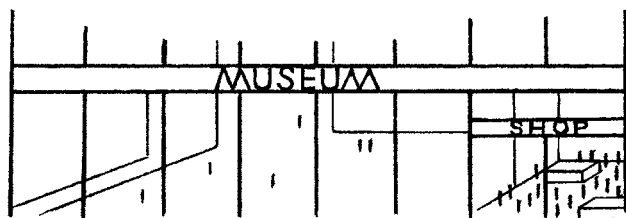


THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

PANDORA'S BRIEFCASE

It was a dazzling feat of wartime espionage. But does it argue for or against spying?

BY MALCOLM GLADWELL

On April 30, 1943, a fisherman came across a badly decomposed corpse floating in the water off the coast of Huelva, in southwestern Spain. The body was of an adult male dressed in a trenchcoat, a uniform, and boots, with a black attaché case chained to his waist. His wallet identified him as Major William Martin, of the Royal Marines. The Spanish authorities called in the local British vice-consul, Francis Haselden, and in his presence opened the attaché case, revealing an official-looking military envelope. The Spaniards offered the case and its contents to Haselden. But Haselden declined, requesting that the handover go through formal channels—an odd decision, in retrospect, since, in the days that followed, British authorities in London sent a series of increasingly frantic messages to Spain asking the whereabouts of Major Martin's briefcase.

It did not take long for word of the downed officer to make its way to German intelligence agents in the region. Spain was a neutral country, but much of its military was pro-German, and the Nazis found an officer in the Spanish general staff who was willing to help. A thin metal rod was inserted into the envelope; the documents were then wound around it and slid out through a gap, without disturbing the envelope's seals. What the officer discovered was astounding. Major Martin was a courier, carrying a personal letter from Lieutenant General Archibald Nye, the vice-chief of the Imperial General Staff, in

London, to General Harold Alexander, the senior British officer under Eisenhower in Tunisia. Nye's letter spelled out what Allied intentions were in southern Europe. American and British forces planned to cross the Mediterranean from their positions in North Africa, and launch an attack on German-held Greece and Sardinia. Hitler transferred a Panzer division from France to the Peloponnese, in Greece, and the German military command sent an urgent message to the head of its forces in the region: "The measures to be taken in Sardinia and the Peloponnese have priority over any others."

The Germans did not realize—until it was too late—that "William Martin" was a fiction. The man they took to be a high-level courier was a mentally ill vagrant who had eaten rat poison; his body had been liberated from a London morgue and dressed up in officer's clothing. The letter was a fake, and the frantic messages between London and Madrid a carefully choreographed act. When a hundred and sixty thousand Allied troops invaded Sicily on July 10, 1943, it became clear that the Germans had fallen victim to one of the most remarkable deceptions in modern military history.

The story of Major William Martin is the subject of the British journalist Ben Macintyre's brilliant and almost absurdly entertaining "Operation Mincemeat" (Harmony; \$25.99). The cast of characters involved in Mincemeat, as the caper was called, was ex-

traordinary, and Macintyre tells their stories with gusto. The ringleader was Ewen Montagu, the son of a wealthy Jewish banker and the brother of Ivor Montagu, a pioneer of table tennis and also, in one of the many strange footnotes to the Mincemeat case, a Soviet spy. Ewen Montagu served on the so-called Twenty Committee of the British intelligence services, and carried a briefcase full of classified documents on his bicycle as he rode to work each morning.

His partner in the endeavor was a gawky giant named Charles Cholmondeley, who lifted the toes of his size-12 feet when he walked, and, Macintyre writes, "gazed at the world through thick round spectacles, from behind a remarkable moustache fully six inches long and waxed into magnificent points." The two men coordinated with Dudley Clarke, the head of deception for all the Mediterranean, whom Macintyre describes as "unmarried, nocturnal and allergic to children." In 1925, Clarke organized a pageant "depicting imperial artillery down the ages, which involved two elephants, thirty-seven guns and 'fourteen of the biggest Nigerians he could find.' He loved uniforms, disguises and dressing up." In 1941, British authorities had to bail him out of a Spanish jail, dressed in "high heels, lipstick, pearls, and a chic cloche hat, his hands, in long opera gloves, demurely folded in his lap. He was not supposed to even be in Spain, but in Egypt." Macintyre, who has perfect pitch when it comes to matters of British eccentricity, reassures us, "It did his career no long-term damage."

