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“An active and conscious agent”?: Ric Throssell and Soviet Espionage

Phillip Deery

Abstract

This article examines the controversial Cold War case of Ric Prichard Throssell, the son of the famed Australian writer and communist, Katharine Susannah Prichard. Because of his relationship to his mother, his association with “persons of interest” to ASIO, the revelations of the Venona decrypts, and the evidence of Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov, ASIO was convinced that Throssell committed espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union. Numerous scholars and commentators have concurred with this view. Using Australian and British archival files, some recently declassified, the article revisits the case to argue the opposite: that the balance of probability points strongly to Ric Throssell being not a Soviet spy but a Cold War victim.

The innocence or guilt of those suspected of Cold War espionage rarely remains unresolved. In the McCarthyist period of the 1940s and 1950s the accusers and the prosecutors – security and intelligence services, government agencies and courts of law – were charged with partisanship, Cold War-fuelled paranoia or right-wing political posturing by progressive organisations and liberal opinion. The case of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg can be considered an exemplar. The strenuous campaign in the United States to “Save the Rosenbergs” generated impassioned and widespread support. Condemnation of their trial in 1951 as a flagrant miscarriage of justice and denunciation of their executions in 1953 as legal murder, was echoed internationally.¹ The Rosenbergs’ sons, Michael and Robert Meeropol, continued the campaign for posthumous exoneration, accompanied by a legion of supporters and sympathetic writers, into the 1980s.²

¹ Lori Clune, *Executing the Rosenbergs: Death and Diplomacy in a Cold War World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Phillip Deery, “The Left and the International Arena: The Rosenberg Case”, in Michele Di Donato and Mathieu Fulla (eds), *The Left and the International Arena in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: A Transnational Political History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

² See, for example, Walter and Miriam Schneir, *Invitation to an Inquest* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965, 1983). More recent defenders include Emily Arnow Alman and David Alman, *Exoneration: The Rosenberg-Sobell Case in the 21st Century* (Seattle: Green Elms Press, 2010); Walter Schneir, *Final Verdict: What Really Happened in the Rosenberg Case* (New York: Melville House, 2010); Anne Sebba, *Ethel Rosenberg: A Cold War Tragedy* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2021).

That is, until Venona. In 1985 the United States National Security Agency released the results of an ultra-secret operation, codenamed Venona, which deciphered and translated highly classified intercepted cables and telegrams sent from Moscow to its embassies and consulates in the 1940s.³ The culpability of Julius Rosenberg, and a great many other individuals, in spying for the Soviet Union was confirmed.⁴ There were other sources, too, that delivered their verdict. These ranged from the Mitrokhin archive (six trunk loads of files brought to Great Britain by former KGB archivist and defector, Vasili Mitrokhin), the Vassiliev notebooks (Alexander Vassiliev, another defector and former KGB officer), and the brief KGB archival opening of the early 1990s, of which Yale University researchers took advantage.⁵ All revealed the extensive nature of Soviet espionage networks in the West and the complicity of hundreds of individuals.

When the Venona decrypts pertaining to cable traffic between Moscow and Canberra were released in 1996, Australians were added to the list. Many members of the public learnt for the first time of the existence of a spy ring inside a government department that passed secrets to the Soviet Union. This “nest of traitors” – to use R.G. Casey’s colourful term – was the *raison d’être* of the early years of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and was a central preoccupation of the Royal Commission on Espionage (RCE), established by the Menzies government in 1954. Again, until Venona, the left in Australia generally dismissed such allegations. Now, they could not be ignored. But there remains one case in which the still-held conviction by ASIO of the guilt of one individual is in doubt. That individual is Ric Prichard Throssell. It is time to revisit the Throssell case and the inference of espionage through the lens of archival evidence. This article examines the evidence against

³ There is an extensive literature on Venona, but see John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

⁴ The veracity of Venona, and therefore the spying of their father, was belatedly accepted by the Meeropols. For Michael’s current perspectives on the subject, see his “‘A Spy Who Turned His Family In’: Revisiting David Greenglass and the Rosenberg Case”, *American Communist History* 17, no. 2 (2018): 247-60, and “My Mother, Ethel Rosenberg”, *Labour History* no. 121 (2021): 219-2.

