

INTRODUCTION

BASIL THOMSON WAS an astonishing character and a dominant figure within the British intelligence community for a period that covered the First World War and the subsequent, and to a degree resultant, growth in support for left-wing ideas. As the head of Scotland Yard's Criminal Investigation Department, Thomson was in charge of hunting down German spies, in tandem with MI5, and, in the three years following the war, communist subversives within the trade unions. He dealt with some of the most interesting spies and traitors of that period, including the infamous female spy, Mata Hari, and Roger Casement, the Irish nationalist hanged for his attempt during the First World War to get the Germans to support a republican uprising.

Queer People, as this book was originally called (we have changed the title for obvious reasons), remains a rollicking read. Thomson provides a fascinating account of the main stories from that period. His dismissal of the various spy scares propagated by military intelligence and its successors in MI5 is entirely appropriate, albeit in part the result of an intense rivalry. Thomson held ambitions to take

ODD PEOPLE

charge of a security and intelligence service which would absorb MI5 under his control. Although it was largely MI5 which uncovered the German spies sent to Britain ahead of, and during, the First World War, it was Thomson who arrested and interrogated them. His account here reflects a number of the common prejudices of the period, including Thomson's reference to Casement's homosexuality as 'obsessions' which could only have been induced by some form of madness. Thomson supposedly cannot bring himself to use the word 'homosexual', although he unscrupulously used Casement's diaries to smear him ahead of the trial. Similarly, Thomson's description of his interview with Mata Hari is underlain by what seems now to be an incomprehensible degree of misogyny in his dismissal of the effectiveness of women as spies, particularly given the fact that their effectiveness in that area is now generally accepted, and used, by the world's intelligence services. Nevertheless, it was a common view which Thomson shared with his rivals in MI5.

It is inevitably the stories of the spies he met which generate interest, but Thomson was an extraordinarily colourful character in his own right. The son of a future Archbishop of York, he was educated at Eton and then went up to New College, Oxford. Suffering from severe depression, he quit after two terms and went to America to find a new life, before joining the colonial service and working in Fiji first, then Tonga and finally New Guinea. Thomson returned to Tonga in 1899 to successfully fight off a German attempt to gain control of the islands.

After a spell as governor of a number of prisons, including Dartmoor and Wormwood Scrubs, he was appointed to the post of Assistant Commissioner in charge of criminal investigations at Scotland Yard, becoming Director of Intelligence in 1919. His ambitions to take over MI5 operations, and his thoroughly justified dismissal

INTRODUCTION

of their effectiveness during that period, ensured him many enemies, as did his efforts to root out left-wing elements within the post-war labour movement. This ultimately brought about his downfall. He was sacked in 1921 on the insistence of Prime Minister Lloyd George, ostensibly because of IRA graffiti daubed on the walls of Chequers (the Prime Minister's newly acquired country residence) and brought to public disgrace by an incident in Hyde Park in 1925 involving the well-known prostitute Thelma de Lava. His friends insisted it was a sting aimed at discrediting him and there remain good grounds for suspecting they were right. He died in March 1939.

Michael Smith
Editor of the Dialogue Espionage Classics series
October 2014

PREFACE

MY READERS WILL be divided between those who think that I have not told enough, that I have told too much and that I had better have told nothing at all. I bow my head to them all.

The list of those to whom my thanks are due is too long to set out in a preface. It would include the names of my admirable staff, of sailors, soldiers and civilians of many countries besides our own in almost every walk of life and even of a few of our late enemies. No drama, no film story yet written has been so enthralling as our daily repertory on the dimly lighted stage set in a corner of the granite building in Westminster. In a century after we, with our war-weariness, are dead and gone, the Great War will be a quarry for tales of adventure, of high endeavour and of splendid achievement; when that time comes even some of the humbler actors who play their part in these pages may be seen through a haze of romance.

My thanks are due to Mr Milward R. K. Burge for permission to use his verses on the Hotel Majestic during the Peace Conference.

Basil Thomson
London, 1922