

INTRODUCTION

Dublin Castle, 25 December 1803

He lay in a bed set up in his rooms in the dark forbidding castle which only five months before had been the objective of a wildly speculative revolutionary insurrection. He had some reason to feel satisfied, for he had been responsible for successfully excising the poisonous sore of revolutionary Irish nationalism in the aftermath of Robert Emmet's rebellion. But the effort had completely exhausted him, leaving him emotionally drained and the suffering victim of a chronic knee complaint. Even the sound of a door slamming nearby caused tremors of pain to flow through his body and sparked twitches of anxiety in his mind. Too frail to face the short journey to his residence in Pheonix Park, he struggled to write a letter to Charles Abbot, his old friend, confidant and Speaker of the House of Commons. With a shaky hand and sardonic irony, he began: 'I write to you from my bed where I am keeping a merry Christmas'. The purpose of the letter was twofold: to inform Abbot of the continued internecine warfare between the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Hardwicke, and the commander of the military forces in Ireland, Lord Cathcart; and to announce the surrender of the Dwyer gang, the last significant group of rebels in the country. Ireland, he wrote, was now safe, although he still feared further disorder if the French invaded.¹ Exactly one week later William Wickham resigned his position as Chief Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant in Ireland, an event that marked the end of his decade-long career as one of Britain's great spymasters.²

Possibly because of the low-key nature of his resignation from public life, possibly because he had always shunned the limelight, William Wickham's influence on his times has never been fully addressed. Yet he remains the most important British figure in the era of the French Revolution not to have been the subject of a modern biography. Part of his clandestine career, focusing on his two missions on the Continent in 1794–7 and 1799–1801, has been highlighted – mostly more than forty years ago – and he has played a walk-on role in books concerned with aspects of counter-espionage and state security in Britain, but there has been no attempt to assess Wickham's central role in the rise and fall of

the British intelligence service – a transient but important ‘secret state’ – in the years of the French revolutionary wars.³ Yet during ten dangerous years, when the volcanic French Revolution threatened the very foundations of Britain’s global hegemony and oligarchic rule, Wickham first developed and then effectively controlled both the espionage and security wings of a nascent British intelligence service, making it an essential element in Britain’s war machine.

On the Continent he harassed and threatened successive revolutionary regimes in France; in London and then in Dublin, he oversaw the destruction of several major indigenous political conspiracies, finally applying the *coup de grâce* to rebellion in the British Isles. His intrigues in Europe may have been unsuccessful, although he prolonged counter-revolutionary resistance in France for many years, but at home as a counter-espionage and security controller he created an efficient and effective security system, one which took into account the British people’s fierce commitment to the preservation of their freedoms and liberties. The opinion that in the 1790s William Pitt, the Prime Minister, oversaw a ‘reign of terror’ in Britain cannot be substantiated.

Perhaps Wickham has been ignored because he was no James Bond. Indeed, in some ways he was Bond’s antithesis, although he shared the fictional hero’s suavity of manners and ability to mix comfortably in the most varied company. Nor was he a Scarlet Pimpernel, although he played a part in one famous escape from a Paris prison. Instead, Wickham was a family man, happily married, with a powerful sense of public duty. He had strong, if unorthodox, evangelical religious views, which both caused him moral anguish and sustained him in adversity. He may thus be seen to be in the mould of another great spymaster, Sir Francis Walsingham. With personal experience of the violence of the French Revolution, and with a wife whose Swiss relatives suffered greatly because of the social and political upheavals of the time, Wickham, like so many of his fellow Whigs, became a committed counter-revolutionary in the 1790s. His role in that decade embraced all facets of that which more recently has been described as ‘the fourth dimension of warfare’: subversion, intelligence and resistance.⁴ It is this which justifies most strongly a study of his career, for Wickham is an unrecognized but significant player in a clandestine ‘Great Game’ that stretches from Elizabeth I’s Walsingham to the current heads of SIS and MI5.

But Wickham’s life also throws considerable light on the paradoxes, dilemmas and perplexities that inhabit the world of the spy. Of the three classical spy archetypes – the patriotic, the ambitious and the mercenary – Wickham most neatly fits the first, but his was a particular eighteenth-century and Whiggish form of patriotism, which gave due, if rather cloying, deference to King and country, but which was grounded on loyalty to a political family, or network, with strong links to an Oxford foundation, Christ Church. On behalf of King and political family he undertook the deeply unpleasant project of spying on

both foreign and domestic enemies, a task which was to lead ultimately to personal disappointment and the blighting of his life after his resignation in 1804.

Although no James Bond or Sir Percy Blakeney, Wickham does have some of the hallmarks of the more unassuming and anti-heroic modern fictional spies, such as Somerset Maugham's Ashenden or John Le Carré's George Smiley, whose sense of duty and resolution are slowly eroded by self-questioning and growing disenchantment with the legitimacy of the cause – and some of the cause's representatives – they are meant to be protecting. Wickham did not have to contend with the excruciating marital difficulties of Smiley or of Len Deighton's Bernard Samson, but he did suffer several significant debilitating physical and psychological episodes before the final despairing decision to resign. The first major cracks occurred on the Continent towards the end of his second mission, where the strain of his official diplomatic duties and the sordid nature of his undercover work, combined with the internecine intrigue and selfish narrow-mindedness of the allied courts in Europe and the counter-revolutionary émigrés, fuelled a growing disillusionment.

Returning to London and following the break-up of Pitt's ministry – which, disastrously for Wickham, caused both a severe disruption of the security service in London and irrevocably divided his political family – he was persuaded to join a ministry with responsibility for implementing an Irish policy that he found increasingly unpalatable, especially as its main political opponents, the followers of William, Lord Grenville, were the part of his now-shattered political family with whom he felt most sympathy. Close to the centres of power in Westminster and Dublin Castle, his confidence in his political masters, already shaken during his last mission in Europe, further eroded and, as he delved deeply into Robert Emmet's rebellion in its aftermath, Wickham became ever more aware of the paradox at the centre of his clandestine career. As a diplomat-spy on mission, he had plotted in the interests of, and financed the cause of, self-determination for small states such as Switzerland; yet as domestic security chief, he had plotted the defeat of the cause of self-determination in Ireland. As this, in his mind, was an unresolvable dilemma he resigned, but its legacy was to haunt him for the rest of his long life.