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feature | Thomas Shepherd

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A LIFE IN MIRRORS

Jeff Sparrow and Rjurik Davidson meet Thomas Shepherd, a former ASIO informer

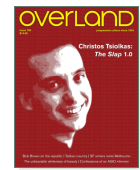
Thomas Shepherd does not seem like a spy. He walks slowly, gently, into the *Overland* office, and accepts a proffered cup of tea. He speaks softly; his tone measured, contemplative. But there's a sad hunch to his shoulders, a distinct note of melancholia in everything he says. Thomas Shepherd worked for over fifteen years as a 'sparrow', an undercover ASIO agent spying on the Left. The experience ruined his life.

The first hint of Shepherd's story came through the mail. The letter contained a scrawled email address for further correspondence but, oddly, no name, while the enclosed press release (headed 'ASIO agent thrown to the wolves') seemed, at first, another of those eccentric missives that literary journals inevitably attract. But in subsequent emails, Shepherd attached correspondence with ASIO in which he discussed infiltrating the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and, later, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), giving details that suggested an insider's knowledge of those groups. He gave the names of former and current SWP members; when contacted, they confirmed that a Thomas Shepherd of Chippendale was indeed expelled as a suspected informer. Shepherd had also been in touch, it later transpired, with a number of academics who had expertise in ASIO's history and they, too, believed his claims.

Within Australia, there is very little literature on the army of informants working undercover in left-wing organisations. In her play *The Spook*, Melissa Reeves dramatised the true story of Phil Geri, recruited as an ASIO agent in Bendigo in 1963 to infiltrate the local branch of the CPA. In 1991, Geri spoke to newspapers about his years undercover: 'It was a very lonely time. My whole life changed. I had played a lot of sport and enjoyed the army, but now I was regarded as a radical left-winger. Bendigo people just didn't know what had happened to me. It was extremely difficult to live with, and still is.'

The academic Phillip Deery used declassified files to chart the strange case of Max Wechsler, an ASIO agent who penetrated the CPA and then the Socialist Workers League (forerunner to the SWP) before going spectacularly public in 1975. In Deery's opinion, the stresses of 24-hour deception greatly contributed to Wechsler's eventual breakdown.

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Shepherd's story is similar. His years undercover, he explains, have left him with post traumatic stress disorder. He has received no compensation and ASIO has threatened prosecution if he divulges too much.

But he no longer cares what ASIO says. He simply wants to tell what happened to him, a story that begins at Sydney University.

I was about nineteen; I had just started university, first year Arts. A fellow called Mike rang me. This Mike asked me to meet him in a pub in Rushcutters Bay. He said he wanted to talk to me about the courses I was taking.

But being a pretty inquisitive, curious person, I wondered what it was about - he got my number from somewhere, after all! I thought I had nothing to lose: he was talking about better courses to do at university than the ones that I was doing. And it was during the day, at a reputable hotel. So I went and met him, one day in the afternoon, probably 1962 or 1963.

He started off with the usual boozy, football talk and then said, look, I've got a proposition for you. He came out and said he worked for ASIO and explained what a wonderful organisation it was and how it was defending Australia. We could use someone like you, he said. At that time, the Cold War was pretty rabid: 'Chinese under the bed', the Petrov Affair, all that king-and-country background.

This meeting went on for about two and a half hours. I was still hesitating and so he said to give him a ring if I had any further questions.

I thought about it, chewed it over. He didn't offer me the rewards that they offered others - a house, a pension for life, and so on - but he did say that I would be looked after, that I would never be let down.

Shepherd agreed to work for ASIO, though, he says, 'nothing was signed at that stage - except what they said was a secrecy agreement. There is actually no such thing as a Secrecy Act in Australia but there is a secrecy clause in the criminal law code. I don't know what I signed, but I did sign something and they threw this up at me a couple of times later.' In any case, he did not take the enterprise too seriously.

