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Review Article

Canadians and Secret Operations in the Second World War

Roy MacLaren, *Canadians Behind Enemy Lines, 1939-1945*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver and London, 1981, XV, 330 pp. \$24.95.

David Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance, 1940-1945*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1980, XIV, 298 pp. \$25.00

The Special Operations Executive (SOE) was the most romantic and least understood of the secret organizations created by the British during the Second World War. The mystery which necessarily cloaked its activities in wartime has fascinated the public and confounded professional historians ever since. The agency's files have been closed to scholars since the end of the war and will remain closed until 1992. In the meantime we must rely on reminiscences of former agents and oblique references in the files of other departments. Popular appetite for adventure has led to a flood of superficial paperbacks recounting the daring exploits, real and imaginary, of former "operatives." At the same time the lack of documentary evidence has resulted in an almost total absence of reliable scholarly studies describing the organization and its contribution to the success of the Allies.

In July, 1940, following the defeat of France and the evacuation from Dunkirk, the British Cabinet in desperation seized upon the idea of irregular warfare as a means of continuing the struggle against the Nazis. SOE was set up to organize, arm and direct vast secret armies of patriots in occupied Europe which would be ready to rise on a signal from London as Allied troops launched a frontal attack from the sea. SOE's aim, exhorted Churchill, was "to set Europe ablaze".

The concept was novel and imaginative but soon it became clear that it was also impractical. The hope for secret armies proved to be illusory. They could not be mobilized and, even if they had been, SOE had few arms to send and no means of sending them. The original aim

of SOE was hastily altered. Its new task became the encouragement and support of widespread sabotage and subversive activity aimed at loosening the Axis grip on occupied territory. Even this relatively modest mandate proved difficult to implement in the face of hostility from other departments both military and civilian. The Foreign Office distrusted the political judgment of the SOE directorate and was appalled when agents in the field chose to support Communist-led movements such as Tito's Partisans. The Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) feared that the clumsy efforts of amateurs would expose their own spies to capture and death. Most crippling of all, the RAF was reluctant to divert aircraft from the strategic bomber offensive in order to drop supplies to SOE-sponsored guerrilla groups. By 1943 SOE had been brought firmly under the control of the Chiefs of Staff and became a useful but minor adjunct to regular military forces.

The literature on SOE is broad but fragmentary. There are nearly two hundred books dealing directly or indirectly with the subject. In addition, information can be gleaned from the most unlikely sources. For example, the James Bond novels were inspired by SOE. Though Ian Fleming was not a member of the organization he was keenly aware of its reputation for flamboyant exploits and on a visit to the SOE training camp near Oshawa, became fascinated with their vicious techniques and murderous weaponry (SOE specialized in gadgets such as rifles made to look like umbrellas and land mines disguised as cow dung). In similar vein, the best British novel to come out of the Second World War, Evelyn Waugh's *Unconditional Surrender*, owes much to the author's experience as an SOE officer in Yugoslavia where, incidentally, the page proofs of *Brideshead Revisited* were dropped to him by parachute while he was marooned with Randolph Churchill in the hills of Croatia. In the 1960s readers of newspaper stories exposing Kim Philby's long career as a Russian spy learned a great deal about SOE, Philby having been an early recruit before he moved up to higher levels of treachery in the British Secret Service.

Until recently there has been no authoritative historical study of SOE operations based on wartime documents. Most general summaries have been the work of men who were directly involved during the war. They have had the advantage of inside knowledge but they were bound by the Official Secrets Act and could not tell all they knew. The first, and in many respects still the best, of these general descriptions of the organization appeared in 1965 when Bickham Sweet-Escott published *Baker Street Irregulars*, an urbane and gracefully written account of his career at SOE headquarters in London. The title of the book recalls one of the irreverent names by which SOE was known among its critics. There were other less charitable gibes, including one

which was popular among regular army officers who observed SOE's penchant for choosing luxurious country mansions as training centres and claimed that the initials stood for "Stately 'Omes of England". Another survey which also appeared in 1965, E. M. Cockridge's *Inside SOE*, was described by the publisher as "the first full story of SOE in Western Europe." In fact, it added little that was not already known through the Sunday supplements. The one historian who had access to secret information at this time was M. R. D. Foot who was commissioned by the British Prime Minister to investigate certain allegations of personal impropriety relating to SOE operations in France. His *SOE in France* (London, 1966) is a thorough piece of historical research but the focus and scale were limited by the specific assignment that he had been given.

While the archives of SOE remain closed to the public, those of other departments closely associated with SOE have become available over the past several years. David Stafford, a young professor of history at the University of Western Ontario, has made excellent use of them. *Britain and European Resistance 1940-1945, A Survey of the Special Operations Executive, With Documents* is the first comprehensive survey of SOE operations based on the many papers now available in the Public Record Office and private collections located in London, Oxford and Cambridge. Stafford, having been born after Pearl Harbour, has the advantage of a fresh point of view. He is obviously quite aware of all the sinister episodes, colourful characters, and remarkable acts of courage associated with SOE, but he has preferred instead to concentrate on the larger question of political policy and broader issues of military strategy within which SOE was expected to operate and on which it might exert an influence. He carefully traces the origins of SOE, through the several stages when its mandate was revised, until the end of the war when its chief purpose was to thwart the expansion of Communism and the westward thrust of Russian influence. There are unavoidable gaps in the story, of course, but these cannot be filled until another decade has elapsed. Meanwhile, Professor Stafford's book is likely to remain the definitive work on the subject. It should be added, perhaps, that SOE did not confine its activities to the European continent. It was a world-wide organization employing thousands of agents around the globe and one would hope that Professor Stafford, or someone equally competent, might undertake to tell the story of SOE's activities in other theatres such as the Middle East, Malaysia and China.

