

Misc reviews

These reviews of mine were written for other publications.

Robin Ramsay

Who killed Dag Hammarskjold?

The UN, the Cold War and white supremacy in Africa

Susan Williams

London: Hurst and Company, 2011, £20.00, h/b.

After travelling thousands of miles, visiting many libraries and archives, interviewing the surviving eyewitnesses and re-examining the previous inquiries, Susan Williams still cannot tell us who did kill US Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold, in 1961. Nor how it was done. Nor, for certain, that the plane crash in the Congo which killed him and everyone else on board, wasn't an accident. Hardly anyone still believes the official version of the incident – pilot error – not least because of the behaviour of the authorities after the event: a perfunctory official inquiry took place at which witnesses who saw things which didn't fit the official verdict of 'pilot error' were marginalised or ignored and photographs were doctored. It looks like the standard formula: conspiracy and cover-up.

The evidence assembled over the 50 years since can be construed to plausibly support a scenario in which the plane was brought down by a bomb, or was shot down by another aircraft. Many of the eyewitnesses near the scene reported seeing a second, smaller aircraft near Hammarskjold's plane before it crashed. And after the crash the authorities didn't exactly rush to find the accident site, perhaps to allow time for people to arrive at the scene to make sure everyone was dead. (Another witness reported a vehicle coming and going from the scene hours before the plane was officially 'found'.)

Culprits? Many interests had reason to want Hammarskjold dead: the French, dickering in Central Africa;

the Americans (CIA), obsessed with the red menace, who thought this meddling Swede was a bit pink; South Africa, afraid that the UN would encourage African nationalism in the region; the big companies (some British) in the Congo after its minerals. All of these trails are carefully explored by Williams and none lead to a conclusion.

We have a confession (a pilot says he shot the plane down by accident while trying to force it to change direction); two people who say they heard radio transmissions from an aircraft apparently attacking Hammarskjold's plane – not the 'accidental' confession; and documents (possibly faked) which appear to implicate an obscure South African organisation in planting a bomb on the plane. None of it adds up (which is probably the intent, at some level).

If there is no final answer, the search takes her on many interesting trails through imperialism and the cold war in Africa, the territory suggested by her subtitle. A fascinating story, nicely written, thoroughly documented and presented in a well produced book on good paper and with a decent binding. As history or as historical whodunit this is very good indeed.

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Casa Pia

The making of a modern European witch hunt

Richard Webster

The Orwell Press, £7.95 (UK) 2011, p/b

Webster's analysis of the British children's home pedophile panic of the 1980s and 90s, *The Secret of Bryn Estyn*, is one of the great solo investigations. Webster showed that the entire series of episodes, the result of a nation-wide 'trawling' by the police for pedophile networks preying on the residents of children's homes, was a fantasy: the result of bad journalism, public officials afraid of being blamed for ignoring a scandal, and lies told by some of the children who were motivated by

the police promise of large compensation for any abuse. Webster dismantles the whole thing and concludes that over a hundred wrongful convictions ensued.

This much smaller book (Bryn Estyn was 750 pages; this is 105) describes a similar outbreak, again in a group of municipal children's home, Casa Pia, this time in Portugal. But while in the British witch hunt the tales of children being abused by the Great and the Good never got beyond rumour, in Portugal a group of public figures – politicians and Portugal's best known television personality among them – were accused and eventually tried and convicted in 2010. It is as if Ken Livingstone and Terry Wogan (among others) were found guilty of being part of a homosexual pedophile ring in Bernado's homes in London.

Once again Webster shows that the evidence is false, the result of the same elements which caused the British version: amplification and invention by the media, the fear and incompetence of politicians, social workers and the prosecuting authorities; and the lies of some children (and one politician). The fact that the major witness and some of the children have recanted since the verdicts has not yet overcome the profound embarrassment of a huge section of Portugal's civil society at being swept along in the holy hunt for today's witches.

