

In the Service of Empire: Imperialism and the British Spy Thriller 1901–1914

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In the decade before the First World War, the British spy thriller was a cultural phenomenon drawing large and expectant readerships across all classes and catapulting its authors to prominence as spokesmen for then widely prevalent concerns about imperial strength, national power, and foreign espionage. Three hundred is a conservative estimate of the number of spy novels that went into print between 1901 and 1914. This article reflects upon some of the seminal publications from the period, including Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901), the tale of a streetwise orphan who trains as a spy and becomes embroiled in the intelligence duel on India's North-West Frontier; Erskine Childers's *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), the story of two gentleman yachtsmen who, cruising in the North Sea, stumble upon a secret German plot to invade England; and William le Queux's *Spies of the Kaiser* (1909), a dire prophecy of German espionage in advance of an invasion.

In recent years, intelligence historians have become increasingly interested in spy fiction. A

sure sign of this was a special issue of the journal, *Intelligence and National Security*, published in 2008, devoted entirely to “Spying in Film and Fiction.” Another indicator was the appearance in June 2009 of a supplemental edition of *Studies in Intelligence* in which practicing intelligence officers considered contemporary fiction in literature, film, and television.

Historiography on the subject has tended to hinge on the issue of realism or, put another way, the symbiosis between real spies and fictional spies. In keeping with the growing influence of “new literary historicism,” which seeks to demonstrate how both canonical literature and, perhaps even more so, “low” or “popular” works can be quarried for historical meaning, scholars like Allan Hepburn have scrutinized *Kim* and *The Riddle* to see whether they reconstitute the “intelligence cycle” with accuracy or even disclose tradecraft.¹

In *The Great Game: The Myths and Reality of Espionage*, Fred Hitz, a former inspector general of the Cen-

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the authors. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of an article's factual statements and interpretations.

eigners. More than that, the assumption of Kipling's India is that disorder itself is threatening, with no acknowledgement of the inherently undemocratic nature of British colonial rule that would make protest necessary. Indeed, there was a tendency to conflate protest and threat and to see all public expressions of anger and frustration as indicative of latent native fanaticism. The sheer size of the native population meant that public disorder had to be taken seriously, and, as a general rule, prompt coercive action was preferred. Muslims, particularly those astride the frontier, were not only well armed and numerous, but also saw the Afghan king as their natural leader or, in the extreme, the caliph of the Ottoman Empire.

When it came to the interception of nationalist agitators, who began a bombing and assassination campaign before the First World War, there was little enthusiasm to consider political reforms. There were, nevertheless, considerable efforts to track down the conspirators who were directing the terrorist campaign from outside India. As Popplewell has demonstrated, this led to the surveillance of agitating movements in Britain and Asia.³²

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their treachery toward the Empire and their dependence on foreign support. Instead, Kipling's idealized world is one where British intelligence is alert to the dangers, operates within the sub-strata of native society, and thwarts the conspirators to maintain British security.

Between 1899 and 1901, when Kipling was writing *Kim*, the Army in India was deployed to restore order no fewer than 69 times.³³ Concerns that the police were unreliable to the point of mutiny, not to mention the difficulties of gathering intelligence before an insurrection broke out, meant that the army was a vital instrument in maintaining order. Kipling was aware of its importance, and it is not purely coincidental that a British regiment features so prominently in *Kim*, making its presence felt by "showing the flag." Lord Roberts wrote:

We cannot afford to let our Native troops or the people of India doubt the maintenance of our supremacy, which they certainly would if we were to allow Russia to overrun Afghanistan. We must let it be clearly seen that we do not fear Russia, and that we are determined she shall not approach near enough to India to cause us serious trouble in our rear.³⁴

Roberts felt that the British people supported a robust imperial defense policy.³⁵ The press and the enfranchised public could be used as tools to exert pressure on governments that did not exhibit sufficient resolve. When Roberts returned from the South African War, he was convinced that Britain's voluntary system of enlistment was no longer adequate. He set up the National Service League and asked if Kipling would "write some stirring lines to bring home to the public the danger of allowing ourselves to be a second time in the same risky position without any properly trained troops in the country."³⁶

Kipling was an eager recruit. He was appalled by the fact that successive Liberal governments had neglected the army, given concessions to the Boers, and vacillated over Home Rule for Ireland, all of which were critical issues for the Empire. Kipling, however, did not share Roberts's faith in the British people and publicly criticized the complacency that seemed to prevail.

