The Secret Life of Spies and Novelists: Herbert Dyce Murphy And Patrick White

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This article considers the 'secret life' of two Australians who worked for brief periods in intelligence and transmuted aspects of their experience in stories they subsequently told. Herbert Dyce Murphy's depictions of himself as a 'lady spy' in Europe in the early 1900s came to influence Australia's premier novelist Patrick White in the characterisation of his homosexual protagonist in White's novel The Twyborn Affair *(1979). For Dyce Murphy and White, as for W H Auden and others, the image of the spy held imaginative appeal as a way of projecting the necessary disguises, subterfuges and possibilities that a life of secrecy entailed.*

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Disguise, subterfuge and deception are features of espionage narratives, ancient and modern. Sun Tzu writes: 'Be subtle! Be subtle and use your spies for every kind of business'.[1] He observes that spying requires 'men of the highest mental caliber'.[2] Without spies an army is 'like a man without eyes or ears'.[3] An iconic example of subterfuge in espionage is the wooden horse of Troy. More recently, Kim Philby presented himself over a working lifetime as an outstanding intelligence officer for Britain while spying for the Soviet Union.[4]

To disguise oneself is typically to alter aspects of the appearance, sound or even smell of oneself to conceal identity; more positively perhaps, to misrepresent or cover up one's actual identity. (Philby's successful ploy was to disguise his communist sympathies by joining right-wing organisations and adopting conservative causes and manners.) Erving Goffman's sociological investigations in the 1950s and 60s showed that we are all actors when we interact with other humans.[5] If this is so, the concept of acting assumes a more complex and layered form in espionage contexts. To play a part is one thing: to live one's cover identity, often for years, is a difficult and emotionally wearing experience, as

John Le Carré acknowledges in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* when he reflects on the difficult deceptions of his protagonist Alec Leamas: [w]hile a confidence trickster, a play actor or a gambler can return from his performance to the ranks of his admirers, the secret agent enjoys no such relief'.[6]

This essay sets out to explore some of the kinds of disguise adopted, and the insights gained from the lives of spies and to raise some relevant questions about the fixedness or plasticity of human identity. The investigation begins with biography – and proceeds to a novel, demonstrating that fiction and fantasy operate in both these genres. The chief actors are Herbert Dyce Murphy, a man of adventure and a teller of tall tales about his exploits; the second is Patrick White, Australia's most decorated novelist. Both men worked for parts of their lives as spies and translated this experience in different ways in their later life and work. The two are linked by White's adaptation of parts of Murphy's reported experience in his novel *The Twyborn Affair*.[7]

Herbert Dyce Murphy's life has been traced by several biographers – notably Stephen Murray-Smith,[8] Moira Watson[9] and Heather Rossiter.[10] Murray-Smith describes Murphy as a 'gentleman adventurer and raconteur' who was born in 1879 and educated in Melbourne but visited Russia with his mother and subsequently attended Tonbridge School in Kent in 1894-95. As a schoolboy, Murphy went on three Arctic voyages with an uncle then made two trips to Australia on a sailing ship. Seafaring remained a lifelong passion. Murphy rejected his parents' wishes for him to work their pastoral properties in New South Wales and Queensland, evidently wanting more adventure than this offered. He studied at Oxford University in 1900 but appears not to have completed a degree there though he later styled himself MA(Oxon). In 1912, Murphy joined Mawson's Antarctic expedition in charge of the dogs and stores and earned a reputation as a teller of tall tales. In Adrian Caesar's *The White*, Murphy appears in the expedition as a reader, storyteller, and sewer – he is good with a needle and thread and reads books – who is contrasted with Mawson, the masculine man of action.[11]

Performing was Murphy's forté. In Oxford, he played the title role of Alcestis in Euripides' play performed without masks. Murray-Smith briskly describes the momentous outcome of Murphy's performance of Alcestis: 'After seeing Murphy perform a female role in a Greek play at Oxford, the director-general of military

intelligence recruited him for secret work'.[12] Moira Watson, who was one of the children who listened to Murphy's stories at Mount Martha near Melbourne in his later years, extends the story: '[Sir John] Ardagh [the head of British Military Intelligence] wanted Murphy to act as a spy on the Continent (mainly in France and Belgium) disguised as a woman. His salary was £12 a week and expenses, which he said was a princely sum in those days'.[13]