⁵ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West* (London: Allen Lane, 1999); Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America – the Stalin Years* (New York: Random House, 1999); John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr and Alexander Vassiliev, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). For more nuanced appraisals, see inter alia Katherine A.S. Sibley, *Red Spies in America: Stolen Secrets and the Dawn of the Cold War* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2004); Ellen Schrecker, “Stealing Secrets: Communism and Soviet Espionage in the 1940s”, *North Carolina Law Review* 82 (2004): 1841-89.

Throssell made by ASIO, Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov, and the Venona decrypts; it also reassesses the Royal Commission on Espionage insofar as it concerned Throssell. Using mainly security files declassified since Throssell's death in 1999, a fuller and more rounded analysis is possible.

The allegation

In October 1996, under the front-page headline, "Confirmed: Our Soviet Spies", the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* published a photo of Ric Throssell alongside photos of the notorious British spies, Guy Burgess and Kim Philby.⁶ The implication was clear. *The Australian* followed suit with the same headline and a photo of Throssell was juxtaposed with one of Walter Seddon Clayton.⁷ The context was the release of the Venona cables, which pointed to a senior communist functionary, Wally Clayton, given the Soviet codename "Klod", who operated a small network of spies in the Australian Department of External Affairs (DEA).

Two years later, in 1998, in their authoritative study of Soviet espionage in Australia, *Breaking the Codes: Australia's KGB Network*, Desmond Ball and David Horner elaborated. Drawing on the Venona cables, they (or rather Ball, who wrote this section) stated that Ric Throssell was "a member of the KLOD group" and was therefore part of "a substantial network" of spies within the DEA that included Frances Bernie, Jim Hill, Ian Milner and, allegedly, Throssell. Prefaced by "It is believed" (no sources were cited), Ball wrote that Throssell "ceased all contact with the KGB" after 1950.⁸

Confirming this assessment, the conservative commentator, Gerard Henderson, twice referred to Throssell as an Australian who had spied for the Soviet Union.⁹ Henderson found an unlikely bedfellow in Mark Aarons, the son of the former national secretary of the Communist Party of Australia. In his deeply researched family memoir he describes Throssell as an "agent" of spymaster Wally Clayton, to whom he "provided [classified] information

⁶ Peter Charlton, "Confirmed: Our Soviet Spies", *Courier-Mail*, 4 October 1996, 1.

⁷ Peter Wilson, "Confirmed: Our Soviet Spies: Secret papers reveal communists infiltrated Canberra", *The Australian*, 4 October 1996, 1.

⁸ Desmond Ball and David Horner, *Breaking the Codes: Australia's KGB Network* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 268, 273, 325. Horner's *The Spy Catchers: The Official History of ASIO 1949-1963* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014) is more circumspect. For Throssell's acerbic response to *Breaking the Codes*, see his "Witchhunt", *Blast* 38 (Summer 1998-9), 3-4.

⁹ *Media Watch Dog*, Issue 91 (15 April 2011), and Issue 92 (29 April 2011).

directly”.¹⁰ Peter Monteath and Valerie Munt claim that from 1947 Throssell’s “nefarious obligations” involved “receiving intelligence, collecting it and passing it on to Clayton”. Throssell’s Canberra home was therefore an “intelligence collection point”.¹¹ Historian Denis Lenihan similarly accepted Throssell’s complicity in espionage, as did law professor Ryszard Piotrowicz.¹² In 2012, Desmond Ball again asserted, boldly and without qualification, that Throssell was “spying for the Soviet Union” and a member of “the Soviet spy ring”.¹³ Although the evidence for Ball’s assertion is at best suggestive and far from persuasive – the 65 year-old recollection of Coral Bell, Throssell’s junior colleague in 1947 – there appeared to be a growing consensus that Ric Throssell was, as long suspected by ASIO, culpable of spying on behalf of the Soviet Union.

Revisiting the allegation

With the 2021 publication of Karen Throssell’s literary memoir of her father, *The Crime of Not Knowing Your Crime*, a fresh spotlight has been thrown on this allegation.¹⁴ Many readers of this journal will already be aware that the Throssell case is one of the most controversial during Australia’s Cold War. For thirty years within the DEA promotions were denied and advancements blocked on the ground that Throssell constituted a serious risk to national security. The allegation that he was a Soviet agent stymied his career, tarnished his

¹⁰ Mark Aarons, *The Family File* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2010), 145, 168.

¹¹ Peter Monteath and Valerie Munt, *Red Professor: The Cold War Life of Fred Rose* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2015), 157.

