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Spies at The *Observer* Part Two

Nearly three years ago Paul Lashmar wrote for the BJR about the surprising number of journalists who had been spies and worked at his old newspaper, The *Observer*. Since, more has come light.

Donald Trelford, the former editor of The *Observer*, has not lost his ability to surprise. It's not so long along he was 'Britain's oldest new father' and his recent autobiography has some visceral score-settling revelations about former colleagues that have clearly rankled with the 81 year old Fleet Street veteran for decades. Reading through this 420 page self-justification, my particular interest was piqued when he identifies a number of spies that had also worked for world's oldest Sunday newspaper. Most surprisingly, Trelford, who is also an emeritus Professor at Sheffield University, outs himself as secretly helping MI6 with 'small tasks' while an editor of a newspaper in Africa. In another chapter he reveals the then head of MI6, Maurice Oldfield's concern for the safety of the legendary foreign correspondent Gavin Young who Trelford deduced worked for MI6 at the same time as gallivanting across the world for The *Observer*. Later, Trelford ponders which intelligence agency his long time East European correspondent Lajos Lederer was working for and whether Middle East correspondent Patrick Seale worked with any spy agency. Finally, while explaining his controversial personal relationship with the paper's former owner, he suggests that Tiny Rowland may have worked for British intelligence.

In the mid-1960s, Donald Trelford, then 25, was sent to edit the *Nyasaland Times* by its owners, Thomson Newspapers to be "the youngster editor of a national newspaper in the world". There he became friendly with Ronnie Bloom, who was listed as a diplomat at the British High Commission, but who, says Trelford, 'was really MI6'. This friendship consolidated in the bar of Ryall's Hotel in the capital Zomba and the youthful editor agreed to do a 'few small tasks' for MI6. In late 1965, after the breakdown of talks with Harold Wilson, the nearby British colony of Southern Rhodesia made a 'unilateral declaration of independence' (UDI) from Britain under its Prime Minister Ian Smith. Rumours circulated of a British military invasion and it was big news in UK. Trelford was on the story paying a number of visits to Rhodesia's capital then called Salisbury (now Harare) in both as a journalist and to do those small unpaid tasks for MI6 (Bloom could not get into Rhodesia). These tasks, Trelford says, were 'usually dropping a letter through a gap left in the window of a parked car, or handing over a letter addressed to named individuals at different hotels'.

"I had no qualms about doing this, because I was strongly opposed to a right-wing coup in Salisbury designed exclude Africans from power – which is what UDI amounted to," he adds and that after each visit he gave Bloom a written account of what he had seen in Salisbury and how he judged the public mood. On his third trip he managed get to some inside information on the intent of the

Rhodesian military. "I blagged my way onto the Salisbury Club, using my out-of-date membership for the RAF Club in London and there I struck gold." He fell to drinking with Rhodesian military aircrew, two of them pilots. These colonial fliers took their former RAF pilot (now journalist and MI6 asset) to a nearby military club where they met more aircrew. Amid the pints and gins, Trelford endeavoured to find out how they would respond if British forces tried to retake the country.

Trelford then returned to Malawi and handed over a report to Bloom on the evening's carousing concluding that South Rhodesian forces would be very reluctant to fight the British. "I went way beyond my brief to suggest that if British planes were to fly under the radar over Umtali from an aircraft carrier they kept off the coast at Beira and land paratroopers in Cecil Square in the centre of Salisbury they would not be met by gunfire."

Sometime later Bloom told his Zomba drinking partner that the detailed pro-invasion memo had gone to MI6 HQ and it had then made its way to a Cabinet committee overseen by the Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart. The Labour Government did not act and UDI, and its white supremacy rule, remained until civil war broke out. In his book Trelford attacks Harold Wilson as pusillanimous, comparing him unfavourably with Margaret Thatcher and her later determination to retake the Falkland Islands. "I still believe that if Wilson had shown more guts in 1965, Smith's rebellion could have been snuffed out with minimal casualties and the country spared a vicious fifteen year civil war....."

Trelford got his quid pro quo from Bloom. On one occasion the Daily Mail asked Trelford to write a freelance piece about a breaking story in Lagos without realising it was the other side of the continent. Our intrepid freelance rang up Bloom who got his MI6 colleague in Nigeria to send him a sit rep from Lagos. Trelford filed the story to an unsuspecting Daily Mail. Freelance payments from the British press, Trelford says, made while in Africa helped him buy his first house back in London.

We move on from Zombo to the panelled walls and leather armchairs of the establishment's Garrick Club some years later where Donald Trelford, now editor *The Observer*, is having lunch. He describes how the owlish head of MI6 Sir Maurice Oldfield 'padded' up to his table and asked whether *The Observer* had any news of their foreign correspondent Gavin Young. "We heard he was swept overboard in a storm off the Celebes. If you get any news, you'll know where to find me."

Trelford had not yet heard of this latest Gavin drama, that had taken place in the wild seas off Sulawesi, but observes of Oldfield's request: "I could only assume that by 'we' he meant the he meant the Secret Intelligence Service and that Gavin belonged to it, or was at least well enough known to it for 'C' to care about his whereabouts."

On his return to the office *The Observer* editor was told that they had just had a telex to say that Gavin was shipwrecked but was ok. "I duly passed on the message to what I had to assume was his other employer that 'our' man was apparently safe."

