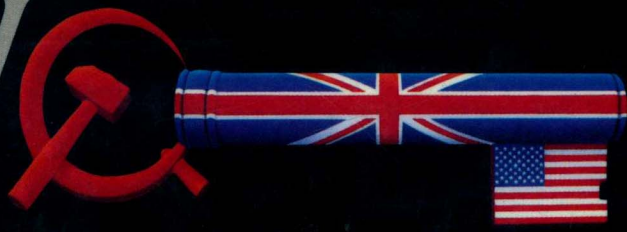
SPY CATCHER



The Candid Autobiography of a Senior Intelligence Officer

by

PETER WRIGHT

Former Assistant Director of MI5

WITH PAUL GREENGRASS

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Prologue

For years I had wondered what the last day would be like. In January 1976 after two decades in the top echelons of the British Security Service, MI5, it was time to rejoin the real world.

I emerged for the final time from Euston Road tube station. The winter sun shone brightly as I made my way down Gower Street toward Trafalgar Square. Fifty yards on I turned into the unmarked entrance to an anonymous office block. Tucked between an art college and a hospital stood the unlikely headquarters of British Counterespionage.

I showed my pass to the policeman standing discreetly in the reception alcove and took one of the specially programmed lifts which carry senior officers to the sixth-floor inner sanctum. I walked silently down the corridor to my room next to the Director-General's suite.

The offices were quiet. Far below I could hear the rumble of tube trains carrying commuters to the West End. I unlocked my door. In front of me stood the essential tools of the intelligence officer's trade—a desk, two telephones, one scrambled for outside calls, and to one side a large green metal safe with an oversized combination lock on the front. I hung up my coat and began mechanically to arrange my affairs. Having seen too many retired officers at cocktail parties loitering for scraps of news and gossip, I wanted to make a clean break. I was determined to make a new life for myself breeding horses out in Australia.

I turned the dials on the lock and swung open the heavy safe door. In front was a mass of Registry files stamped Top Secret, and behind them a neat stack of small combination boxes. Files: over the years I had drawn thousands. Now these were the last. Routine agent reports circulated routinely to me, the latest reports of the Computer Working Party, the latest analyses of Provisional IRA strength. Files always need

answers. I had none to give. The Russian Diplomat's file had been sent to me by a younger officer. Did I recognize him? Not really. It was a double-agent case which had been running off and on for years. Did I have any ideas? Not really. When you join the Service each case looks different. When you leave they all seem the same. I carefully initialed off the files and arranged for my secretary to take them to the Registry.

After lunch I set to work on the combination boxes, pulling them out from the back of the safe one by one. The first contained technical details of microphones and radio receivers—remnants of my time in the 1950s as MI5's first scientific officer. I arranged for the contents to be sent over to the Technical Department. An hour later the head of the Department came over to thank me. He was very much the modern government scientist: neat, cautious, and constantly in search of money.

"They were just odd things I kept," I said. "I don't suppose you'll have much use for them. It's all satellites now, isn't it?"

"Oh no," he replied. "I'll enjoy reading them." He looked a little embarrassed. He and I had never really got on. We came from different worlds. I was a glue, sticks, and rubber-band improviser from the war; he was a defense contractor. We shook hands and I went back to sorting out my safe.

The remaining boxes held papers gathered after I joined the Counter-espionage Department in 1964, when the search for spies in British Intelligence was at its most intense. The handwritten notes and typed aides-mémoire were packed with the universal currency of spying—lists of suspects and details of accusations, betrayals, and verdicts. Here, in the endless paper chase which began so clearly but ended in mystery, lay the threads of my career.

Eventually my secretary came in and handed me two blue books. "Your diaries," she said, and together we shredded them into the burn bag beside my desk until it was time for the final ritual.

I walked along to the Establishments Office. The duty officer handed me a file containing a list of my current secret indoctrinations. I began to sign off the small chits. Access to Signals Intelligence and Satellite Intelligence went first. Then I worked through the mass of case indoctrinations I held. The acquisition of secrets is such a personal thing; the loss of them is painfully bureaucratic. Each stroke of the pen shut the door a little farther. Within half an hour the secret world which had sustained me for years was closed off forever.

