

The **Press**

Peace activist target of 'official' hit squad

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Rob Green and Kate Dewes who are bringing out a book making allegations about old UK spy scandals.

Murdered or assassinated?: Hilda Murrell

Fact or fiction?: A Thorn in Their Side, a book by Rob Green and Kate Dewes making allegations about old UK spy scandals, surrounded by mail that they allege was intercepted and opened.

A new book on an old spy story has been launched from Christchurch. It's a great tale with a twist - is it fiction or reality? JOHN McCRONE reports.

You couldn't make it up, as they say. A spy story to rival anything by John le Carre or Ian Fleming.

The setting: Margaret Thatcher's unlovely 1980s Britain. A government under siege in a country bitterly divided by its miners' strikes, IRA bombings, cruise missile protests and the recently-concluded Falklands War. The Cold War is at its paranoid height, the enemy apparently rising within.

The killing: A doughty 78-year-old spinster, a commercial rose-grower turned anti-nuclear campaigner living in the ancient Shropshire market town of Shrewsbury, gets rubbed out by Britain's secret police. Abducted from her home one Wednesday lunchtime with a leather satchel full of documents, then found dead in a copse three days later, mutilated and apparently sexually assaulted.

The unlikely twist: Right as this abduction is happening, a 16-year-old petty thief from the local kids' home spots the open door of the old farmhouse and blunders into the middle of the raid. Guns are held to his head to convince him to forget what he is seeing. But 20 years later - needing a conviction to end awkward questions - the lad is sent down for the murder.

The denouement: It is October 2011, Christchurch, New Zealand. The murdered woman's nephew, a former Royal Navy commander in charge of nuclear weapons, and his prominent Kiwi peace campaigner wife, blow the lid off this and many other British security scandals in an explosive tell-all book printed up in complete secrecy at the dead of night by their Masterton publisher.

Fearing for their own lives after years of alleged harassment in their suburban Riccarton home, the pair tell of friends and informants stalked, raped and murdered.

But how does this story end? With a Britain rocked by the revelations, a Kafkaesque era of state-sponsored terror against nuclear whistle-blowers finally exposed? With an innocent man dramatically freed and the out-of-control elements of an establishment brought to book?

Or is it indeed a case of the made up? A wild conspiracy theory, a vivid fantasy. The truth is instead simply what the authorities say it is - that a juvenile robbery ended in the unfortunate

death of an elderly woman. Commander Robert Green, one-time bombardier on Buccaneer nuclear strike jets and a headquarters intelligence officer during the Falklands campaign, arrives along with his partner, Dr Kate Dewes, a New Zealand nuclear disarmament researcher appointed adviser to the United Nations secretary-general in 2007, bearing his heavy bags of files.

It is an old habit. Green says it's safest to keep the evidence with him, their house is broken into so regularly.

Dewes says the last time was about two months ago. They had gone out for a half-hour walk, but a male house guest was in the shower in the small flat on the top floor. "He came out of the shower, looked down the stairs, and saw a bolted door left open."

Green believes an intruder came in the front door, perhaps hoping to find a manuscript of his book, *A Thorn in Their Side: The Hilda Murrell Murder*, lying about, then dashed out the bolted side entrance when disturbed. Or equally, it was just a deliberately unsubtle reminder from agents of the British secret service to the couple that they were still being watched. A case of "look what we can do".

Dewes throws up a hand, suddenly remembering that only two nights ago she found the bolster she puts across the front door had been shoved aside as if a nose had been briefly poked in. These incidents are almost too commonplace to be remarked upon now.

It has been going on for years, says Green, ever since he moved to New Zealand in the mid-1990s. Strange men sitting in cars in the street for hours. Break-ins whenever they are out of the country. Mail ripped open. There must be a whole team of operatives on their case they claim.

They have got used to presuming that their house is under continuous electronic surveillance, their conversations recorded. Dewes says with modern gear the spooks can hijack the microphones on your own computer and record even off the power cables in the wall as antennae. If there is an urgent need to talk, the two go into the laundry and switch on its noisy dryer.

Green says cheerfully he takes this continuing campaign against them as corroboration he is on to their dirty secrets. Dewes, who runs her Canterbury University-affiliated nuclear disarmament research centre from the house, is a lot less happy.

She says as the mother of daughters who have been alone in the house when strange men with flashlights have been caught wandering about, you can imagine that it is actually bloody terrifying. "That did nearly put me off, make me rethink [about] being involved," Dewes admits.

For their own safety, Dewes says they have made sure that New Zealanders in high places know all about their experiences.

Dewes is a friend of former prime minister Helen Clark through her years of disarmament campaigning.

National Party MP and minister Kate Wilkinson was their family lawyer and has confirmed she is happy to attend this Friday's book launch in Christchurch, although she has no official comment on its content.

