

A Thorn in Their Side
The Hilda Murrell murder

Robert Green with Kate Dewes

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p/b, 40 NZ dollars

Once upon a time I used to know something about the Hilda Murrell case. At any rate, a piece about it without an author, therefore by me, is in *Lobster* 27. Seventeen years on from that piece, as I began reading Robert Green's account of the death of his aunt (who was a kind of surrogate mother, his biological mother dying when he was 19), I would summarise my knowledge thus: she was murdered; it might have been about her opposition to nuclear power; or, more likely, the connection to the author, who had been a naval officer with some connection to the sinking of the Argentine ship the *General Belgrano*; recently someone who was 16 years old at the time was convicted of the murder, basically on DNA evidence. Which is to say I had remembered so little that I was almost new to the story.

First, Green describes Hilda Murrell in some detail and takes us through his experience of the event and its immediate aftermath: the police investigation and the autopsy. He tells us that, on hearing of her death, he immediately suspected she had been 'rubbed out', as he puts it. This is very striking indeed. Not a politico, two years after leaving the Navy – and senior, too, a Commander – his response to hearing of the murder of his aunt isn't, 'Oh dear, I always knew living alone in rural isolation might go bad for her. I'll bet it's some burglary gone wrong', but 'They've killed her'. But who is 'they'?

Initially he assumed it was because of her opposition to the proposed nuclear expansion at Sizewell in Suffolk. This never struck me as likely. Woman writes paper opposing nuclear power station for public inquiry? We'd better go and burgle her house to find the paper. Don't think so. This is taking public inquiries far too seriously. No amount of absolutely killer objections to civil nuclear power (and there are many) was going to stop it, as long as this country was

committed to being a military nuclear power. 'Consultation' is not democracy; public inquiries are not Socratic dialogues; for the most part they are the necessary pantomimes to rubber-stamp decisions taken in Whitehall.

On the other hand, this was 1984: the Thatcher regime was still being challenged by the left; the Labour Party had not then embraced the 'Washington consensus'; the American banks had not completed their take-over of British economic thinking; the Cold War had been revived for the benefit of the American arms companies and opposition to American power and nuclear power was significant. The British secret state was more or less given its head by Mrs Thatcher, who believed – genuinely, as far as I can determine – that Britain really was facing a vast, Soviet-funded communist conspiracy, 'the enemy within'. And so when Green heard that Murrell was missing it wasn't so irrational that he should ring the Shropshire police and inform them that she had been writing a paper opposing Sizewell and that she 'may have made enemies'.

The other explanation for her death, that it was her connection to her nephew, was first mooted by the late Judith Cook in an article in the *New Statesman* in November 1984 and amplified by Tam Dalyell MP. Pursuing the Belgrano issue, and prompted by leaks from Clive Ponting at the MoD, Dalyell was misinformed by one of his sources (unidentified) about Green's actual role during the Falklands War and suggested in the Commons that Murrell had been killed because of her nephew.

1984 was a long time ago and we knew little about the British secret state then. Now we know enough to imagine how it would have reacted to the *possibility* that a former Commander in the RN with all kinds of secret knowledge about the war against Argentina, was talking to his anti-nuclear, peacenik aunt: full bore investigation; surveillance, phone-taps, mail intercepts, burglaries, harassment. *Whatever it takes*. And this would have begun before Murrell's death. Green notes on p. 48:

'I would have come under suspicion soon after Dalyell began his campaign in late 1982 when I was on leave before ending my Naval career. I was one of only two

officers in Northwood with access to top secret intelligence signals relating to the Belgrano sinking who had taken redundancy.'

The other officer was also burgled, his house ransacked and nothing taken. Even Francis Pym MP, a disaffected former member of the Thatcher cabinet, complained that his Commons office had been searched in the hunt for the leak to Tam Dalyell within the MoD. *Whatever it takes.*

As the Shropshire police inquiry failed to come up with a suspect, Green became the focal point of an unofficial inquiry as members of Murrell's network began reporting events indicating that they – and she – had been under some kind of surveillance/harassment; and the media began taking an interest in this unsolved murder with political overtones. Books and articles appeared and Green carried on accumulating evidence, some of which we knew about already and some we didn't. Every so often the media and Green tried to interest the police in what they have found. And got blanked. Telling the police that the spooks might be involved doesn't help. Either they suspect this themselves and know they can't go there, or they think the idea ridiculous and carry on with their normal procedures. Eventually, we are told, they interviewed 13,000 people.

Murrell's death was in the 'unsolved' file until DNA matches started to be used by police forces. DNA traces on Murrell's clothes led to a local man, Andrew George, who was 16 and in local authority care at the time; and he was eventually convicted in 2005 after a kind of confession. Case closed for the police with a big 'told you it was a local burglar' to their critics. But by this time Green had too much other evidence to believe this and discovered what seemed to him to be flaws in the DNA evidence.

Green's investigations eventually enabled him to document a large (and distinctly unsubtle) surveillance operation around Murrell's house in the days before her death, and he concluded that Andrew George and his brother wandered into the middle of this – they said they walked into the house because the door was open – and were essentially

framed by the perps, who abducted Murrell and took her away to be interrogated. Who the perps were is still not clear but the affidavit of Trina Guthrie,¹ to which Green refers, looks plausible. But those perps, named by Green, are dead, mad or in prison; and maybe there has been a big cleaning-up operation by persons unknown and the state is now covering-up the cover-up. Nothing short of a major reinvestigation by the state itself is going to get to the bottom of this; and no such reinvestigation is going to happen.

Green and his partner are living in New Zealand where the burglaries and surveillance continue. And no wonder! Now he is a *disaffected* former senior naval officer who knows God-knows-what and might talk. Green gives a little hint at the end of the book, noting on p. 196 in his long list of outstanding items in the case:

'From my experience as a Naval Intelligence officer with a top security clearance, MI5 would have discovered I knew there were things to hide over the Falklands War which were potentially more serious than the torpedoing of the General Belgrano.'

This is very good. The writing is clear, the story compelling. Green doesn't try to take the reader beyond the evidence he has and there are is a lot of (to me) new information. This is also an ugly picture of the unregulated power of the secret state in Britain at that time and how that felt when we and not the *jihadis* were 'the enemy within'.

Robin Ramsay

At time of writing no British publisher had been found and the book should be ordered, using paypal, at <www.hildamurrell.org>. It will cost around £20.

¹ On-line at <<http://hildamurrell.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/trina-affidavit1.pdf>>