To fashion the container that would keep the corpse "fresh," before it was dumped off the coast of Spain, Mincemeat's planners turned to Charles Fraser-Smith, whom Ian Fleming is thought to have used as the model for Q in the James Bond novels. Fraser-Smith was the inventor of, among other things, garlic-flavored chocolate intended to render authentic the breath of agents dropping into France and "a compass hidden in a button that unscrewed clockwise, based on the impeccable theory that the 'unswerving logic of the German mind' would never guess that something might unscrew the wrong way." The job of transporting

ABOVE: PHILIPPE WEISBECKER; OPPOSITE: JOHN RITTER



In the months before the invasion of Sicily, British spies fooled German spies with a caper inspired by a detective novel.

the container to the submarine that would take it to Spain was entrusted to one of England's leading race-car drivers, St. John (Jock) Horsfall, who, Macintyre notes, "was short-sighted and astigmatic but declined to wear spectacles." At one point during the journey, Horsfall nearly drove into a tram stop, and then "failed to see a roundabout until too late and shot over the grass circle in the middle."

Each stage of the deception had to be worked out in advance. Martin's personal effects needed to be detailed enough to suggest that he was a real person, but not so detailed as to suggest that someone was trying to make him look like a real person. Cholmondeley and Montagu filled Martin's pockets with odds and ends, including angry letters from creditors and a bill from his tailor. "Hour after hour, in the Admiralty basement, they discussed and refined this imaginary person, his likes and dislikes, his habits and hobbies, his talents and weaknesses," Macintyre writes. "In the evening, they repaired to the Gargoyle Club, a glamorous Soho dive of which Montagu was a member, to continue the odd process of creating a man from scratch." Francis Haselden, for his part, had to look as if he desperately wanted the briefcase back. But he couldn't be too diligent, because he had to make sure that the Germans had a look at it first. "Here lay an additional, but crucial, consideration," Macintyre goes on. "The Germans must be made to believe that they had gained access to the documents undetected; they should be made to assume that the British believed the Spaniards had returned the documents unopened and unread. Operation Mincemeat would only work if the Germans could be fooled into believing that the British had been fooled." It was an impossibly complex scheme, dependent on all manner of unknowns and contingencies. What if whoever found the body didn't notify the authorities? What if the authorities disposed of the matter so efficiently that the Germans never caught wind of it? What if the Germans saw through the ruse?

In mid-May of 1943, when Winston Churchill was in Washington, D.C., for the Trident conference, he received a telegram from the code breakers back

TOADSTOOLS

The toadstools are starting to come up,
circular and dry.
 Nothing will touch them,
 Gophers or chipmunks, wasps or swallows.
 They glow in the twilight like rooted will-o'-the-wisps.
 Nothing will touch them.
 As though little roundabouts from the bunched unburi-able,
 Powers, dominions,
 As though orphans rode herd in the short grass,
as though they had heard the call,
 They will always be with us,
transcenders of the world.
 Someone will try to stick his beak into their otherworldly styrofoam.
 Someone may try to taste a taste of forever.
 For some it's a refuge, for some a shady place to fall down.
 Grief is a floating barge-boat,
who knows where it's going to moor?

—Charles Wright

home, who had been monitoring German military transmissions: "MINCEMEAT SWALLOWED ROD, LINE AND SINKER." Macintyre's "Operation Mincemeat" is part of a long line of books celebrating the cleverness of Britain's spies during the Second World War. It is equally instructive, though, to think about Mincemeat from the perspective of the spies who found the documents and forwarded them to their superiors. The things that spies do can help win battles that might otherwise have been lost. But they can also help lose battles that might otherwise have been won.