In the most recent biography of Murphy, Heather Rossiter indicates Murphy's physical suitability at age 21 for the role of a 'lady spy':

> Herbert Dyce Murphy was slight, inconspicuous, self-effacing: admirable characteristics for a spy. When he was recruited by British Military Intelligence in late 1900, his pink and white face was still beardless, his hair blond, his eyes bright blue, his voice high-pitched. Herbert's masculine achievements during his four years in the extremely demanding world of sailing and whaling denied the ambiguity suggested by his late-developing physical appearance.[14]

Rossiter adds that cross-dressing was common among men at sea and that the all-male environment at Oxford – women were not admitted until 1920 – encouraged men to play female roles in college plays.[15] Not all environments were so congenial, as Murphy discovered when he was turned down by Shackleton's 1908 Antarctic expedition for alleged 'effeminacy – a charge he always vigorously denied'.[16]

Murphy's cameo role as a spy became his most celebrated exploit. Accompanied by a retired sea captain with whom he shared a house (and presumably a bed though this is never explicitly stated by his biographer), Murphy spent some two months as Miss Edith Murphy travelling the Belgian National Railways and the French Northern Railway.[17] Posing as a female artist, 'Edith' Murphy collected information for British Military Intelligence. Moira Watson explains:

> [British Intelligence] needed somebody to make sketches of the coastline of France and Belgium, and also to look over both countries' rolling stock

> in case the railways were needed to transport British troops in time of war. The army spies they sent were soon uncovered and forced to leave immediately, but the beautiful Australian heiress, Miss Edith Murphy, in large hats and veils, long flowing gowns and parasols, and complete with chaperone [her veteran sea-captain] could travel around freely asking artless questions and poking at machinery with her parasol. She could also conceal a small camera in the folds of her long skirts, or, having an excellent memory and some training in engineering and planning, could retain measurements in her head so that she could draw up plans later.[18]

The main problem with such accounts is that they rely heavily on the retrospective versions by Murphy himself of these times – often adapted to the ears of his young, mainly female listeners. No corroborating records of Herbert Dyce Murphy's intelligence work seem to have been found by his biographers either at the Public Records Office in London or elsewhere.[19] There is no reason however to doubt Murphy's biographers' accounts of his work as a spy: he already held a territorial commission and was therefore highly recruitable for secret work. Moreover, Murphy later served in British military intelligence at the beginning of the First World War before retiring to Australia in 1916. Yet Murphy's stories have a distinctly literary air about them. The male spy in women's clothing recalls Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. It is also interesting to observe that Murphy was acquainted with John Buchan, the most popular spy novelist of the early twentieth century. While Buchan's protagonist, Richard Hannay, is a 'straight' male hero, he shares with Murphy's Edith the fate of an adventurous, buccaneering individual pitting his wits against the encroaching Europeans, especially the Germans.

The practice of disguise and its concomitant, mistaken identity are features both of espionage and of the literary arts from Shakespeare to Oscar Wilde. Critics and hoaxers of various kinds have also practised the art. For example, in July 2006 Patrick White's anagrammatic would-be cousin Wraith Picket suffered the indignity of having his chapter from '*Eye of the Cyclone'* rejected by ten Australian publishers and ignored by two others.[20] In thin disguise, Patrick White's chapter from *The Eye of the Storm* was as invisible as a spy in the night to these publishers and was consigned by them to the

rubbish bin of history. They rejected it. Perpetrated by the *Australian* newspaper, this hoax revealed among other things the complacent ignorance of a number of leading Australian publishers of the recent literary history of the country they inhabit. They saw neither literary merit nor a reading audience for White's work. From another perspective, one can imagine the ghost of Patrick White – his double or apparition or wraith – warming to the trick played on publishers, if not to the associated news of the dramatic decline of sales of his books in the twenty-first century.[21]

But Patrick White will have his day again as readers recognise his skill in revealing the many-sidedness of men and women. For example, Patrick White's free adaptation of elements of Herbert Dyce Murphy's tale of a 'lady spy' may revive interest for those who currently diminish or ignore White's prodigious creative powers. At the same time, we may see ways in which White's own autobiographical experience in wartime intelligence contributed to his creation of one of his most powerful novels *The Twyborn Affair* (1979). Central to this is the notion of necessary disguise – an essential element of a spy's repertoire.