¹² Denis Lenihan, “Dr Rob Foot, Dr Adam Hughes Henry, Dr Desmond Ball and Dr John Wear Burton: Untangling the Threads”, [pp. 10-11], <https://www.academia.edu/41328109/>; Ryszard Piotrowicz, “Clayton’s Choice” [review of *Breaking the Codes*], *Weekend Australian*, 24-25 October 1998, 15.

¹³ Desmond Ball, “Soviet Spies had Protection in Very High Places”, *The Australian*, 14 January 2012, and repeated in Desmond Ball “From External Affairs to Academia: Coral’s Encounter with the KGB’s Spy Ring in Australia”, in Desmond Ball and Sheryn Lee (eds), *Power and International relations: Essays in Honour of Coral Bell* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), 13. Monteath and Munt (*Red Professor*, 158-9) accept the veracity of Bell’s story.

¹⁴ Karen Throssell, *The Crime of Not Knowing Your Crime: Ric Throssell Against ASIO* (Melbourne: Interventions, 2021).

reputation, and stalked his life.¹⁵ As an ASIO officer told him in 1972, “there is never a closed door on this”.¹⁶



Photograph of Ric Throssell by Gabriel Carplay

The accumulation of evidence against Throssell began in World War II, and is contained in a Commonwealth Investigation Branch file (later transferred to ASIO and declassified in 2019). On 4 June 1943 the *West Australian* newspaper reported the announcement by Prime Minister Curtin of the appointment of diplomatic staff cadets in the DEA. One of the nine cadets selected was Corporal R. Throssell. By itself this was innocuous. But the newspaper report was placed in his mother’s security file. Thus began a long history of guilt-by-association. Katharine Susannah Prichard was not only a renowned

¹⁵ On the irreparable damage to Throssell’s career and the longer-term impact on his life generally, see Anika Piira, *The Petrov Generation: Personal Legacies of Australia’s Long Cold War, 1948-2021* (Honours thesis, ANU, 2021), 42-5, 64-8, 81-3.

¹⁶ Transcript of interview, 14 December 1972, National Archives of Australia [NAA]: A12694, 10, folio 20; Ric Throssell, *My Father’s Son* (Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1989), 373.

novelist but a foundation member of the Communist Party. According to the jaundiced security report, she was a woman of “mischievous propensities”, responsible for “inflammatory speeches” and “harmful propaganda”.¹⁷ In 1943, too, allegedly under “her influence”, Throssell wrote an article for the first issue of *Australian New Writing*, a periodical that was “communist influenced”.¹⁸ Correspondence with MI5’s Director-General in 1948 referred to him as a “possible” Soviet contact given “the details known about him and his mother”.¹⁹ He was now a person of interest. In 1950, ASIO opened a Top Secret Personal File on Ric Prichard Throssell.²⁰ A memorandum noted that Throssell was “the subject of a good deal of enquiry owing to his relationship to Katharine Susannah THROSSELL nee PRICHARD”.²¹ But as Katharine later wrote to her son, “How stupid these people [ASIO] are! As if, with a mother known to be friendly towards the Soviet Union, you would do anything in your official capacity to bring you under suspicion, even. It would be too obvious!”²²

In that same year, 1950, ASIO received a report from a state police Special Branch that the communist defector, Cecil Sharpley (whose allegations triggered a royal commission into communism in Victoria in 1949-50), informed them that Throssell was “an active Party member”.²³ It is not known if Sharpley’s assessment was treated with the wariness it warranted. ASIO was certainly not averse to drawing incriminatory conclusions from reports that Throssell’s mother “discussed his future with an important Party functionary before his appointment to Moscow”.²⁴ The source, not revealed in Throssell’s files but shared by MI5 with ASIO, was Venona and the functionary was Wally Clayton.²⁵ The upshot was a thirteen-

¹⁷ NAA: A6119, 95, folios 2-3, 8. Katharine amassed 16 security files; the relevant one here is NAA: A6119, 43.

¹⁸ Memorandum, Director-General to NSW Regional Director, 3 January 1951, NAA: A6119, 97, folio 14.

¹⁹ Draft letter to “C”, 6 April 1948, The National Archives, UK (TNA): KV2/3450, folio 41.

²⁰ NAA: A6119, 95, folio 23.

²¹ Director-General to NSW Regional Director, 3 January 1951, NAA: A6119, 97, folio 49. This filial relationship was the first-mentioned of the “Unfavourable Factors” on his ASIO Assessment Form. Ibid, folio 2.