In early 1943, long before Major Martin's body washed up onshore, the German military had begun to think hard about Allied intentions in southern Europe. The Allies had won control of North Africa from the Germans, and were clearly intending to cross the Mediterranean. But where would they attack? One school of thought said Sardinia. It was lightly defended and difficult to reinforce. The Allies could mount an invasion of the island relatively quickly. It would be ideal for bombing operations against southern Germany, and Italy's industrial hub in the Po Valley, but it didn't have sufficient harbors or beaches to allow for a large

number of ground troops to land. Sicily did. It was also close enough to North Africa to be within striking distance of Allied short-range fighter planes, and a successful invasion of Sicily had the potential to knock the Italians out of the war.

Mussolini was in the Sicily camp, as was Field Marshal Kesselring, who headed up all German forces in the Mediterranean. In the Italian Commando Supremo, most people picked Sardinia, however, as did a number of senior officers in the German Navy and Air Force. Meanwhile, Hitler and the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht—the German armed-forces High Command—had a third candidate. They thought that the Allies were most likely to strike at Greece and the Balkans, given the Balkans' crucial role in supplying the German war effort with raw materials such as oil, bauxite, and copper. And Greece was far more vulnerable to attack than Italy. As the historians Samuel Mitcham and Friedrich von Stauffenberg have pointed out, "in Greece all Axis reinforcements and supplies would have to be shipped over a single rail line of limited capacity, running for 1,300 kilometers (more than 800 miles) through an area vulnerable to air and partisan attack."

All these assessments were strategic

inferences from an analysis of known facts. But this kind of analysis couldn't point to a specific target. It could only provide a range of probabilities. The intelligence provided by Major Martin's documents was in a different category. It was marvellously specific. It said: Greece and Sardinia. But because that information washed up onshore, as opposed to being derived from the rational analysis of known facts, it was difficult to know whether it was *true*. As the political scientist Richard Betts has argued, in intelligence analysis there tends to be an inverse relationship between accuracy and significance, and this is the dilemma posed by the Mincemeat case.

As Macintyre observes, the informational supply chain that carried the Mincemeat documents from Huelva to Berlin was heavily corrupted. The first great enthusiast for the Mincemeat find was the head of German intelligence in Madrid, Major Karl-Erich Kuhlenthal. He personally flew the documents to Berlin, along with a report testifying to their significance. But, as Macintyre writes, Kuhlenthal was "a one-man espionage disaster area." One of his prized assets was a Spaniard named Juan Pujol García, who was actually a double agent. When British code breakers looked at Kuhlenthal's messages to Berlin, they found that he routinely embellished and fictionalized his reports. According to Macintyre, Kuhlenthal was "frantically eager to please, ready to pass on anything that might consolidate his reputation," in part because he had some Jewish ancestry and was desperate not to be posted back to Germany.

When the documents arrived in Berlin, they were handed over to one of Hitler's top intelligence analysts, a man named Alexis Baron von Roenne. Von Roenne vouched for their veracity as well. But in some respects von Roenne was even less reliable than Kuhlenthal. He hated Hitler and seemed to have done everything in his power to sabotage the Nazi war effort. Before D Day, Macintyre writes, "he faithfully passed on every deception ruse fed to him, accepted the existence of every bogus unit regardless of evidence, and inflated forty-four divisions in Britain to an astonishing eighty-nine." It is entirely possible, Macintyre suggests, that von Roenne

"did not believe the Mincemeat deception for an instant."

