

Sylvia Vetta transports
Oxfordshire-based
writer and former
intelligence officer
Michael Smith to
our desert island

Photographs: Antony Moore

Writer and journalist
Michael Smith's latest
book *Six — a History of
Britain's Secret Intelligence
Service: Murder and*

Mayhem 1909-1939 is the first
comprehensive account of the successes
and failures of Britain's secret service
during the First World War — and the
critical period between the two world wars,
when British and Russian spies pitted their
wits against one-another.

Michael Smith, now defence
correspondent of *The Sunday Times*, writes
about his subject with some authenticity
— as he was once a spook himself.

After a career in military intelligence, he
turned to journalism and has a track-record
of breaking stories that the establishment

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Secrets and lies



Michael Smith with a tablet from Knossos in the Ashmolean Museum

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has attempted to keep under wraps.

This was demonstrated graphically when, in 2004, he broke the story of the Downing Street memos which showed how US president George W Bush and then prime minister Tony Blair agreed to use military force to bring about regime change in Iraq more than six months before votes in the Congress or the United Nations were deemed to have authorised the allied invasion.

Michael, who lives near Henley-on-Thames, with his wife Hayley and their two children, explained: “Managing sources in journalism has much in common with managing agents,” you must treat them as you would want to be treated and develop trust, often becoming good friends.”

Born in 1952 in Lambeth, London, Michael attended Borden Grammar School in Sittingbourne, Kent, but left aged 15 “just because I wanted to get away from school” and joined the Army, training as a surveyor with the Royal Artillery.

“I didn’t find the work satisfying because I often ended up surveying Forestry Commission land or cleaning Land-Rovers,” he recalled. “I had a facility for learning languages and transferred to the Intelligence Corps, who taught me Arabic and, later, German.”

Michael worked in the Middle-East for three years, collecting intelligence on terrorists operating in Syria, Iraq and the Lebanon.

He admits he had a romantic image of intelligence work in the Middle East, inspired by T E Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

“I have a copy of the Oxford edition of Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars*, given to me as a gift

for a lecture I gave,” Michael said. “That is probably the book I would like to find on my desert island because I would finally have the opportunity to actually read it!

“But my job at the time was more Bletchley Park than T E Lawrence! I was listening in to Arab terrorists in the Middle East — and later East Germans in Europe.”

“I spent a lot of time writing reports and thought I could transfer that skill straight into journalism, but it wasn’t that simple.

“In 1982, I began working for the BBC monitoring service, the British equivalent of

“While at the BBC, a Persian monitor listening in to Tehran Radio told me that a Fatwa against Salman Rushdie had been announced. At the time, I did not know the meaning of the word.

the CIA’s Foreign Broadcast Information Service, hoping to move into a reporters post.

“I was soon disabused of my ambitions because they only wanted native German speakers or graduates,” Michael recalled.

“While in that post at the BBC, a Persian monitor listening in to Tehran Radio told me that a Fatwa against Salman Rushdie had been announced.

“At the time, I did not know the meaning of the word. My Persian colleague explained that a Fatwa was a sentence of death — allowing a ‘true believer’ to kill the subject of the Fatwa. I realised this was an important story and, to the concern of a nervous editor, released it.”

In 1990, he became a newspaper journalist writing on Eastern Europe for the *Financial*

Times and the *Sunday Times* before joining the *Daily Telegraph* where he became defence correspondent.

“This was a time of dramatic foreign events — the Berlin Wall was coming down — and because of my knowledge of Eastern Europe and foreign affairs generally, I was recruited by the *Telegraph* and reported on the ‘second’ Gulf War — the ‘first’ being between Iran and Iraq.

“Working in the field fired my enthusiasm. That was when I started writing my own copy rather than working on other people’s reports.

I spent ten years as a *Telegraph* reporter. It was a fantastic job. But I have seen a lot of dark, awful things.

“I covered the Dunblane shootings and that was obviously horrific, not just because of the deaths of the children, but in the way someone turned from normal humanity into a maniacal killer.

“‘But he was such a nice man,’ is what you hear said so often of killers, and I don’t doubt they were. Something turned them, like someone flicking a switch in their brain. We have seen that recently again in Cumbria. The horrifically dark side of human nature is something you see a lot of as a news reporter.

Michael also reported on various conflicts in the Balkans — twice going into Kosovo under fire to meet the Kosovo Liberation Army during the 1999 war. More recently, he has reported on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

“In the Balkans murder and brutality became almost institutionalised, just another part of society. I cannot forget the stench of dead

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and the sight of a Serb paramilitary camp where a young girl had been raped and murdered. One of her shoes still lying there on the ground — truly awful.

“I saw people struggle to hold on to hope and, despite all that dark stuff, you do come away at times with an admiration for the resilience of the human spirit.”

Becoming defence correspondent for the *Telegraph* was Michael’s dream job. “I only left to have more time to write books,” he said.

“But it often kept me desk bound so I sometimes broke free and went to Iraq and Afghanistan!” he said.