The couple say they have even spoken to the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service director Warren Tucker, first at his office, then at their home. Green says Tucker assured them - as did Clark - that, if true as alleged, the intrusions were nothing to do with local security forces and would clearly be a disgraceful violation of New Zealand sovereignty.

"I hope their microphones were there to pick that up, " says Green gleefully.

The idea of all this effort being expended in New Zealand over an event that happened back in 1984 does sound crazy - "low grade Bourne Ultimatum stuff" - Green agrees. But time now to get the full story out in the open and let the world make up its own mind whether it is fact or fiction he says. Hilda Murrell was a Cambridge scholar who took over the family rose-growing business after the Second World War, winning gold medals at the Chelsea Flower Show and becoming a noted horticultural expert.

She had a sharp mind and was spry into old age. Green, who viewed her as a second mother after his own died in his teens, recounts how Murrell could still chase off the local youths who invaded her large fruit and vegetable garden.

On retirement Murrell became politically active, interested in environmentalism and especially the perils of nuclear reactor waste.

Nuclear was big at the time because of the Cold War and with citizen protest more pronounced over the US cruise missiles based on UK soil.

But there was also the gathering protest over Thatcher's plan to break the coal-miners, the traditional powerbase of the Left, through a crash programme of nuclear power plant building. A move to nuclear electricity generation would mean striking miners could no longer turn the lights out on the country.

A first plant, Sizewell B, was to be followed by nine more pressurised water reactors of the type that in 1979 had so nearly melted down at Three Mile Island in the US.

Murrell took it upon herself to make a private submission to the Sizewell B planning inquiry, presenting a paper on the health dangers of plutonium leaks and long-lived reactor waste.

Green says she was of course one of many and had no particular expertise. Hardly a threat even for a state acting on the belief that energy security had become a matter of over-riding national interest.

But Green says Murrell was not the typical "beads and bangles, lefty peacenik figure" that the establishment would find so easy to dismiss in public debate. She was "one of us", rather than one of them.

And far more of concern to any security forces, like MI5, assigned to monitor the swelling anti-nuclear movement, Murrell had begun to talk to a lot of people who did have proper secrets to tell.

There was Green himself. As an intelligence officer in charge of a 40-strong team at Northwood through the Falklands War, Green did indeed know much about the conduct of the campaign that was political dynamite at the time.

The decision to torpedo the Argentine cruiser, the General Belgrano, with the loss of 321 lives, even though the vessel was outside the official warzone. The fact there had not been time to offload nuclear weapons aboard the British Fleet. Green had even authored a critical memorandum about the scrapping of the HMS Endurance in 1981 - a miscalculation said to have encouraged Argentina's invasion in the first place.

Green was retired from the Navy, looking for a change of life as a roof thatcher. Damaging revelations were starting to leak out about events like the Belgrano's sinking. Green says he never revealed anything to Murrell or anyone else, yet to watchers, their family connection would have appeared immediately suspect.

But then Murrell, through her persistence, was in fact building up a whole network of risky contacts. There were retired nuclear scientists who knew reactors like the proposed Sizewell

B had a faulty design because their fuel rods could melt at low temperature, others who had files on birth defect clusters around nuclear installations.

So here was this classic little old British lady - "valiant for the truth" - dashing about the country, collecting information, says Green. And then, just days before her death, she seems to have discovered something big as she was reportedly making uncharacteristically urgent phone calls to friends seeking a safe haven for a set of documents.

"We don't know what, " says Green, but he is convinced it triggered her watchers into action. "I think it was 'turbulent priest' stuff. They said just get rid of her. But find out what she's got first."

It has taken Green 25 years to piece together his version of what happened next. Gradually a weight of police investigation files have become available - detectives interviewed nearly 12,000 people in what became Shropshire's most celebrated murder hunt. But also Green has followed up a host of informants.

Much hinges on a secondhand tale of a prisoner, an armed robber, boasting to a cellmate about being one of the hired help involved in the Murrell snatch.

As Green reconstructs it, the town of Shrewsbury is strangely busy with oddly-behaving people in the days just beforehand. Neighbours report men smoking ornate pipes, wearing conspicuous trenchcoats, dressed up like tramps. A host of conflicting sightings the police were later to find baffling.

And Green believes quite deliberately so. He says it was a clever secret service tactic to swamp any subsequent investigation with dozens of false leads. Detectives would be left chasing their tail as they tried to make sense of witness statements. Green says it also shows the manpower available for the operation.

Then an improbable crew of three men and a woman made the actual raid. The men were known criminals, and at least one seems mentally unstable, going by a Nazi nickname. However, Green says it is common practice for security services to out-source their dirty work in this fashion to make it "deniable".