These are two fine examples of why the proprietary kind of information that spies purvey is so much riskier than the products of rational analysis. Rational inferences can be debated openly and widely. Secrets belong to a small assortment of individuals, and inevitably become hostage to private agendas. Kuhlenthal was an advocate of the documents because he needed them to be true; von Roenne was an advocate of the documents because he suspected them to be false. In neither case did the audiences for their assessments have an inkling about their private motivations. As Harold Wilensky wrote in his classic work "Organizational Intelligence" (1967), "The more secrecy, the smaller the intelligent audience, the less systematic the distribution and indexing of research, the greater the anonymity of authorship, and the more intolerant the attitude toward deviant views." Wilensky had the Bay of Pigs debacle in mind when he wrote that. But it could just as easily have applied to any number of instances since, including the private channels of "intelligence" used by members of the Bush Administration to convince themselves that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

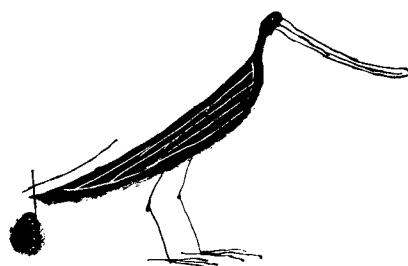
It was the requirement of secrecy that also prevented the Germans from properly investigating the Mincemeat story. They had to make it look as if they had no knowledge of Martin's documents. So their hands were tied. The dated papers in Martin's pockets indicated that he had been in the water for barely five days. Had the Germans seen the body, though, they would have realized that it was far too decomposed to have been in the water for less than a week. And, had they talked to the Spanish coroner who examined Martin, they would have discovered that he had noticed various red flags. The doctor had seen the bodies of many drowned

fishermen in his time, and invariably there were fish and crab bites on the ears and other appendages. In this case, there were none. Hair, after being submerged for a week, becomes brittle and dull. Martin's hair was not. Nor did his clothes appear to have been in the water very long. But the Germans couldn't talk to the coroner without blowing their cover. Secrecy stood in the way of accuracy.

Suppose that Kuhlenthal had not been so eager to please Berlin, and that von Roenne had not loathed Hitler, and suppose that the Germans had properly debriefed the coroner and uncovered all the holes in the Mincemeat story. Would they then have seen through the British deception? Maybe so. Or maybe they would have found the flaws in Mincemeat a little *too* obvious, and concluded that the British were trying to deceive Germany into thinking that they were trying to deceive Germany into thinking that Greece and Sardinia were the real targets—in order to mask the fact that Greece and Sardinia *were* the real targets.

This is the second, and more serious, of the problems that surround the products of espionage. It is not just that secrets themselves are hard to fact-check; it's that their interpretation is inherently ambiguous. Any party to an intelligence transaction is trapped in what the sociologist Erving Goffman called an "expression game." I'm trying to fool you. You realize that I'm trying to fool you, and I—realizing that—try to fool you into thinking that I don't realize that you have realized that I am trying to fool you. Goffman argues that at each turn in the game the parties seek out more and more specific and reliable cues to the other's intentions. But that search for specificity and reliability only makes the problem worse. As Goffman writes in his 1969 book "Strategic Interaction":

The more the observer relies on seeking out foolproof cues, the more vulnerable he should appreciate he has become to the exploitation of his efforts. For, after all, the most reliance-inspiring conduct on the subject's part is exactly the conduct that it would be most advantageous for him to fake if he wanted to hoodwink the observer. The very fact that the observer finds himself looking to a particular bit of evidence as an incorruptible check on what is or might be corrupted



BRIEFLY NOTED

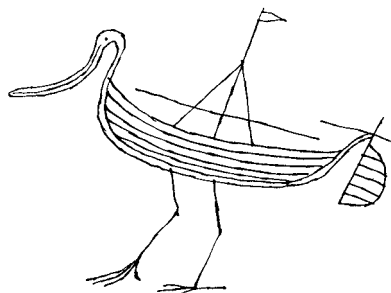
Supreme Power, by Jeff Shesol (Norton; \$27.95). In February, 1937, F.D.R., frustrated by a conservative-dominated Supreme Court that had struck down one New Deal law after another, tried to increase the number of Justices from nine to fifteen. “Tell your President, he has made a great mistake,” Justice Louis Brandeis said when told of the plan. But Shesol’s engrossing, well-calibrated account of what is commonly regarded as F.D.R.’s lowest moment shows that there was “a growing agreement that the Court must be curbed,” including calls for constitutional amendments even more radical than the court-packing scheme. Justices had been openly questioning each other’s motives, with one opining that it was hard to find any basis for the majority opinion “other than our own personal economic predilections.” Roosevelt’s bill failed, largely because the Court gave in; key Justices changed direction and began supporting the New Deal—which raises the question of how big a mistake F.D.R.’s challenge really was.