IV. "A Yachting Story with a Purpose": Erskine Childers and The Riddle of the Sands

The Edwardian period was a time of much anxiety and insecurity for the British Empire. Although the South African

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War (1899–1902) had been won, many Britons were left wondering how the British Army, numbering almost half a million soldiers, had taken nearly three years to defeat a guerrilla force of roughly 60,000 men. Goaded into the conflict by the British, the outnumbered Boers evoked great international sympathy, especially in France and Germany, leaving the British devoid of both friends and allies. In an age increasingly influenced by the doctrine of “survival of the fittest,” as much between nations as individuals, certain voices suggested that England had somehow “gone soft” and that the nation was deteriorating physically.

Testament to the public mood, in 1905 a pamphlet entitled “The Decline and Fall of the British Empire” sold 12,000 copies in just six months.³⁷ British eyes also began to turn nervously toward Germany, which, seeking its “place in the sun” commensurate with its rising industrial strength, determined that Weltpolitik was impossible without the construction of a High Seas Fleet. In challenging the Royal Navy's dominance of the seas, the traditional linchpin of national security, the kaiser undermined the wisdom of diplomatic isolation and provoked a state of profound unease concerning the vulnerability of

Britain's defensive preparations.

The air thick with fear and uncertainty, the spy novel began to reproach the authorities for what it saw as a chronic lack of preparedness against potential invasion. By any yardstick, the most famous spy thriller to address this was Erskine Childers's 1903 novel *The Riddle of the Sands*. Born into the governing class and schooled at Haileybury College, the principal Victorian training ground for Britain's colonial elite, Childers was a staunch imperialist.³⁸ “One can set no limits to the possibilities of an alliance of the English speaking races,” he declared in a letter to Basil Williams, a close friend, in October 1903.³⁹

The South African War deeply colored Childers's thinking. Shocked at the ease with which British forces had met their match at the hands of guerrillas, he developed an uncomfortable feeling that the Empire was in mortal danger. Childers became particularly concerned about Germany, which had made no secret of its sympathy for the Boers (even supplying armaments against the British troops). Like most of his fellow countrymen, he had been appalled by the notorious Kruger Telegram in 1896, a message sent by Kaiser Wilhelm II to the president of the South African Republic, con-

gratulating him on repelling the Jameson Raid, a sortie on the Transvaal from the British-controlled Cape Colony. Upon his return from the Boer War, therefore, he resolved himself to write a “yachting story, with a purpose.” That purpose was to rouse the government to the German threat.

The Riddle occupied much of Childers's time between spring 1901 and winter 1902. He was not, by his own admission, a naturally accomplished writer of fiction. It is clear from his correspondences that he felt constrained by the medium and hampered by the need to provide titillation and a sense of climax consistent with literary conventions. “I fear the story is beyond me,” he lamented in one letter.⁴⁰ “There is no sensation, only what it meant to be convincing fact,” he grieved in another.⁴¹

Having finally submitted the draft shortly before Christmas 1902, Childers's worst fears were soon confirmed, when his publisher, Reginald Smith of Smith, Elder & Co, returned the manuscript forthwith, asking for “drastic” revisions. “My experience is that people will not take their literary publications in the close pemmican fare which you adopt,” explained Smith.⁴² With its forensic attention to detail, particularly with respect to all things nautical, the draft had none of the “flow and glow” required of a work of fiction. While caviar to the yachting fraternity, Childers's extensive use of cartographic materials

(see below), delineating (with exact depth indications) the tellurian sands and archipelagos of the North Sea mudflats had the potential to “frighten the [general] reader away.” “The man who reads a work of imagination, however clearly founded on fact, is in a word not energetic,” tutored Smith.⁴³

What really troubled the publisher about the manuscript was the complete omission of women. As it stood, *The Riddle* was very much a man’s book. It is worth remembering that, by the dawn of the 20th century, women (ever more literate following advances in education provided for girls, but still largely excluded from the public sphere) had become big consumers of fiction. At Smith’s insistence, therefore, the narrative had to offer more in the way of feminine interests.

