

# England's spy in America

By John le Carre

Feb. 29, 1976

[ John le Carre. (Feb. 29, 1976). England's spy in America. The New York Times. Reproduced for educational purposes only. Fair Use relied upon. Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/02/29/archives/englands-spy-in-america-a-man-called-intrepid.html> ]



[ "He [Stephenson] was directly responsible, through President Roosevelt, for the founding of an American offensive intelligence service under his close friend General "Wild Bill" Donovan, who said handsomely. "**Bill Stephenson taught us all we ever knew about foreign intelligence.**"

See the article in its original context from February 29, 1976, Page 215 [Buy Reprints](#)

New York Times subscribers\* enjoy full access to TimesMachine—view over 150 years of New York Times journalism, as it originally appeared.

**SUBSCRIBE**

\*Does not include Crossword-only or Cooking-only subscribers.

## About the Archive

*This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.*

*Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems; we are continuing to work to improve these archived versions.*

*In Germany, Hitler was plotting to dominate the world, hut gentlemen of England were still abed. In the States, isolationism was rampant. Only a small hand of farsighted men and women led by a shunned Winston Churchill.. etc.. etc.. etc.*

*The Secret War. By William Stevenson. Illustrated. 468 pp. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. \$12.95.*

Britons love this kind of story, and perhaps Americans do too, I even wonder whether there is not buried in our unconscious spiritual selves a hope that our old heroes will rise again and save us now.

Let me say at once that the hero of William Stevenson's new book is an entirely worthy subject for this kind of treatment. Confusingly, he is the author's namesake: Sir William Stephenson, a Canadian millionaire industrialist of Scottish descent who became director of the combined British intelligence services in World War II and, till autumn 1942, when the British tacitly turned junior partner in the game, the de facto general of Anglo-American clandestine warfare against Hitler. **He was directly responsible, through President Roosevelt, for the founding of an American offensive intelligence service under his close friend General "Wild Bill" Donovan, who said handsomely. "Bill Stephenson taught us all we ever knew about foreign intelligence."** Donovan, was to Roosevelt what Stephenson was to Churchill, and separatists will not miss the point that in the secret war the job of saving Britain was entrusted to a Scottish Canadian and an Irish American.

Stephenson worked from New York, on the 35th and 36th floors of the International Building in Rockefeller Center, under the supposedly innocuous cover of "British Security Coordination" (B.S.C.). Few of the thousands who worked for him knew his name, let alone his face. His mission in the States was twofold. He was Churchill's secret intelligence ambassador to President Roosevelt, who, no thanks to Joseph Kennedy in London, supported Churchill's view of Hitler even when Churchill himself was in the wilderness. The United States possessed in those days no offensive intelligence service of its own, so Stephenson briefed the President from British sources. He was also a lobbyist who, having demonstrated the German threat, sued for still greater contributions of American aid, many of them secret and unauthorized. At the same time, Stephenson not only geared the various British intelligence agencies to the secret war in Europe, hut contrived to establish, train and run, on North American soil, a large, secret operational force which often filled the gap till Donovan's intelligence service (the O.S.S.) came along.

Intrepid is the code name given to Stephenson by Churchill when he sent him on his mission. To avoid confusion with the author, I will call him Intrepid here. He is today a spry 80. The code name is revealed in this book as something of a sensation, incidentally, I was all

the more amused, when looking up Sir William Stephenson in "Who's Who," to find that for the last 10 years or more his telegraphic address has been "Intrepid, Bermuda."

Nor is this the first time that Intrepid, despite a reputation for reticence, has backed into the limelight. The British historian H. Montgomery Hyde, like Stephenson a former member of B.S.C., published a capable biography of Intrepid in 1962 called in England "The Quiet Canadian" and in the United States "Room 3603." But Mr. Hyde knew a lot more than he was able to tell. The codebreaking triumphs that were achieved in a redbrick Victorian mansion at Bletchley Park (mainly through Enigma, the purloined Nazi cypher machine — the Ultra Secret) were still under wraps; Kim Philby was in Moscow, but the scope of his betrayal was not yet revealed; Sir John Masterman's account of the Double Cross System, the use of double agents, had not appeared; and the British Official Secrets Act was a force to be reckoned with. We are even asked to believe, in a short preface to the present volume, contributed by Charles Howard Ellis, a distinguished British intelligence officer now dead, that Mr. Hyde's book <was in fact put out to minimize the effects of Philby's defection by implying to the Russians that there was much that Philby didn't know. If that was the case, the logic of the action escapes me, and a few days ago I asked Mr. Hyde for his views. Was his book really just so much sand in the Russian eyes? If it was, he said, then the thing happened without his knowledge, but he recalled that the idea of a biography had certainly originated with Intrepid.

The new book is therefore a great deal richer in detail, even if, in order to enjoy it, you must put up with muddled organization, mawkishly "reconstructed" dialogues, a provocative, not to say patronizing habit of selfcensorship at crucial points, and a Dobbinlike adoration for the author's former chief, who one afternoon in New York, Mr. Stephenson would have us believe, slipped out and killed a traitorous British seaman with his bare hands.

Mr. Stephenson flings names of the famous at us — Noel Coward, P. G. Wodehouse, the Korda brothers, Greta Garbo, Roald Dahl, Leslie Howard and others—but he is not half so lavish in explaining just how they served the secret causes of B.S.C. He describes episodes that seem to have only the loosest connection with B.S.C., and he goes over a lot of ground that has been covered better elsewhere, by F. W. Winterbotham (in "The Ultra Secret"), by Masterman, and by Hyde. He also seems unaware that he is writing for post-Watergate man, who is neither as gullible nor starryeyed about the Great Game as Mr. Stephenson himself appears to be. It was the C.I.A. after all, not Intrepid, that seriously considered the second coming of Christ.

