



Master of Deception: The Wartime Adventures of Peter Fleming by Alan Ogden.

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In his early but authoritative history of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) during the Second World War, M.R.D. Foot notes the difficulty of researching and writing about how the organization waged its war of deception against the Axis powers: “Unhappily for the historian, deception was plunged in the deepest secrecy at the time, and has not been much illuminated by later disclosures. The whole subject is tricky and slippery, and is currently wrapped in a particularly dense cloud of secrecy.”¹ Thirty-four years on, former infantry officer and archivist of the Grenadier Guards Alan Ogden has made a significant scholarly (yet lively) contribution to that arcane field of study with *Master of Deception*, an in-depth look at SOE subterfuge through the career of one of its most skillful practitioners, Peter Fleming.² In the course of Ogden’s study, which draws liberally from declassified documents, Fleming emerges as something close to a real-life 007, but one more authentic, fallible, and beleaguered by bureaucracy than his more famous brother’s freewheeling creation.

Unlike Duff Hart-Davis’s treatment of Fleming,³ Ogden’s book is more a history of one man’s work for British special forces over a seven-year period. From 1939 to 1946, Fleming conceived and orchestrated a range of military and counterintelligence operations first against Nazi Germany and then Imperial Japan. His activities included organizing resistance efforts in Norway, training British stay-behind forces, recruiting Italian POWs, cultivating Greek guerrilla fighters, and finally conducting an elaborate deception campaign in the Far East. While many of these efforts failed outright or met with questionable degrees of success, Fleming’s wartime service was remarkable for its ingenuity and Ogden’s book provides a much needed assessment of the man and his methods.

Ogden, a travel writer as well as historian, has an eye for the curious and the exotic. His episodic approach would suit a rather rollicking Netflix series based on his subject’s adventures. Fleming’s own career as a journalist clearly prepared him for life in the field. By the mid-1930s, he had made a name for himself as a witty globetrotter and author of publications like *Brazilian Adventure* (1933), an account of his attempt to trace the ill-fated expedition of Col. Percy Fawcett, who set out in 1925 to find the lost Amazonian city of Z. Fleming’s account, which Ogden calls “a grand caper reported with a liberal dollop of understatement and laid-back insouciance” (3), revolutionized the genre of travel writing and launched the young man on further treks into China, India, and Russia. Fleming’s intrepid spirit earned him the reputation of “a modern Elizabethan”

1. *SOE: An Outline History of the Special Operations Executive, 1940-46*, rev. ed. (Frederick, MD: U Pubs of America, 1986) 156.

2. Ogden’s earlier work includes several other books on the SOE: *Through Hitler’s Back Door: SOE Operations in Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria, 1939-1945* (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2010); *A Spur Called Courage: SOE Heroes in Italy* (London: Bene Factum, 2011); *Tigers Burning Bright: SOE Heroes in the Far East* (id., 2013); *Sons of Odysseus: SOE Heroes in Greece* (id.).

3. *Peter Fleming: A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974).

(5), and in 1935 he married one of the most beautiful and talented actresses of the time, Celia Johnson. All the while, he was also working as an investigative journalist, reporting on the political vicissitudes of the 1930s. As Ogden aptly puts it, Fleming the writer “wore two hats”:

The first, predominantly of clownish design, he donned when writing about his travels, reeling off light-hearted, witty and derring-do pieces to entertain and enthrall his readers; the second, a hybrid between a bowler hat and a military cap, was worn when engaged on serious political and military enquiries and gave his work the authority of an expert commentator and perspicacious political analyst. (9)

A cross between “an avant-garde travel writer and diplomat manqué” (9), Fleming eventually caught the eye of British intelligence. Ogden speculates he may already have been working for the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) while traveling through the Soviet Union (10). At any rate, in 1939, with war on the near horizon, Fleming received a captain’s commission in the Grenadier Guards and shortly joined Military Intelligence Department One (Research), known as MIR, the forerunner of the SOE.

The new hat fit, and Fleming took to his role with gusto. His early efforts on behalf of MIR consisted of training troops at home and abroad to thwart anticipated German invaders. However, pulling guerrillas out of a hat proved to be quite a challenge. In April 1940, Fleming and a small force landed in besieged but neutral Norway, where they set up headquarters in the far northern municipality of Namsos. After additional Allied troops arrived by sea, they made their way south, playing “a cat and mouse game” (29)—sometimes on skis—with the advancing German army. But, despite a valiant effort, they were eventually forced to retreat. Back in England, Fleming found himself for a time in rural Kent, training stay-behind units that could be activated in the event of a successful German invasion. Their arsenal included bows and arrows tipped with a potent poison Fleming discovered in the wilds of Brazil.