²² Prichard to Throssell, 26 July 1954, cited in Nathan Hobby, *The Red Witch: A Biography of Katharine Susannah Prichard* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2022), 339.

²³ NAA: A6119, 95, folios 62, 65.

²⁴ Ibid, folio 61.

²⁵ For more on Clayton, see Phillip Deery, “Clayton, Walter Seddon (Wally) (1906–1997)”, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, ANU, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/clayton-walter->

page ASIO report in early 1952; this was removed from his file, but formed the basis for NSW ASIO Director, G.R. (Ron) Richards, to conclude: “Whilst there is not sufficient to bar [Throssell] from employment, it is certainly evident that he should not have access to anything of even a secret nature”.²⁶

ASIO interviews Throssell

Report compilation escalated to subject interview in 1953. This interview was approved by the Minister for External Affairs, R.G. Casey, after consultation with the Director-General of ASIO, Charles Spry. For nearly two hours on the afternoon of 30 March 1953 in a rented suite in the Hotel Canberra, Throssell was questioned by Wilf Blackett and another senior ASIO officer from the Melbourne headquarters. Their initial impressions of Throssell provide an insight into the conservative mindset of ASIO.

Mr. THROSSELL duly arrived at the suite at 2 p.m. His appearance was most unlike what one would expect from a member of the diplomatic corps. He wore a cheap, badly fitting pale blue suit. His hair, collar and tie and shoes were most untidy. He was not wearing a black tie as other members of the Department were on account of the period of mourning of the death of Queen Mary.²⁷

Blackett also noted that Throssell seemed to be in a “truculent mood” and was “not in any way apprehensive”. Evidently Throssell felt he had nothing to fear or answer for. He was asked about his views on communism and the Soviet Union, his time in Moscow, his contacts with Soviet diplomats, his mother’s influence, his loyalties to Australia and his membership (or otherwise) of the Communist Party. Given his response to one question – “I have never been approached by anyone to furnish them with information clandestinely” – we can deduce that the ASIO interrogators were probing any connection with Clayton via Katharine Susannah Prichard. The other connection was his personal friendship with J.F. (Jim) Hill. In 1948 Hill had been identified in the Venona decrypts as TOURIST, one of the Klod group

[seddon-wally-31299/text38682](https://www.search.org.au/wally_clayton); David McKnight, “Wally Clayton, 1906-1997”, https://www.search.org.au/wally_clayton.

²⁶ Regional Director, NSW, to Director-General, 7 February 1952, *ibid.*, folio 52. Richards had been the *bête noir* of WA communists and led the raid on Katharine’s house in 1941. As she warned Ric in 1954, “He has no love at all for your mother, darling”. Throssell, *My Father’s Son*, 304.

²⁷ Memorandum for Director-General, 20 April 1953, NAA: A6119, 97, folio 28.

suspected of passing classified information to the Soviets. Throssell acknowledged that “Jimmy”, as he affectionately called Hill, had informed him that he had been interrogated by MI5 in June 1950.²⁸

However, the ASIO officers’ assessment of Throssell was positive: he had answered their questions “thoughtfully...frankly and honestly” and concluded: “We are of the opinion that THROSSELL is a loyal subject and is not a security risk in the Department in which he is employed”.²⁹ For ASIO’s head of counterespionage (B2), Michael Thwaites, the unfavourable factors about Throssell “boil[ed] down” to only three things: he was the son of Katharine Susannah Prichard, an “active” communist and propagandist; he was a friend of “persons of B2 interest”; and was “clearly a sympathiser or fellow traveller”.³⁰ Spry wrote to Casey, stating that he was satisfied that Throssell was not, and never had been, a communist nor was pro-Russian in outlook. Consequently, Spry reversed his previous assessment that Throssell was a security risk to Australia.³¹ For the moment, at least, he was in the clear.

Enter the Petrovs

This all changed after the defections of Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov in April 1954. The connection between their testimony and ASIO’s designation of Throssell as a security risk is made clear in this letter from Spry to the Secretary of the DEA, Arthur Tange. Spry wrote: “If I were to give a security clearance to THROSSELL, it means I do not believe the PETROV’s [*sic*] evidence. I cannot accept this ... I therefore cannot give THROSSELL a Security clearance”.³² In the same month, ASIO began tapping the Throssells’ phone.³³

What, then, was the Petrovs’ evidence that proved so damning for Throssell’s future diplomatic career? When Petrov was interrogated on 21 May 1954 by ASIO’s Leo Carter, he

²⁸ Record of interview, NAA: A6119, 95, folios 83-5; “Appendix ‘B’”, NAA: A6119, 97, folio 82.