Nevertheless, my advice is to persevere. It's worth it. And since, with characteristic daring, Intrepid seems to have scooped up the B.S.C. files and carted them off to his island fastness, where he hands them out, or doesn't, according to his whim, it may be quite some while before we get that disinterested history which the man and the subject undoubtedly merit.

What a man! Even John Buchan, the author of “The 39 Steps” and other spy stories and a friend of Intrepid's, would have hesitated before equipping his secret service chief with such an armory of achievement. Born in Winnipeg in 1896, the son of a Scottish lumbermill owner, he showed from childhood a considerable mechanical talent and a passion for radio. In August 1914, when Germany invaded Europe, he left his bluechip Canadian college to join the Royal Canadian Engineer,. Gassed in France, he faked his medical history and signed with the Royal Flying Corps, who were losing men faster than they could recruit them. Flying instruction: five hours. As a flyer he lay low till one day his Sopwith Camel was shot up by a pair of German fighters. Annoyed. he took off and bagged two that same day and 18 more over the next few weeks. Net score, 26 planes and a cluster of French and British gallantry medals. Significantly, he also became known for “valuable and accurate information on enemy movements.” Wounded and iniprlsnned, he made a bold escape and promptly turned in an intelligence report on German prison camps that caught the eye of Admiral Hall, the hero of World War I codebreaking operations and reigning monarch of Whitehall's darker kingdoms. From then on, Intrepid was “on the books” and Hall never let him go.

After the war he became world amateur lightweight boxing champion (or was it European? —the records conflict) retiring undefeated in 1923. He won the King's Cup air race, invented the first device for sending photographs by radio and became a millionaire all before he was 30. He chose the perfect wife (American), was tough as nails, an exceptional shot, and had guilt feelings about having survived the war.

At Hall's suggestion he based himself in England, where he kept a wide and influential acquaintance, including Churchill and Beaverbrook, and sat in on Hall's “Focus” groups of good men and true, some of them frustrated professional intelligence men who could see the next war coming. (Was Kim Philby of the party? Whisper who dares.) His European business interests quickly showed him how, despite Versailles, German steel production had been turned over to arms and munitions. Intrepid assembled the information; Churchill, out of office, gave it the roar. Soon he had his own unofficial, private intelligence network, which provided him, for instance, with Hitler's plans for the conquest of Europe and the Empire. and for the rape of Czechoslovakia.

For some men, intelligence work is an extension of life's illusion. Intrepid took to it as the very element of war, as he had taken to radio, to boxing, to industry, to the air. As a scientist he understood the threat of atomic warfare and fixed his sights, well before the war, on the Norwegian lwayywater plants. As a radio expert, eoiles and cyphers were second nature to him. As an airman he anticipated the next air war, built plant's and encouraged Reginald Mitchell to complete the Spitfire fighter before he died. When the R.A.F. poohpoohed Frank Whittle's revolutionary jet engine, Intrepid found the cash to build it for him.

For the American reader in 1976, however, the most interesting sections cover Intrepid's relations with Roosevelt from 1940 to 1942. On becoming First Sea Lord in September 1939, Churchill found himself in an extraordinary dilemma. He was determined to bring F.D.R. into the family circle of those privy to Bletchley's codebreaking secrets and to acquaint him with the site of the German atomic threat, but Neville Chamberlain, still Britain's Prime Minister, was not "on the list," nor in any formal sense was his cabinet. Churchill went to King George VI (whose participation in secret matters comes as a touching surprise) and obtained royal consent to go ahead. Chamberlain went to his death uninformed of his country's hottest secrets. But F.D.R., without the knowledge, let alone the consent, of Congress or the American people, became joined to Britain by bonds of perilous complicity.

The implications of Roosevelt's position are startling even today. His head was on the British block. "I'm your biggest undercover agent," he reportedly said to Intrepid; there is no reason to suppose he was joking. F.D.R. had not the slightest doubt, then or later, that he ran fearful political and constitutional risks in the event of discovery. Indeed, it was partly in order to ease the strain of this situation that Intrepid urged on the President the formation of an offensive American intelligence agency, whose existence would loosen his dependence on British information.

Thus—ironically enough in the light of recent events—it might seriously be argued that the Central Intelligence Agency was born out of an urgent need to restore the Presidency to the Constitution; and that for want of such an agency at the time, a brave President was obliged to risk impeachment, both for waging secret war without the consent of his Government and for exposing his office to the wiles of a foreign power (Britain). Conversely, modern United States intelligence came to life at a time when, of necessity, the intelligence fraternity's inner circle paid not the smallest regard to the formal institutions of American democracy; at a time, indeed, when there was every reason for the President and his intimate advisers to regard Congress, State Department and military as unreliable or even hostile bodies. Small wonder if the C.I.A. since then has had a spot of bother, here and there, in finding its democratic feet; and the Presidency in dealing with its spics.

In a lugubrious foreword, Intrepid himself displays an ambivalent attitude to recent earthtremors in the spy world. The professionals are the bad guys, he suggests. He seems to be half way in for some kind of amateur spy club of the sort they ran in the war. Here, I fear, the great man shows his years. International Communism is our society's enemy all right, but a complex one, as recent Presidents have learned to their cost: and very prickly to get your hands on. Hitler, by comparison, was a wonderfully uncomplicated evil. Better all round, I'm afraid, if we leave the job with the pros and make very, very sure they stick to the rules. That way at least we know which cupboards to look in for the skeletons.

Intrepid had good friends and had enemies. He may be the last Intelligence Chief to be So lucky. A decent modesty behooves him to leave us to our agonizing.