It was just a hoot. I didn't have any concerns about it. I honestly just thought it was a good game, a bit of an adventure.

Why did I join ASIO? I really don't know. I don't think James Bond was even around at that time. It's something that I'm really going to have to dig deeply to understand. But you see it all sounded appealing ... doing something for the good of your country, defending Australia as a wonderful place. Of course, at that time, I wasn't aware of all the situations in Australia that weren't so wonderful.

Why would they pick me? Why? I've never understood that. I was an ordinary sort of person: I'd done reasonably well in the Leaving Certificate in NSW but I didn't have any ambition. I didn't even know what I wanted to do - I just took Arts at Sydney University.

Geri's story might provide a partial answer. He, too, was contacted out of the blue. 'You've been recommended

Craig, Luoyang Chen, Jane Downing, and Jo Langdon. Featuring cover art from Liss Fenwick's haunting *Humpty Doom* series.



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to us,' the ASIO man said. 'I can't tell you who by, but we want you to become an undercover agent.' In Geri's case that recommendation probably came via his background in the army reserves, just as it's possible that ASIO learned of Shepherd through his mother, who moved in Sydney business circles.

At first, Shepherd was asked to attend the Sydney University Labour Club, a centre of student activism and the anti-war movement. Later, when he went to study at the Teachers College, he was told to join the Teachers Federation. 'I was fairly dormant there,' he says. 'ASIO never asked me to do much, just find out who was who and what were they talking about.'

He was eventually instructed to join the Earlwood branch of the CPA.

Did he understand how significant a decision he was taking? No, he says. At the time, becoming an undercover communist merely seemed an incremental development of what had come before.

I rang the branch secretary and signed up. I moved to Earlwood - before that I was living near the university in digs with friends - and I became more or less a protégé of this fellow. He took a shine [to me] because he was one of the few members there with a tertiary education of sorts, probably the youngest member of the CPA in Earlwood. He was pretty chuffed that he'd recruited someone. We did things like attending meetings; there were generally about ten or fifteen people there.

Shepherd was saving to go overseas, and the regular payments from ASIO, topping up his teaching salary, proved a major incentive to continue with what seemed, then, merely a temporary adventure.

Still, the changes he'd made to his life were significant.

I had moved into an area where I knew nobody and nobody knew me. I just had to fabricate a life, which was fairly easy, being twenty, since you've got a fairly nebulous identity, particularly in a new suburb.

The pressure of being two-faced, of deception, was always there. It was difficult to cope with: you were constantly thinking about the stories you had told, trying never to lie but to readjust the truth so it fitted into a gambit that suited you.

I virtually withdrew from the friends that I'd had. They'd all taken different paths, anyway: some had failed their first year at university, others had gone on to bigger and better things. The new school where I taught was where I made friends and so this new face was easy to carry there.

By that time, the CPA was already in decline. In 1945, it had boasted perhaps 20,000 members but by the early 1960s most of them had left, and a split with a Peking-aligned faction weakened the party further. Shepherd says:

It was a dying, fragmented organisation, mainly consisting of people older than I was - they were people in their forties who had ideals, but ideals to which the climate wasn't receptive. People in the general public were so brainwashed by Cold War propaganda that the CPA were having trouble financing themselves. But they were dedicated, they were honest, they were trying to build a better society. I mean, there was always rhetoric about how 'the revolution will come from the young and there will be a bloody overthrow' and so on, but there was really nothing revolutionary about the CPA in those days.



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And I was attracted to their ideas because to me they made sense. I almost went along forgetting about what I was doing - perhaps not forgetting, exactly, but putting my work for ASIO into a separate compartment, while agreeing with what was going on in the CPA. It was like the old idea of schizophrenia, where you have two separate personalities. I used to look at myself and think, well, you believe in what they're doing, so you are being immoral by reporting on them. But I never went further, I never took that stand. And I sublimated my concerns by telling myself that I didn't see the bigger picture, that I was a very small cog. And my handlers were constantly telling me what a good job I was doing, that the work was very helpful and that I just had to maintain my distance.