In Pursuit of Silence, by George Prochnik (Doubleday; \$26). Prochnik’s quest for the many meanings of silence takes him on an adventure of profound listening. A Trappist monk says that silence offers a “radical confrontation with ourselves”; anti-noise policymakers in Europe explain noise-mapping projects; and deaf students reveal unexpected ways of observing space and light. To understand silence, one must understand noise as well, and Prochnik, an advocate for quiet, takes himself to a car-audio competition where boom-car enthusiasts compete in decibel production. He investigates the unexpected paradoxes at the heart of our relationship with sound: we create noise in order to soundproof ourselves, and we create noise by clamoring for silence. There is a difference between mere noise control and genuine silence, and Prochnik makes an eloquent case for the latter, whether in the form of personal contemplation or communal spaces of tranquillity.

All That Follows, by Jim Crace (Doubleday; \$25.95). During the Bush Administra-

tion, Lenny Lessing was a promising British jazz saxophonist whose actions could never quite keep up with his leftist rhetoric. By 2024, he is in full retreat, living off royalties, nursing a bad shoulder, and surfing news channels. But when an old colleague tries to disrupt an international summit and ends up taking a family hostage instead, Len finds himself sucked into events that he would have much preferred to watch on television. Crace’s decision to give this Walter Mitty an entire novel to hiccup and stumble through is a risk: when Len apologizes to a Texan who has just punched him in the head, you’re ready to punch him yourself. But the book is not without its unexpected accents—a sinuous evocation of the saxophone, futuristic touches such as dementia-preventing cigarettes, and a tender portrait of Len’s faltering marriage—and eventually the antihero’s frantic improvisations begin to sound like music.

Witz, by Joshua Cohen (Dalkey Archive; \$18.95). In this ambitious novel, Benjamin Israelien—born full grown, bearded, and wearing glasses—is the last living Jew, a national celebrity and Messiah-like great hope for an America terrified of losing God’s grace. In more than eight hundred pages of dense, often self-amused prose, he tours in a big revival show, visits Holocaust sites (“Whateverwitz” in “Polandland”), and even makes a brief sojourn in space with a tentacled alien named Doktor Froid. “Witz,” as Cohen explains, means “joke,” and the novel overflows with puns, allusions, and Borscht Belt zingers, in an incantatory modernist style. But the story, which, for all its intellectual energy, values cleverness above clarity, is a bleak one, in which the flesh is cursed, life is absurd, and the end is near.



is the very reason why he should be suspicious of this evidence; for the best evidence for him is also the best evidence for the subject to tamper with.

Macintyre argues that one of the reasons the Germans fell so hard for the Mincemeat ruse is that they really had to struggle to gain access to the documents. They tried—and failed—to find a Spanish accomplice when the briefcase was still in Huelva. A week passed, and the Germans grew more and more anxious. The briefcase was transferred to the Spanish Admiralty, in Madrid, where the Germans redoubled their efforts. Their assumption, Macintyre says, was that if Martin was a plant the British would have made their task much easier. But Goffman’s argument reminds us that the opposite is equally plausible. Knowing that a struggle would be a sign of authenticity, the Germans could just as easily have expected the British to provide one.