The transmission of Murphy's story to Patrick White occurred in Melbourne. After winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973, White was elected Australian of the Year and visited Melbourne where he praised historian Manning Clark and also Barry Humphries, the creator of Edna Everage, whom White described as 'one of the most original, scintillating minds we have produced … if the mirror is sometimes a distorting one, isn't distortion the prerogative of art?'.[22] This praise of Humphries could almost be a disguised manifesto for *The Twyborn Affair*. During a visit to the Victorian National Gallery with the Labor Member of Parliament, Barry Jones, White was told about a painting, a person and a story that would trigger his writing of *The Twyborn Affair*, as David Marr observes:

> [White and Barry Jones] were standing in front of a pretty Edwardian study of figures reading in an arbour when Jones remarked that there was an interesting story behind the painting, for the fragile figure wearing a white dress and carrying a parasol was a man. White was interested. Jones told him something of the history of Herbert Dyce-Murphy, whom he had

> met as a very old man living out on Mornington Peninsula. White returned to the subject later as they drank at the Duke of Wellington and walked together in the Botanical Gardens. One detail he heard that day, an exchange he heard between Dyce Murphy and his mother, sowed the seed of *The Twyborn Affair*.
>
> ‘Are you my son Herbert?’ Mrs Murphy had asked this familiar figure in a dress.
>
> ‘No, I am your daughter, Edith’.
>
> ‘I’m so glad, I always wanted a daughter’.[23]

Varying accounts preceded this apparently authentic version of how White first encountered the story of Murphy, including the one that he first heard about Murphy from Stephen Murray-Smith rather than Jones; and that Murphy was not the figure represented in E. Phillip Fox’s painting *The Arbour* but another one *Al Fresco*.[24] It is clear however that White assimilated aspects of Murphy’s story and bent them towards his own personal and artistic obsessions. *The Twyborn Affair*, White conceded, is more explicitly autobiographical than the rest of his novels though there were still ‘plenty of disguises’.[25] ‘While homosexuals had appeared in many of his books’, Marr explains, ‘the closer they come to command the action the more heavily [White] disguised them. In *Twyborn*, a homosexual was to stand centre stage in clear sight for the first time’.[26]

This essay contends that ‘the spying game’, including Patrick White’s own involvement in it during the Second World War, contributes a fresh angle from which to view *The Twyborn Affair*. A neglected aspect of White’s experience, from the standpoint of the literary historian, is the period from 1940 to 1945 when he worked in Air Force intelligence in North Africa, the Middle East and Greece. As White’s perceptive biographer, David Marr, reminds us, ‘eavesdropping in the service of the Allies’ was one of White’s recurrent tasks.[27] Other tasks included the interrogation of prisoners, the interception of messages and in North Africa ‘picking over the corpses of enemy dead for maps, letters and diaries.[28] White also ‘compiled reports, collated clippings … and briefed the press’.[29] In Palestine in 1943, White ‘quizzed refugees about bombing targets in the towns they had abandoned in Germany’.[30] ‘Probably nothing came out of my

interrogations', White later commented in his ironic, self-dismissive manner, 'beyond insights of my own into the characters I came across, and sometimes friendship. But in one instance, the clues provided by one of my craziest and most persistent informants led to such a fruitful bombing raid that we received a letter of thanks and a senior officer in RAF Intelligence was decorated for his pains'.[31] During the war years, the major emotional impact on White seems to have been caused by his meeting with Manoly Lascaris, with its reunions and partings leading to their lifelong partnership after the war. Against this background, it is possible to see *The Twyborn Affair* as a novel triggered by the intriguing image of a 'lady spy' – Herbert Dyce Murphy in drag – which delves more deeply into the writer himself/herself as both novelist and spy than any of his previous work.

The Twyborn Affair begins on the verge of the First World War and ends with a German bombing raid on London in the Second World War in which the protagonist Eddie Twyborn is killed as he crosses the city to meet his estranged mother. If not exactly a series of quests, the novel presents characters setting out on adventures of the flesh or consciousness. White uses a quote from David Malouf as his first epigraph:

> What else should our lives be but a series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become.