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Shepherd's sense of living two lives proved extremely difficult from the beginning. Phillip Deery suggests that spies in deep cover necessarily engage in 'looking-glass wars', in which reality and illusion become hopelessly confused. Something like that runs throughout Shepherd's narrative: on the one hand, a certain pride in his success at following ASIO's instructions; on the other, a growing admiration for the people on whom he was informing.

Interestingly, Phil Geri expressed an almost identical sentiment. 'The people I was spying on became my friends,' he told one newspaper. 'They weren't radicals, and they weren't interested in bombing anything. Their ideology was to change the world peacefully. I began to realise the information I was passing on was hardly relevant to national security. When I look back on my time spying on the CPA in Bendigo it was a complete and utter waste of time. There was not one shred of evidence of a group trying to bring down the government, or trying to cause harm to the people.'

Shepherd agrees. 'In retrospect,' he says, 'it was all useless; it was all pointless.'

All they wanted was as much detail about personalities as I could get. [Union leader] Jennie George was a typical example. At that stage she was very active in the Teachers Federation. ASIO's objective was for me to ingratiate myself with her and find out what the Teachers Federation was really doing - they weren't prepared to accept that the Teachers Federation was looking after the welfare of teachers. The idea was that the union was being financed and run by the CPA, and that these people had close links to Moscow, which wasn't true. But they were convinced that it was. And they said, you've just got to keep digging until you find it - and the best way was to ingratiate myself with someone like Jennie George. So I did. I was invited to her home, had meals, and so on. She and her husband were just great people, dedicated to the welfare of the teaching community.

ASIO just wanted any gossip, any information that could relate back to the CPA or any connections with the CPA. Were these people members of the CPA? What were their positions in the CPA? Where was funding coming from? Where were they being supported?

They were particularly interested in personal relationships. They wanted to know about who was getting off with whom, what kind of person everyone was. Were they stable or unstable, were they liars? Anything like that.

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In 1966, Shepherd left Australia on his long-planned overseas trip.

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ASIO told me that if I got the opportunity, I should make contact with any Left parties or groups. They gave me the names of people in the embassies and Australia House that I could contact. I went off, lived in Greece. I

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went to Turkey and then to Italy and lived there for a few years. I made no political contacts at all.

I eventually went to England and, on the way back, I got involved in May 68 in Paris, just as part of the mob on the street, which I thought was great fun.

When I returned to Australia ASIO said, well, we've got a new target for you: the SWP. I ummed and ahed about it because I was pretty heavily involved in a business my mother and my stepfather had set up. But in the end, I thought, why not? I don't know anyone in Australia any more. My ideas, my interests were completely different from any of my former friends. So I ended up saying yes again - probably because I'm weak, I'd always rather say yes than no. And it was that decision, when I came back from overseas, that really put the nail in coffin.

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The Trotskyist SWP of the early 1970s was a very different organisation to the CPA. Its members were younger and heavily involved in the anti-war movement, and their dynamism seemed, perhaps, attractive to a young man accustomed to an adventurous travelling life.

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I was supposed to find out how they were being financed. There were suppositions that they were being financed by the PLO, or that there was some dissident group in the Eastern Bloc that was financing them.

The other task was to break down all the people in the branch, to get a complete picture of their positions and their abilities. Was their objective a violent one? How were they planning to expand? How was Direct Action [the SWP paper] published? Where did the money come from to publish it?

ASIO was constantly suggesting that I should get onto the National Committee. Well, that was never realistic. I just wasn't well enough read in that area, though I read all the books they recommended. Maybe my heart wasn't in it. But at one stage I was director of sales for Direct Action, the minutes secretary at weekly meetings. I was a few other positions. I was involved with the production of Direct Action, with the proofreading, as well as being involved in all the regular activities.