The absurdity of such expression games has been wittily explored in the spy novels of Robert Littell and, with particular brio, in Peter Ustinov’s 1956 play, “Romanoff and Juliet.” In the latter, a crafty general is the head of a tiny European country being squabbled over by the United States and the Soviet Union, and is determined to play one off against the other. He tells the U.S. Ambassador that the Soviets have broken the Americans’ secret code. “We know they know our code,” the Ambassador, Moulsworth, replies, beaming. “We only give them things we want them to know.” The general pauses, during which, the play’s stage directions say, “he tries to make head or tail of this intelligence.” Then he crosses the street to the Russian Embassy, where he tells the Soviet Ambassador, Romanoff, “They know you know their code.” Romanoff is unfazed: “We have known for some time that they knew we knew their code. We have acted accordingly—by pretending to be duped.” The general returns to the American Embassy and confronts Moulsworth: “They know you know they know you know.” Moulsworth (genuinely alarmed): “What? Are you sure?”

The genius of that parody is the final line, because spymasters have always prided themselves on knowing where they are on the “I-know-they-know-I-

know-they-know” regress. Just before the Allied invasion of Sicily, a British officer, Colonel Knox, left a classified cable concerning the invasion plans on the terrace of Shepherd’s Hotel, in Cairo—and no one could find it for two days. “Dudley Clarke was confident, however, that if it had fallen into enemy hands through such an obvious and ‘gross breach of security’ then it would probably be dismissed as a plant, pointing to Sicily as the cover target in accordance with Mincemeat,” Macintyre writes. “He concluded that ‘Colonel Knox may well have assisted rather than hindered us.’” In the face of a serious security breach, that’s what a counter-intelligence officer *would* say. But, of course, there is no way for him to know how the Germans would choose to interpret that discovery—and no way for the Germans to know how to interpret that discovery, either.

At one point, the British discovered that a French officer in Algiers was spying for the Germans. They “turned” him, keeping him in place but feeding him a steady diet of false and misleading information. Then, before D Day—when the Allies were desperate to convince Germany that they would be invading the Calais sector in July—they used the French officer to tell the Germans that the real invasion would be in Normandy on June 5th, 6th, or 7th. The British theory was that using someone the Germans strongly suspected was a double agent to tell the truth was preferable to using someone the Germans didn’t realize was a double agent to tell a lie. Or perhaps there wasn’t any theory at all. Perhaps the spy game has such an inherent opacity that it doesn’t really matter what you tell your enemy so long as your enemy is aware that you are trying to tell him something.

At around the time that Montagu and Cholmondeley were cooking up Operation Mincemeat, the personal valet of the British Ambassador to Turkey approached the German Embassy in Ankara with what he said were photographed copies of his boss’s confidential papers. The valet’s name was Elyesa Bazna. The Germans called him Cicero, and in this case they performed due diligence. Intelligence that came in over the transom was always considered less trustworthy than the

intelligence gathered formally, so Berlin pressed its agents in Ankara for more details. Who was Bazna? What was his background? What was his motivation?

“Given the extraordinary ease with which seemingly valuable documents were being obtained, however, there was widespread worry that the enemy had mounted some purposeful deception,” Richard Wires writes, in “The Cicero Spy Affair: German Access to British Secrets in World War II” (1999). Bazna was, for instance, highly adept with a camera, in a way that suggested professional training or some kind of assistance. Bazna claimed that he didn’t use a tripod but simply held each paper under a light with one hand and took the picture with the other. So why were the photographs so clear? Berlin sent a photography expert to investigate. The Germans tried to figure out how much English he knew—which would reveal whether he could read the documents he was photographing or was just being fed them. In the end, many German intelligence officials thought that Cicero was the real thing. But Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Foreign Minister, remained wary—and his doubts and political infighting among the German intelligence agencies meant that little of the intelligence provided by Cicero was ever acted upon.