More than one hundred Canadians served with SOE at one time or another. Probably the most famous was Sir William Stephenson, code-named "Intrepid". A native of Manitoba, a decorated veteran of

the Royal Flying Corps in the First World War, university lecturer, inventor, self-made millionaire and confidant of Churchill, he was head of the office of British Security Coordination in New York from 1940 to 1946. There he was responsible for liaison between British and American intelligence agencies and the training of agents for service with SOE. He also assisted "Wild Bill" Donovan in the development of the Office of Strategic Services, a partnership described by C. H. Ellis in *The Two Bills*, (1972). Stephenson's exemplary wartime service was rewarded by a knighthood and decorations from both the French and American governments. In 1980 he was invested in the Order of Canada by the Governor-General in a special ceremony held at his retirement home in Bermuda.

Sir William has been the subject of two biographies. The first, Montgomery Hyde's *The Quiet Canadian* (London, 1972), is a conventional, balanced account of the man and his accomplishments. The second is another matter altogether. *A Man Called Intrepid: The Secret War* (Toronto, 1976) by William Stevenson (no relation) is conceivably the worst book yet written about clandestine activity in the Second World War. A hugely successful best-seller, it was hailed in Canada as "... a brilliant light penetrating the shadowy world of espionage Time and again it corrects the record of received history with the story behind the story" (*The Globe and Mail*, March 6, 1976). It is, in fact, nothing of the kind. Far from providing a penetrating light, the book obscures and grossly distorts the historical record. It bulges with errors, wrong-headed conclusions and sheer ignorance, all in support of the absurd notion that Stephenson controlled or otherwise influenced the entire British intelligence apparatus. One is left with the impression that MI6, MI5, SOE, as well as naval and military intelligence agencies, were in some vague and ill-defined way subject to direction from Stephenson and his British Security Coordination located in Rockefeller Centre. Virtually every success of Allied intelligence in World War II is attributed to the efforts of "Intrepid" whether it was the discovery of Enigma or the assassination of Gestapo Chief Reinhard Heydrich. Small wonder that British critics condemned the book as worthless and that Hugh Trevor-Roper, a severe critic at the best of times, should have held Stephenson up to personal ridicule in a savage review in the *New York Review of Books*. The British reaction was understandable but unfair to the man. Stephenson himself rejected the label of "spymaster" and has recently attempted to redress the balance (*The Globe and Mail*, May 20, 1982). Having served gallantly in two world wars, his real accomplishments were exceptional by any standard. Such an illustrious career deserves better than the grotesque caricature portrayed in these pages.

Most of the Canadians who volunteered for service with SOE, unlike Sir William Stephenson, came from modest backgrounds and performed their missions in obscurity. It is not surprising therefore that their contribution to the success of allied underground operations should have been overlooked at the time. It is odd, however, that they should have received so little recognition in Canada since. There have been occasional articles in newspapers and magazines describing the heroic exploits of individuals, but these have been largely of local interest. The scale and significance of the overall Canadian participation in SOE has not been generally appreciated. Now after nearly forty years of neglect, we finally have a full survey of their role. Roy MacLaren's *Canadians Behind Enemy Lines, 1939-1945* is an admirable example of historical research and a worthy tribute to the courage and initiative of a remarkable group of Canadians.

The prerequisites for undercover work behind enemy lines were severe. Agents were required to be fluent in the language, familiar with the terrain, politically reliable, and possess the physical and mental stamina to withstand the pressures of a dangerous life in the heart of enemy territory where every day brought the threat of betrayal and death. During the first two years of the war, SOE and similar secret organizations were able to find prospective agents in the armed forces and among qualified civilians in Britain. As the war expanded and the level of clandestine operations increased, the supply of qualified British personnel became depleted. SOE was forced to look elsewhere and found a ready response among Canadians. Many of them were already in Britain with the British armed forces or as members of the First Division of the Canadian army. Others were recruited directly from Canada, the most notable example being the large group of Yugoslav-Canadians who were located with the assistance of Bill Stephenson's British Security Coordination, the RCMP and the Communist Party. Broadly speaking, those who volunteered fell into three categories: French-Canadians; immigrants from Italy and eastern Europe; and, Chinese-Canadians. By the time the war ended in 1945 they had served in France, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Italy, Burma, Malaya, and Sarawak. MacLaren has personally interviewed many of these men and describes their individual experiences in vivid detail. While giving full credit for acts of bravery and perseverance, he makes no extravagant claims on their behalf. When measured in purely military terms they probably did not contribute greatly to the defeat of the Axis, but in supporting the resistance movements they helped to give back to people in occupied countries the self respect they had lost in the moment of occupation.