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Sailing was a school of character, saying much for the grit and hardihood of young Britons; maps demonstrated the ease with which England could be invaded; while lashings of romance undermined the serious message contained in the book. After much procrastination on both sides, a compromise was eventually reached: the maps would not be cut; the book would now have a “love interest.” “I was weak enough to spatchcock a girl into it and find her a horrible nuisance,” grumbled Erskine in a private letter.⁴⁴

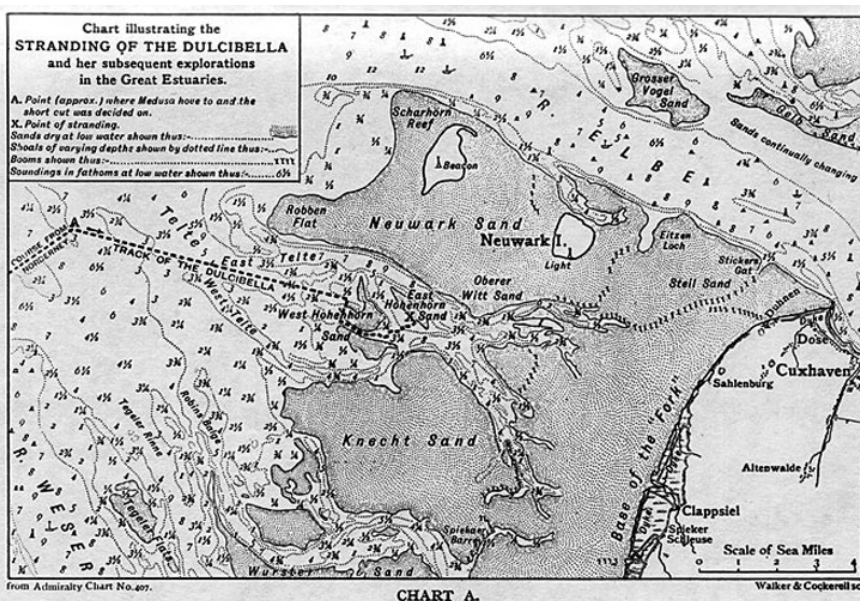
What then of the finished product? Drawing upon Childers’s own experiences of sailing along the German coast, which brought to the narrative an astonishing verisimilitude, *The Riddle* tells the story of two patriotic duffers—Messrs. Caruthers and Davies—embody-

ing all that was good about the adventurous English character, who lark about in a small seven-ton yacht—the *Dulcibella*—and explore islands in the North Sea.

When off the Frisian Islands duckshooting and incidentally fathoming the shoals and inlets thereabouts, they discover that the Germans, with the aid of an armada of shallow draft boats, plan to send troops across from the sand berms that adorn the lonely stretch of coast between Holland and Denmark. This was to be a surprise attack or, in military parlance, a coup de main.

With no shore defense on the East Anglian coast, and no British fleet permanently stationed in the North Sea, the two sailors conclude that a German D-Day, if launched, was bound to succeed. Mr. Davies points the finger of blame at Britain’s “blockheads of statesmen.”⁴⁵ At another point in the text, he gives the bluff declaration, “Those Admiralty chaps want waking up.”⁴⁶

Thankfully for England, the mudlark and his companion foil the fiendish plot before it is too late. As if the propagandist masquerading as fiction was not enough, Childers also provided a postscript, which reminded readers about the growing capacity of Germany as a sea power — “We have no North Sea naval base, no North Sea Fleet, and no North Sea policy”—and



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called for the creation of a volunteer naval reserve, one that would take advantage of the unquenchable enthusiasm and untapped talents of the cruising fraternity.

The published version of *The Riddle* is less acerbic in its treatment of Germany than the draft manuscript. Whereas the draft is embroidered with Germanophobia, describing its cafés as "hostile" and referring to the "unconquered spirit" and "iron heel of Prussia," the published copy rejects nationalist stereotyping and implies that Germany is motivated by Realpolitik rather than ruthlessness.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the kaiser banned the book, and it is said that when Childers next went sailing in the Baltic, German spies followed his movements.

The Riddle was published in May 1903. Sales of the book were more than ample to justify the effort put into it. By the end of the year, it had become a best seller, going through three editions, plus a cheap "penny-packet" issue that sold more than 100,000 copies. Reviewed widely in the press, the book was greeted with widespread critical acclaim. The *Westminster Gazette*, which, as its title indicates, sought to be influential in parliamentary circles, called it a "literary accomplishment of much force and originality"; an anonymous critic of

a "Boston Newspaper" rhapsodized: "The author must be credited with an ability amounting to genius, to be compared in the minutia of his art only to Defoe and in the resources and fertility of his imagination to Robert Louis Stephenson."⁴⁸

As England's newest literary sensation, Childers received many letters of congratulation. "You have written one of the most original books," gushed W.D. Howells. "Your people are wonderfully life-like. Davies is extraordinarily good, and the whole thing perfectly circumstanced."⁴⁹ In a particularly sycophantic letter, a Mr. K. Ward from Stanthorpe County Durham, wrote that the book had "stirred in me a fresh desire...to do a little for my country," prompting him to form a local rifle club presumably from where well-intentioned patriots could be trained to kill the "Boche."⁵⁰

Among Childers's more distinguished admirers was Kipling, who, from the 1890s on, was repeatedly denouncing his countrymen in the press for failing to prepare or take a firm stand against the "shameless Hun." As well as excellent sales and reviews, *The Riddle* brought Childers, an eligible bachelor, to the front ranks of London's social scene.