So Murrell is seized and taken away to a safe house for interrogation. Three days later, she turns up dead, sprawled half naked in a small wood, her car apparently run into a muddy ditch nearby, her body covered in strange injuries - shallow knife punctures, a broken collar bone - and also bodily fluids suggestive of a sexual assault.

I protest that if Murrell were really in possession of secrets, or even if there were people who wanted her silenced, then she could have been just arrested and detained. These shadowy forces could have found less drastic ways of discovering what she knew, then shutting her up.

Green says there was plenty else going on in Britain, the "shoot to kill policies" in Northern Ireland, the attacks on the Greenham Common women's protest camp, to suggest that intelligence services were becoming a law unto themselves. Perhaps, using criminals, the raid got out of hand. Or, worse still, Murrell's death might have been put out as an intentional warning to others.

"She could have just disappeared. All sorts of activists do disappear, " says Green. "But instead she was left to be found mutilated - with a sexual component - and that would've been a very heavy message to other anti-nuclear women in particular."

Green cites many details to support his account. The way the phones were put out of action at both Murrell's home and holiday house. People being seen planting knives in hedgerows. Murrell's car being dumped to make it look like she had been dead in the copse from the first

day, yet a landowner walking right through the spot with his dog the afternoon before the body was found and discovering nothing.

Then there is the prisoner who talked, even naming those in the hit squad and explaining peculiarities like a pile of wet sheets found at the house - used to "water-board" Murrell in an initial attempt to extract information about what documents she had concealed around the house. The existence of these sheets was not mentioned in any media report, so only those involved could have known, Green points out.

So it seems an innocent old lady becomes the unlikely victim of a political machinery that is either spinning out of control through its paranoia, or playing a rather dreadfully ruthless long-game where lives don't matter.

Yet then there has to be the still more incredible twist to this story. In the middle of the snatch, a 16-year-old youth stumbles on to the scene.

Andrew George, an opportunistic thief, one of three brothers all in care, is wandering the neighbourhood, sees an open door and sneaks in hoping to find cash for drugs, becoming a real complication for the hit squad.

He is threatened, promised a payoff of £60,000 (which never turns up) and is returned to the kids' home before nightfall. For the next 20 years, until 2004, nothing further is heard from him. But finally, following a cold case review which uses the latest DNA forensics to match semen on Murrell's clothing, George finds himself arrested and charged.

It seems police have got their man. A case which has dogged the headlines for years can be closed. All the allegations about "men of the British intelligence" can be forgotten.

On remand in prison, there is another of those cellmate tales.

George is said to be talking about being mixed up with spies, Greenpeace, state secrets - perhaps retelling a garbled version of the original newspaper reports he has read.

At the trial however, there is a surprise defence, a very different explanation. George tries to blame it on his older brother, saying he was a helpless witness during a burglary gone wrong. The court's verdict is simply that George acted alone and he is sentenced to 15 years.

Green says George was undoubtedly present that day, but he never did it. Too many details don't tally for the official version to be true.

Like the fact George could not even drive. Then the phones disconnected at two locations, the body turning up several days after the car is dumped, and much else.

The semen looks a plant. The security boys are nothing if not clever and thinking ahead, claims Green.

George had become a fallback plan.

Green visited George in prison to get the truth. He says he found George was alert and respectful, but unwilling to elaborate. Although - and again it is only Green's word here - George did nod quiet agreement when questioned about his original account of men with guns and broken promises of £60,000 to forget what he might have seen. A tale and a half. Then there are all the other cases Green recounts in his book. Those connected to anti-nuclear campaigning who turned up as unlikely suicides - two bullets in the head while driving a car, or syringe punctures followed by a hammer blow to the skull. Or the mother harassed for 27 years by a man she came to call "crater face".

Green says many of these stories have made it into print before. There have been three or four books on Murrell's death alone. But it is only in the past few years that the whole ugly picture of the era has come into focus.

"Lots of people just won't believe it because in Britain, MI5 doesn't kill people. 'They play cricket, you know.' So they can hide behind this image and have a much clearer run than they would in a totalitarian state."

Copies of his book have now been dropping through some notable letterboxes the past week. Green flourishes a quick thank-you note from another high-placed supporter, Lord "Paddy" Ashdown, former military intelligence officer and leader of the British Liberal Democrats party.

Green rubs his hands in anticipation of the awkward questions that might be raised in the British parliament fairly soon. There could be quite a stink.

But will we ever really know the truth of any of this - the death of Murrell, the innocence of George, the campaign of intimidation by foreign agents even decades later on New Zealand shores?

Most probably not. Yet it is a gripping read. Something to rival a le Carre or Fleming.

* A Thorn in Their Side: The Hilda Murrell Murder by Robert Green, published October 14, Rata Books. www.hildamurrell.org.