²⁹ Record of interview, NAA: A6119, 95; Throssell, *My Father’s Son*, 288-9. Throssell stated that “he was completely loyal to Australia ... [and] had no loyalty to the Soviet Union”. “Short Summary of Interview”, “Appendix ‘B’”, NAA: A6119, 97, folio 83.

³⁰ Undated note from M.R. Thwaites, NAA: A6119, 97, folio 21.

³¹ Spry to Casey, 1 April 1953, NAA: A6119, 95, folios 86-7; “Assessment Form” [nd 1952?], *ibid*, folio 66.

³² Spry to Tange, 22 May 1956, NAA: A6119, 364, folio 179.

³³ NAA: A6119, 97, folios 45-53. Nothing incriminating was discerned from the many conversations, which were all of a domestic (and innocuous) nature. Soon after, samples of his typewriting were obtained: G.R. Richards to Regional Director, ACT, NAA: A6283, 72, folio 228. On a visit to Melbourne in 1955, ASIO recommended that surveillance sources be “utilized [*sic*] to the fullest extent”: G.R. Richards to Regional Director, Victoria, 19 January 1955, NAA: A6283, 72, folio 249.

stated that he received a Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD)³⁴ cable from Moscow that contained the following. Throssell was a member of a “special group” in the DEA led by KLOD (Petrov was unaware of Clayton’s identity); that his Soviet-assigned codename was FERRO; that he was “very important”; that during the war years he gave “very important information” to KLOD, who transmitted this information to the MVD representative in Canberra.³⁵ Later, it should be noted, Petrov backtracked:

you may like to know that PETROV has now said that FERRO and the other members of K’s group were not aware that they were passing information to the Russians but were under the impression that it was solely for the benefit of the C.P.A.³⁶

Petrov also alleged that Philip Kislytsin (Second Secretary of the Russian Embassy in Canberra and Petrov’s MVD colleague, responsible for reactivating former agents and developing illegal networks) was instructed to “personally contact” Throssell.³⁷ Accordingly, Throssell was invited twice to the Russian embassy to attend social events – in May 1953 to attend a film evening, and in November 1953 to attend the Soviet National Day celebrations. He had another commitment on the first date, but attended the second. However, Kislytsin, who spoke very poor English and was unaware (as was Petrov) what Throssell looked like, failed to establish contact and the plan was aborted.³⁸ Evdokia believed that Throssell did not attend the film evening “because he was afraid”, but more credible is Throssell’s response: “the fact was that I was not afraid, I would very much liked to have gone and seen their film...In fact I went to their November reception”.³⁹

³⁴ The MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs), whose predecessor was the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs), incorporated secret political activity (previously assigned to the Ministry of State Security (MGB)) and was succeeded by the Committee for State Security (KGB) in March 1954.

³⁵ “Statement of V. Petrov”, 21 May 1954, NAA: A6119, 96, folio 29; “Appendix ‘A’”, NAA: A6119, 97, folio 84.

³⁶ “Extract from a letter from SLO [Senior Liaison Officer] Australia re THROSSSELL”, 31 August 1954, TNA: KV2/3459, folio 147b.

³⁷ “Royal Commission on Espionage – Exhibit 380: Statement by VM Petrov concerning R Throssell”, NAA: A6201, 380.

³⁸ *Report of the Royal Commission on Espionage* (Sydney; Commonwealth of Australia, 1955), para 503, p. 141.

³⁹ *Royal Commission on Espionage Official Transcript of Proceedings*, 3 February 1955, p. 2036.