Toward dark I took a taxi over to MI5's old headquarters at Leconfield House in Mayfair. The organization was in the process of

moving to new offices at the top of Curzon Street, but the staff bar, the Pig and Eye Club, where my farewell party was due to be held, still remained in Leconfield House.

I went into the old building. Here, in the teak-inlaid corridors and corniced offices, Philby, Burgess, Maclean, and Blunt were hunted down. And here too we had fought MI5's most secret war over suspicions of an undiscovered mole at the heart of the Service. Our suspect was the former Director-General of MI5, Sir Roger Hollis, but we had never been able to prove it. Hollis's friends had bitterly resented the accusation and for ten long years both sides had feuded like medieval theologians, driven by instinct, passion, and prejudice.

One by one in the 1970s the protagonists had retired, until finally the move to new offices signaled the end of the war. But walking the corridors of Leconfield House I could still feel the physical sense of treachery, of pursuit, and the scent of the kill.

My party was a quiet affair. People said nice things. The Director-General, Sir Michael Hanley, made a pretty speech, and I received the customary cards with their handwritten farewell messages. Lord Clanmorris, the great MI5 agent runner, wrote that my departure was "a sad, sad, irreplaceable loss." He meant to the office. But the real loss was mine.

That night I slept in the flat on the top floor of the Gower Street offices, woken occasionally by the noise of trains arriving at Euston Station. Early the next morning I dressed, picked up my briefcase, empty for the first time, and walked down to the front door. I said goodbye to the policeman and stepped outside onto the street. My career was over. A sad, sad, irreplaceable loss.

1

It all began in 1949, on the kind of spring day that reminds you of winter. The rain drummed against the tin roof of the prefabricated laboratory at Great Baddow in Essex, where I was working as a Navy scientist attached to the Marconi Company. An oscilloscope throbbed in front of me like a headache. Scattered across the trestle table was a mass of scribbled calculations. It was not easy designing a radar system able to pick out a submarine periscope from amid the endless rolling wave clutter; I had been trying for years. The telephone rang. It was my father, Maurice Wright, the Marconi Engineer in Chief.

"Freddie Brundrett wants to see us," he said.

That was nothing new. Brundrett had been Chief of the Royal Naval Scientific Service and was now Chief Scientist of the Ministry of Defense; he had been taking a personal interest of late in the progress of the project. A decision was needed soon over whether to fund production of a prototype system. It would be expensive. Postwar defense research was an endless battle against financial attrition, and I prepared myself for another ill-tempered skirmish.

I welcomed the chance of talking to Brundrett direct. He was an old family friend; both my father and I had worked for him in Admiralty Research during the war. Perhaps, I thought, there might be the chance of a new job.

The following day we drove down to London in a steady drizzle and parked the car close to Brundrett's office in Storey's Gate. Whitehall looked gray and tired; the colonnades and statues seemed ill suited to a rapidly changing world. Clement Attlee was still promising "teeth and spectacles," but the winter had been hard and people grew restless under rationing. The euphoria of victory in 1945 had long since given way to sullen resentment.

We introduced ourselves to the neat secretary in Brundrett's outer office. The annex hummed in that subdued Whitehall way. We were not the first to arrive. I greeted a few familiar faces: scientists from the various Services' laboratories. It seemed a large turnout for a routine meeting, I thought. Two men I had never met detached themselves from the huddle.

"You must be the Wrights," said the shorter of the two abruptly. He spoke with a clipped military accent. "My name is Colonel Malcolm Cumming from the War Office, and this is my colleague Hugh Winterborn." Another stranger came over. "And this is John Henry, one of our friends from the Foreign Office." Cumming employed the curious code Whitehall uses to distinguish its secret servants. Whatever the meeting was about, I thought, it was unlikely to concern antisubmarine warfare; not with a contingent from MI5 and MI6 present. Brundrett appeared at the door of his office and invited us in.

His office, like his reputation, was vast. Giant sash windows and high ceilings completely dwarfed his desk. He showed us to the conference table, which had been carefully lined with ink blotters and decanters. Brundrett was a small, energetic man, one of that select band, along with Lindemann, Tizard, and Cockcroft, responsible for gearing Britain for the technical and scientific demands of fighting World War II. As Assistant Director of Scientific Research for the Admiralty, and later Deputy Director of the Royal Naval Scientific Service, he had been largely responsible for recruiting scientists into government service during the war. He was not especially gifted as a scientist, but he understood the vital role scientists could play. His policy was to promote youth wherever possible and because the Service chiefs trusted him he was able to get the resources necessary to enable them to perform at their best.

