

DIVINE RASCAL
On the Trail of LSD's Cosmic Courier, Michael Hollingshead
Andy Roberts
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Most decent sized UK towns in the 70s – and certainly any with a university or college – had a 'head' shop, or a hippie pub, or a rock music venue, or independent record shops where people like Michael Hollingshead could be encountered. The washed-up debris of the preceding decade, they were unreliable types who lived in shared houses or squats; were generally good company but borrowed money and never paid it back; did little to nothing and lived on what were then quite generous amounts of social security. Such people often had extraordinary personal histories, and interesting insights into recent events and well-known characters. They had skirted the fringes of fame but had either been unlucky, or were simply not good enough to grasp the opportunity and had then drifted down to wherever they landed – or 'crashed' to use the parlance of the time. This is the story of one of those people.

This book operates on two levels. The narrative in the foreground is that of another one-way ticket to a clearly sign-posted oblivion, the latest account of a 60s hanger-on and chancer who once circulated in hip circles, but is now tarnished and forgotten. Occasionally there are allusions to a parallel narrative in the background. As early as page 14 the author states

'. . . secret intelligence services, initially in America and Britain and latterly in former Iron Curtain countries, may have played a subtle but carefully-planned role in LSD's discovery and penetration of western culture. It is suggested these agencies introduced LSD into certain demographics for reasons ranging from observing how psychedelic drugs affect individuals to the intentional creation of the hippie counter culture with the aim of undermining and disrupting organised political opposition and radical social change.'

But we rarely head into such territory and in the next paragraph the author caveats this with 'However, it is extremely difficult to prove unequivocally that someone was a police informant or worked for the intelligence services, and almost impossible to prove that they weren't.'

Hollingshead was actually Michael Shinkfield, from Darlington. At 14 he was sent to an approved school for difficult (or as termed then) 'maladjusted' children, where he was found to have an extremely high IQ – in excess of 130. He did his national service in the RAF and, after he was discharged in 1951, obtained a passport and moved to Denmark. There he was employed at the University of Copenhagen, teaching English as a foreign language – quite a step up for a non-officer, non-graduate – and travelled extensively around Europe, visiting Finland, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and France. By 1956 he was presenting radio shows in Denmark and later wrote guide books for students studying abroad. In 1958 he quit Denmark and travelled via London to New York. Roberts points out that Shinkfield was a fluent speaker of Danish and Norwegian. He could not have learned these at school (they weren't on the curriculum in the 40s), so this may mean that he was taught them in the RAF.¹ But, if so, what was he doing in Denmark? Some sort of pro-NATO cultural work?

In the US he contacted Dr John Beresford, with whom he formed the Institute for British-American Cultural Exchange, about which almost nothing is known.² Shinkfield himself described it as 'a semi-official British propaganda agency in the field of international cultural relations'. As to what it did: over the next few years Beresford and Shinkfield cultivated the widest possible social circle and, in 1961, ordered a gram of LSD (enough for 5000 doses) from Sandoz Pharmaceuticals. Now calling himself Michael Hollingshead, Shinkfield mixed this in a jar of mayonnaise and met up with Timothy Leary. Prior to this Leary had only tried peyote and psilocybin and was impressed. Hollingshead moved in, Leary paying him a retainer of \$300 a month, equivalent in 2020 money to \$850 per week. Hollingshead introduced Leary to LSD, with jazz musicians Maynard Ferguson and Charlie Mingus, poet Allen Ginsberg and many others dropping by for the sessions.³ He also managed – bizarrely, given his lack of academic qualifications – to get a co-authorship credit in an article published by *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*.

And then he split, turning up in Jamaica in June 1962 with his latest girlfriend. He had already had a couple of marriages by then and a regular

¹ The Joint Services School for Linguists started at RAF Kidbrooke in 1949, teaching mainly Russian.

² For an account of Dr Beresford's life see https://stopthedrugwar.org/chronicle/2007/sep/28/memoriam_dr_john_beresford.

³ Leary was a lecturer in Clinical Psychology at the time, researching the uses that psychedelic mushrooms might have in reducing recidivism by convicted offenders.

stream of girlfriends, most with money, and mainly younger than him, feature in the narrative. Hollingshead never committed. In Jamaica he met Eileen Garrett, reputedly a medium, and head of the Parapsychology Foundation, who gave him \$3,000 and flew him to France. By April 1963 he was back in New York, where Beresford was running the Agora Scientific Trust, which had Victor Lowmes, Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* gopher, in tow as 'tantric adviser'. Beresford later believed that Hollingshead was responsible for his being placed under government surveillance; by the time he did, though, Hollingshead had moved back to Leary.

Leary was worried that he hadn't heard from Mary Pinchot Meyer, with whom, apparently, he had been planning to turn on President Kennedy to the wonders of LSD so that the Cold War could be de-escalated and mankind saved.⁴ Leary obtained a batch of LSD 'made available by courtesy of the Czech government laboratories in Prague' and sufficient for another 5000 doses and gave it to Hollingshead who – in keeping with his James Bond lifestyle – sailed to the UK on the RMS *Queen Elizabeth*.

On arrival he set up the World Psychedelic Centre (WPC) in Pont Street, Knightsbridge, with a couple of flaky old Etonians, Desmond O'Brien and Joe Mellen. Visitors – in a kind of the-gangs-all-here listing – included Robert Fraser, Paul McCartney, Victor Lowmes (again), Donovan, Eric Clapton, William Burroughs, Julie Felix, Roman Polanski, Sharon Tate, Anthony Blond and RD Laing. Also present, and possibly linking the foreground and background stories, were Victoria and Julian Ormsby-Gore and Michael Rainey. The Ormsby-Gores were key socialites and their sister Jane was the partner of Rainey, who was the proprietor of the trendy clothes shop Hung on You in the King's Road.⁵ Another Ormsby-Gore sibling, Alice, would later become engaged to Eric Clapton (although the two never married). Jane Ormsby-Gore had also, herself, previously been attached to Mick Jagger, who wrote the song 'Lady Jane' about her.

