

The History Racket



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Blowing the Whistle on the Official Versions and Perversions of the Past

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ANDREW LOWNIE (PICTURE ON COVER PAGE) BLOWS THE WHISTLE ON THE HISTORY RACKET TO PETER JUKES AND HARDEEP MATHARU who explore the real threats to history – emanating not from ‘wokeists’ intent on rewriting the past but an establishment elite regularly burying inconvenient truths to maintain Britain’s mythic narratives.

He seems embedded at the heart of the British establishment. His house nestles in the Georgian back streets behind Parliament, close to the precincts of Westminster Abbey and the network of right-wing libertarian think tanks on Tufton Street. His father was a judge and the portrait of his wife’s grandfather, General Sir Archibald Ritchie, who led the 26th Brigade in the 9th (Scottish) Division at the Battle of the Somme, stares out imperiously above his desk.

But literary agent and historian Andrew Lownie now finds himself on the wrong side of Britain’s official history. He has become a rebel against a system which, in his eyes, consistently and deliberately censors and distorts our national past.

While the last decade or so of online propaganda wars have exposed the ‘information operations’ of digital data firms and state-sponsored cyber warriors, Lownie is fighting – at huge personal expense – against a more insidious form of manipulation: that of our fusty national archives.

This November will see the culmination of his campaign to have the letters of the late Lord Louis Mountbatten released in their entirety. To do so, he has conscripted the help of the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO), more readily associated with data protection investigations, such as tabloid

privacy intrusions in 2013 or the harvesting of millions of Facebook profiles by Cambridge Analytica in 2016.

Now, Lownie is relying on the ICO to uphold its decision ordering the documents in question to be published – and to dismiss the action by the Cabinet Office and Southampton University which have both been vigorously fighting against their release.

From phone and computer hacking, to the hacking of history – Lownie is blowing the whistle on the way history actually is being suppressed in Britain. And how this distortion leads all the way up the corridors of power into the heart of the monarchy itself.

Radicalised

My father was a judge. I trusted all the institutions. That’s why I wasn’t a natural rebel,” Lownie told Byline Times. “I assumed civil servants told the truth – I didn’t think politicians did, but I thought civil servants did and that their briefings were perhaps economical with the truth but that they were true – that they weren’t outright lies, which I now see time and time again.

Lownie’s first encounter with official censorship and suppression began more than six years ago when he was researching his book on the famous double agent and spy Guy Burgess. He found gaps in the official archives and started filing Freedom of Information requests to get access to the missing material. But these were met with constant evasion and delay, and he began to take the Government to information tribunals over the refusal of departments to release the material.

He soon concluded that officials were deliberately “suppressing information” and found himself at the sharp end of “a huge battle between historians and the Government to release stuff which legally they should release”. One example of official repression, Lownie says, was in relation to a vetting file for someone he suspected was part of the Cambridge spy ring, but who had been allowed to continue to work into the 1970’s. The

Foreign Office claimed the file could not be released for national security reasons, because it revealed details of the vetting process – even though the department publicly lists the details of the vetting process on its own website. It then claimed that it could not release the file because the son of the alleged spy would be shattered by the revelation – a selective use of the privacy rule, since it soon released the details about another spy in Prague, whose son was a public figure.

Lownie's book, *Stalin's Englishman: The Lives of Guy Burgess*, was due to be published in October 2015. The Foreign Office refused to give him early access to the 300 or so Burgess files it held – which were eventually publicly released two weeks before his book was published. To his shock and fury, Lownie discovered the department had let other historians have access to them six months beforehand.

“There was a rule for those, like the BBC, who either they trusted or were cosy with – and there were rules for historians who weren't part of the circle,” Lownie says.

Having not been a rebel before, the experience of the Burgess book “radicalised” him. “If you're going to have trust and transparency in Government,” Lownie argues, “they've got to behave openly and I've just found them more and more deceitful.”

To Lownie, the selective release of documents to a cartel of preferred historians is as controlling and dangerous as the client journalism of the lobby briefing system – where the lure of access often invites acquiescence via ‘government sources’. He refers to other “tame” historians and journalists who are “completely fed stuff by the intelligence services” because they are seen as “a safe pair of hands who will do their bidding”.

“My argument is that I'm independent, I'm not prepared to pay the price,” says Lownie.

But, for his next book, Lownie would pay a very steep price indeed. Sinking a quarter of a million pounds of his own savings into a battle between historian and state, Lownie was to find out just how determined

the powers that be were to keep the entirety of the diaries of the Queen's cousin and the last Viceroy of British India buried.