Such transitions of consciousness are in this novel expedited by international crises, especially by wars, rumours of war and the deracination of individuals' lives. Suspicion of strangers is rife. In the build-up to the First World War, Joan and Curly Golson, Australian travellers in France, are suspected by local people of being spies. To Joan Golson though, 'They, the servants were the spies'.[32] In these circumstances of heightened fear and suspicion, and instant prejudice, letters and secrets become precious. White recognised this himself when he worked for the Red Cross Postal Message Scheme before he joined the Air Force early in the Second World War: he saw reading other people's letters as a way of keeping his novelist's instincts alive. Marr may overstate the case when he concludes that 'White fought a novelist's war',[33] but many of the

techniques of imaginative engagement and analysis required of the intelligence officer and the writer of novels are closely correlated. We see this in the loosely autobiographical figure of Eddie Twyborn. Eddie has earned himself a DSO through his action in the trenches but he remains throughout the novel a person who observes, feels and responds with sensitivity rather than reacting abruptly in the manner of the typical action hero. Afflicted with 'the disease of remembering', Eddie is a secret agent who has learnt to be subtle and indirect, as Sun Tzu advised, and is a master of disguise.

The gender and identity crises that have tended to dominate critical thinking about *The Twyborn Affair* may be seen to have deeper roots in the seething confusions of interwar Europe. The widely publicised adventures of W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood offer a window onto this world – in particular, Auden's romanticised images of the spy in Europe as a border-crosser in sexual and psychological as well as geographical ways. The infamous Cambridge spies who were recruited by the KGB in the interwar years – especially Blunt, Burgess and Maclean – also lived double lives both as spies and homosexuals.[34] In his novel about the League of Nations, *Grand Days*,[35] Frank Moorhouse too reveals the connection between sexual adaptability and spying in the setting of the Molly Club in interwar Geneva. While Patrick White does not embroil Eddie Twyborn in international espionage, as he himself had been, he invests him with some of the characteristics of the secret agent, revealing a remarkable capacity to penetrate surfaces and understand intuitively the secret desires and motives of others. While he may lack training in the tradecraft of spies, Eddie Twyborn in drag seems a highly recruitable figure for the secret service.

Carolyn Bliss has acutely observed that 'Eddie, who once described himself as a "pseudo-man-cum-crypto-woman" is neither simply a transvestite nor a homosexual, but rather a fluctuating transsexual who is comfortable as neither male nor female'.[36] Paradoxically, Eddie's failure to resolve these apparent conflicts enables him to recognise the rifts of personality in others and their need for disguises of various kinds. Eddie's x-ray vision of other people occurs in all three parts of *The Twyborn Affair* but is perhaps best illustrated in the concluding section when Eddie has taken control of his life and as Eadith Trist runs a high-class brothel in London. Here more than anywhere else, Eddie/Eadith is the spymaster/spymistress running her agents in the city of London who

report their intelligence back to her/him, their controller. Here we see Herbert Dyce Murphy transformed as Edith Murphy, the 'lady spy' at work in a different milieu. To those who meet her at Lady Ursula Untermayer's stately home 'Wardrobes', Mrs Eadith Trist is an international woman of mystery and they speculate whether this 'accredited brothel-keeper' is not really 'a guardsman, a nun, a German, a Colonial, or the tail end of a dream nobody ever succeeds in arresting'.[37]

Herbert Dyce Murphy's lightly told tale of his deception and disguise in the service of country is taken to audacious fictional heights in the third part of *The Twyborn Affair* by a deeply psychological tale of a voyeur: Eadith senses that 'she was fated never to enter the lives of others, except vicariously'.[38] Like Patrick White in Air Force Intelligence, she eavesdrops and intercepts others' messages principally in order to understand herself, having recognised that friendship and truth in relationships depend on 'the woman in a man and the man in a woman'.[39] Eadith remains somewhat aloof from the prostitutes who work for her: the 'whore mistress of Beckwith Street' seems 'as somber as a nun'.[40] Like Stephen Ward who employed Christine Keeler and other 'good-time girls' at parties at Cliveden in the 1960s,[41] Eddie/Eadith has access to the aristocrats and powerful politicians of the nervous 1930s. But unlike Ward, or indeed Keeler, Eadith is not caught up in political intrigues nor is pillow talk in her brothel especially attuned to state secrets. By contrast, the aristocratic country house called 'Wardrobes' does suggest Cliveden with its much darker and more ominous signs of secrets and deception, including perhaps espionage among a British ruling class in disarray in the first throes of war. Here, secrets are stored so that blackmail may begin. As Dennis Maufey in *The Twyborn Affair* remarks of 'Wardrobes': 'Open any of the cupboards and I'm sure you'll find even the skeletons are catalogued'.[42]

