a remarkable study of these drugs and similar works would not be published until the druggy 1960s. He was a man ahead of his time in this area, not least of which for using the word *hallucinogenic*. The first occurrence of the word given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2004 edition) is 1952, the year before publication.

Johnson also mentions a lecture given by Professor Joel Elkes at Birmingham University in July 1953 on LSD drug experiments. Further and better particulars are needed on the good doctor.

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