

Robert Green, *A Thorn in Their Side*, John Blake, 2013, 414 pages, paperback ISBN 9781782194286, £7.99

Hilda Murrell died a horrible death. Her partially clothed body was found in a remote copse several miles outside Shrewsbury on Saturday 24 March 1984. She had been missing since the preceding Wednesday. There were stab wounds to the arm and abdomen, and her collar-bone was broken. But the primary cause of her death was recorded as hypothermia. Then came ‘penetrating wounds to the abdomen and multiple bruises to the face’. The words ‘DECEASED WAS KILLED UNLAWFULLY’ are underlined on her death certificate. She had been left to die a lingering, painful and lonely death.

Hilda had much to live for. At 78 years of age, she was in full cry against the folly of installing ‘theatre’ nuclear weapons at Greenham Common and elsewhere whilst also preparing a detailed submission to the public inquiry into the planned Sizewell B pressurized water reactor (PWR). In 1982, she had opposed Mrs Thatcher’s war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands/Malvinas. She was busy, resolute and sociable, whilst also maintaining her large house and gardens on the outskirts of Shrewsbury.

Her next of kin was Robert Green, retired Royal Navy Commander turned Thatcher to the roofs of Dorset. Robert was very close to his spinster aunt. Later, he served for 20 years in the Royal Navy, beginning in 1962, as a Fleet Air Arm observer/bombardier-navigator flying in Buccaneer nuclear strike aircraft and anti-submarine helicopters. Later, he was promoted to the senior position of Staff Officer (Intelligence) to the Commander-in-Chief Fleet. In 1981, he took voluntary redundancy, but was not released from the Navy until the Falklands War was over, in 1982.

Hilda’s work on Sizewell was to do with acute environmental threats associated with the disposal of nuclear waste. However, she was being advised by Don Arnott, a retired nuclear scientist, who had discovered a fundamental flaw in the safety system of the PWR which had shown itself in the nuclear near-disaster at Three Mile Island in the United States in 1979. Robert Green read his aunt’s written submission to the Sizewell Inquiry after her death.

Green’s Naval career culminated with the Falklands War, where he was at the heart of Naval Intelligence. He writes:

‘... Back on 2 April 1982, with intelligence reports of the Argentine invasion pouring in, I had worked non-stop for 36 hours. My intelligence team was therefore reorganised and expanded into a four-watch system, in addition to the separate cell providing 24-hour intelligence support on Soviet deployments. I was watching TV at home on 2 May when I learned HMS *Conqueror* had torpedoed the *Belgrano* [an Argentinian warship with more than a thousand crew]. From my previous time on watch, I knew the cruiser was being trailed by *Conqueror*, which was not allowed to attack it while it stayed outside the exclusion zone, but then the submarine was secretly ordered to attack. I immediately realised the implications, and that repercussions would be serious.’

The repercussions were, indeed, very serious. Some 321 crew, many of whom were young sea cadets, and two civilians lost their lives in what has been described as the worst British maritime war crime of modern times. Tentative peace plans were aborted, so that many more lives were to be lost in the conflict.

Robert Green puts straight the record of his non-involvement in the fateful decision to sink the *Belgrano*. For the incorrect impression that he was instrumental in the sinking of the *Belgrano* has endured, ever since Tam Dalyell MP told the House of Commons, on 20 December 1984,

‘... Commander Rob Green was, I am told, the person who physically sent the signal to *Conqueror* that sank the *Belgrano* ...’

Not so. No wonder Rob Green's 'heart sank' when he saw Dalyell's words, spoken under Parliamentary privilege, reported in the newspapers. This muddle has echoed down the decades. For two years since the Falklands War in 1982, Dalyell had been pursuing a courageous Parliamentary campaign to expose the authentic political responsibility for the sinking of the *Belgrano*, which was sailing away from the Falklands at the time it was sunk. In this work, Dalyell was assisted by information and tip-offs from his extensive network of contacts.