Much of Forteana takes place in the intersection of human perception, psychological need and religious belief, where answering the question 'What is going on here?' becomes more interesting as it gets more difficult; and little is currently more difficult to deal with than allegations of pedophilia. Webster shows that it is still possible to navigate through this foggy, booby-trapped interior landscape; but he also shows how difficult the journey becomes once the mob begins to gather.

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Intelligence Wars

American Secret History from Hitler to Al-Qaeda

Thomas Powers

New York Review Books, 2002, £16.99, h/b

Somewhere between an academic and a journalist, Thomas Powers is a commentator on recent American history and the role in it of the American intelligence services. He won a Pulitzer Prize for journalism in 1971. This is his first collection of essays. They began as book reviews, mostly for the *New York Review of Books*.

Powers is what the Americans call a 'liberal'; but he is a liberal who has written a biography of former CIA Director Richard Helms. Since big time spooks won't return your calls if you say nasty things about them, Powers doesn't.

These essays are mostly about the CIA. The problem is that there are two CIAs. There's the CIA which does analysis, gathers information and conducts espionage and counter-espionage. This is a central *intelligence* agency. But there's another one, which kills, bribes, corrupts, overthrows. This is not an intelligence agency: it is a kind of secret army. Powers writes eloquently and interestingly about the intelligence agency and barely mentions the heavy mob down the corridor.

This book's essays were published in the period 1977-2002 and cover subjects from WW2 onwards. What were the big stories about US intelligence in the period covered by this collection of book reviews? On my Top Ten List would be the persistent involvement of the CIA with the drug trade. In Vietnam the CIA's airline, Air America, transported opium for the Agency's local allies. In the 1980s the CIA got permission from the US Attorney General in to allow contributors to the privately-funded war against the government of Nicaragua to import cocaine into the US. For a minute fraction of their monthly earnings, cocaine dealers got a 'get out of jail' card from Uncle Sam. If the 'war on drugs' is one of America's leading domestic problems, the CIA has played a significant role in creating it.

But this subject is missing. Not a word. Cocaine and Air America are not in the index. Indeed, the ghastly series of atrocities that was US foreign policy in the 1980s in Central

America in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala – remember Blowtorch Bob, the Americans' proxy psychopath in El Salvador? – is missing. Around half a million dead Central Americans do not merit comment, apparently. The domestic political spin-off, the Iran-Contra scandal, is there *en passant*. As are many other things. His introduction tell us that the Kennedy assassination was a landmark: but of all the hundreds of books on that event published in the period covered by these essays, he reviews only two of the least significant, both of which recycle the absurd Oswald-did-it cover story. Powers may think the Kennedy assassination was a landmark but he hasn't bothered to understand it; and the other domestic assassinations of the period – King, Bobby Kennedy, the Black Panthers – are missing.

Powers writes very well, has many interesting things to say and is a pleasure to read; he just doesn't get close to the bone. The most important writers in Powers' field, Noam Chomsky and Peter Dale Scott, published many books during the period covered by Powers' essays: neither are mentioned, let alone reviewed. Powers devotes most of this book to the spy-vs-spy aspects of the espionage war with the Soviet Union. This is interesting but unimportant compared to – say – the CIA's role in the slaughter of half a million 'communists' in Indonesia in 1965. Powers is unwilling or unable to face the brute reality of America.

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Without Smoking Gun

*Was the death of Lt. Cmdr Will Pitzer part of the JFK
assassination cover-up conspiracy?'*

Ken Heiner

Walterville (Oregon): Trine Day, 2005, \$14.95 (US)
(www.trineday.com)

The Kennedy assassination literature is littered with sexy-looking fragments. This book is about one such. As the book's subtitle asks: 'Was the death of Lt.Cmdr Will Pitzer part of the

JFK assassination cover-up conspiracy?' Alas, after 130 inadequately sourced pages, 'Maybe' is the only possible response to the question.