Evdokia and Vladimir Petrov in 1954 following their defection. Source: NAA: A6285, 11

Evdokia Petrov was interviewed by Ron Richards, now ASIO's Deputy Director-General (Operations), on 24 May. She confirmed her husband's statements, but went further. She believed Throssell was a conscious MVD agent. She recalled that Kislytsin told her he knew of Throssell by his codename and that "he had been an active and successful agent for the Soviet, both in Australia and abroad". By abroad Evdokia meant both the Soviet Union and South America. When Throssell was stationed in Moscow (1945-6) he was "useful". When he was then posted to Brazil in the Australian legation in Rio de Janeiro (1949-1952), he was "an active agent for the Soviet...giving valuable information", an allegation never mentioned by Petrov.⁴⁰ She told Richards, furthermore, that the MVD cadre leader, Evgenii Kovalenok – who arrived in Australia on 3 April 1954 to replace Petrov – assessed Throssell as a "valuable agent". Kovalenok informed her on 5 April that he was tasked by Moscow to

⁴⁰ "Richard Prichard Throssell (or 'Ferro')", 28 May 1954, NAA: A6283, folio 70; "Statement of V. Petrov", 21 May 1954, NAA: A6283, folios 80-1. Throssell referred to the difficulties of being "taken seriously" in Rio where there was "nothing of any importance to Australia in the work of the Australian Legation". *My Father's Son*, 257, 269. Evdokia did not mention this allegation during her RCE testimony.

reactivate FERRO (ASIO's words were "to bring THROSSSELL back into activity").⁴¹ Richards surmised that all attempts to contact Throssell were rendered unsuccessful because of Throssell's fear of exposure after he learnt of MI5's interrogation in London of Jim Hill in June 1950.⁴² Indeed, Evdokia had explicitly told Richards, "I think he [Throssell] is afraid".⁴³ Evdokia also referred to the Kislytsin-Ferro-Klod connection during her *in camera* testimony at the RCE.⁴⁴

We need to recall – and, as we shall see, this was emphasised by Throssell's counsel – that the Petrovs' statements were based on second-hand information, speculation or memory. As MI5's Senior Liaison Officer later noted, the Petrovs' information on Throssell was "hearsay, somewhat fragmentary, and of limited value as evidence".⁴⁵ The only mention of FERRO/Throssell in the documents Petrov supplied to ASIO (the so-called Petrov Papers) was in Document G.14, Item 14: "Charli – Rex Claude Ferro – transmitted oral information Comm. and then they to us". This was part of an aide-mémoire in connection to documents dealing with the 7th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. ASIO approached Petrov twice to explain this but he could give no satisfactory answer; "the last information I heard from [redacted] was that Petrov was 'thinking about it'".⁴⁶ (Significantly, the "offending passages" about Throssell in the Petrovs' memoir, *Empire of Fear*, were expurgated because they were "clearly libellous".⁴⁷)

⁴¹ Report, "Richard Prichard Throssell or 'FERRO'", 28 May 1954, NAA: A6119, 96, folio 45; "Appendix 'A'", NAA: A6119, 97, folio 84.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Memorandum to Deputy Director General, 25 May 1954, NAA: A6119, 96, folio 37. This was the basis for MI5's assessment that Throssell "dropped out [of espionage activity] through fear of discovery". "Aide Memoir for Director-General's Statement on the Petrov Case to be made at the Joint Intelligence Committee", TNA: KV2/3442, folio 249a.

⁴⁴ *Royal Commission on Espionage: Official Transcript of Proceedings In Camera*, 20 July 1954, paras. 161-3, p. 2802.

⁴⁵ "Extract from Monthly Report for February 1955 from SLO Australia", paragraph 2, TNA: KV2/3448, folio 475c. Ric's mother put it more bluntly – that allegations against him were "all on the say-so of a treacherous rat like Petrov". Prichard to Throssell, 3 February 1955, cited in Hobby, *The Red Witch*, 339.

⁴⁶ Memorandum for Director-General, 11 October 1954, NAA: A6119, 97, folio 86; memorandum for Deputy Director-General (Operations), 5 January 1955, NAA: A6119, 365, folio 58. For Document G.14 see *Report of the Royal Commission on Espionage*, Appendix No. 1, 414.

⁴⁷ Telegrams, SLO to Head Office MI5, and MI5 to SLO, 7 March 1964, TNA: KV2/3453, folio 663a. Both MI6 and the FBI were sent proofs of *Empire of Fear*.