As a weary and diminished Britain girded herself to fight a new war in the late 1940s—the Cold War—Brundrett was the obvious choice to advise on how best to galvanize the scientific community once again. He was appointed Deputy Scientific Adviser to the Minister of Defense and succeeded Sir John Cockcroft as Scientific Adviser and Chairman of the Defense Research Policy Committee in 1954.

"Gentlemen," began Brundrett when we were seated. "It is quite clear to all of us, I think, that we are now in the midst of war and have been since events in Berlin last year."

Brundrett made it clear that the Russian blockade of Berlin and

the Western airlift which followed had made a profound impact on defense thinking.

"This war is going to be fought with spies, not soldiers, at least in the short term," he went on, "and I have been discussing where we stand with Sir Percy Sillitoe, the Director-General of the Security Service. To be frank," he concluded, "the situation is not good."

Brundrett crisply described the problem. It had become virtually impossible to run agents successfully behind the Iron Curtain, and there was a serious lack of intelligence about the intentions of the Soviet Union and her allies. Technical and scientific initiatives were needed to fill the gap.

"I have discussed the matter in outline with some of you here, Colonel Cumming from the Security Service and Peter Dixon representing MI6, and I have formed this committee to assess the options and initiate work at once. I have also suggested to Sir Percy that he obtain the services of a young scientist to help on the research side. I intend to submit the name of Peter Wright, whom some of you may know. He is currently attached to the Services Electronics Research Laboratory and he will go over on a part-time basis until we find out how much work needs doing."

Brundrett looked across at me. "You'll do that for us, won't you, Peter?"

Before I could reply he turned to my father. "We'll obviously need help from Marconi, G.M., so I have co-opted you onto this committee as well." (Father was always known in the Navy by the name that Marconi was known by in the old days.)

It was typical Brundrett, issuing invitations as if they were orders and bending the Whitehall machine thoroughly out of shape to get his way.

For the rest of the afternoon we discussed ideas. The MI5 and MI6 contingents were conspicuously silent and I assumed it was the natural reticence of the secret servant in the presence of outsiders. Each scientist gave an extempore synopsis of any research in his laboratory which might possibly have an intelligence application. Obviously a full-scale technical review of intelligence services requirements would take time, but it was clear that they urgently needed new techniques of eavesdropping which did not require entry to premises. Soviet security was so tight that the possibility of gaining entry, other than through party walls or when an embassy was being rebuilt, was remote. By teatime we had twenty suggestions of possible areas of fruitful research.

Brundrett instructed me to draw up a paper assessing them, and the meeting broke up.

As I was leaving, a man from the Post Office Technical Department, John Taylor, who had talked at some length during the meeting about post office work on listening devices, introduced himself. "We'll be working together on this," he said, as we exchanged telephone numbers. "I'll be in touch next week."

On the drive back to Great Baddow, Father and I discussed the meeting excitedly. It had been so gloriously unpredictable, in the way that Whitehall often was during the war and had so seldom been since. I was thrilled at the opportunity to escape from antisubmarine work; he because it continued the thread of secret intelligence which had run through the family for four and a half decades.

2

My father joined the Marconi Company from university in 1912, and began work as an engineer on an improved method of detecting radio signals. Together with Captain H. J. Round, he succeeded in developing a vacuum receiver which made the interception of long-range communications possible for the first time.

Two days before World War I began, he was working with these receivers in the old Marconi Laboratory at Hall Street, Chelmsford, when he realized he was picking up German naval signals. He took the first batch to the Marconi works manager, Andrew Gray, who was a personal friend of Captain Reggie Hall, the head of the Naval Intelligence Department.

Hall was the dominant figure in British Intelligence during World War I and was responsible for attacking German ciphers from the famous Admiralty Room 40. He arranged for my father to travel up to Liverpool Street Station on the footplate of a specially chartered locomotive. After studying the material he insisted Marconi release my father to build intercept and direction-finding stations for the Navy.

