

## Jack Lindsay and MI5: More than Surveillance

Helen Lindsay

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In December 2012, together with Dr Anne Cranny-Francis, I visited the National Archives at Kew Gardens in London to view the MI5 files relating to my father, Jack Lindsay. His files had been released in 2009 and I had been curious about them for some time. Motivated by a desire to shed light on this aspect of his life, I arranged the trip to the archive.

Anne and I collected the first few files and took them to our table and for the first few minutes as we thumbed through the papers I found it difficult to make sense of what we were seeing. There were papers that listed phone calls, copies of forms and reports, interspersed by letters in Jack's distinctive hand-writing and typescript. It was disorienting and peculiar to see letters written by Jack next to intelligence reports about him, together with accounts from informants on his activities. Surely this was the stuff of espionage and spy fiction; why collect all this information on Jack? He wasn't a spy – or was he?

Sowing the seeds of suspicion is easy; for a few moments the fundamental assumptions about my father were shaken. Not only that, but Anne began to feel distinctly uneasy. 'Are we being watched?' she suddenly asked, looking around. The power of the files lies partly in their capacity to assume guilt; to question past events and cast doubt on their construction so that one's interpretation of the present is also questioned.

The files reveal a level of clandestine activity around Jack and his legitimate activities which is difficult to understand or justify. To be a member of the Communist Party was legal and there is no suggestion in the files that Jack's personal and professional activities were anything but ethical and lawful. This article is a first step in a process of working out why MI5 were so interested in Jack and untangling that web of information. It is also a description of a personal journey in the course of which I have explored and reflected on the impact of the files on my understanding of the past.

It would have been no surprise to Jack, as a prominent Marxist historian and Communist Party member since the late 1930s, to know that he was under surveillance. Indeed, in the 1960s two secret service agents followed some Russian visitors<sup>1</sup> and parked their car across the road from our house. The agents remained in the car and my mother took them a cup of tea, which they received, but they disappeared soon afterwards. It was a family joke that they had watched and followed the Russians and that in the spirit of English amateurism received a 'cup of tea' from us with all the social forms and conventions implicit in that act.

In retrospect, however, the joke is not so funny. It seems likely that the agents must have intended to be seen for they would certainly have been capable of remaining hidden had they wanted to. In this way, some incidents from my past have had to be mentally re-written, and memories adjusted to be consistent with the information supplied by the files.

During that first morning at the archive, following a short period of uncertainty, the papers came more into focus and the authorship and structure became clearer. But it was only as we continued to interrogate the files systematically that their significance started to emerge, and the methods and language of the surveillance and possible consequences of the clandestine scrutiny become clearer.

There are eight bundles of papers on Jack Lindsay at the National Archives (KV2/3252 to KV2/3559)<sup>2</sup> and they cover 1936 to 1959. It is highly likely that there are more files post-1959 but MI5 will neither confirm nor deny this.<sup>3</sup> The KV2 series are the personal PF series of the MI5 archive and form the backbone of several other related series, the KV3 records which are subject files, KV4 policy records and KV5 organisational files. The KV2 records span the period 1913 to 1983 and contain information on thousands of people from a range of backgrounds, including suspected spies, double agents, German and Japanese intelligence officers, right-wing groups, communist sympathisers and communist members.

Jack first came to MI5's notice in 1936 when he and Eliza de Loche were living together in a house called Whitstone Cottage on the edge of the small town of Paignton, Somerset; living on vegetables, writing and surviving on a tiny income. Jack sent a letter to Tom Wintringham, who was a communist activist and writer (Purcell). Wintringham was well-known by the secret

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1 Unfortunately, I cannot recall their names. I was probably about eight years old and we regularly had visitors from all over the world, including Russia, so the visit itself would not have been an unusual occurrence.

2 TNA catalogue, [http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/results/r?\\_q=KV2%20Jack%20Lindsay&\\_p=1950&\\_hb=tna&\\_col=200](http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/results/r?_q=KV2%20Jack%20Lindsay&_p=1950&_hb=tna&_col=200), accessed 28 Dec. 2014.

3 Email enquiry 26 Feb. 2013, the Enquiries Team, the Security Service.

service of the time<sup>4</sup> and although the letter only talked about Jack's help with checking some proofs of 'the mutinies of 1917–19' it was intercepted by the post office and copied. The MI5 copy of this letter, which can be found in KV2/3252, started a course of surveillance that was to carry on for at least the next 30 years.