In mid-May 1954, after being informed by ASIO of the allegations against Throssell, the DEA Secretary, Arthur Tange, instructed officers in his department to deny Throssell direct access to information classified as “secret”. With the Petrovs’ claims, the advice of Spry and the wish to “play safe”, Tange had no option. But before Throssell’s diminished security status could be confirmed, Tange requested from Spry that the incriminating evidence “be placed in my hands as soon as possible”.⁴⁸ Spry’s position was that nothing further be done until Throssell appeared before the RCE.⁴⁹ So Tange, somewhat reluctantly, acted against Throssell in conformity with ASIO’s advice but without witnessing any evidence. Tange continued to be sceptical of ASIO’s assessment of Throssell. In May 1955, he informed Spry that the information (he had been provided) about Throssell’s wartime activities was not an adequate reason to withhold higher access from him.⁵⁰ In December 1958, he questioned ASIO about whether the “continued rebuffs’ to Throssell’s promotion were “justified according to law” and requested a personal meeting with Spry to discuss this.⁵¹

The second ASIO interview

Sixteen months after the first interview that exonerated him, Throssell was interviewed, again, on 22 July 1954. Ron Richards was the sole interrogator. Richards told Throssell that ASIO needed to re-examine his statements given in March 1953 “in view of further information concerning him which was now in the possession of A.S.I.O.” This set the pattern for Throssell’s long and unsuccessful quest, lasting into the 1980s, to discover the source and content of the allegations against him. ASIO’s refusal to be specific and to leave Throssell ignorant is captured by this exchange, recorded by Richards:

He said that he felt fairly sure that the interview was connected with the Royal Commission on Espionage. I asked him why he should think that, and he replied that he thought perhaps his ‘name had appeared on a list or something given by those

⁴⁸ Tange to Spry, 12 August 1954, NAA: A6119, 97, folio 80.

⁴⁹ Note by Spry, 18 August 1954, NAA: A6119, 97, folio 79. The Solicitor General was also sent a copy of Tange’s letter; Spry’s note records their discussion on 18 August.

⁵⁰ Tange to Spry, 23 May 1944, NAA: A6119, 364, folio 94.

⁵¹ Memorandum, ACT Regional Director to Spry, 24 December 1958, NAA: A6119, 365, folio 45.

people'. I asked him why he should think that and he replied that he 'couldn't imagine why'.⁵²

A subsequent handwritten marginal note asked whether this exchange represented Throssell 'searching out extent of ASIO's information?' If Throssell were a Soviet agent, ASIO's concerns were understandable; if not, his increasingly palpable frustration was justified. Either way, Richards told him explicitly "I do not intend to give you the details of the information we have which concerns you". This silence over sources tormented Throssell for the rest of his life.

At different moments in the interrogation, Throssell became emotionally unsettled. When shown a photograph of Wally Clayton and asked whether he knew or met him, Throssell became "upset and in some distress". When Richards asked him "most seriously" whether he had discussed his DEA work with unauthorised persons, Richards reported "THROSSELL was greatly distressed and took some minutes to reply to this". When Richards reminded him that he would have to appear before the RCE, he became "a little overwrought". The separate summary notes of the interrogation also stated he was "very distressed" throughout.⁵³ Although no judgements were made, we can surmise, in view of subsequent history, that ASIO interpreted Throssell's anxiety and agitation as implicit evidence of guilt.

An alternative and more exculpatory explanation is that Throssell became distraught during the interview for good reasons: ASIO refused permission for a DEA officer to be present; he was bereft of explanations ("I just can't explain it"); he did not know the source(s) of the allegations made against him; and he lacked specific details from those sources (the Petrovs and the Venona decrypts). To the question why the MVD in Moscow and in Canberra had described him as "very important", he could only answer "I have done nothing to warrant the description". In the end, Throssell "hung his head, and was tearful and said 'I cannot think of anything I have done or said which was wrong'". These are not necessarily the reactions of someone guilty, but of a despairing and frustrated interviewee.

The cryptic marginalia, handwritten by a senior ASIO officer on Richards' report, points to the absence of sympathy for Throssell's predicament. When he acknowledged that, for example, he knew someone, or that he was once friendly with a young Soviet diplomat

⁵² "Richard [*sic*] Prichard Throssell", report for Director-General, 26 July 1954, NAA: A6119, 97, folios 73-77.

⁵³ *Ibid*; "Appendix 'C'", NAA: A6119, 97, folio 81.

when posted to Moscow, or that whenever he discussed his work with his mother “we ended up in an argument”, the marginal note reads “admission”.⁵⁴ In fact, the word “admission” appears nine times and the phrase “let out” (implying inadvertent admissions) appears three times on this document. These cryptic comments speak volumes about ASIO’s readiness to cast Throssell’s answers in an incriminating light.