The central problem facing Naval Intelligence at the outbreak of World War I was how to detect the German High Seas Fleet putting to sea in time to enable the British Fleet, based at Scapa Flow, to intercept them. Naval Intelligence knew that when the German Fleet was quiescent she lay at the eastern end of the Kiel Canal. Hall believed it might be possible to detect the German Commander-in-Chief's wireless communications on board his flagship as they passed through the Kiel Canal into the North Sea.

My father set to work to design sufficiently sensitive equipment and eventually developed "aperiodic" direction-finding. This enabled

the bearing of the wanted signal to be accurately identified among the mass of other interfering signals. It took several years to become operational but eventually became an important weapon in the war against the U-boats. Even today all direction-finding equipment is "aperiodic."

In 1915, before the system was fully operational, my father suggested to Hall that the best solution was to locate a direction finder in Christiania (now Oslo). Norway at this time was neutral, but the British Embassy could not be used for fear of alerting the Germans, so Hall asked my father if he was prepared to go and run the station clandestinely for MI6. Within days he was on his way to Norway, posing as a commercial traveler trading in agricultural medicines. He set up in a small hotel in a side street in Christiania and rented an attic room high enough to rig direction-finding wireless without being conspicuous.

The MI6 station in the Embassy supplied him with communications and spare parts, but it was dangerous work. His radio equipment was bound to give him away eventually. He was not part of the diplomatic staff and would be denied if discovered. At best he faced internment for the rest of the war; at worst he risked the attentions of German Intelligence.

The operation ran successfully for six months, giving the Navy invaluable early warning of German Fleet intentions. Then one morning he came down to breakfast at his usual table. He looked casually across the street to see a new poster being pasted onto the wall opposite. It was his photograph with an offer of a reward for information leading to his arrest.

He had worked out his escape route with MI6 before the operation began. He quickly finished his breakfast, returned to his room, carefully packed his wireless equipment in its case and pushed it under the bed. He gathered up his travel documents, passport, and Naval identity card, leaving a substantial quantity of cash in the hope that it might encourage the hotelier to forget about him.

Rather than taking the road toward the Swedish coast which the Norwegian authorities would assume to be his most likely escape route, he set off to the southwest. Ten miles down the coast he sat down on a rock by the roadside. Sometime later, a British Naval lieutenant walked up to him and asked him who he was. Father identified himself and he was taken to a launch and ferried out to a waiting British destroyer.

Years later, when I was coming up for retirement, I tried to find the details of this operation in the MI6 files. I arranged with Sir Maurice

Oldfield, the then Chief of MI6, to spend the day in their Registry looking for the papers. But I could find nothing; the MI6 weeders had routinely destroyed all the records years before.

I was born in 1916 at my grandmother's house in Chesterfield, where my mother had gone to stay while my father was in Norway for MI6. There was a Zeppelin raid on nearby Sheffield that night, and I arrived very prematurely. There were no hospital beds available because of the pressure of the war, but my mother kept me alive with an improvised incubator of glass chemical jars and hot-water bottles.

After World War I my father rejoined the Marconi Company. He became a protégé of Marconi himself and was made Head of Research. We moved to a large house by the sea near Frinton. But this lasted only a few months, when we moved to a house on the outskirts of Chelmsford. The house often resembled a disused wireless factory. Radios in various states of disrepair and tin boxes filled with circuitry were hidden in every corner. My father was an intense, emotional, rather quick-tempered man—more of an artist than an engineer. As early as I can remember he used to take me out into the garden or onto the open fields above the Essex beaches to teach me the mysteries of wireless. He spent hours explaining valves and crystals and showed me how to delicately turn the dials of a set so that the random static suddenly became a clear signal. He taught me how to make my own experiments and I can still remember his pride when I demonstrated my crude skills to visiting guests like Sir Arthur Eddington and J. J. Thomson.

MI6 had close connections with the Marconi Company after World War I, and my father retained his contact with them. Marconi had a large marine division responsible for fitting and manning wireless in ships. It provided perfect cover for MI6, who would arrange with my father to have one of their officers placed as a wireless operator on a ship visiting an area in which they had an interest.

