

Classified

Secrecy and the state in modern Britain

Christopher Moran

Cambridge University Press, 2012, £22.00, hardback

Most of this is a decently written and entertaining account of the British state's attempts to enforce its 'everything official is secret' legislation – run through the House of Commons before WW1 during a panic about German espionage – and its subsequent modifications. Before WW2, in practice the state was willing to clobber little people – e.g. the novelist Compton MacKenzie who revealed a handful of secrets about MI6 in a book in the 1930s – but unwilling to do anything when prime minister Lloyd George took van loads of official (and thus secret) papers home while writing his memoirs. Later PMs, Eden, Churchill and Wilson followed this example.

After the war we get accounts of the familiar controversies surrounding the publication of the diaries of Richard Crossman, Harold Wilson's memoirs, the Philby 'third man' story and the ABC trial in the 1970s; a detailed account of the hassles generated by the trickle of books which began in the early 1960s about intelligence during WW2, notably the Bletchley Park 'ultra' story; and the farcical events around Peter Wright's *Spycatcher*. If the theme and the major incidents are familiar, much of the detail was new to me.

But within this is an 80 page section in which Moran tries to persuade us that in the 1950s and 60s the British press – essentially one man, the *Express's* Chapman Pincher – was much less docile about official secrecy than most accounts have suggested. Though the author's account of Pincher's 'scoops' in the first decade post-war was new to me and rather interesting, of this thesis I am not entirely persuaded. As Moran acknowledges, having established itself as the paper willing to risk publishing official secrets, the *Express*, in the shape of Pincher, began to get lots of scoops as bits of the British state began to leak material which would serve its interests or damage that of its rivals. The author tries to persuade us that Pincher was a pioneering investigative journalist in the official secrecy field when Pincher simply wined

and dined around Whitehall and was given the 'scoops'. (Moran is aware of this but understates it.) The state knew it was going on but did nothing; too many state factions were using him.

Moran then gives us an account of the 'D-notice affair' of 1967, in which Pincher played a part, which is inadequate: a large element in it, involving the America NSA, the real subject matter, is backgrounded; and he underplays the extent to which some of the participants in the drama, notably Pincher and D-notice Committee secretary Lohan, were motivated by hatred of the Labour government. Prime Minister Wilson knew this, which explains his (failed, disastrous) attempt to tackle them head-on. And it really wasn't, as he has it, 'the British Watergate': that epithet must surely go to the anti-Labour operations of the 1970s, about which he says nothing. The 80 pages on Pincher and the D-notice Affair feel like they're from another book.

There is one striking error. In his section on the publication of *The Quiet Canadian* (1962) about William Stephenson, Moran describes the wartime organisation in New York, British Security Co-ordination (BSC), of which Stephenson was head, as 'an umbrella organisation tasked with representing the interests of British secret services throughout North and South America' (p. 299). Had Moran even consulted the Wikipedia entry on BSC he would know this wasn't true. Actually tasked with destroying the American opposition to US entry into WW2, BSC was the biggest and, arguably, the most important covert operation mounted by the British state during WW2 and one of the biggest intelligence secrets.

Robin Ramsay