On reading this story I looked up the cuttings for The *Observer's* once star foreign correspondent and later famous travel writer Young and indeed he had worked for MI6. He had joined the Sunday paper in 1960. I had also missed out John de St Jorre, another foreign correspondent, who according to the book, admitted to Trelford in later years that he had worked for MI6. Indeed de St Jorre, who is still writing, now says on his website that he worked for MI6 before joining The *Observer* in the 1960s.

Next on Donald's list of spies was the extraordinary character of Lajos Lederer, the paper's well-connected East European correspondent, of Hungarian birth, who was still there in my day, carrying into the office as Trelford puts it an "exotic atmosphere of intrigue, espionage and faintly hidden menace".

"The *Observer* journalists would have been amazed if they had known that Lajos, for over a decade, was my chief guide and mentor, a sort of angelic Rasputin in the newspaper's byzantine internal politics," says Trelford who survived 18 volatile years as editor. Trelford says, aside from spying for him in the office, that Lajos 'was certainly accused of being a spy' and speculates whether it could have been for Tito's regime, Charles de Gaulle, Israel or all three but can't provide any conclusive evidence. "If so he would not have been alone in David Astor's *Observer*," Trelford rightly muses and about the preponderance of spies. In a similar vein to Lajos, he wonders about the paper's former Middle East correspondent Patrick Seale, who he says "was widely assumed, rightly or wrong, to be engaged in intelligence, but it was never clear who he might have been working for."

In defence of his and other colleagues' involvement with MI6 he uses what you might call the Forsyth defence, that it was a patriotic duty for a journalist to work or help MI6. (In 2015, Forsyth, after years of silence, admitted that he had done tasks for MI6 for over twenty years.)

In his autobiography, Trelford says that to a modern journalist, working for a security service is total anathema, the betrayal of an honourable profession. "But this is a relatively recent attitude, only dating back to the demonisation of the CIA at the time of the Vietnam War. To the generation of Lederer, and indeed of David Astor, who had survived two world wars, working for your country was not a betrayal but a patriotic duty."

Being Trelford, his motive for telling us all this now seems largely to thumb his nose at those, like myself, that take a puritanical line that journalism is not interchangeable with spying.

That issue dealt with, Trelford then goes on to discuss the relationship between Tiny Rowland and British Intelligence. Tiny, then known by the surname Fuhrhop, had grown up in Germany, had a brief period as a Hitler Youth Troop leader, before coming to the UK in 1939. At one point, during the war while working as an ambulance driver, Rowland apparently applied to join MI6 but was turned down. Shortly afterwards he was interned and remained in prison for most of the war. Trelford has a theory 'based on a hint' that Tiny once gave him about serving British Intelligence interned. Trelford suggests Rowland was used to spy on German prisoners of war or Mosley's detained fascists. Trelford also

believes that entrepreneurial Tiny Rowland's many activities in Africa post war brought him into the sphere of MI6. During a visit to MI6 headquarters in the early 1990s, Trelford says he met the then 'C', then Sir Colin McColl. "Tiny's name came up in the conversation very quickly. Everyone round the table laughed when one of them says: 'Tiny knows more about Africa than we do. He's a hard man to keep up with.' Another man said: 'He has been useful to the Service in the past.' He gave no particulars and it didn't seem polite to ask."

All this adds to the growing list of *Observer* staff who worked for British intelligence at some point including David Astor, Terence Kilmartin, Wayland Young, Edward Crankshaw, Denis Bloodworth, Malcolm Muggeridge, Mark Arnold Foster and Mark Frankland. There were also regular contributors like G Paulton who had spy connections. In later life Frankland said he left MI6 after a year noting its "boyish tricks and thuggery, stealth and deceit" were not for him and he then became a journalist, and the same may apply to others identified. But as Trelford himself asks "do they ever leave?" and unlike good journalism there is a complete lack of transparency about all this, patriotic or otherwise. (For the list there is also the *sui generis* case of Kim Philby, who worked for MI6 but was a double agent for the KGB, and worked for both agencies while a correspondent for *The Observer* in the early 1960s, just before he defected to Moscow.)

I was able to quote in a recent academic paper the former journalist and good friend Christopher Roper who detailed how MI6 attempted to recruit him during the Cold War. He was based in Lima as the Reuters' Peru correspondent in the late 1960s where, like Trelford, he knew the then MI6 station chief, in this case John White. After his return to London, he received a vague letter offering the possibility of working for the Government. Curiosity aroused, he accepted an invitation to a meeting at Carlton House Terrace in London where he was offered the opportunity to work as an MI6 officer which he declined. He told me, fifty years on, that it was as clear then as now that journalists 'certainly shouldn't work for intelligence'

Despite Trelford's claim that the *cordon sanitaire* between journalism and spying is only recent, there were plenty of journalists who realised the long term costs a revolving door between the two professions would incur. Responding to a piece I wrote back in 1999 the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) condemned the practice. 'If spies pose as journalists some people will see journalists as legitimate targets', said the union's then general secretary, John Foster. There is now a long list of journalists who were killed, injured or kidnapped because their assailants took the view they were spies. One of them was *The Observer* freelance Farzad Bazoft was executed on Saddam Hussein's orders in 1990 after being accused of espionage and is the subject of an entire mournful chapter in Donald Trelford's autobiography.

Paul Lashmar was employed by *The Observer* from 1978-89

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