Admiral Hall was a visitor to the house; he and my father would disappear into the greenhouse together for hours at a time to discuss in private some new development. My father also knew Captain Mansfield Cumming, the first Chief of MI6. He admired Cumming greatly, for both his courage and his technical ability. He knew Captain Vernon Kell, the founder of MI5, much less well, but did not like him. As with Oxford and Cambridge, people are usually disposed either to MI5 or to MI6, and my father very definitely leaned in favor of MI6.

The Marconi Company during the 1920s was one of the most ex-

citing places in the world for a scientist to work. Marconi, known to everyone by his initials, "G.M.," was a superb picker of men, and had the courage to invest in his visions. His greatest success was to create the first shortwave radio beam system, and he can justly claim to have laid the foundations of modern communications. As with so many British achievements, it was done against the opposition of the British Government and the top scientists of the day.

Before World War I Britain decided that a long-wave radio system should be built to replace the cable system as the principal means of communication with the Empire. The decision was held in abeyance during the war. But Marconi believed it was possible to project short wavelength transmissions over vast distances using beams. The use of shortwave beams promised a greater volume of traffic at much higher speeds. Despite the advances in wireless made during the war, Marconi's vision was derided as "amateur science" by a Royal Commission in 1922. One member even concluded that radio was "a finished art."

Marconi issued a challenge. He offered to build, free of charge, any link across the world—provided the government would suspend long-wave development until the beam system had passed its trials, and provided they would adopt it if the trials were successful. The government agreed and specified the toughest contract they could devise. They asked for a link from Grimsby to Sydney, Australia, and demanded that it operate 250 words a minute over a twelve-hour period during the trials without using more than twenty kilowatts of power. Finally they demanded that the circuit be operational within twelve months.

These were awesome specifications. Radio was still in its infancy and little was known about generating power at stable frequencies. The project would have been impossible without the commitment of the Marconi technical team, consisting of my father, Captain H. J. Round, and C. S. Franklin. Marconi had a special talent for finding brilliant scientists who were largely self-taught. He found Franklin, for instance, trimming arc lamps in an Ipswich factory for a few shillings a week. Within a few years he rose to become the outstanding technical man in the company.

The proposed Grimsby-to-Sydney link astonished the rest of the radio communications industry. My father often described in later years walking down Broadway with David Sarnoff, the then head of RCA, when the project was at its height.

"Has Marconi gone mad?" asked Sarnoff. "This project will finish him. It'll never work."

Father replied: "G.M. and Franklin think it will."

"Well, you can kick my ass all the way down Broadway if it does," said Sarnoff.

Three months later the circuit was operational, on contract time. It worked twelve hours a day for seven days at 350 words a minute and was, in my view, one of the great technical achievements of this century. My father's only regret was that he never took the opportunity to kick Sarnoff's ass all the way down Broadway!

My youth was spent living through this great excitement. I suffered constantly through ill-health. I developed rickets and wore leg irons until practically into my teens. But there were compensations. Nearly every day when my father was at home he collected me from school and drove me to his laboratory. I would spend hours watching him and his assistants as the great race from Grimsby to Sydney unfolded. It taught me a lesson which stayed with me for life—that on the big issues the experts are very rarely right.

The 1930s opened hopefully for the Wright family. We scarcely noticed the growing worldwide financial crisis. I had joined Bishop's Stortford College, a small but hardily independent school, where I began to shine academically and finally threw off the ill-health which had dogged me since birth. I returned home for the summer holidays of 1931 having passed my school certificate with credits in all subjects. The following term I was due to join the University Group, with every expectation of a good scholarship to Oxford or Cambridge.

A week later my world disintegrated. One evening my father came home and broke the news that he and Franklin had both been sacked. It was days before he could even try to explain, and years before I understood what had happened.

In the late 1920s Marconi had merged with the Cable Companies in the belief that only by cooperation with them could wireless gain the investment necessary to ensure its emergence as the principal method of worldwide communications. But as the slump developed, wireless posed more and more of a threat to the cable interests. They were dominant in the new company and slashing cuts were made in wireless research and the installations of new systems. Marconi, old and sick, had retired to Italy, but not even an intervention from him could secure a change of heart in the new management. Franklin, my father, and many others were sacked. For the next decade long-distance wireless communication stagnated and we as a family passed into years of great hardship.