14.8.44

Sgnt Jack LINDSAY

This man originally came to our notice in 1936 as a correspondent of Tom WINTRINGHAM. He came to our notice from Top secret sources in 1942 and after some difficulty in identifying him it was found that he was known to Special Branch .... It was decided unwise to move him and we shall be informed of any future postings ....<sup>5</sup>

In order to structure and shape the information supplied by the files this study looks at the sources, their methods of gathering data, use of language and issues that arise because of the large number of redacted sheets. It also touches on my subjective experience of this information and the disturbing impact of reading the files.

The papers are arranged chronologically and originate from a range of sources:

- MI5 agents, administrative staff and paid informants
- Special Branch Police
- The UK Foreign Office, and
- Foreign agencies, including from France, USA and Australia.

The interception and copying of personal communication form a large part of each file. These documents consist of letters (both to and from Jack) intercepted by the post office and copied by MI5 staff, transcripts of telephone calls made by Jack from the many houses and flats he lived in over the years, and details of telephone calls from other people who were also under scrutiny and who mentioned Jack. There are also long transcripts of conversations obtained from clandestine listening devices when the person mentioned Jack or where Jack was himself talking. These mainly appear to stem from 'bugs' placed in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) office, although there may also have been other locations as the files do not disclose the specific eavesdropping sites.

For example, a letter to Australia sent on 15 Feb. 1949 had the following information extracted:

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4 Wintringham had been imprisoned for incitement of the Dockers in the 1920s and helped found the *Daily Worker* in 1930.

5 KV/3252, sheet 27a, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

Int. Petition to the Minister of Immigration and Information, Canberra, deploring the Australian Government's action of deporting coloured residents from Australia, sent to Stephen Murray Smith, Australian Communist, 10 Connaught Mansions, London SW11 signed by LINDSAY<sup>6</sup>

And, a conversation '(EMILE [BURNS] and ROBSON were in the office)', presumably the CPGB office, was summarised as:

10.44. BILL left, and ROBSON was telling EMILE that LINDSAY [LINDSAY is red in the original typescript] had written a very good 'critique' of Modern Poetry ... . ROBSON thought LINDSAY [again, LINDSAY is red in original typescript] was improving as a Marxist. EMILE did not recall having met him and ROBSON said he was in the Army at Present. He was an Australian and a 'very nice chap'...<sup>7</sup>

Some conversations must have had little value:

8.11.44 Temple Bar 2151

Jack LINDSAY rang for ROBSON and wanted to know if he would lunch with him and Ann, but R. was out.<sup>8</sup>

Copies of administration papers are scattered throughout each of the files: bank statements, tax returns, publishers' letters, membership forms, passport applications and visa information. There are frequent Special Branch reports which detail the current address, appearance and activities of Jack, as well as checks and searches made when he travelled in and out of the country.

19<sup>th</sup> April 1949

With further reference to Jack LINDSAY, subject of Special Branch correspondence 402/44/393 –

This man, who was born on 28.10.1900 ... appears to be something of a recluse and spends most of his time indoors engaged in his literary work. He has some 22 novels to his credit, many of them based on Roman history, as well as numerous collections of poems, drama and ballads. He is also a student of ancient Greek history and literature, and much of his writing is greatly influenced by these studies.

In addition to this work he also, from time to time, prepares scripts for broadcasts by the B.B.C. One of the most recent of these was his adaptation of a Greek play of Herondas which was broadcast in the Third Programme on 15.3.1949. In August, 1948 he himself broadcast a talk on 'Post War Trends in British Literature, and I understand that his notes on this subject were later used in the B.B.C's Russian Service ...

LINDSAY continues to be quietly active in communist affairs. Since date of the last report he has come to notice on several occasions .... There is little of

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6 KV/3252, sheet 56, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

7 KV/3252, sheet 14c, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

8 KV/3252, sheet 31, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

value to add to this man's description beyond the fact that he is most untidy and unkempt in appearance. He is known to me.<sup>9</sup>

A trip to Holland in 1954 prompted the following comments to be made by Special Branch:

John LINDSAY, British, subject of Harwich report of 28<sup>th</sup> February 1954, arrived at this port this morning from the Hook of Holland.

