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Best-Kept Secret: Canadian Intelligence in the Second World War by John Bryden [Review]

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BOOK REVIEWS

Best-Kept Secret: Canadian Secret Intelligence in the Second World War

John Bryden. *Best-Kept Secret: Canadian Secret Intelligence in the Second World War* (Toronto: Lester Publishing, 1993). 390 pages, \$28.95.

In the previous issue I discussed a recent book on transatlantic intelligence sharing during the Second World War - Bradley F. Smith's examination of British-American dealings over the sharing of cryptanalytic secrets. (*Canadian Military History*, Vol.3, No.1. (Spring 1994) pp.135-139.) Out of their complex and often difficult negotiations there evolved a relationship not only important in the war against Germany and Japan, but for peacetime too; the Ultra/Magic pacts built the foundation of a transatlantic intelligence charter that helped shape the world for the Cold War as well. Smith concentrates almost exclusively on the British and Americans, digging with remarkable success into the archives in London and especially Washington. But he never made it to Ottawa, and invariably omits the Canadian dimension to this triangular transatlantic story. John Bryden's book, *Best-Kept Secret: Canadian Secret Intelligence in the Second World War*, helps fill in that crucial gap.

Let me first get rid of several irritations with the book that will undoubtedly conspire to interfere with a fair response by other historians, too. Bryden, who since the last federal election is an M.P., describes himself as "an investigative historian, combining the sleuthing qualities of the journalist with the scholarly discipline of the academic." If only it were true. At heart Bryden is the journalist seeking the exclusive scoop and placing himself at the centre of his story. The first word in his book is the personal pronoun, and the first sentence of the Introduction portentously claims that, "This is a book of many secrets, disclosed here for the first time." Reach for the salt cellar, folks, because here we're in the land of media hype. It's difficult to get through the Introduction, indeed, without marvelling, or gagging, at the sheer chutzpah of an author who can write in all seriousness that "My research disclosed that Canada had been an intimate partner of Britain and the United States in almost all areas of secret intelligence during the Second World War." **His** research has revealed **that**? Where are all those historians who've written about Canada and the Second World War during the last fifty years? Or those in particular who've been digging in this patch for at least a decade? One braces oneself for the revelation that Mackenzie King was an eccentric, dog-loving bachelor who spoke to his dead mother during these critical years.

It's not just that Bryden pretends he's the only one to have ploughed the furrow, it's his lack of generosity in crediting others that sticks in the throat. In fact, for someone who claims to be an historian, he possesses a curiously cavalier attitude towards his fellows and a breathtaking methodology that would earn him a failing grade in graduate school. He tells us that early on he decided to reject all secondary sources which were not either autobiographical or backed up by archival records. Other than those dealing with wartime operational intelligence, he confesses, "that eliminated most British books on the subject." Christopher Andrew's book, *Secret Service*, he dismisses as "poorly documented" (at least it has a bibliography, unlike his own), and as for Hinsley's multi-volume official history of British wartime intelligence, Bryden considers it highly suspect, based as it is on sources the public cannot check. It's one thing to be sceptical, another to be totally cynical. In any case, Bryden prefers, wait for it, Peter Wright's *Spycatcher* (1987) as "the best book on the British secret services." What is scepticism worth here? As for Canadian books, he mentions only two as worthy of serious consideration: John Sawatsky's *Gouzenko: The Untold Story* (1984), and - should I be grateful? - my own *Camp X* (1986). Only one Canadian article meets his approval: Bill Robinson's "Fall and Rise of

Cryptanalysis in Canada" in the January 1992 issue of *Cryptologia* (an excellent article, incidentally). "There was not much else of value to choose from," sighs our author. No wonder he omits a bibliography.

Fortunately, the book fails to live down to its promise. In the end Bryden salvages something from the damage and produces a book that, read with care, tells a useful story about Canada's role in the wartime intelligence alliance. And as a journalist, he knows how to write something without triggering immediate narcolepsy.

He's certainly a good investigative digger in the archives, and he's used the Access to Information Act, and its U.S. equivalent, imaginatively and to good effect to provide us with much basic data about the origins, evolution and eventual demise of Canada's cryptanalytic agency, the Examination Unit. Cross-checking documents released in Ottawa and Washington, he has filled in many of the gaps deliberately blanked out by the screeners. So we learn of names and countries that our guardians would still prefer us not to know about. Of particular interest is the confirmation of how extensively Canada and its allies were eavesdropping on neutral and even Allied diplomatic traffic. Bryden does us a favour in reminding us how important these intercepts were. In the obsessive (and understandable) focus by scholars on military intercepts, non-military intercepts (not just diplomatic, but commercial too) have been neglected. They touch on some still sensitive issues such as spying on neutrals, and worse, on Allies. But here again Bryden goes overboard. This is not so new to specialists, and it's revealing that, ploughing through the footnotes, I found not a single reference to any article from

Intelligence and National Security or the *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence*, the two leading journals in the field.

The basic story he reveals is how the Examination Unit, once established, tried to find a useful role to play in inter-allied intelligence without getting swallowed up by the British or Americans and how, at the end of the war, Canadian decided to continue their efforts in order to assume some independent intelligence capacity rather than rely on the assessments of other powers. But for all his valiant efforts to praise Canada's achievements, it's difficult not to come away with the impression that we were indeed minor players in this field, outgunned, outmanoeuvred, and bypassed by our larger and more experienced partners. As an attempt at national boosterism it seems to me that this book fails.

It works far better if read along with the work of others in this field, and indeed Byron and Smith usefully complement each other. Both examine allied conferences on intelligence sharing, mostly held in or around Washington D.C., and by comparing their accounts one can get a far more rounded picture of what actually happened than each, individually, produces. To give but one example: Bradley Smith's account of the crucial and historic BRUSA agreement on the sharing of finished intelligence, formalised in Washington in June 1943, makes the point that it explicitly excluded diplomatic traffic, but that in practice British-American exchanges in this sphere were already taking place. Bryden helps complete the picture with an account of an earlier meeting at Arlington Hall, Virginia, in January 1943 to discuss the monitoring of diplomatic traffic - a meeting not

mentioned by Smith at all. This is helpful, and with Smith's broader and more coherent conceptual framework historians interested in this field can gain a great deal from the two books together.

There's a real irony here. Scholars are still replicating the selfsame national barriers they're so apt to expose and deplore when studying the behaviour of nation states during the Second World War. The story of inter-allied intelligence relations, indeed, allied relations of any kind, cannot be sensibly confined within the narrow blinkers most of us continue to wear. Inter-allied intelligence co-operation, so vital for the war effort, was only slowly achieved, and then not completely, as a result of hard work and grind in overcoming national jealousies, interests and insecurities. As historians, individually and as a profession, we still mostly work in some kind of nationalist paradigm that not only determines the questions we ask (not to mention the answers we give), but also isolates us from the work of scholars working on closely related subjects elsewhere, and makes genuine and fruitful co-operation difficult or impossible. In our perspectives and methods it seems that, living in our national boxes, we have learned little from the past.

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