Within a few months my father slipped into the abyss of alcoholism. He could no longer afford to keep both his sons at school, and as I was older and already had my school certificate I was the one to leave. The trauma of those events brought back my ill-health and I was afflicted with a chronic stammer which rendered me at times virtually speechless. In the course of that short summer holiday I changed from a schoolboy with a secure future to a man with no future at all.

The decision to remove me from school and its effect on my health consumed my father with guilt. He drove himself to further drinking excesses. My mother coped as best she could, but bereft of status and income she gradually became isolated until the only visitors were the nurses called to restrain my father after a dangerously prolonged bout with the Scotch bottle.

Years later, when I began to search out for MI5 the well-born Englishmen who had become addicted to Communism in the 1930s, this period of my life came to fascinate me. They had enjoyed to the full the privileged background and education denied to me, while my family had suffered at the capricious hand of capitalism. I experienced at first hand the effects of slump and depression, yet it was they who turned to espionage. I became the hunter, and they the hunted.

In one sense the explanation was simple. It was 1932. I had no qualifications. I was fifteen, I needed a job, and I had little time for political philosophy. I advertised in the personal columns of *The Times* for any work. The first reply was from a woman named Margaret Leigh, who ran a small farm called "Achnadarroch" at Plockton near Wester Ross, Scotland. I became her farmhand. There was no pay, just board and lodgings. But amid the rolling hills and endless skies of Scotland, I gradually recovered from what had gone before, and in time discovered the greatest love of my life—agriculture.

Margaret Leigh was an idealist. She wanted to run her farm as a training ground for boys from London slums so that they could obtain employment as farm managers. In the event, the idea never took off, and she decided instead to write a novel about life on Achnadarroch; she wrote while I tended the farm. And at night, when I had finished the chores, she made me read aloud what she had written until slowly my stutter was mastered. The book was eventually published and became a great success under the title *Highland Homespun*.

In spring 1935 we were evicted from Achnadarroch by a landlord greedy for more rent than we could afford to pay. We moved to another, cheaper farm in Cornwall and our life went on much as before. My

ambition at this time was to become an agricultural scientist researching into food production techniques. But with my truncated formal education I could not hope to qualify for a scholarship. There were no grants in the 1930s. Eventually, with a little help from Margaret, some astute pig dealing of my own, and a useful family connection with the Master of St. Peter's College, Oxford, I was able to raise enough money to get a place at the School of Rural Economy. A year after I reached Oxford I married my wife, Lois. It was 1938. War was in the air. Like most young people we felt we might not have too long together.

By the time I went up to Oxford my father had begun to repair the damage of the previous six years of alcoholism. At my mother's instigation he had begun to work again at the Marconi Company as a consultant. And partly, I think, he was jolted by the realization that war was once more imminent. Anxious to help as he had in 1915, he approached Sir Frederick Brundrett in the Naval Scientific Service. Brundrett told him frankly that his reputation for alcoholism made a senior position impossible. Instead Brundrett offered him a post as an ordinary scientific officer for a trial period. I always admired my father tremendously for this. He sacrificed half what he was earning from the Marconi Company as a consultant to come and work at an experimental bench with scientists who were twenty years younger than he was. He made no issue of having once been the Marconi head of research. In a sense I think he was anxious to atone for the past; but he also genuinely believed that war was coming and that everyone had a duty to contribute.

His long experience scanning the ether ensured that his career soon flourished again. He was given charge of technical developments of the Y intercepts—the tactical intercepts of German Communications—and later he became Chief Scientist at the Admiralty Signals Establishment. Once again he was back in the Great Game, and he rediscovered his youth. By 1943 he was responsible for drawing up the signal plans for D-Day. It was a massive task. But after every working day he sat into the small hours with his wireless, listening to the chatter of Morse, logging and analyzing it ready for the next day. I often think he was at his happiest hunched over those sets, headphones clamped around his head, trying to make sense of the mysterious electronic universe.

At the outbreak of war the School of Rural Economy closed and my tutor, Scott Watson, became Chief Scientist at the Ministry of Agriculture, taking most of the staff with him to begin the vital task of preparing the country's food supplies. I was now the only member