A discreet but thorough search by H. M. Customs of his baggage, two small cases, revealed a number of books and pamphlets of a communist nature. Full details were not obtained as LINDSAY is an alert type of individual and it was considered advisable to avoid suspicion of any kind.<sup>10</sup>

There are letters and reports regarding Jack's work in the army and for the BBC. MI5 was exercised about Jack's work with ENSA<sup>11</sup> and as a scriptwriter for the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, but decided to leave him in position. However, it appears that they were not as relaxed about his work with the BBC, as the following letter to a producer dated 3 May 1949 indicates:

SECRET

Dear Miss Wadsley,

I notice on a recent report on Jack Lindsay the author ... that he is said from time to time to prepare scripts for broadcasts for the BBC and that his adaptation of a Greek Play was broadcast in the Third Programme on March 15 this year. In August 1948 he is reported to have broadcast himself a talk on 'Post-War Trends in British Literature' and his notes on this subject are said to have been used in the BBC's Russian Service.

Lindsay has been known to us in a Communist connection since 1936 and for some years has been active in the Party's literary activities. He is at present one of the lecturers attached to the Historians' Group of the Communist Party and is connected with the Writers' Group of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR.

Yours sincerely,

C S Weldsmith<sup>12</sup>

While the letter makes no specific demands nor gives no ultimatum, the tone and content leave little doubt that its intention was to warn and to put pressure upon the BBC producer.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the scrutiny for me as a member of the family is the large number of reports from informants. Some of these informants (they appear to be called 'source reports' by MI5) were individuals

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9 KV2/3252, sheet 58, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

10 KV2/3254, sheet 163, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

11 Entertainments National Service Association, set up in 1940 to entertain the troops.

12 KV2/3252, sheet 59a, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

who attended and reported on meetings or other party activities. They often could not resist adding their own opinions, for example:

On 9.1.51. Jack LINDSAY addressed the British-Czechoslovak Friendship league on 'Cultural Life in Czechoslovakia'.

This Australian Communist had another Australian Communist – Noel COUNIHAN, the cartoonist – as his Chairman. Both are bad speakers. LINDSAY possesses the qualification of having actually been to the U.S.S.R. The talk itself was on the usual lines.<sup>13</sup>

Other informants must have been closer to Jack and our family as they were reporting on shared conversations or discussions overheard, presumably in public places such as a restaurant or pub or maybe even on the street. Informants provided material that was not always correct, such as when it was reported that Jack and Ann Davies were married in 1944.<sup>14</sup> Although they were never married Ann often did, for convenience, use the title Mrs Lindsay.<sup>15</sup> Despite their mistakes, the police and MI5 were keen to protect their informants, as the following 1953 letter illustrates.

Dear Sir,

Jack Whitestone LINDSAY

A delicate source has reported that LINDSAY plans to visit Holland ... we are anxious that LINDSAY should not learn that we are aware of his intended journey.<sup>16</sup>

Among the ambiguities in the files are the different names used for my father: Jack Whitestone, Jack Whitstone, John Lindsay, Frank Whitestone, James Collins-Baker, Mr and Mrs 'Blue' Lindsay, Jack Leslie. Some are easily accounted for as mis-heard pronunciations (Leslie), the use of John and Jack as interchangeable names, and the mistaken use of Whitstone/Whitstone as a surname when it was the name of the cottage in Devon. But the constant reference to a 'James Collins-Baker' has so far eluded explanation, whilst the literary alias 'Richard Preston' which Jack used a number of times is not mentioned.

Not only did the security services document Jack's attendance of meetings and work they also included long transcripts of broadcasts, reviews and news cuttings, for example

Summary of World Broadcasts No 108 dated 19.5.50 – 'A Month of Humiliation',

'Jack Lindsay on Soviet Literature', and

'Jack Lindsay on Recent Trends, Soviet Literature.'

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13 KV2/3253, sheet 812, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

14 KV2/3252, sheet 38, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

15 Jack Lindsay was married to Janet Beaton until she died in 1974.

16 KV2/3254, sheet 149a, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

These three articles each consist of several pages of typescript that introduce and copy the text of the broadcasts in full. Some reports also include a critical review of the work and it is surprising to see that the secret service had so much interest in content. In addition, there are many papers that transcribe long telephone calls and narrate sections of discussions from local CPGB, History Group or other meetings. The inclusion of these ephemeral telephone discussions provides a fascinating insight into the personalities, conflicts and alliances which arose within the Communist Party. The following transcripts are typical:

Extract from Telephone Check on Temple Bar 4277 dated 12 Jan. 1944.

Diana POULON told Douglas GAMMAN that she understood that at the meeting on Friday they were going to discuss 'the whole question of Fore Publications. I have been receiving curious deputations of one person after another at my place'. GARMAN said he had mentioned it to Emile BURNS but that Emile did not seem very interested.

