

**Peace Researcher: Journal of the Anti-Bases Campaign, New Zealand May
2012, Number 43**

Review by Jeremy Agar

**“A THORN IN THEIR SIDE:
The Hilda Murrell Murder”**

by Robert Green, Rata Books, Christchurch, 2011

Robert Green was an officer in the British Navy at the time of the 1982 Falklands War. By his own account he held a set of assumptions that you'd expect from that rigid era. He was conservative and disciplined. His Aunt Hilda was a respectable spinster growing roses in a quiet country town. This is the remarkable story of what happened on and after March 1984, when Hilda Murrell's car was reported in to the local Police, abandoned and dented at the side of a rural lane. Three days after that Murrell's abused body was found in a copse some way distant. The official version became that she had been killed by an opportunistic 16 year old boy, who panicked when he feared discovery during his burglary of Murrell's house. There is no doubt that this young thief was at her house, but Green became convinced that he wasn't the killer. This thickly documented account explains why not.



Was Hilda Murrell killed by an MI5 hit team? Photo: The Mirror

Whodunit?

As articles on the case note, the whole affair might have been scripted as a formulaic British TV show. A little old lady found dead near a Shropshire village, a bumbling local constable, mysterious strangers acting suspiciously, inconsistent witnesses, arson, conflicting DNA evidence, questions raised in Parliament: it's all there. This extraordinary episode seems to have been a case of happening to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. The time was Margaret Thatcher's first term as Prime Minister, when the Tories were ramping up East-West tensions. The peace movement was resisting the introduction of new weapons systems which would increase the chance of nuclear war. As has since been established, the Government was infiltrating the protest groups both to gather information and to try to discredit them by encouraging agent provocateurs to promote violence. We now know that State spies had been checking a previous Labour PM, Harold Wilson - while he was in office. There had long been popular talk of an "Establishment", an informal coalition of the elite which existed to defend privilege and power, and during the Thatcher Conservatives' rule, it was beginning to look as if the Establishment was going to war against its critics.

Hilda Murrell had become concerned about nuclear power, not, as in NZ, as a concept, but in reaction to what was already happening. In the UK, plants were suspected of being unsafe. Murrell was asking questions of sympathetic scientists and liaising with environmental activists. In

March 1984, she was talking to contacts about technology being used which in 1979 had melted down at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania. The rose expert was no outsider hippie, so was she a potential threat? Did someone see her as pricking at the status quo, a thorn in the side of the Establishment?



Hilda Murrell was found dead in 1984, just days before she was due to give evidence to the public inquiry into the proposed Sizewell B nuclear reactor (above) in East Anglia. Photo: The Mirror

Domestic Politics In Britain Were Also Polarised

Thatcher had picked a fight with the coal miners, who could be demonised to the nervous and misinformed, so that the Government could seize a moment of opportunity to bash trade unions and drive down living standards. The attack signalled the end of a trend to increased opportunity and equality. Now, looking back with Green, we might see 2011's UK riots as a culmination of a 30 year trend (with interlocking interests in play, the new emphasis on nuclear power might in part have been motivated by the need to rely less on carbon fuel. It certainly wasn't to do with climate change issues).

The Establishment has always been there (and here) in some form - witness the admission in March 2012 by the current PM, David Cameron, that the latter-day elite, hedge fund speculators and the like (including those bailed out with mega-millions of public money) have paid millions to have dinner with him. They were looking after business as usual. In the 1980s the elites had seen a chance to concentrate their efforts and (to pick one of the many clichéd metaphors that have since evolved to describe what happened) move the goal posts to their advantage. Preparing the ground for the likes of Cameron, Thatcher became very unpopular, so when the government of Argentina - luckily for her, they were a bunch of military fascists ready made to wear black hats - invaded a tiny South Atlantic outpost that remained part of Britain's old empire, she could put it all together. She had her chance to assume the mantle of Britannia and Rule - and win the upcoming election in a flare of old style patriotic fervour.

