

## 2. From External Affairs to Academia: Coral's Encounter with the KGB's Spy Ring in Australia<sup>1</sup>

Desmond Ball

Coral Bell was one of the world's foremost academic experts on international relations and power politics. However, her life in academia was unintended. She had envisaged a vocation in international politics, but in some aspect of public service. Her move to academia was essentially an accidental by-product of a friendship with colleagues who were spying for the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

She began her career in the Australian Diplomatic Service, joining the Department of External Affairs as a Diplomatic Cadet in Canberra in 1945. Over the next three years, she got to know well several members of the Department who were members of the Soviet spy ring, especially Jim Hill (code-named 'Tourist') and Ric Throssell ('Ferro'). She subsequently became 'absolutely persuaded' that John Burton, the head of the Department, 'provided top-cover' for the spies. She believed that an attempt was made to recruit her in late 1947, and that her caustic response caused Burton to move quickly to sideline her in the Department.

Coral recorded her recollections of this controversial period in an unpublished memoir, which I discussed further with her on 15 November 2011 and 10 January 2012. She described the general security situation in External Affairs at the time, as well as her own personal experience, in great detail.<sup>3</sup>

In 1946–48, External Affairs was one of several Departments housed in West Block, on the western side of Parliament House. 'In those days we were a very small group: the whole of the diplomatic staff [about 30 people] could fit into one medium-sized seminar-room'. Security in the building was appalling. 'In those innocent days, no one, from the Minister down [in fact particularly the Minister], was in the least security-minded. There were no guards about, and practically no locks or barriers within the building.' Bell recorded that the staff 'used in most cases to bring sandwiches for lunch, and eat them sprawled on the lawn outside the office, not even bothering to lock our rooms as we left

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1 This is a revised version of Desmond Ball, 'Soviet Spies had Protection in Very High Places', *The Australian*, 14 January 2012.

2 Desmond Ball and David Horner, *Breaking the Codes: Australia's KGB Network, 1944–1950*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998.

3 Coral Bell, 'A Preoccupation with Armageddon', unpublished memoir, Canberra, 2012.

temporarily, though foreign diplomats roamed unescorted about the building'. She says that Dr Evatt, the Minister, 'not only did not believe in security; he despised security'.

In 1946, Bell was assigned to the United Nations Division of the Department, of which Burton was then the head as well as being head of the entire Department. Here she formed a close relationship with Hill and Throssell, her senior colleagues in the Division. 'I said I used to bring sandwiches for lunch, and eat them on the West Block lawn. And much of the time I had very pleasant company in the shapes of three agreeable young men, Jim Hill, Ric Throssell, and Fred Rose. Fred was an anthropologist who worked nearby, a great charmer who always seemed to be at everyone's parties'. Rose, who worked successively in the Department of Territories and the Department of Post-War Reconstruction, also worked for Soviet intelligence (code-named 'Professor').

At one of the lunches with Throssell, Hill and Rose in late 1947, after they had finished eating, Throssell said to Bell that, 'Some of us think that the Soviet Union ought to see these documents'. Bell said that, 'I assumed he was joking, so I laughed merrily, and said something to the effect that it sounded like a splendid way to get oneself into jail'.

Bell believed that Throssell told Burton of her 'frivolous' response, and that Burton 'acted fast' to remove her from his central policy division. 'A [week or two] after that carefree mention of jail, I had found myself transferred out of Dr Burton's UN Division to the Southeast Asia Division, so I saw less of the others. And again only a few months after that, in 1948, I was "posted" to the Australian office in New Zealand, so I never saw any of them again'. She resigned from the Department at the end of her term in Wellington in 1951, and moved to London to begin her illustrious academic career.

The 'documents' that were specifically referred to at the lunch were officially called Foreign Office Prints. They were important British Foreign Office dispatches and telegrams which were routinely distributed around the Foreign Office itself and to the Cabinet, other relevant government agencies in London, and the External Affairs Departments of a few Commonwealth countries. They were classified 'Confidential' rather than 'Secret' or 'Top Secret'. Jim Hill had already been providing this material to Soviet intelligence on a regular basis (every week or two) since at least September 1945. It was relatively low-level political reporting, although it gave Moscow a detailed picture of British foreign policy regarding numerous other countries and international issues.

Bell recalled the incident on the West Block lawn eight years later, in late 1955, when she was at Chatham House in London and read the section on Fred Rose and June Barnett in the Report of the Royal Commission on Espionage (the

Petrov Royal Commission). In April 1950, Barnett, who had only recently joined the UN Division, was invited to dinner by Rose at his home in Froggatt Street in Turner, where Rose introduced her to Walter Seddon Clayton, the 'spy-master' of the KGB's espionage network in Australia. Bell found that the arguments used by Rose to suborn Barnett included a 'precise sentence said to me, by Ric,' at the lunch in 1947.

Barnett's story raised with Bell 'the possibility that I might have been initially seen as a "possible recruit to the cause" by Ric and Fred and Jim, [and others higher up?]; and that she 'had disappointed that expectation with my light-hearted remark about jail'. She also realised 'that my subsequent days in the Department might have been influenced by those circumstances'.

Bell firmly believed that Burton provided 'top-cover' for the spies in his Department. 'Someone in Moscow must have had a sense of humour, for the code-name given to the Department of External Affairs was "Nook", and it definitely appears to have been one, in its standard definition of "a sheltered place". But who was doing the sheltering? To my mind, [it was] Burton, not Evatt'.

Indeed, Bell believed that Burton was more involved with Soviet intelligence than merely his 'top-cover' role. In particular, she considered the possibility that Burton was the principal contact of the head of the Soviet military intelligence (GRU) office in the Canberra Embassy, Victor Zaitsev. She said, 'I wouldn't be in the least surprised'.

Bell recalled Rose with some fondness. She said he was 'such a nice person', and 'very charming'. She went to parties at his house in Turner, which were also attended by Throssell and Hill. In 1948 to 1950, this house was the main 'drop' used by the spies in External Affairs to leave documents and other material for collection by Clayton. For the previous three years, Clayton had used a flat in Braddon, occupied by Throssell from 1947 to 1949, for this purpose.

Bell believed that: 'The truly tragic figure in all this was to my mind Ric Throssell. When I first knew him, round 1947, he was a handsome young man with apparently everything to live for, and prospects of rising to whatever eminence he wanted, either in diplomacy or politics, or even literature. He used to read to us, during those lunchtimes, bits of a play he was writing, all about atomic weapons and such'.

Coral was a woman of high personal principles. Although she had often intimated to me over the previous two decades that she had more information to tell about Burton, Throssell and Hill than Horner and I had recounted in *Breaking the Codes*, she had wanted to withhold it until her memoirs were

completed. She would not betray friends; she never lost affection for Rose and Throssell. She was always adamant, however, that the truth as she recollected it should eventually be told.

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