D: 'Well, the position is that there seems to be tremendous dissatisfaction there. There is no responsible committee or anything ... . Then this morning Jack LINDSAY came up to see me on the same sort of thing, and said he had been discussing it and understood it was being raised on Friday. G: It is nothing whatever to do with Jack LINDSAY anyway ... .'<sup>17</sup>

Extract 25 Sept. 1956

BETTY said ... she had had another letter from LINDSAY (JACK) to say he was sorry but he could not give an answer until tomorrow because he had three books to finish by the spring. He was incredible! She had never met anyone like him.<sup>18</sup>

Extract 13 Oct. 1958

FALBER asked BETTY REID what her answer to Andrew (?ROTHSTEIN) had been on the question of LINDSAY.

BETTY said she had told ANDREW that he was basically all right. They both agreed that although he had done a lot of stupid things, he was basically O.K ... FALBER followed this by remarking that DORIS LESSING has written a new book, giving the impression that there was some connection between her and LINDSAY. BETTY thought the Party would do better without DORIS LESSING as a member.<sup>19</sup>

Another aspect of the files that is immediately striking is the language. Like a reviewer who oscillates from admiration to abhorrence, lengthy quotes and sophisticated descriptions of Jack's work sit alongside derogatory and 'hostile' language. For example, Jack was portrayed as 'hair grey, long and

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17 KV2/3252, sheet 8a, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

18 KV2/3256, sheet 225a, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

19 KV2/3257, sheet 294b, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

untidy, complexion pale with pimply spots, large nose, small sore on upper lip, rather lined and worried face ... seems to stoop, sallow complexion, blotchy, untidy appearance, ruddy complexion, rough, unkempt. No hat'.<sup>20</sup> The descriptions regularly and repeatedly employ negative language which builds up a sense of dismay and suspicion. Such language suggests deep assumptions and prejudices on the part of the writer and pulls the reader into the suppositions and norms that it proposes.

While reading the files I was struck again and again by the level of detail and the sheer quantity of surveillance that occurred over a considerable period of time, particularly as there was no suggestion that anything illegal or any activity relating to espionage was occurring. Comparing Jack's eight files with those of other literary left-wing sympathisers and CPGB members indicates that in terms of both size and coverage, they are considerably larger than average. Only Harry Pollitt, who as General Secretary of the CPGB for nearly 30 years would have been expected to have been under constant observation, had more KV2/ files:

Randall Swingler	2 files
Emile Burns	4 files
Stephen Spender	2 files
Ewan MacColl	2 files
Harry Pollitt	14 files
W.H. Auden	1 file
Christopher Isherwood	1 file

As I have a deep personal conviction that Jack had no association with any kind of espionage the question arises as to why the secret service kept him under such detailed surveillance for so long. It seems likely that the answer to that question has little or nothing to do with espionage, but is about the complex relationship between the security services and the literary and cultural establishment. While this whole area needs further research a few hypotheses can be offered.

The security services identified Jack as a useful (if unwitting) source of names. He was extremely active in friendship societies, international and national literary groups, and he worked with such a wide range of people that he provided MI5 with a constant supply of people to add to their network:

2 March 1959

Dear Harlow,

Jack Whitestone LINDSAY @ John LINDSAY @ James COLLINS-BAKER.  
Bangslaps, Castle Hedingham, Halstead, Essex

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20 KV2/3252 – 3259, various sheets, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

I am applying for a new warrant to replace H.O.W number 12157, which has been operating on the above-named since December 1956.

As you will be aware this check has been continuously productive of information about the National Cultural Committee and the Writers' Group. It has also produced helpful details about the Historians' Group of the Party, of which LINDSAY is also a member.<sup>21</sup>

So, the surveillance of Jack was a good source of information for MI5. But this was not their only interest as is shown by the large number of papers which examine his literary output, access to the BBC and publishers, and his relationship with the Communist Party.

During and following the Second World War the secret service and the Ministry of Information employed writers such as Cecil Day-Lewis and Stephen Spender who had previously professed left-wing sympathies. Many such writers used their literary talents to the advantage of the war effort and, in the cold-war propaganda battle, formed an effective tool in the struggle to resist the popular swell towards left-wing ideology. Certainly James Smith, in his work on British writers and MI5, concludes that some disaffected left-wing authors were not just recipients of MI5's panoptic gaze but also engaged in covert political warfare against communism.

