In Compton Mackenzie's satiric novel, "Water on the Brain," "N," the chief of M.Q. 99(E), warns a new recruit that the work of the Directorate of Extraordinary Intelligence did not "consist entirely of meeting mysterious Polish countesses in old castles." Or persuading one's counterparts in distant lands to defect. The "greater part of the work was routine stuff. Card-indexing, filing, making out lists, putting agents reports into proper English."

And so it was for Britain's MI6, the world's oldest foreign intelligence service. But by dint of its hard, often unsexy, work, and its "resilience, responsiveness and esprit de corps," according to Keith Jeffrey, a professor of history at Queen's University, Belfast, MI6 emerged as a permanent, professional, distinctly civilian and relatively autonomous agency.

For this authorized history, Mr. Jeffrey had unrestricted access to the archives of the Secret Intelligence Service. The practice of MI6, however, was to destroy documents when they were no longer deemed useful. His detailed narrative, Mr. Jeffrey acknowledges, contains "few fiendishly clever master spies or Mata Hari seductresses" -- and focuses, by necessity, more on the "process and administration of acquiring intelligence than on the intelligence itself."

Although it does not always make for scintillating reading, "The Secret History of MI6" is a thorough, informative and remarkably candid account of the institutionalization of espionage in the first half of the 20th century. Before World War II, Mr. Jeffrey reveals, MI6 was understaffed, amateurish and rarely effective. Agents in Europe, for example, "failed completely" to provide advance warning for Germany's assault on France through Belgium in August 1914. MI6 was "dumbfounded" by the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939. And as late as 1942, a shipment of 13 crates of SIS wireless equipment to Chile was labeled "Secret English confidential material, net weight not revealed, declarable value not revealed."

Nonetheless, MI6 came of age during World War II, as human intelligence was supplemented with technological expertise. Bletchley Park, a small country house and estate 50 miles from London, housed a 24/7 communications facility, with four transmitters, six receiving positions, a Government Code and Cypher School (which broke the "Enigma Code") and an organization tasked with planning and carrying out clandestine operations, including sabotage. MI6 agents identified factories producing V-1 pilotless jet-propelled planes and V-2 rockets (both carrying tons of explosives) and launching sites for them. They maintained contacts with Allied governments in exile and exploited sources in the Vichy government in France. And MI6 and the OSS (later the CIA) began what would become a long-term collaboration, crucial to the Anglo-American strategic and military alliance.

Mr. Jeffrey attributes MI6's survival -- in "the Whitehall Darwinian jungle" -- not only to its code-breaking and Ultra signal intelligence but to the ability of its first three directors, Mansfield Cumming, Hugh Sinclair and Stewart Menzies, to engage in legitimate intelligence work, providing the government with clandestinely acquired information, "without becoming politically engaged in the policy-making process."

But then again, off-the-record conversations and "black ops" (illegal operations) conducted by MI6 may have been expunged from the archives. And, of course, we do not know whether the agency was as fastidious about political involvement in the second half of the 20th century as Mr. Jeffrey suggests it was between 1909-49.

As we've learned in recent years, it matters. A lot. In a dangerous world, intelligence agencies -- and some level of secrecy -- do seem necessary. Despite all its evidence about the professionalism and decency of its leaders and rank-and-file agents, however, "The Secret History of MI6" leaves you more than a bit uneasy about the growing role of spooks, spies, slam dunks, wire-taps and e-mail intercepts in 21st-century democracies.

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