Green is telling his personal story, which leaves little room to do more than hint about this background. A generation away, on the other side of the globe, we do well to take it into account. Britain was a fraught place. It so happened that Commander Green was a leading member of the Naval Intelligence team in the Northwood bunker in the UK where the war was run from. One day he reported for duty to find that overnight his mates had sunk an Argentine cruiser, with the loss

of over 300 people. For two modern countries to go to war is not something that's supposed to happen. At most, it might have been thought, the Brits would take a few prisoners and then concoct a mutually face-saving end to the nonsense. But this was serious for more than the number of wasted lives. The *General Belgrano* had been sailing away from the Falklands and was outside the "exclusion zone" that the UK had announced.

Green had taken voluntary redundancy as part of Thatcher's 1981 defence cuts to pay for replacing UK Polaris with Trident, and when he was released soon after the war he trained as a roof thatcher (small 't'). Coincidentally, some highly sensitive signals intelligence about the *Belgrano* had gone missing; Green was among only about 30 people with access to it, and Labour MP Tam Dalyell was embarrassing Thatcher with questions about the controversial sinking. Also, Green had previously written a critique of Thatcher's insistence on including the Falklands guardship HMS *Endurance* in the cuts. He was informed and he wasn't afraid. The authorities might have asked themselves if he had hidden stuff at his anti-nuke auntie's place. Had a previously reliable chap made common cause with the peaceniks and tree huggers?

Green's questions: Why had Hilda's latest research disappeared from her house? Had two sets of burglars surprised each other in her house? That was the most plausible way of explaining the mess of contradictory facts around the murder. To clean up, the Government's agents could have found it had to silence the woman and frame the boy. So much of the evidence could be taken two ways. Some of the episodes that Green describes suggest an incompetence that might not point to the Police or intelligence services - unless the jobs were contracted out. Some almost comical red herrings could have been to create false leads and diversions. They could have been intended to make Green look ridiculous. An average citizen might be expected to ask, "why would Her Majesty's Government behave like clowns when they have the resources to disappear troublesome civilians in a way that no-one notices?" But not if they want to confuse and intimidate. Like criminal gangs, they might need potential enemies to fear them.

Lots Of Unanswered Questions

Ten years later Murrell was said to have been kidnapped and tortured. Twenty years later the burglar was charged with murder, DNA having placed him at the scene. Green was still unconvinced and pressed for a retrial. Thirty years later, he can find no more stones to turn over, and at the end of his account he lists almost 50 questions which he thinks need answers. Green now lives in Christchurch, having met Kate Dewes, the well-known peace campaigner. They became partners in life and detection. Back in NZ, where the couple might have expected respite, strange things have kept happening. Men in cars outside their house; burglaries inside it. Green and Dewes told PM Clark, whom Dewes knew through her anti-nuclear advocacy, and the Director of the Security Intelligence Service (SIS), but neither could help. As Green notes, it's not likely that any NZ agency would be involved in the harassment - or that we'll ever know who has been.

Perhaps the story is more action thriller than *Miss Marple* or *Midsomer Murders*. A favourite of this genre is the isolated hero who's being framed. The closer he comes to revealing the baddies, the less he is believed and the more endangered he becomes. Apart from us, the viewers, no-one is on his side. The evidence that should incriminate the villain looks far-fetched. Our guy looks guilty or mad. And in the movies the worst villains are the most powerful villains, like the corporation or the State.

Green has been taking on the British government, its Police force and intelligence services and he must have spent the long years suppressing the thought that he couldn't win. You can't beat City Hall, and he was up against the UK State. Whatever the truth, his courage and perseverance, and his loyalty to the memory of his aunt, have been remarkable. Conspiracy theory or fact? It would be nice to hope for a happy ending so that the theatre lights go up on an agreed version of events, with the Government vindicating Green. Nice, but we know it won't happen. The one constant about the way States behave is that if they lie or behave badly they

have to deny it. The worse the behaviour or the more stark the lie, the greater the need to dissemble. That's the logic of the thriller. Given what we know about Thatcherite Britain and its military and intelligence services, Green's assertions about their morality and tactics are credible. You feel it could have been as bad as he says.

More information and copies of the book are available from www.hildamurrell.org.Ed.



Director of NZ Security Intelligence Service, Dr Warren Tucker and Robert Green (Photo: Lois Dalton)