Cicero, it turned out, was the real thing. At least, we think he was the real thing. The Americans had a spy in the German Embassy in Turkey who learned that a servant was spying in the British Embassy. She told her bosses, who told the British. Just before his death, Stewart Menzies, the head of the British Secret Intelligence Service during the war, told an interviewer, “Of course, Cicero was under our control,” meaning that the minute they learned about Cicero they began feeding him false documents. Menzies, it should be pointed out, was a man who spent much of his professional career deceiving other people, and if you had been the wartime head of M.I.6, giving an interview shortly before your death, you probably would say that Cicero was one of yours. Or perhaps, in interviews given shortly before death, people are finally free to tell the truth. Who knows?

In the case of Operation Mincemeat,

Germany’s spies told their superiors that something false was actually true (even though, secretly, some of those spies might have known better), and Germany acted on it. In the case of Cicero, Germany’s spies told their superiors that something was true that may indeed have been true, though maybe wasn’t, or maybe was true for a while and not true for a while, depending on whether you believe the word of someone two decades after the war was over—and in this case Germany didn’t really act on it at all. Looking at that track record, you have to wonder if Germany would have been better off not having any spies at all.

The idea for Operation Mincemeat, Macintyre tells us, had its roots in a mystery story written by Basil Thomson, a former head of Scotland Yard’s criminal-investigation unit. Thomson was the author of a dozen detective stories, and his 1937 book “The Milliner’s Hat Mystery” begins with the body of a dead man carrying a set of documents that turn out to be forged. “The Milliner’s Hat Mystery” was read by Ian Fleming, who worked for naval intelligence. Fleming helped create something called the Trout Memo, which contained a series of proposals for deceiving the Germans, including this idea of a dead man carrying forged documents. The memo was passed on to John Masterman, the head of the Twenty Committee—of which Montagu and Cholmondeley were members. Masterman, who also wrote mysteries on the side, starring an Oxford don and a Sherlock Holmes-like figure, loved the idea. Mincemeat, Macintyre writes, “began as fiction, a plot twist in a long-forgotten novel, picked up by another novelist, and approved by a committee presided over by yet another novelist.”

Then, there was the British naval attaché in Madrid, Alan Hillgarth, who stage-managed Mincemeat’s reception in Spain. He was a “spy, former gold prospector, and, perhaps inevitably, successful novelist,” Macintyre writes. “In his six novels, Alan Hillgarth hankered for a lost age of personal valor, chivalry, and self-reliance.” Unaccountably, neither Montagu nor Cholmondeley seems to have written mysteries of his own. But, then again, they had Mincemeat.

“As if constructing a character in a novel, Montagu and Cholmondeley . . . set about creating a personality with which to clothe their dead body,” Macintyre observes. Martin didn’t have to have a fiancée. But, in a good spy thriller, the hero always has a beautiful lover. So they found a stunning young woman, Jean Leslie, to serve as Martin’s betrothed, and Montagu flirted with her shamelessly, as if standing in for his fictional creation. They put love letters from her among his personal effects. “Don’t please let them send you off into the blue the horrible way they do nowadays,” she wrote to her fiancé. “Now that we’ve found each other out of the whole world, I don’t think I could bear it.”

The British spymasters saw themselves as the authors of a mystery story, because it gave them the self-affirming sense that they were in full command of the narratives they were creating. They were not, of course. They were simply lucky that von Roenne and Kühlenthal had private agendas aligned with the Allied cause. The intelligence historian Ralph Bennett writes that one of the central principles of Dudley Clarke (he of the cross-dressing, the elephants, and the fourteen Nigerian giants) was that “deception could only be successful to the extent to which it played on existing hopes and fears.” That’s why the British chose to convince Hitler that the Allied focus was on Greece and the Balkans—Hitler, they knew, believed that the Allied focus was on Greece and the Balkans. But we are, at this point, reduced to a logical merry-go-round: Mincemeat fed Hitler what he already believed, and was judged by its authors to be a success because Hitler continued to believe what he already believed. How do we know the Germans wouldn’t have moved that Panzer division to the Peloponnese anyway? Bennett is more honest: “Even had there been no deception, [the Germans] would have taken precautions in the Balkans.” Bennett also points out that what the Germans truly feared, in the summer of 1943, was that the Italians would drop out of the Axis alliance. Soldiers washing up on beaches were of little account next to the broader strategic considerations of the southern Mediterranean. Mincemeat or no Mincemeat, Bennett writes, the Germans “would probably have re-

fused to commit more troops to Sicily in support of the Italian Sixth Army lest they be lost in the aftermath of an Italian defection.” Perhaps the real genius of spymasters is found not in the stories they tell their enemies during the war but in the stories they tell in their memoirs once the war is over.