Could this be the impetus behind much of the MI5 surveillance? Was the intention to restrict and limit the career opportunities of left-wing writers, with vigilance to the possibility that they could become disheartened and turned into informants, or provide conservative propaganda in the form of critical reviews and journalism?

As noted earlier, the files have many redacted sheets. Where a sheet is absent it is replaced with a numbered and stamped blank page indicating that the original document has been retained 'in Department under section 3(4) of the *Public Record Act* 1958. May 2009'. The assumption is that the original pages have been removed because they could reveal the identity of informants. Although MI5 implies on its website that redactions are there to protect the identity of former staff and agents, it does not provide any information or justification for specific redactions. It says:

When we consider the release of historical papers, we have to take into account the need to protect former staff and agents. It remains a fundamental principle that we provide a commitment of confidentiality for the identities of such individuals indefinitely. We must also consider whether the release of intelligence records into the public domain will cause substantial distress to an individual and their family.<sup>22</sup>

Contrastingly, a spokesperson for Liberty says:

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21 KV2/3259, sheet 24, MI5 Files, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

22 <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/home/about-us/how-we-operate/managing-information/retention-and-destruction-of-files.html>, accessed Dec. 2014.

Unfortunately all work undertaken, and information held, by the security services (which includes MI5) is covered by an ‘absolute’ exemption under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. An absolute exemption means that MI5 did not have to consider the ‘public interest test’ when it considered your FOI request, i.e. even if there is a public interest in releasing the information, and no public interest in keeping the information confidential it is not obliged to release the information.

The matter is further complicated by the fact that the activities occurred between the 1930s and the 1980s. Prior to the Security Services Act 1989 the security services did not have a statutory basis, and their existence was not acknowledged by the Government. The activities of the security services were regulated by unpublished internal guidelines. The security services did not require a warrant to intercept communications until the enactment of the Intelligence Services Act 1994.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore it is possible that these records will never be made available and consequently the full story of informants over this era may remain untold. Despite this the KV2 series of archive papers offers considerable potential for research, providing an extraordinary window into left-wing political and cultural activities in the twentieth century. They provide a unique record of activities and data on the content of phone calls, meetings and networks of people which would not be available from any other source. However, it is a view through distorted glass into a myopic scene set by a powerful but isolated and self-referential organisation which reveals the prejudice of those who compiled them as clearly as the informational content reveals who travelled, where and when and to which meeting.

The objectification of the family is a particularly disorienting factor. There is a group of papers covering the period of Ann Davies’ illness and death that shows this disjunction in sharp focus. File KV2/3238 includes some letters from Jack which refer to Ann’s illness, followed by a telegram from ‘the writers of Rumanian People’s Republic’ sending Jack their heartfelt condolences. They are alongside a Special Branch report where Ann’s death is referred to in official language and an MI5 agent’s document which also mentions that she has died. The combination of this documentation side by side, and the idea that strangers were observing and writing about Jack during this sad and difficult time, is unnerving. Similarly, the meeting and association between Jack and my mother Meta Waterdrinker a couple of years later is covered by episodic documentation, including a photograph of her, and address and status checks which provide a disconcerting picture of a developing relationship.

Coming from a family of writers (father, uncle, cousin, grandfather are all published authors) who produced many autobiographical works I am used

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<sup>23</sup> NathanR@liberty-human-rights.org.uk; response to email enquiry, June 2014.  
www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk

to reading, sometimes in intimate detail, about their lives. From Jack's sunny but chaotic Brisbane childhood, through his ups and downs in Sydney, sexual encounters and move to England, there is an enormous amount of personal documentation by the Lindsay family and unsurprisingly over the years I have read much of it. This may have made me complacent about the impact of the files and the prospect of reading about Jack as portrayed by the secret service, for I was surprised by the strength of my reaction. But as well as finding the experience disturbing I have become increasingly fascinated by the way in which MI5 operated and have wanted to try to analyse and reflect on this strange chronicle of Jack and his activities.

There have, of course, been far greater atrocities and invasions into people's privacy by the secret service than this but when seen as a continuum of infiltration and covert observation the files support the view that there has been a dark underside of surveillance in the UK which has operated outside the law.<sup>24</sup> If the activities of the secret service were indeed angled to influence the ideological and cultural landscape as much as they were to identify espionage and incitement, then they may have had much more success than is commonly thought.

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<sup>24</sup> The clandestine activities of the secret service and Special Branch reached extreme proportions in the 1970s and '80s. See Rob Evans and Paul Lewis, *Undercover: The True Story of Britain's Secret Police* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013).