The book's success was no fluke. Childers's skill as an author was to sense and to seize on glib contemporary talk about imperial collapse and foreign threats. The timing of its publication was in one sense brilliantly done to make maximum impact of the fallout from the South African War, when questions about national strength and efficiency, as well as the wisdom of diplomatic isolation, dominated both public and official discourse.

The book's release also coincided with the first wave of real public anxiety about Germany, with whom relations had soured markedly. By 1903, many island-folk were concerned that the Royal Navy was about to lose its mastery of the seas, thus increasing the possibility of invasion. Only a year earlier, in a speech to the Reichstag, Vice Admiral Livonius of the German navy had boldly pronounced:

Carrying out a landing on the English coast has been greatly increased by the introduction of steam power. The possibility of steaming by night with lights covered in order to escape the enemy's observation, have much reduced the advantages of England's insular position.⁵¹

Under Kaiser Wilhelm II, Germany had begun launching its pre-dreadnought fleet, some of the largest and fastest warships ever built. A popular image was that of the kaiser—

disguise, he continued to flood government departments with reports of “German officers in mufti.”

By the war’s end, however, evidence suggests that the authorities had finally wised up to le Queux’s febrile imagination. In August 1914, paranoid that the Germans were out to get him on account of his counterintelligence work and involvement with M05, he wrote to the Metropolitan Police requesting that local “Bobbies” give him and his family special protection:

Owing to the fact that for a number of years I have interested myself in the tracing and identification of German spies in England and in laying them before the proper authorities...threats have been conveyed to me that the gentry in question intend to do me bodily harm!

A reply was sent to the effect that the local police would make a “short beat” near his house. Not satisfied with this, le Queux took to carrying a pistol before protesting to Edward Henry, commissioner of the Metropolitan Police: “Although I continue to be threatened and am unfortunately a ‘marked man’ by Germans, I am being afforded no special protection whatsoever.”⁸⁶

Over the next few months, his tactic was to engulf the local station sergeant with reports of German intruders infiltrating his premises, only to be driven

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off by guard dogs. On 17 November, he wrote, “On two occasions...strangers have been prowling about my property with evil intent, presumably to inquire about my private Wireless station, or, possibly, to make an attempt upon myself and my family.”⁸⁷ Henry nevertheless saw him as “not a person to be taken seriously” and refused to fulfill his request.⁸⁸

In a final desperate bid to secure protection, le Queux sent a series of fawning letters to Patrick Quinn of Scotland Yard’s Special Branch, promising that, if Quinn were willing, le Queux would “urge certain influential gentlemen” to recommend that [Quinn] should be placed in supreme command of the whole department and given complete powers, with “no superior authority.”⁸⁹ The “influential gentlemen” whose ears the fabulist apparently had included Lord Leith of Fyvie, Lord Portsmouth, Holcombe Ingleby, and Cecil Harmsworth—men who believed that present police methods for dealing with enemy aliens were insufficient and ineffective.

By now, however, no one was going to be taken in by le Queux’s anxieties. The Metropolitan Police severed all contact with him, even issuing a circular, entitled “Mr. Le Queux,” warning officials that he should be “viewed in the proper perspective.”⁹⁰ According to the circular, this was a

man whose attention had been so long centered on German spies that the subject had become a “monomania with him.” Although le Queux, in his own eyes, was a “person of importance and dangerous to the enemy,” to the establishment he had now come to be seen as a charlatan.

Conclusion

While it is clear that Kipling, Childers, and le Queux were prone to exaggeration, their works were based on reality and, more importantly, reflected both an idealized view of Britain’s imperial needs and a desire for greater security. The anxieties they represented were not entirely without foundation and appear all the more authentic when we remember that they were often passed on by military figures.

Fiction is more believable when anchored in reality, and it is the case that early 20th century spy fiction was used to push genuine agendas, including calls for a national service army, a larger navy, and a secret service. Though they celebrated imperialism and the qualities that built it, they also represented a tool for the mobilization of opinion and stood as clarion calls against perceived complacency in Whitehall.

In *Kim*, Kipling’s characters speak of the need to combat Russian intrigue on the North-

Notes (cont.)

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