Deception Mounts

Along with foreign relations and issues related to 'national security', getting information on the royals is always an uphill struggle, according to Andrew Lownie, as they are exempt from Freedom of Information laws. There are also the courtiers, the men in grey suits, doing their bidding – ensuring blunders are spared and providing access to those willing to author the past in a favourable light.

Just what this involves was revealed to Lownie when he started researching his 2019 book, *The Mountbattens: Their Lives and Loves*.

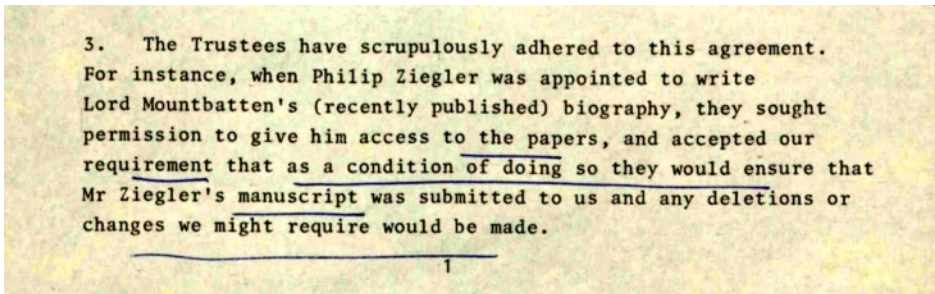
Having requested access to diaries and correspondence he knew to be in the possession of Southampton University's archives on Lord Mountbatten and his wife Edwina, he was told that this would not be possible. Challenging this at information tribunals over the course of four years, Lownie has been engaged in a shadow fight with seemingly no end against both the university and the Cabinet Office – which provided a secret "ministerial direction" that certain documents were not to be published without permission to Southampton when it took possession of the Mountbatten archives.

Lownie says he has continued with the battle despite his own book on the Mountbattens being published because it is "important as a principle and important for history to be able to get this stuff". He's also had enough of the deception. "I just got bolshy. I thought 'why should I give in to these bullies?'"

The Mountbatten documents which have already been released by Southampton University are "completely innocuous", Lownie says – which he argues shows that the Government and Royal Family are engaged in "censorship for the sake of censorship", in a bid to "discourage and make an example of me" and "discourage others". He speculates that Prince Charles is behind the obfuscation, as well as a key former courtier

in the Royal Household. But Lownie also believes the hurdles placed in his way are part of a regular system of historical suppression, which sees archivists and researchers willing to write acceptable accounts in exchange for being given access to information made unavailable to others.

Documents in The National Archives, for instance, show that an official, authorised biography on Lord Mountbatten by Philip Ziegler in 1985 was first submitted to the Government so that “any deletions or changes we might require would be made”.



According to Lownie, most historians know that this is how it works. So they either don't kick up a fuss, stop researching controversial areas, or – rarely – fight on.

“That’s one of the reasons I think no historian came on my side during the Mountbatten campaign,” he told Byline Times. “Not a single one came forward.”

Approaches to individuals and organisations to help fund his legal costs were met with private sympathy but no public support. One person said they didn't want to contribute even though they didn't like how Lownie had been treated because they were friends with a member of the Royal Family and didn't “want to do anything to affect that relationship”. Another refused to get involved “because he was hoping for a peerage”.

“They’re not going to rock the boat,” Lownie says. “You do see historians moving away from controversial areas, like the Royal Family, unless it’s going to be very supportive. Look at all the historians who wrote the puff

pieces about Prince Philip – those are the ones that want the peerages... People within academia probably feel that they have to do that, certainly at the beginning of their careers.”

While the back-scratching circles of historians providing each other with favourable reviews has always been a feature of the profession, Lownie’s experiences have revealed another level of cronyism on top of this: a world of favoured archivists controlling who gets to see which information and pliant historians willing to have their work influenced – both open to being rewarded for their partiality with more access and honours.

Lownie’s MP friends were another group reluctant to stick their heads above the parapet.

“I got the feeling people thought I was a nutter with this Mountbatten thing,” he says. “So MP friends of mine said they couldn’t help me with my campaign – that was both former Cabinet ministers who had nothing to lose and new MPs who I could see needed to work their passage.”

He says the former Cabinet ministers told him “there’s normally a good reason for the way they’re behaving” and that “they just assume that it’s logical and rational, which isn’t always the case”.



Treachery

“The only access we have to so much material is what they choose to give us. If you go to the files, the only files you’re going to see are the files they want you to see. So they have complete control over the information that you’re working from,” Lownie told Byline Times.

For his latest book, *Traitor King: The Scandalous Exile of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor*, Lownie got most of his material from the archives in the Bahamas, where the Duke of Windsor was appointed governor following his abdication as King Edward VIII. The differences between the documents available there, in contrast to the UK, were striking.