Pitzer was present at the autopsy of President Kennedy. About the autopsy there are any number of unanswered questions. (Starting with: on whose body was the autopsy done? Yes, it may not have been JFK's.) But what Pitzer saw which made him uniquely dangerous isn't demonstrated by the author. A great many other people saw the autopsy and didn't die. The author thinks Pitzer's suicide was staged: but the evidence is not overwhelming.

The 'Fitzer question' exists because a retired US soldier, Dan Marvin, a US Army Special Forces officer, has said, and says again here, in the foreword, that in 1965 he was asked by a CIA officer if he would 'volunteer' to kill Fitzer. The CIA officer said Pitzer was a spy, a traitor. Marvin declined – but only because the CIA officer wanted it done in the US: Marvin wouldn't kill at home, only overseas. (To my knowledge Marvin is the first Special Forces officer to admit that people like him did conduct political assassinations.) When Fitzer apparently committed suicide a year later, Dan Marvin assumed that the CIA officer had found another 'volunteer'. This is the story of Marvin's suspicion. But even if we believe Marvin, the suicide-autopsy stories have not been stood-up.

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Counterknowledge

Damian Thompson

London: Atlantic Books, £12.99, 2008, h/b

The author's theme is given in his subtitle: 'How we surrendered to conspiracy theories, quack medicine, bogus science and fake history.' For anyone who has been reading the Bad Science column in *The Guardian*, for example, or who has read Francis Wheen's *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered The World*, much of this book will be familiar; and if you enjoy watching the usual suspects (complementary medicine and

'alternative' archaeology and history, for example) getting a good intellectual kicking, this will be rather enjoyable. (But When worked the same territory more thoroughly.)

But Thompson has some larger theses. He sees 'a significant lowering of standards of proof in society generally' and 'counterknowledge.....corrupting intellectual standards across a range of disciplines'. He blames both the left, which 'has helped to spread counterknowledge by insisting on the rights of ethnic, sexual and religious minorities to believe falsehoods that make them feel better about themselves', and the free market – 'the free market likes counterknowledge' (because it sells) – and 'the privatisation of knowledge caused by the explosion of intellectual choice'. Most of this is the consequence of the unregulated nature of the Internet; and this has one big danger for Thompson: 'its ability to carry the virus of counterknowledge to societies that are not protected by evidence-based methodologies'.

Clearly there is *something* to this. The Internet does not follow society's 'official' rankings of knowledge and any old nonsense can be listed by Google next to academic writing; and acquiring the ability to use 'evidence-based methodologies' is a more complex proposition than getting a C in one of today's devalued A levels. But how big is the danger? It is not yet clear to me that popular culture is that much crappier than it used to be. Quacks we have always had. People who can't think clearly we have always had. He may be right. We may be going to Hell in a post-modern handcart driven by morons who cannot distinguish between the website of the British Medical Journal and Loonytunes-healthcures.com. But the author is in a weak position to tell us so. For he is the editor-in-chief of the *Catholic Herald*, with a large axe to grind in many of the areas about which he has written, centrally the notion of intellectual authority; and, *qua* Catholic, his claims to rationality are difficult to take too seriously. Nonetheless this is an interesting and enjoyable polemic.



A Culture of Conspiracy
Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America

Michael Barkun

Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2003,
£16.95, p/b

Barkun is a professor of political science and this is a survey of some of the recent effusions from the American conspiracy theorists. He identifies three categories of conspiracy theory: event conspiracies, systemic conspiracies and super-conspiracies. The first category – of which the assassination of John F Kennedy in 1963 is the best example – is a big problem for Barkun. Such conspiracy theories are open to empirical investigation – Oswald's rifle could fire the shots or it couldn't; the Zapruder film has been doctored or it hasn't – and Barkun is not interested in whether or not conspiracy theories are true or false. So, despite giving us the category on page 6, he simply ignores his 'event conspiracies', concentrating on the other two. What follows is a history of the origins of American conspiracy theorising in the pre-WW2 period, followed by a survey – what he calls 'mapping', to make it sound grander – of some recent and contemporary theories, with an emphasis on UFO theories of the past 20 years and the way they have been incorporated into systemic and superconspiracies. So we got potted accounts of the nonsense spouted by the late William Cooper, David Icke, Val Valerian and a smattering of others.

