

Secret Sharers

A review of Sinclair McKay's *The Secret Life of Bletchley Park, the WWII Codebreaking Centre and the Men and Women Who Worked There*

Sheila Lawn, summoned to the Park when she was 19:

"How could I really speculate about what I was getting into?

This was a very secretive business, you see."

Since the publication of Frederick Winterbotham's *The Ultra Secret* in 1974, the story of Bletchley Park has been public knowledge. Before that, we knew nothing. At the end of the Second World War in 1945, the Park was shut down and Prime Minister Churchill ordered its records destroyed.

Thousands of men and women served at Bletchley, among them codebreakers, translators, linguists, cooks, cleaners, drivers, classicists, engineers, clerks, handy-men, messengers, and mathematicians. Some were military, including a small number of male officers and many female non-officers, mostly Wrens (women who served with the WRNS, the Women's Royal Naval Service). The majority, however, were young civilians, female and male, with more of the former than the latter.

Some served at Bletchley for months, others years; most seem to recall it warmly. A few met their future spouses there, and thousands entered adulthood in the Park's intense, sometimes feverish, wartime seclusion. All served a single purpose, directly or in support: the breaking of intercepted enemy encryptions originating from the German Enigma and Lorenz ("Tunny") cipher machines, and the provision of

decrypted intelligence, codenamed “Ultra,” to the British government and armed services. In the end – thanks to individual genius, the genesis of computer technology, and grinding, round-the-clock labour – they are said to have shortened the war by at least two years. Might the Allies have lost without Ultra? It seems possible. At the very least, the war’s outcome – and Britain’s survival – rested with Bletchley to a remarkable degree.

In addition to its staff’s brilliance and dedication, the Park’s success depended on what seems an almost superhuman restraint and discretion. As Sinclair McKay shows in *The Secret Life of Bletchley Park* – an absorbing overview and oral history of the codebreaking centre – Bletchley’s people were subject to surveillance and potential discipline by MI6, Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). All had signed the Official Secrets Act and were expected to maintain an absolute and indefinite silence about their work and everything related to the Park.

In 1938, anticipating war, the SIS sought a relatively remote site for its Government Code & Cypher School (GC&CS). Admiral Sir Hugh Sinclair, head of SIS, thought the Bletchley Park property suitable and, with his own money, bought the Buckinghamshire mansion and acreage. Located fifty miles north of London, the estate – sometimes known as B.P. or Station X – started filling up with intelligence operatives, assorted boffins, Oxbridge dons, and a range of young men and women tasked with doing their bit to outwit a brilliant enemy. They were responding to a challenge, McKay writes, one “that would require not merely diamond-sharp minds, but also . . . the energy and the character to face exhausting trials of patience. Recruits with the strength to focus every single day upon tasks of stunning complexity, without letting the pressure undermine their mental well-being.”

For many at Bletchley, including those who toiled on the “fearsomely complicated” prototype code-breaking computing machines, the Park operated on the naval watch system: three eight-hour watches a day, rotated weekly, with the night watch

particularly unpopular. The work often required hours of relentless concentration, perfectionist attention to detail, and mind-numbing repetition. Burnout was not uncommon. “It would get too much for some,” a veteran recalled. “The strain really did tell.”

It’s significant, therefore, that so many of those who served at Bletchley remembered it with the “utmost fondness.” One said: “Even though I’ve had wonderful friends since, I’ve never experienced that atmosphere of happiness, of enjoyment of culture, of enjoyment of everything that meant life to me.”

So much at Bletchley was hard work, but there was fun as well: social clubs, games, sports – Churchill ordered the construction of tennis courts – musical events, theatrical performances, lectures, classes, and dances. It was a time when people aspired to culture, and the Park was a place where men and women from all backgrounds rubbed elbows not only at work or in the cafeteria but in off-duty social and intellectual activities. Away from the Park there were picnics, bicycle rides along country lanes, and shared trips to one town or another. Not surprisingly, given Bletchley’s “hothouse atmosphere,” there was also the possibility of romance.

In the end, however, service at the Park was a serious affair. Decades later, one veteran wrote that she was “‘sick to the back teeth’ of articles about the Park placing so much emphasis on the ‘dancing on the lawn’ and the social side of it. This, she said, was a time of war and the work was extraordinarily hard, and it is that aspect that ought to be remembered.”