“The files are exactly the same as the files in The National Archives, the same numbering,” says Lownie. “But, if you look at what’s in The National Archives file and the Bahamas file, they’re very different. Pages aren’t there. That happens time and time again. That’s why I go to American archives, because we find so much stuff there in correspondence or in people’s private papers or diaries and there is no censorship at all. Whereas here, like Southampton with Mountbatten, there’s clearly pressure from the Government which they’ve kowtowed to.”

At the UK’s Royal Archives, for instance, there is no inventory provided – “a bit like going to a restaurant where there’s no menu”, Lownie observes.

Then there are the periodical “reviews” of archives by spooks. One Oxbridge college, for instance, is visited by the intelligence services to vet documents when newly-released files appear in its archives. “There are certain archivists who get OBEs and other archivists who don’t get OBEs,” Lownie says. “The ones who have OBEs are the ones who are very happy for them to come down.”

In his new book on another controversial royal figure, the Duke of Windsor, Lownie once again strays into territory others are reluctant to explore. His central thesis, that the duke was “actively engaged with the Nazis and that he should have been tried for treachery”, is not one which has been advanced by other historians.

“The line then and now is that ‘this is all an embarrassment, let’s brush it under the carpet’,” Lownie told Byline Times. “The book is about the cover-up that went on.”

At the end of the Second World War in 1945, German archives that were meant to have been destroyed were found by the Americans. A battle ensued, with Winston Churchill pressurising President Eisenhower to get rid of the so-called ‘Marburg Files’ on the Duke of Windsor. While Eisenhower seemed to be persuaded, American historians were outraged. “To their credit, the American historians said ‘this is history, we cannot get rid of it’,” Lownie says.

The Marburg Files were published in 1957 with some details missing – including the duke’s meeting with Hitler – and “tame people” were wheeled out to condemn suggestions that the Duke of Windsor had been conspiring against Britain, Lownie says.

“Their argument was ‘this is all Germans boasting to each other – these were senior diplomats, all clearly colluding to somehow trap the Duke of Windsor and this was all rubbish’.”



The Duke and Duchess of Windsor with Adolf Hitler at his home in the Bavarian Alps in October 1937. Photo: Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy

However, Lownie found the diary of an MI5 operative, as well as the diary of the private secretary of the sovereign, stating that the contents of the Marburg Files – and the concerns they caused about the Duke of Windsor’s actions – were all true. “It’s in the files that the FBI was watching the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and that they had been bugged,” says Lownie.

“The nearer you get to it, the less supportive you become” is his view of the institution of the monarchy now.

Myths

Stepping outside of the system of historical cronyism has come at a cost – “any public appointment I put in for, the response comes back the next day” – but Lownie has no regrets.

“I was not a natural rebel and it has made me really angry,” he says. “I have fallen out with a lot of friends who are much more establishment now – having moved from the left, have got very establishment and clearly don’t want to rock the boat and think I’m nuts or an obsessive.

“But I think it goes to the core of the whole relationship in a democracy between the governed and the government.”

While he believes history needs constant investigation and revision in the light of new facts, he does not agree with calls to remove statues of controversial historical figures. Lownie admits that “it’s not a very logical position I hold”, but his battles with government and royalty have made him suspicious of the instinct to interfere with the historical record.

“I just don’t like this idea of trying to destroy things from the past – that’s what happened, that’s part of history. I don’t like this rewriting, it’s quite Orwellian the whole thing,” Lownie says – observing that his own experiences can be characterised in the same way.

“So many of the archives are destroyed and we don’t know what’s destroyed, there’s no public inventory, they just destroy what they want.

Let's have all the information and then we can draw our own conclusions and people will have different conclusions and it doesn't mean you're not critical."

In Britain's current 'culture war' debates dominated by statues, flags, and simplistic narratives around Empire, there is widespread concern that history is somehow being suppressed in the name of 'political correctness', 'woke warriors' and 'cultural Marxism'. But Lownie's experience suggests that there is a much more powerful and insidious political correctness afoot – the self-censorship and cultural control coming from an establishment elite that is intent on burying inconvenient or uncomfortable truths.

For Andrew Lownie, it is important that the public knows that "the history which we've been given is not the true history".

"The historian's task is to try and find the truth about the past and not all historians are doing that in the way they should be," he told Byline Times. "They've either given up the fight or they're very happy to take the stuff they're given and pump out the same myths. There's a fear about telling the truth.

"The public might not care if they get a nice little story about Harry and Meghan, but they're not really getting what happened – and that's a banana republic."



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