While 'the spying game' plays a more subdued role in *The Twyborn Affair* than it does in the 'tall tales' of Herbert Dyce Murphy, the reader is nevertheless drawn into a kind of intelligence exercise in White's novel, that involves the penetration of the protagonist's disguises and engagement in 'discovering the identity beneath the assumed persona'.[43] Unlike Shirley Hazzard who also worked for a time in intelligence (in Hong Kong in 1947-48), White prefers to seek truth or illumination not through deductive reasoning but from the underside of his characters' lives. The brothel in Beckwith Street

exemplifies the kind of setting in which secrets of the soul as well as society may occur. White wanted to present 'the worm's eye view of events'.[44] In the fate of Eddie Twyborn, White shows a man under deep cover as a woman who becomes the madam of a brothel in London on the verge of war. From the many selves he enters and the disguises he adopts, Eddie selects one and sets out to reconcile his mother to this person. His culminating moment before his death is when, as Eadith Trist, he presents himself to his mother as her daughter Eadith and she replies, 'I am so glad. I've always wanted a daughter'.[45] This is the line from Herbert Dyce Murphy's story that inseminated *The Twyborn Affair* and set on its course a novel that incorporates elements of the spy story genre but extends these into a drama of identity crisis with universal ramifications.

NOTES

[1] See Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Dallas Galvin (ed.) (New York, 2004), p.207.

[2] *Ibid.*, p.210.

[3] *Ibid.*, p.211.

[4] Of the many biographical studies of Philby, Phillip Knightley's *Philby: The Life and Views of the KGB Masterspy*, (London, 1989), shows the special benefit of its author's extensive interviews with Philby.

[5] See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (Harmondsworth, 1971) and *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Harmondsworth, 1961).

[6] John Le Carré *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* (London, 1963), p.149.

[7] Patrick White, *The Twyborn Affair* (London, 1979).

[8] Stephen Murray-Smith, 'Murphy, Herbert Dyce (1879-1971)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 10 (Carlton, Vic., 1986), pp.637-638

[9] Moira Watson, *The Spy Who Loved Children* (Carlton, Victoria, 1997).

[10] Heather Rossiter, *Lady Spy, Gentleman Explorer: The Life of Herbert Dyce Murphy* (Sydney, 2001).

[11] See Adrian Caesar, *The White* (Sydney, 1999).

[12] Murray-Smith, 'Murphy', p.637.

[13] Watson, *Spy Who Loved Children*, p.61.

[14] Rossiter, *Lady Spy, Gentleman Explorer*, p.78.

[15] *Ibid*., pp.78-9.

[16] Murray-Smith, 'Murphy', p.637.

[17] Rossiter, *Lady Spy, Gentleman Explorer*, p.87.

[18] Watson, *The Spy Who Loved Children*, p.62.

[19] *Ibid.*, p.63.

[20] See Jennifer Sexton, 'Empire Strikes Back', the *Australian*, Friday 11 August 2006, p.13.

[21] *Ibid*.

[22] David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (Sydney, 1991), p.544.

[23] *Ibid.*, p.545.

[24] *Ibid.*, p.562.

[25] *Ibid.*, p.563.

[26] *Ibid.*, p.581

[27] *Ibid.*, p.203.

[28] *Ibid.*, p.220.

[29] *Ibid.*, p.227.

[30] *Ibid.*, p.224.

[31] *Ibid*.

[32] White, *The Twyborn Affair*, p.67.

[33] Marr, p.203.

[34] See Cahal Milmo, 'The double agents with poetic licence to kill?' *Canberra Times* 3 March 2007, Forum B3. Auden and Burgess were friends and Auden was sought for questioning by MI5 over Burgess's disappearance from Britain in May 1951.

[35] Frank Moorhouse, *Grand Days*, (Chippendale, NSW, 1993).

[36] See Carolyn Bliss, *Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure* (London, 1986), p.168.

[37] *The Twyborn Affair*, p.379.

[38] *Ibid.*, p.374.

[39] *Ibid.*, p.360.

[40] *Ibid.*, p.383.

[41] See Christine Keeler, *The Truth at Last: My Story* (London, 2001).

[42] White, *The Twyborn Affair*, p.379.

[43] See John Colmer, *Patrick White* (London, 1984), p.79.

[44] David Marr (ed.), *Patrick White Letters* (Sydney, 1994), p.502.

[45] White, *The Twyborn Affair*, p.423.