After the newly established SOE absorbed MIR, Fleming was sent to Greece in March 1941 to establish a similar training program, but this “Greek tragedy,” as Ogden characterizes it, ended in yet another unsavory withdrawal (chap. 5). Fleming’s official report reveals his frustration with the local forces: “The retreat of the Greek Army was greatly retarded by the universal custom of jumping out of your lorry and running 300 yards if you or one of your friends thought he heard an aeroplane” (quoted in Ogden, 48). When possible, Ogden lets Fleming tell his own story, and the book is richer for it.

Most of *Master of Deception* concerns the second, more significant phase of Fleming’s wartime service—his role in the deception campaign in Southeast Asia in 1942–45. Based primarily in New Delhi, under the command of Gen. Archibald Wavell and later Lord Louis Mountbatten, Fleming and his unit, D. Division, conceived and implemented a wide variety of strategic ploys, mostly intended to exaggerate the Allied Order of Battle and hence dissuade the Japanese from making further advances. One of Ogden’s major contributions here is his clarifying of the relationship between deception operations in the Far East and their better known counterparts in the European theater. A number of Fleming’s devices were variations of the so-called “haversack ruse,” the planting of falsified documents for the enemy to discover and, ideally, act upon. Inspired by Operation Mincemeat, in which British naval intelligence planted forged papers on a corpse at sea to deceive the Germans, Fleming masterminded Operation Fathead, in which he disguised a cadaver as an unlucky parachutist dropped behind enemy lines (chap. 7). He also took advantage of ULTRA intercepts, intelligence derived from cracking the Enigma code, in Operation Purple Whales, a communication channel for red herrings through which Fleming transmitted

fabricated military conference proceedings and other sham documents (chap. 9). ULTRA allowed him to track the progress of his counterfeit creations through the Japanese chain of command.

As a writer, Fleming was adept at constructing believable fictions. In cooperation with MI5, he developed a false persona associated with the GARBO network in Britain, a collection of fictitious spies German intelligence believed were supplying credible intelligence. Fleming's fantasy agent, codenamed GLEAM, ostensibly a member of the Women's Royal Naval Service in Sri Lanka, transmitted phony intelligence to the Germans in Lisbon, who then passed on her messages to the Japanese (chap. 16). Fleming, Ogden observes, worked not unlike a composer: "Using nearly every channel at his disposal like sections of an orchestra and the Dummy Order of Battle he had so painstakingly created as his musical score, Fleming wrote and conducted a masterful symphony of deceit" (222).

Fleming's war ended in August 1945 with the US bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The sudden termination of hostilities left a number of his plans in suspension, and his overall contribution to the war effort is difficult to gauge. One reason for his operations' often negligible results, Fleming believed, was the incompetence of the Japanese military, who never seemed to know what to do with the bogus intelligence they had been handed (270). Another barrier was his superiors in London and New Delhi, who failed to articulate a clear policy regarding the Far East (269).

Fleming ended the war as a lieutenant colonel, and he was discharged in 1946 at age thirty-nine. For his efforts, he was awarded an OBE, an honor that Ogden judges "paltry" (264). Whatever Fleming himself may have felt, he eschewed further government service, for which he would have been well suited, and opted instead for the life of a country squire. It is telling that the only work of fiction he wrote based on his extraordinary wartime experiences was his novel *The Sixth Column*⁴—a satire.

Ogden's book is packed with documentation that can make for dense reading. Besides maps, photos, staff lists, and organizational charts as complex as the family trees of European royalty, the author includes lengthy reproductions of reports and official papers within the body of the text itself. As a result, *Master of Deception* sometimes feels more like a collection of primary source documents than a coherent narrative. Specialists will value the book as a reference work, but casual readers will find some of it hard going. The book would also have benefited from a listing of acronyms and abbreviations, a common feature of intelligence studies.

For all its attention to detail, Ogden's book does have one curious omission: Ian Fleming. The future novelist, who served as a naval intelligence officer throughout the war, makes a handful of brief and unmemorable cameos in the course of the narrative, but more might have been said about the professional and creative relationship between the brothers. On the one hand, Peter's career contrasts with the fantasy world of 007. In a 1943 letter to his wife, he observes that "you can't fight the Japanese with glamour and gadgets" (quoted in Ogden, 160). On the other hand, his clever deceptions and overall derring-do would not be out of place in one of his brother's thrillers. In early 1945, Ian visited Peter in New Delhi⁵—a visit that Ogden never mentions. This leaves the reader with a burning question: how much did Ian know about his brother's wartime activities and what influence, if any, did they have on the eventual creation of James Bond? Given that *Master of Deception* ends in 1946, that connection remains to be explored, but Ogden's extensive research will no doubt prove valuable to future scholars.

4. Subtitle: *A Singular Tale of Our Times* (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1951).

5. Andrew Lycett, *Ian Fleming* (NY: St. Martin's, 1995) 155.