

Reading between the lies: Edward Jay Epstein and Lee Harvey Oswald's 'Historic Diary'

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Lee Oswald's 'Historic Diary' has always aroused suspicions. Written in Oswald's distinctive hand, and complete with his dyslexic traits, it ostensibly records his stay behind the Iron Curtain during his defection from the USA between 1959 and 1962. The very text itself is suspect, containing several anachronisms (references to US embassy staff not *in situ* on the dates of the diary entries in question, for example) and other details that just don't ring true at all.

Perhaps the loudest discordant note is in the entry commencing 4 January 1961, in which Oswald bemoans his (by Soviet standards rather luxurious) circumstances: 'The work is drap [sic], the money I get has nowhere to be spent. No nightclubs or bowling alleys, no places of recreation except the trade union dances. I have have [sic] had enough.' All this despite the author being renowned as a solitary introvert and bookworm: it simply reeks of propaganda meant for an American readership.

Of particular interest has been the question of when the Historic Diary manuscript was written. In the 1970s the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) set out to test the theory that the diary had been written more or less in one sitting, rather than in a truly episodic diary form. HSCA consulted three document analysts, who each declared that the manuscript – heavily stained with fingerprinting fluids during the FBI's 1963-64 investigation of Oswald's background – could not be examined clearly enough to permit a verdict on

that question.¹

However, one does not need any particular skill to see that the writing – rank after parallel rank of text, all in the same pen and the writing of roughly uniform size – was laid down almost in one pass. Where a slight ‘hump’ creeps into a line of text, it is echoed in subsequent lines, producing an effect not unlike a broad ripple across the page.²

Any doubt as to the time-span of the diary’s production is surely dispelled by just a casual examination of pages six and seven of the manuscript, in which one can clearly see the onset of fatigue in the writing hand. The regular horizontal lines of script begin to droop as each successive line approaches the right-hand edge of the page. Ultimately the effect is as though the text is almost sliding off the paper as the right-handed author gradually loses the will to move his stationary writing wrist across the page and allows the writing to curve around it instead.³ After this apparent exhaustion, the handwriting returns to normal on page eight, indicating that the writer took a break for his hand to recover then set to work again. However the fatigue visibly sets in again within a page or two.⁴

Since the dates and events recorded in the Historic Diary

1 This analysis was conducted as part of an attempt to discern whether any of Oswald’s writings were written by someone else. Findings and conclusions of Joseph P. McNally, David J. Purtell, and Charles C. Scott, HSCA Report, volume VIII, 1979. See <http://www.history-matters.com/archive/jfk/hasca/reportvols/vol8/html/HSCA_Vol8_0119a.htm>.

2 A full transcript of the Historic Diary, complete with Oswald’s dyslexic errors, was given in the Warren Report and accompanied by a photographic reproduction of each manuscript page. See <http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/jfk/wc/wcvols/wh16/pdf/WH16_CE_24.pdf>.

3 That Lee Oswald was right-handed was established beyond argument by a bizarre and prolonged line of questioning when his brother Robert first appeared before the Warren Commission on 20 February 1964. Robert Oswald was repeatedly questioned on whether Lee ever used his left hand either in preference to his right or ambidextrously, in an interrogation that verged on outright witness-badgering. See <http://www.history-matters.com/archive/jfk/wc/wcvols/wh1/html/WC_Vol1_0153a.htm>.

4 For a sharp, close-up photograph of the author’s struggles with page ten, see <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph339322/m1/1/med_res/>.

manuscript tally fairly well with Oswald's known activities during his defection, the prolonged bout of writing that produced the known manuscript must have involved copying an original version of the diary, which is now lost. We shall refer to this lost source as the Q-Diary for convenience.⁵

Enter Epstein

Under what circumstances did the Q-Diary get redrafted into the manuscript we know today?

This question exercised the mind of assassination researcher Edward Jay Epstein in the 1970s as he amassed the material that would form the basis for his 1978 *Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald*, wherein he indicates that Oswald was a KGB agent. Mr Epstein wrote a long piece, 'Reading Oswald's Hand', about his analysis of the Historic Diary manuscript for the magazine *Psychology Today* in April 1978. It is that article, which gives a wealth of background details not discussed in *Legend*, that forms the basis of this essay.⁶

In *Psychology Today* Mr Epstein records that he took advice from 'a former CIA research director' who helpfully 'mentioned that the agency had on occasion used a graphologist to help crack difficult cases'. Mr Epstein describes feeling 'startled' by the notion that the CIA believed in graphology. That feeling can only have been amplified as the CIA man explained how 'from an analysis of clandestine correspondence, the graphologist was able to determine that an anonymous letter writer was lame, and this quickly led to his identification'. Such a marvellous feat – surely beyond the capacity of even Sherlock Holmes – apparently inspired Mr Epstein to pursue the recommendation, and the next day he

⁵ With Q coming from the German word 'Quelle' meaning 'source', by analogy with the lost Q-Gospel manuscript that was evidently recycled into the biblical books of Matthew and Luke. HSCA decided that the Historic Diary manuscript was composed with reference to separate notes and jottings that were compiled into one. However this contradicts the fact that Marina Oswald specifically told HSCA that Oswald began keeping his diary shortly after arriving in the USSR.