Quite what the point is of this 'mapping' exercise is unclear to me other than to show the reader that people willing to believe nonsense in one field are willing to believe nonsense in others. Did I write 'nonsense'? Dear me: that's the fuddy-duddy, old true/false thing and Barkun steadfastly declines to evaluate the material, this 'stigmatized knowledge'. But nonsense most of this manifestly is and at the end of the book his unwillingness to use such a term struck me as being at least as strange as the territory he is

'mapping'.

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Real Enemies
Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy,
World War 1 to 9/11
Kathryn S. Olmsted
Oxford University Press, 2009, £12.99, p/b

If I was going to be generous I would say 'Close but no cigar' to Professor Olmsted's account. She has at any rate identified one of the central issues, expressed in her final paragraph:

'Since the first World War officials of the U.S. government have encouraged conspiracy theories, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes intentionally. They have engaged in conspiracies and used the cloak of national security to hide their actions from the American people. With cool calculation, they have promoted official conspiracy theories, sometimes demonstrably false ones, for their own purposes.....If Antigovernment conspiracy theories get the details wrong – and they often do – they get the basic issue right: it is the secret actions of the government that are the real enemies of democracy.'

But why should I be generous? She has the time, the academic tenure (at the University of California) and the access to the material and still hasn't done a half decent job.

For the first third of the book she guides us through the conspiracy theories generated by the US entry into WW1 (led by a president who promised not to do join the war and did so against the population's wishes) and WW2 (ditto) and into the Cold War and through the McCarthy period. So far so unexceptional.

But when we start moving through the sixties towards the present day, it all goes off the rails. Once again Oswald, Sirhan and Ray are presented as the assassins of the Kennedys and King. None of the more substantial research

which suggests they were innocent is even suggested. Olmsted says (p. 8) that her 'goal is not to prove or disprove the conspiracy theories discussed in this book'. But by her choice of which version of them to present she judges the theories. Had she presented the minutely documented and cautious views on JFK's death of – say – Professor Peter Dale Scott or former CIA officer John Newman, she could not have so blithely dismissed the JFK researchers as 'amateurs'.

Iran-Contra is sketched in and she flunks the central issue of the CIA's role in facilitating the wholesale importation of cocaine. She notes that CIA officers (she calls them 'agents') 'turned a blind eye' to the import of cocaine if the dealers contributed to the (illegal) war against Nicaragua. But it's worse (or better) than that. In 1982 the Agency actually went to the Attorney General of the United States to get his permission to ignore drug dealing. In effect the CIA, with government permission, gave cocaine dealers in Central and South America a 'get out of jail free' card: for a few thousand dollars of support for the contras they could fly their product in unhindered. And so the guns out and drugs back pattern began. Iran-Contra is all too frequently short-handed as weapons-for-hostages. More significantly it was guns-for-coke.

The MJ-12 theories about alien-government contact are presented but she forbears to tell her readers that the whole thing was cooked-up by the US Air Force. Rather than the more considered views of the better, academic or professional (pilots, engineers, architects) 9-11 sceptics, she devotes most of her attention to the Internet documentary, 'Loose Change', and the activities of the group of 9-11 widows, the so-called 'Jersey girls'. She quotes Hilary Clinton's 1998 reference to a 'vast right-wing conspiracy' against her husband without mentioning that the conspiracy has been documented in great detail and one of its leading members has written a memoir about his role in it. And so on.

Simply because she hasn't read the material, she gets some of the post 1963 stuff wrong; and her presentation of the other material is designed to reduce its impact. Her central thesis, that state conspiracies have produced conspiracy

theories, is true; but how much more oomph it would have carried had she been able to look the covert nature of American politics since the Cold War in the face.