Keith Jeffery, intelligence historian (1952-2016)

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Obituary

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Many readers of this journal will have their own memories of Keith, distinguished historian, raconteur, connoisseur of good food and wine, great colleague, and terrific friend. Keith was an outstanding military historian, a specialist on Irish history, and author of a prize-winning biography of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson. But in the aftermath of his sadly early death on 12 February 2016, I would like to pay particular tribute to him as an historian of secret intelligence. Though he had a long-established interest in the field and had written about intelligence in a number of his earlier works, it was his appointment as the official historian of the Secret Intelligence Service, to write the first ever authorised history of MI6, which exposed him to the workings of the secret world from the inside, rather than the outside.

When Keith asked me to join his research team, to provide the Whitehall context for the SIS story, he told me that his first months in the job had been like being parachuted behind enemy lines. It was not that people were hostile or unhelpful, merely that it was a completely different world. Historians normally write about how intelligence operations were carried out, or their impact on events; now Keith encountered the professionals responsible for planning and implementation, concerned with secrecy and security rather than recording their achievements. His ability to absorb the atmosphere and the culture was a key element in the success of his groundbreaking volume published as MI6 in 2010.

Keith used to say that being asked to write the official history of SIS was an irresistible challenge: like being given the keys to the sweet shop. But this shop did not have neatly arranged shelves with labelled products: secret organisations are not in business to provide records for future historians, but for operational utility. Finding the raw material was a major task, before deciding how to use it. Many people assume that there must be a rich store of material hidden away that would answer all the questions if it were available. That is certainly not true for the period covered in Keith’s volume, the first forty years of SIS from 1909-49. It was like doing a very complex jigsaw where many pieces were missing from the box and might—or might not—turn up somewhere else. Keith’s enthusiasm for finding the pieces and assembling a coherent picture was infectious throughout our small team, while his good humour and encouragement made our job not only enjoyable but exciting, too. And though it was a collaborative process, it was his knowledge, skill, and understanding that drove the project through to its very successful conclusion, despite the fact that he was seriously unwell at times. MI6 was by no means the end of Keith’s achievements as a historian, but it marks him out as an intelligence historian of great distinction. We shall all miss him.