⁶ If anyone would like an electronic scan of this article and/or the Lewinson interview, contact the editor.

paid a visit to Dr Thea Stein Lewinson.⁷

One trip to the National Archives later, with microscope in hand, Dr Lewinson's examination of the Historic Diary manuscript determined that, at the time he was writing, Oswald had been 'travelling on a large ship [.....] She said she could detect both wave motions and engine vibrations in the handwriting.'

For Mr Epstein, Dr Lewinson's 'amazing deductions [.....] were partly confirmed by Priscilla Johnson McMillan in her book *Marina and Lee*, which was based on some 14 years of sporadic interviews with Marina Oswald. Marina Oswald acknowledged that her husband had written these notes aboard the SS Maasdam, when they sailed in June [1962] from Europe to the United States.'

However, Dr Lewinson's 'amazing deductions' look slightly less amazing – and Mr Epstein himself a bit of a mug – when one takes into account the fact that *Marina and Lee* had been published a year before Mr Epstein's article appeared, thus giving Dr Lewinson ample time to learn of Marina's alleged acknowledgement and embroider her analysis accordingly.

More to the point, *Marina and Lee* does not claim that the Historic Diary manuscript was written on board the Maasdam. It records Marina's recollection that some of Oswald's notes (including his apparent script for an envisaged press conference upon disembarkation) were written at that time, with the author commenting that it is not possible to say what other documents Oswald might have written while at sea.⁸ This appears to be the grey area into which Dr Lewinson's 'discovery' was inserted. But the simple question remains: why would Oswald sit down and go through the exhausting slog of writing a dozen pages in longhand more or less at a single sitting, during a transatlantic journey lasting a spacious nine

⁷ Graphology is generally regarded as a pseudoscience these days, but that is no reason to wholly dismiss it as an art instead. In any case, the usefulness of graphology is not relevant here, what matters is what the pertinent individuals thought about graphology in 1978.

⁸ Priscilla McMillan, *Marina and Lee* (Glasgow: Collins, 1978) p. 156

days?⁹

Dr Lewinson's other revelations gleaned from studying Lee Oswald's handwriting are similarly unimpressive, although after her 'success' with the deduction about Oswald's seagoing penmanship it appears that Mr Epstein was all agog.

Of Oswald's 15 letters to family, written in Russia between July 1961 and May 1962, Dr Lewinson solemnly declared that the writer was 'a psychopathological person with a misdirected emotional development which resulted in a precarious, if not deficient, social adjustment.' This conclusive and unbiased determination was only trumped by Dr Lewinson's summary of her own findings when the awed Mr Epstein asked her whether Oswald's handwriting gave any clues as to a possible conspiracy. Dr Lewinson announced:

'In my opinion, Oswald needed support and guidance from others for carrying out a complex plan, such as his defection to the USSR and his redefection to the USA, or, for that matter, the assassination. Oswald was an easy target for manipulation and control by others. His loyalty could switch, depending on whom or where he could find support. Perhaps this word "support" is the key: it was the dynamic by which he functioned, those who supported him, had him.'

The long and the short of all of which is that the CIA had helpfully pointed Mr Epstein towards a graphologist who – conveniently for Mr Epstein's burgeoning KGB theories, stoked by his interviews with the artful James Angleton – almost magically detected traces of Soviet espionage in the Historic Diary manuscript.

The good doctor

At this stage, surely a closer look at Dr Lewinson herself is warranted. Dr Lewinson died on 5 September 2000, at the grand age of 93. She left behind no official biography but

⁹ Mr Epstein is inclined toward a notion that Pieter Didenko, a Russian waiter aboard the *Maasdam*, was somehow involved, but this vague suggestion is simply not supported by his source for the information, *Marina and Lee*.

issue 56, April 2001, of *Graphology* (the journal of the British Academy of Graphology) carried, as a memorial tribute, the transcript of a 1997 interview in which she had discussed her life and work, as well as a brief obituary notice. From this, the bare bones of a resumé can be assembled.

Having previously lived in the United States as a German immigrant (arriving in 1933) Dr Lewinson, it appears, then headed back across the Atlantic when war broke out and presented herself to Allied command in London. This resulted in her being assigned to the French resistance. When the war ended, she was returned to Germany between 1946 and 1959 in a post decided (in Dr Lewinson's own words) 'by the military government'. During this time, she 'worked in censorship, then in the library, then I did correspondence, etc.'