We need to rewind a little. On 22 March 1984, Clive Ponting, a 37-year-old senior civil servant in the Ministry of Defence, was instructed to prepare a comprehensive review of the situation about the sinking of the *Belgrano*, 'to be quite sure that there is not a Watergate in this somewhere', according to Defence Minister, Michael Heseltine. Heseltine's subsequent reply to Dalyell's latest questions ignored a draft proposed by Ponting with specific answers, and instead stonewalled. According to Green,

'Ponting was appalled by this deliberate attempt to conceal information showing that Ministers had misled Parliament for the previous two years.'

Ponting went on the offensive and anonymously suggested to Dalyell questions he should put to the Government. Prime Minister Thatcher and Heseltine were desperate to track down the source of these latest leaks to Dalyell. Eventually, in August 1984, Ponting was identified as the source by chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Sir Anthony Kershaw. Ponting was put on trial under the Official Secrets Act and acquitted by the jury. This sensational, democratic verdict saw Michael Heseltine storming off the set of Channel 4 News, watched by a bemused Jon Snow, when Heseltine saw that Ponting was also in the studio.

The timeline of *Belgrano* revelations overlaps quite closely with that of Hilda Murrell's abduction and murder. She disappeared on 21 March 1984, the day before Heseltine instructed Ponting to protect him from a 'Watergate', alluding to US President Nixon's authorisation of the break-in at the Watergate office complex in Washington DC in 1972 to spy on his Democratic Party rivals. Clearly, there was a febrile atmosphere in the inner councils of the Thatcher Government at the time.

Who killed Hilda Murrell and why? In May 2005, 21 years after the event, Andrew George was convicted of her abduction and murder. He was a 16-year-old living in a care home in Shrewsbury at the time. DNA evidence, thrown up in the cold case review, linked him to events at Ravenscroft, Hilda's house, on 21 March 1984. He does not dispute that he was in her house at about the time she was abducted, but says his opportunistic burglary went wrong when he encountered other people there who threatened him with guns.

Robert Green is convinced Andrew George is not his Aunt's killer, and urges his release from prison, where Green has visited him. Green adduces a wealth of evidence that others were involved in Hilda's death. DNA from under Hilda's fingernails indicate she struggled with a different person. And how did she reach the copse where she was eventually found? Andrew George couldn't drive, although Hilda's car was found crashed several hundred yards from the copse, which lay across a muddy, exposed field. Most significantly, perhaps, Hilda's body was not spotted by the owner of the copse when he was inspecting his trees there the day after she was abducted. This indicates she wasn't taken directly to the copse on the Wednesday of her abduction. Police pictures of her frail, prone body amongst the widely spaced trees make it clear that it would be impossible to miss her whilst counting trees in the copse if, indeed, her body was there at that time on the Thursday. If she wasn't there then, as seems highly likely, where was she?

Green speculates that she was abducted and killed by persons acting on behalf of the British State. According to Green, the motive for entering her property may have been to do with her preparations for the Sizewell B Public Inquiry, or it may be to do with his own close involvement in the prosecution of the Falklands War. Did she disturb those searching her house for relevant documents? Did Andrew George do the same? Such coincidences seem unlikely, but Green poses a long series of

unanswered questions. Serious shortcomings in police investigations of the abduction and murder compound the picture.

This is a deeply disturbing book. Not only because of the crimes done to Hilda Murrell, but also because of the enduring harassment of Rob Green and his second wife, Dr Kate Dewes, over many years as they try to establish the truth about Hilda's death. They have enlisted high-level political support in New Zealand, where they live, but their post continues to be opened, and intruders enter their house, to cite only two instances of unwarranted surveillance. Green writes of New Zealand and the United Kingdom:

'The reality is that, in both countries, the security service has free rein regarding surveillance and any other measures it feels are needed to protect the State – because any parliamentary legislation is currently unenforceable.'

This was written before Edward Snowden's revelations about super snooping by the UK's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) and the US National Security Agency (see *Spokesman 121*).

Thirty years on, justice for Hilda Murrell is long overdue.

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