The relationship with your handlers is always quite close but there's still a distance. They're forever wanting to get more and more information from you, persistently pushing, raising unattainable goals. They want to know everything, every action that you take, virtually every word that's spoken. They want accounts of conversations as close as they can be.

Then, at the same time, you are dealing with people you see as having sociopolitical ideals that have validity. Yes, they are recommending a violent overthrow but not in the blood-and-guts sense, more that violence will come because the entrenched want to stay entrenched.

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ASIO particularly wanted information on Marcia Langton, now a prominent academic but then a leading Trotskyist.

Shepherd's return to undercover work was, he came to see, a tragic mistake. The sense of betraying friends -



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It did have a bad effect on you, it really did. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, I understand psychologically why I'd go home and I'd get drunk. Without sounding melodramatic, I'd end up crying and thinking, what the fuck are you doing? These SWP people aren't doing anything harmful!

It took an enormous psychological toll - and I didn't understand that at the time. I started to be disgusted with myself that I was pimping on people, not all of whom I liked, but many of whom were genuine people. They had genuine ideas and the ideas were often good ideas, particularly in the context of the time. But I kept going. I knew that there were other people inside who were doing the same thing that I was. I didn't know who they were but because of comments that would come back to me I knew someone was also keeping an eye on me.

Around 1976, I had a big breakdown, for reasons which at the time I did not fully understand. ASIO didn't do anything to help; they didn't pursue it. I just took a couple of days out and then thought, well, what are you going to do? Are you going to keep going or are you going to pull out?

So I said to ASIO, this is going nowhere: either I'm full-time or I'm out. Before that, it had always been meetings in cars or my mother's house, where they handed over cash and I'd signed for it in a false name. When I went full-time, I signed a contract under my real name and was put on a wage. From that point, I'd meet with my handler on a weekly basis, sometimes twice weekly. The whole week was taken up with the SWP.

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He continued until 1979, when everything fell apart. He explains:

I was very close with one of the women members and she used to come to my place quite a lot: an old terrace house in Chippendale. But we never went upstairs. Upstairs was my own fantasy world, my only escape. When I'd been in Italy, I'd been very taken by a painting of the crucifix of St Francis of Assisi [sic] - not the religious aspect but the artistic aspect. I had bought a larger copy and had it above the bed. One day, we went upstairs, and as soon as she saw the crucifix, she went back to the SWP headquarters and raised the alarm

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The cross, Shepherd says, represented all the ideas the SWP sought to overcome, and its presence in his private sanctum naturally raised suspicions.

They went on and on about religion and what my thoughts on religion were. I was into classical music and about a month before I'd been to Newcastle to see a Schubert mass. I couldn't give a stuff about the mass part but the music was brilliant. When I got back I was asked where I had been and I said I went to Newcastle to see a Schubert mass. That was a chink in the armour. Plus at the time I was seeing a non-SWP woman who had suggested we get married. I had spoken to someone in the SWP about it as a confidant. She reported it, because marriage was not the done thing. These things all added up.

[SWP leader] John Percy called me in and asked whether it was true that I had a crucifix over my bed. I said yes, for there was no point in denying it. They told me that my membership was suspended and sent me home with three other comrades, who searched my house. Three days later, they called me back. They'd done all their investigations and confronted me. They didn't accept my answers but they couldn't find anything that implicated me as an ASIO agent. So they labelled me as some rabid right-wing religious infiltrator.

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Jamie Doughney - then a senior SWP member and now an academic at Victoria University - subsequently confirms that the charges were merely a pretext. 'Shepherd always appeared to be, and was widely regarded

as being, an ASIO agent,' he says. 'He did not seem to fit in. If he wasn't an agent, we wondered why he'd ever joined. My recollection of the crucifix stuff was that, in the absence of positive confirmation, it was just an excuse to get rid of him.'

Where Doughney struggled to remember details, Shepherd becomes visibly emotional discussing the accusations. 'They never proved anything,' he says. 'There was no proof!' The expulsion seems to have left Shepherd shattered, not only because he feared how his former comrades might react but also because of the sudden and irrevocable severance from a world in which he'd been immersed for half a lifetime.