This is interesting because the Allied occupation of West Germany ended in May 1955, leaving four more years unaccounted for in Dr Lewinson's intelligence career pre-CIA. (Dr Lewinson remarks that she spent five years in Munich at some time during this 1946-59 period.) The apparent implication is that Dr Lewinson's relationship with the CIA arose in the late 1950s, which led to a change of employment in 1959, and at some stage a return to the USA.

How she came into contact with the CIA is not elaborated upon, but she was far from an independent authority occasionally consulted by the Agency. In response to a direct question asking her to say something about 'your work for the CIA', Dr Lewinson replied:

'I had a staff of 12 graphological technicians [.....] Almost every day I was given another national handwriting to analyse [.....] The so-called CIA-clients called and wanted a handwriting analysis done by Mrs Hall. My boss told them I had too much to do and inquired whether they couldn't make do with psychological analyses. They said, No, No, they wanted a graphological analysis.'

From this it appears that Dr Lewinson went under the operational alias 'Mrs Hall' and was the head of a dozen-strong team of analysts. She was also answerable herself to

a superior officer in her team's department – although it is unclear what department of the CIA that might have been. The 'so-called CIA-clients' are therefore officers who occasionally sought the use of Dr Lewinson's team when out 'in the field', seeking the supposed psychological insights offered by graphology.

Of particular interest is Dr Lewinson's reply to the question: 'Wasn't it also a way of testing to what extent spies would stand up under strain?' Dr Lewinson responded:

'Yes, that's right. I could tell people that, and they usually listened to me when I said: Don't send this one overseas, he wouldn't be able to hold up. Once they did send someone despite my warnings who then broke down. The CIA apologised to me afterwards.'

In other words, Dr Lewinson – no espionage rookie – was directly employed to analyse handwriting, including that of officers or agents potentially about to be sent overseas on undercover assignments. This was the situation in the year that Oswald defected to the USSR and, by her own chronology, Dr Lewinson would also have been on hand when he returned to the USA three years later.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the central question remained unanswered: why did Oswald rewrite what would be the final version of his Historic Diary at all?

As Mr Epstein related, while informing his readers of the background to his meetings with Dr Lewinson:

'[...T]he graphologist had apparently been able to determine at what points in their documents defectors to the United States from Eastern Europe were showing signs of tension. In fact, because of the usefulness of graphology, the CIA had made a practice out of *asking major defectors to write out their autobiographies in longhand.*' (emphasis added)

Quite so. Mr Epstein had the obvious answer within his grasp in 1978. What makes immediate sense here is Oswald, under

¹⁰ It's tempting to speculate that the instance of the unheeded warning alluded to by Dr Lewinson was that of Oswald himself, but there can be no confirmation of this tantalising possibility.

supervision, laboriously transcribing the Q-Diary by hand, entry by entry, at one sitting, perhaps with a break after the tired-looking entries on page seven, mentioned above, and occasionally adding in misremembered details when the thought occurred to him: hence a handful of anachronisms. The impetus behind this minor feat of endurance would obviously have been a CIA attempt to detect if Oswald had been recruited by the KGB while in the Soviet Union. This being the case, the Q-Diary itself would have been used for comparison against the 'new' manuscript and then filed – or more likely destroyed – soon after.

Epstein was duped

I wrote to Edward Jay Epstein to inform him of the new information about Dr Lewinson's relationship with the CIA, and to ask him whether he felt he had been manipulated by the Agency.

Mr Epstein responded: 'Not true. She admitted her CIA affiliation to me. See my book *Legend*.'

Dr Lewinson's name does not appear in the general index to the first edition of *Legend*. She is referred to precisely twice in the endnotes (note 16, Chapter V; and 'source notes', Chapter VIII) and the CIA is not mentioned on either occasion. There are four entries for 'handwriting analysis' in the general index, and neither the CIA nor Dr Lewinson is mentioned on any of the specified pages. When I put these facts to Mr Epstein, he did not respond.

I also asked Mr Epstein whether he had any comment to make on the possibility that part of Dr Lewinson's analysis was informed by reading *Marina and Lee*, or any comment on the fact that HSCA's document examiners had declared the Historic Diary manuscript ruined for the purposes of analysis. Again, Mr Epstein did not respond.

It is worth pausing to appreciate the audacity with which the CIA manoeuvred Mr Epstein into being duped by a CIA employee, who helpfully fed him what appears to be outright disinformation to bolster the author's emerging theories about

the KGB. Effectively, Mr Epstein was simply passed from one hand of the Agency to the other.

Mr Epstein's patent trust in the good faith of his contacts was admirable. What appears to be his failure to ask basic questions about their motivations and reliability could be regarded as somewhat less so.