The Ormsby-Gores were the children of David Ormsby-Gore, UK

⁴ Mary Pinchot Meyer and her involvement with President Kennedy (she was his mistress 1961-1963) are discussed at <<https://spartacus-educational.com/JFKmeyerM.htm>>. In his autobiography, *Flashbacks*, Leary states that she told him in April 1962, 'I want to learn how to run an LSD session . . . I have this friend who's a very important man. He's impressed by what I've told him about my own LSD experiences and what other people have told him. He wants to try it himself.' Meyer's 1964 murder remains unsolved.

⁵ Michael Rainey ran a clothes shop, Hung on You, at 430 Kings Road SW10, described by music journalist Nik Cohn as 'simultaneously the last fling of dandyism and the first intimation of Hippie, of strangenesses to come'. The premises were later famous/notorious as the Vivienne Westwood/Malcolm McLaren boutique SEX.

Ambassador to the US 1961-1965, and an exceptionally close friend to JFK and his brothers – so close that he proposed marriage to the widowed Jacqueline Kennedy in 1968. What with Mary Pinchot Meyer passing through as well, should we reconsider Kennedy's 'Camelot' as a brief druggy/libertarian episode in US politics that was quickly snuffed out by much more powerful and conventional forces?

Hollingshead's conduct of the WPC was careless and, after a police raid in May 1966, he went to prison, being detained at Wormwood Scrubs where he claimed (some while later) to have met and taken acid with George Blake.⁶ LSD was banned in both the UK and US a few months later. On release, Hollingshead went to Norway and Denmark. He met Karl Eskelund, a prominent Danish travel writer he had known in the 50s, and millionaire Simon Spies, who gave him a huge amount of money to buy some LSD in London. Spies never saw him again, and never got his LSD. Instead, Hollingshead went to the US where, after a spell at Harvard as Assistant Curator of Scandinavian Acquisitions, he headed to San Francisco and appeared in Scott Bartlett's experimental film *A Trip to the Moon*.

Travelling via Fiji, Tonga and Nepal, he was back in the UK by 1970, alternating between a hippy commune in Scotland and a squat in Archway (15 Tremlett Grove N19). At which point he more or less got himself together. He staged an interactive event, *Changes 72*, at the Richard Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh. This is hardly remembered now, but sounds as if it were ahead of its time. The choice of venue, though, was unlucky. If it had been somewhere in London, New York or even Paris, his name might have been made, but . . . Edinburgh? He edited a poetry magazine and Anthony Blond published his autobiography, *The Man Who Turned on The World*. A band – The Friends of St Francis – released a single about his antics on Charisma. By the end of the 70s he was starting to get magazine articles and book reviews published in the US, including a review of John Marks's *The Search for the Manchurian Candidate*. He moved back to the US in 1980 where a film of his life (starring John Hurt and Jack Nicholson) was being planned by Thom Keyes, a sci-fi writer from his circle of UK hippie commune friends. It wasn't made. He got advances for books that weren't written and left for Bolivia in 1984 where he died, at 53, from a severe stomach infection.

Well written and well researched, this book could have done with

⁶ Blake escaped from prison in October 1966 so there is a 4 to 5 month overlap where they were both in Wormwood Scrubs and this event, although it is uncorroborated by any third party, might have been possible.

slightly more footnotes, appendices and context on the many names, places and background events mentioned in the text. The 'gold standard' for that type of biography – i.e. the life and times of an important but marginal figure (if that definition makes any sense) – might well be Kevin Coogan's *Dreamer of the Day*, a fabulous study of Francis Parker Yockey.⁷ This falls short of that, but as a portrait of a vanished person from a vanished era it works well, even if the author doesn't fully discuss whether or not Shinkfield/Hollingshead had an involvement with the intelligence services; and if he did, in what capacity. The evidence here isn't overwhelming, but on balance one would conclude he did. The most likely explanation that comes to mind is that his well above average intelligence was noted in the RAF. He was taught Danish and Norwegian and posted, after formal discharge, to Copenhagen where he worked in a cultural propaganda capacity – as indeed he admitted he continued to do in the US in the early 60s. The hanging around Leary (whom he introduced to LSD) and the various beautiful people in London may have been part of an exercise in seeing what effect LSD would have when introduced into the social and political counter-culture; specifically if it would disable activities that might otherwise threaten the state. We know that the CIA and the UK intelligence services did research of this type through the 50s and 60s (often on 'unwitting subjects')⁸ so Hollingshead's antics are not out of keeping with such an approach.

On the other hand, he was never officer material and clearly didn't operate as a spy or agent in any conventional sense. He was far too unreliable a character. As well as having a prodigious appetite for alcohol and a wide range of drugs, he was obviously a con-man, with an alarming interest in trepanning at one point.⁹ Because of this, Hollingshead has been written out of most accounts of the 60s and hardly figures in biographies of Leary and the other icons of the period. This book redresses that and Roberts, with *Strange Attractor*, allow him to take his place in history.

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Simon Matthews' book, Looking for a New England – UK Film, TV and Music 1975-1986, will be published by Oldcastle Books in 2021.

⁷ Reviewed in *Lobster* 39 <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/issue39.php>>.

⁸ British National Service men were given LSD in the 50s. See <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4745748.stm>> and <<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2005/jan/22/uknews>>.

⁹ On trepanning, the leading advocate of this in the UK was (and is) Joe Mellen. For his views see <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XICPuSlzBiU>>.