In any case, not everyone liked Bletchley. Marjorie Jelinek, a former Wren, contributed the following to the BBC’s archive of wartime memories:

I left school early, as we did, many of us, in those days, with the wish to join something [and the vague idea that I should do something for My Country . . .] . . . so I joined the WRNS. A mistake, as it proved, for I spent a thoroughly unhappy 2 years – and did very little for my country. I was posted to Bletchley Park. . . . How exciting! Some would say; not so. Nobody trained me for anything, not even when I was put onto operating a vast machine [early computer prototype]. I hadn’t a clue what I was doing. . . . So I was more relieved than most when the war ended.

Overall, however, most who served at Bletchley seem to have valued their time there. They had shared a unique experience and an historical achievement. They'd been in on something special.

The catch at Bletchley – and there was one – was “once in, never out.” Young men who asked permission to volunteer for active service were routinely turned down from a sensible fear that their potential capture and interrogation could mean the end of the Park. Similar if less dramatic concerns existed in relation to other personnel. With rare exceptions, men and women who served at Bletchley – regardless of their role or status – stayed at Bletchley.

So much was at stake, and the Park's security, in spite of every precaution, was so fragile. Looking back, one veteran said: “When you think that about nine or ten thousand people worked in all the various sections of Bletchley Park, it is really quite incredible that the secret never got out.” It could have gone smash so easily. The Germans could have figured out that their codes had been broken. Or someone at Bletchley could have been unintentionally reckless. Or a spy could have breached the Park's security.

Sarah Baring, who came to Bletchley in 1941, said that the “awful thing was they couldn't give you the sack. Because you knew too much. So God knows what they would have done if anyone did talk. And nobody ever did.” That may not have been entirely true. It's said that a female academic at the Park was indiscreet after drinking too much at a party and “was never heard of again.” And there *was* a spy, a very successful one, though for Russia not Germany: John Cairncross, said to be the fifth of the infamous Cambridge Five who spied for Moscow. And perhaps, as McKay says, “the reason we have heard so little about security breaches at the Park is because such information remains sensitive today.”

Security at Bletchley was built into its organizational structure. Codebreaking, for example, was compartmentalized: discrete sections, focusing on different tasks, were segregated physically – often in what were called “huts” – and staff were forbidden to discuss their work with people from other sections.

Silence and discretion were imposed in the clearest terms. “Secrecy and security,” McKay writes, “were woven into the texture of life at Bletchley to an extent that is almost pathological. Some veterans were to recall that security at the Park was heavy and unremitting.” It wasn’t just the Official Secrets Act and the awful if unspecified retribution it promised. It was the shared fear of indiscretion. From a 1942 staff communiqué:

Secrecy. This may seem a simple matter. It should be. But repeated experience has proved that it is not, . . . Month after month instances have occurred where workers at BP have been heard casually saying things outside BP that are dangerous. It is not enough to know that you must not hint at these things outside. It must be uppermost in your mind every hour that you talk to outsiders. Even the most trivial-seeming things matter. The enemy does not get his intelligence by great scoops, but from a whisper here, a tiny detail there. . . . There is nothing to be gained by chatter but the satisfaction of idle vanity, or idle curiosity: there is everything to be lost – the very existence of our work here, the lives of others, even the War itself.

By appealing to character and integrity, security was based to a large extent on the individual’s sense of responsibility. When someone did behave unwisely, “action was swift and low-key. One gets the sense that the Bletchley method of securing silence was mostly a visit from an Intelligence operative to put the frighteners on the offender.”

It doesn’t seem that the heavies were needed much. Secrecy, discipline, and probity tended to be self-imposed. As for curiosity, Sarah Baring said that it became second nature not to pry: “The information somehow becomes so precious. It’s the lives of your comrades, isn’t it.” And the war’s outcome was far from certain. The men and women at Bletchley feared not only an Axis victory but the possibility that a critical misstep on their part might contribute to Allied defeat. More prosaically, as one veteran pointed out, “this was a period in which all natural curiosity was numbed.

You just accepted everything you saw and you didn't ask. If there was a need to know, you were told."

Surprisingly, few restrictions were placed on leaves. Staff could go where they pleased, though of course they couldn't reveal anything about their work or the Park. The security implications must have been enormous, but trust seems to have done the trick. Recruits devised cover stories about their service, usually bland and vague, and it seems that friends, families, and neighbours at home – like people living near the Park – didn't pry. McKay says of this "conscious mass discretion" that stifling "the urge to discuss, or speculate, seems to have become endemic. . . . It was widely understood whether in the forces or as a civilian, that one should discuss no more than necessary."

The war ended in 1945, but for Bletchley veterans peace brought no end to wartime silence and dissembling. Russia, until recently an ally, had become the new enemy, and in the intensifying, high-stakes Cold War the skills and technologies developed at the Park were redirected to cracking Moscow's codes. The West's security, it was believed, depended on continued secrecy, and those who had served at Bletchley were ordered to say nothing about their war.