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It was devastating. Devastating. I was terrified, almost to the point of paralysis. I didn't know how they were going to react; I didn't know what to expect. I was half-expecting violence. There was nobody I could turn to, nobody I could talk to, since I couldn't get to a handler. It was very hard.

After the final session with the SWP, I went back to my mother's place, and she looked at me and thought I'd broken up with my fiancé because I seemed so devastated. From there I went to my fiancé's place and lived there in fear. I don't really know what I feared but I expected there would be retaliation of some sort.

ASIO was trying to get me to do debriefing sessions with them. But I'd already been through two episodes of debriefing that were ludicrous since I didn't have anything in common with the handlers, who were mostly hard-drinking, sporty types. So I said to them, your debriefing sessions are absolute bullshit. They don't work.

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At that time, no-one - not his fiancé (later his wife) nor his mother - knew he'd been employed by ASIO. Until he broke the news of his double life, his fiancé had been wondering whether, perhaps, he'd been having an affair.

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When the exposure took place, I told her briefly what had happened, and that I was scared. She was prepared to take me under those conditions and she spent the next twenty years looking after me. We eventually left Sydney permanently, went up the coast to live in a tiny hamlet outside Taree where nobody knew who we were. It was on a farm and I thought that I could spend a couple of years there and sort myself out. But it didn't happen. I was having nightmares, terrible hallucinations. I was drinking and smoking a lot; I was growing my own pot.

It was drummed into me so much about secrecy - that, if you revealed anything, you'd be in the shit - that I didn't even tell my doctors. In 1989, I went to the doctor, unable to sleep, and was given massive doses of Rohypnol, Prozac, Serepax, Valium, you name it. The doctor could never understand why I was in such a bad state. He put it down to a bad relationship with my wife, which it wasn't.

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Over the next years, the prolonged stress and trauma, combined with a concern about retaliation and a deep unease about what he'd done, sent Shepherd into a downward spiral.

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Eventually, I went to ASIO and asked them for help and they virtually said, get lost. I approached Ian Carnell [the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security] and he said, they've treated you very shabbily but because

you had a contract you can take them to Comcare [the agency responsible for compensation for commonwealth employees]. In the application for Comcare, there was a question about when the symptoms first appeared. My reply was that they started in 1962, when I first started living a double life. Fear of exposure, fear of retribution, fear of failure: all of those, over twenty years, led to the situation I'm in.

Up until twelve months ago, I was still having nightmares, about facing the people in the SWP, reoccurring nightmares about being followed or following people. I still suffer enormously from hyper-vigilance. Still I won't drive directly to my home. I go around the block because I'm almost paranoid - no, I am paranoid. It's a combination of things which is why Comcare has twice refused my claim. They say, well, it couldn't have this effect and, anyway, why did you not do something for twenty years?

My wife suffered enormously. We divorced. And it was then that I approached ASIO, saying that I need psychiatric help.

They sent a psychologist who works for ASIO. ASIO then said they would pay for three sessions. I replied, do you honestly think that I'll get any benefit out of three sessions? Well, I went for three sessions and then continued paying my own way for six months. After that, I couldn't afford it.

Now I've been going to a new psychiatrist for the past twelve months. I'm very highly medicated on all sorts of antidepressants and I'm at the Administrative Appeals Tribunal in Sydney trying to get somewhere.

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Asked what he's now seeking, Shepherd hesitates.

'I don't know,' he says at last. 'I just want satisfaction: a recognition that they've fucked up my life in the same way as they've fucked up the lives of other agents I've spoken to. Okay, I'd appreciate some kind of Gold Medicare card, maybe superannuation or pension, if they're prepared to offer compensation. But they're not. So it's the old age pension and maybe a stint in Silverwater prison for going public.'

Thomas Shepherd is a former ASIO agent.

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