Michael started to write books after stumbling across an amazing story in the newsroom. “A guy called Peter Elphick came to the foreign desk with an amazing story about a New Zealand man who was recruited as a spy by the Japanese.

“This became my first book, published in 1993, called *Odd Man Out: The Story of the Singapore Traitor*.

“I wrote the book with Peter, who had come to me with the story of Patrick Heenan, an Indian Army officer stationed in Malaya at the start of the war in the Far East.

“Heenan was a sad character who failed to fit into the class-ridden officer society. He passed secrets to the Japanese that led to the destruction of the RAF’s forces in Malaya, ensuring that Singapore fell to the Japanese.

“He was stationed at an airbase in Malaya and notified the Japanese when planes were about to take off or land. So they were easily destroyed — and once air cover was gone so were our ships. That was why the Japanese were able to move in so quickly.

“Writing this book made me think I could write more. And because I knew the intelligence services, I understood how they worked, and realised a lot written about them was, frankly, rubbish.”

“Then, in 1996, while working on my history of British Intelligence Services, I interviewed a former MI6 officer and said ‘Is there anything I haven’t asked that I should have?’

“He replied that there are a couple of guys who have never been properly recognised, Sydney Cotton — a maverick Aussie pilot who pioneered air photography, and Frank Foley, described as ‘The Pimpernel of the Jews’.

“The ex-MI6 man told me: ‘One of the interesting things about Foley was that normally, to be a good case officer, you have to be a bit of a shit’. But Foley managed to be a brilliant case officer and a near saint. Schindler pales into insignificance along side his work on getting Jews out of Germany.

“I wondered why Foley’s story was not better known and contacted Yad Vashem (the Israeli Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority) and they said there was no evidence to back up Foley’s case,” Michael said.

“But I requested some information from Yad Vashem archives and, in it, I read a report of a Jewish aid worker, Hubert Pollack, describing how Foley had saved ‘tens of thousands’ of Jews.’

“Yad Vashem had been under the misapprehension that Foley was protected by diplomatic immunity, but that was not the case. He risked his life every day, going into camps and harbouring Jews in his own home almost every night.

“He could have been arrested at any time,

Michael Smith admits to once having a romantic view of working in the Middle East, inspired by T E Lawrence’s book, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. He is pictured with Lawrence’s robes, now on show at the Ashmolean Museum

Photograph: Antony Moore



indeed, one of Foley’s colleagues in Vienna was arrested because the Nazis wanted to send warning to MI6 about what they knew.”

As a result of Michael’s research, in 1999 Frank Foley was recognised as Righteous Among Nations, the award also granted to Oskar Schindler.

“I flew to Israel with the foreign secretary, the late Robin Cook, and met many people rescued by Foley,” said Michael.

“One of them wrote: ‘I myself have five children and 18 grandchildren — none of whom would ever have seen the light of day had I not lived. May god bless his memory.’

“It was a moving experience and if I took a copy of that certificate to the desert island it would remind me of a great human being,” Michael added.

“Before my book *Foley: The Spy who Saved Ten Thousand Jews* was published, Channel 4 approached me. They were doing series on Bletchley Park called *Station X* and asked me to write the book to accompany it. The book became a best-seller.

“Behind that story was the success of the Enigma machine. Maybe I could have one on the desert island, and see if I could use it!”

Michael has recently edited Mavis Batey’s *Dilly — The Man Who Broke Enigmas*. Alfred Dillwy Knox was born in Oxford and went to Summer Fields School.

Bletchley recruited many academics like Dillwy, especially those with experience of deciphering and reading ancient scripts. So Michael considered the Linear B tablet from Knossos as his desert island treasure. This tablet was deciphered in 1952 and is now in the writing gallery at the Ashmolean.

After the success of *Foley* and *Station X*, Michael wanted to write a history of MI6, but the announcement of an official history looked

like it had stymied the idea.

“But I realised that an official history would not be able to name agents or talk about them — but I could,” he said. “I have two good researchers in the UK searching the National Archive and a couple abroad. Once I began writing I found I had too much material for one book. So it will end up as a two part history.

“The first part covers the years 1908-1939. At that time, agents did swagger around with a licence to kill like James Bond, so the subtitle is *Murder and Mayhem*.

“I think if I had the cover of my book on the desert island it would remind me of the flamboyant characters I have met and written about. But if I had to pick a photograph of just one to represent them all it would be of Sir John Norton Griffiths.

“He led a group of British secret agents who rampaged across Romania ahead of the invading Germans, destroying the oilfields so the Germans could not get them.

“His entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* talks about his engineering triumphs building railways around the world, but does not mention that he was working for the secret service in Romania.”

■ *Michael Smith is the author of many books on intelligence and special operations, including **The Spying Game: The Secret History of British Espionage**, which revealed details of how MI6 and members of the British Special Boat Service operated inside Basra throughout the 2003 war in Iraq; **Station X: The Codebreakers of Bletchley Park and Foley: The Spy Who Saved 10,000 Jews. Six: Murder and Mayhem, 1909-1939**. Part one of his unofficial history of MI6 has just been published by Dialogue*