As a result, unlike the men and women whose service was a matter of record, Bletchley veterans carried on without recognition, reunions, or the right to tell their story to anyone, including family, friends, and potential employers. Codebreaker John Herivel's father died in 1951. Shortly before his death, the disappointed father exclaimed: "You've never done anything!" John didn't correct him. "The Official Secrets Act," McKay writes, "was so deeply impressed upon everyone who signed it that even under this terrible weight of provocation, he [Herivel] could not imagine himself breaking it. "But really," he said, "out of all those people who had signed that act, I wasn't going to be the one who broke it."

There are stories of former Bletchley operatives going to their graves without telling their spouses, parents, or children about their role in the war. One husband and wife didn't know for decades that they'd both been codebreakers. As they and their colleagues saw it, they had signed an oath of secrecy, and that was that, so for thirty years it was as though their war had never happened.

As at Bletchley, post-war secrecy was, to some extent, imposed: the government's security apparatus and threat of prosecution under the Act saw to that. Again, however, there tended to be a *self-imposed* secrecy as well. It wasn't just fear of the consequences that kept the Park's former staff quiet.

Many Bletchley veterans chose to remain silent for reasons of their own. Some said they had sworn an oath, and it was that simple: "a promise had been made, and it had to be kept." Others felt that continued secrecy was a duty; if the authorities believed something should stay secret, one's duty was clear. Still others buried their memories, putting the past behind them, convinced that this was for the best. They'd been trained to internalize silence, and silent they would remain. "It was subconscious," Sheila Lawn said. "I just never thought about talking."

Many veterans believed that Winterbotham – an ex-field operative – had betrayed the Park and his country by exposing the codebreaking centre three decades after the war. Perhaps a few felt liberated by his revelations, but most seem to have viewed his actions as boastful, dishonourable, shameful.

McKay suggests another reason for the veterans' continued silence: "Secrecy has, until recently at least, been something of a British fetish." Further, "the idea of staying mum retained not merely its importance but also its dignity." If this is true, Winterbotham stole something from the Bletchley people, the special thing they'd served through a lifetime's dignified silence. They had carried their secret for years. Now, in the new tell-all world and with Bletchley blown, their service was over and they were diminished. Something important had been taken from them, something at once personal and very much of their generation.

McKay quotes author Neal Ascherson, whose sister had been a Wren at Bletchley. About her post-war refusal to talk, he wrote: "That silence was very British. Nobody else could have kept it and nobody was rewarded for keeping it. We wouldn't be able to keep such silence today."

Social media, global connectivity, and pressure on the young to market themselves, make humility and discretion seem not merely anachronistic but, for some, inconceivable. Celebrity culture, exhibitionism, uncritical sympathy for whistle-blowers, and the shouty twenty-first century ethos of transparency and personal expression make restraint seem passé, even risible. "On top of this," said Mavis Batey, a former codebreaker, we have mainstream media "giving away serious intelligence. It's as if the idea of secrecy has gone."

Indeed, as Peter Stanford said in a 2014 article in *The Telegraph*, it is impossible to imagine a comparable silence in our time, when secrecy carries "a malign, sour, sinister note." The Bletchley veterans' "long witness to the value of silence . . . stands as a reminder of the value of another way of behaving."

But, as Stanford himself points out, secrecy *can* be malign, and there's a more affirmative side to openness:

This rush to discard and discredit 'old-fashioned' discretion and secrecy in all its forms is part of a larger – and often more positive – change. Keeping painful memories bottled up, for example, is now understood to be profoundly psychologically damaging, in contrast to the stiff-upper-lip received wisdom of pre-war times.

Secrecy can be excessive, repressive, unnatural, unhealthy. Having what it takes to keep a secret is one thing, secretiveness another; dark things happen in the shadows and people get hurt. So as tacky and sad as our era's hunger for the sensational, the confessional, and the self-promotional may be, our world is in many ways an improvement over an intolerant and less inclusive past. We have only to think of Alan Turing, Bletchley's most famous codebreaker, treated as a criminal in the 1950s because of his homosexuality.

In the end, however, the Bletchley story is one of restraint not repression. For many veterans of the Park, their silence was rooted in pride, dignity, and purpose, and as McKay shows, they kept the faith and held to their sense of duty. There was a very *secret* service, during the war and for years after, as they kept the ultimate Bletchley secret: that it (and therefore they) had existed at all. ■

See Sinclair McKay's *The Secret Life of Bletchley Park, the WWII Codebreaking Centre and the Men and Women Who Worked There*, Aurum Press, 2010.

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