It is helpful to compare the British spymasters’ attitudes toward deception with that of their postwar American counterpart James Jesus Angleton. Angleton was in London during the nineteen-forties, apprenticing with the same group that masterminded gambits such as Mincemeat. He then returned to Washington and rose to head the C.I.A.’s counter-intelligence division throughout the Cold War.

Angleton did not write detective stories. His nickname was the Poet. He corresponded with the likes of Ezra Pound, E. E. Cummings, T. S. Eliot, Archibald MacLeish, and William Carlos Williams, and he championed William Empson’s “Seven Types of Ambiguity.” He co-founded a literary journal at Yale called *Furioso*. What he brought to spycraft was the intellectual model of the New Criticism, which, as one contributor to *Furioso* put it, was propelled by “the discovery that it is possible and proper for a poet to mean two differing or even opposing things at the same time.” Angleton saw twists and turns where others saw only straight lines. To him, the spy game was not a story that marched to a predetermined conclusion. It was, in a phrase of Eliot’s that he loved to use, “a wilderness of mirrors.”

Angleton had a point. The deceptions of the intelligence world are not conventional mystery narratives that unfold at the discretion of the narrator. They are poems, capable of multiple interpretations. Kühlenthal and von Roenne, Mincemeat’s audience, contributed as much to the plan’s success as Mincemeat’s authors. A body that washes up onshore is either the real thing or a plant. The story told by the ambassador’s valet is either true or too good to be true. Mincemeat seems extraordinary proof of the cleverness of the British Secret Intelligence Service, until you remember that just a few years later the Secret Intelligence Service was stag-

gered by the discovery that one of its most senior officials, Kim Philby, had been a Soviet spy for years. The deceivers ended up as the deceived.

But, if you cannot know what is true and what is not, how on earth do you run a spy agency? In the nineteen-sixties, Angleton turned the C.I.A. upside down in search of K.G.B. moles that he was sure were there. As a result of his mole hunt, the agency was paralyzed at the height of the Cold War. American intelligence officers who were entirely innocent were subjected to unfair accusations and scrutiny. By the end, Angleton himself came under suspicion of being a Soviet mole, on the ground that the damage he inflicted on the C.I.A. in the pursuit of his imagined Soviet moles was the sort of damage that a real mole would have sought to inflict on the C.I.A. in the pursuit of Soviet interests.

“The remedy he had proposed in 1954 was for the CIA to have what would amount to two separate mindsets,” Edward Jay Epstein writes of Angleton, in his 1989 book “Deception.” “His counterintelligence staff would provide the alternative view of the picture. Whereas the Soviet division might see a Soviet diplomat as a possible CIA mole, the counterintelligence staff would view him as a possible disinformation agent. What division case officers would tend to look at as valid information, furnished by Soviet sources who risked their lives to cooperate with them, counterintelligence officers tended to question as disinformation, provided by KGB-controlled sources. This was, as Angleton put it, ‘a necessary duality.’”

Translation: the proper function of spies is to remind those who rely on spies that the kinds of thing found out by spies can’t be trusted. If this sounds like a lot of trouble, there’s a simpler alternative. The next time a briefcase washes up onshore, don’t open it. ♦

BLOCK THAT METAPHOR!

From the Ottawa Citizen.

“It’s not just public servants paying the price,” said Savoie. “Ministers don’t know what foot to dance on. They don’t know when the bazooka will hit or when a public servant at a committee or an access to information request will blow the lid off an issue. They are also hitched to a bargain that no longer exists.”