The Royal Commission on Espionage

Ric Throssell appeared before the RCE on 2-3 February 1955. Given that the commissioners could not use the Venona material, their questions often relied on the Petrovs’ earlier testimony – almost identical to that given to their ASIO debriefers but without the inconsistencies and contradictions. And Throssell’s answers were much the same as those he gave during the ASIO interviews. He denied ever providing official documents to any unauthorised person, denied ever hearing his mother’s name in connection with Wally Clayton, equivocated over his knowledge of Katharine’s communist connections,⁵⁵ was at a loss to explain the MVD’s and the Petrovs’ “misinformation” about him, and insisted that his association in Moscow in 1945 with Lidia Mertsova, a literary agent and NKVD officer, was entirely innocent. He was repeatedly cross-examined on whether people he knew or met were communists or communist sympathisers, but he refused to be pinned down: “I thought they might be”; however, “It was their own business...I do not consider it my concern”.⁵⁶ As he wrote in his memoir, “I was not going to be put in a position of saying whether someone else was a communist. I tried to explain that I had no way of telling whether or not a person was a communist. How was I to know?...It was clear that I was dodging the issue”⁵⁷ This served to increase the commissioners’ scepticism and confirm ASIO’s suspicions.

⁵⁴ Throssell readily acknowledged that he had met Communist Party leaders Jean Ferguson and Rex Chiplin in his mother’s Sydney flat and J.B. Miles elsewhere, but not Clayton. He had met some Russians (Fedor Nosov, the TASS correspondent, and Victor Zaitsev) but not others (Petrov, Kislytsin, Makarov); he insisted his contact with the former was “purely official”.

⁵⁵ He may have been privately advised to equivocate. He later wrote that he “had been told not to tell them [the RCE] that Katharine was a communist”, but could see “no reason” for that. Throssell, *My Father’s Son*, 314.

⁵⁶ Evidence by R.P. Throssell, 2-3 February 1955, *Royal Commission on Espionage: Official Transcript of Proceedings*, 2015-23, 2027-37.

⁵⁷ Throssell, *My Father’s Son*, 312.

Ball concluded that Throssell's testimony was "not very helpful" and on some matters he was stubborn and untruthful.⁵⁸ My close reading of the 29 pages of the relevant transcript does reveal a certain stubbornness especially to "name names", but no evidence of lying. What has been entirely overlooked by all historians who have discussed the Throssell case are the significant submissions by Throssell's counsel, Dr Frank Louat QC.⁵⁹ He was admitted to the Bar in 1925, took silk in 1952, and had a long and distinguished legal career. Politically conservative, he was president of the Constitutional Association of NSW, and frequently appeared before the High Court of Australia on constitutional cases. He was also a "stickler for procedure", used "his rich and mellow voice" to good effect and was a rare practising doctor of laws.⁶⁰ He was therefore someone whose submissions the commissioners would take seriously. Indeed, it is arguable that his submissions were of such significance that they helped persuade the RCE to issue a favourable report on Throssell.

The role of Frank Louat

Louat began by establishing Ric Throssell's personal qualities. The RCE had before it, he stated, a man who "commended himself as one with a frank, clear, and sensitive mind, and a high degree of intellectual integrity, a man on whose word full confidence could be placed". He suggested to the commissioners that in all their respective long experiences, they "had never seen evidence given more straightforwardly and frankly".⁶¹ He further suggested that Throssell's "whole future and career" will depend on the view taken by the commissioners about the evidence presented before them. This evidence, he argued, has been "complete in itself", but derived from "indirect" and "vague" sources. He then proceeded to unpick, in a forensic fashion, this evidence, which, he stated, "has the character of hearsay, and indeed hearsay upon hearsay".⁶²

⁵⁸ Ball and Horner, *Breaking the Codes*, 323; Horner (*The Spy Catchers*, 492) repeats Ball's conclusion despite citing only one page (2016) of the transcript.

⁵⁹ My thanks to Julie Kimber for drawing my attention to this. For example, neither David McKnight, *Australia's Spies and their Secrets* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 72, nor Robert Manne, *The Petrov Affair: Politics and Espionage* (Sydney: Permagon, 1987), 189-90, refer to Louat's role.

⁶⁰ Martha Rutledge, "Louat, Frank Rutledge (1901–1963)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, ANU, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/louat-frank-rutledge-10863/text19281>

⁶¹ Submissions by Dr Louat, QC, 7 February 1955, *Royal Commission on Espionage: Official Transcript of Proceedings*, 2100.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 2099.

Louat referred to three MVD lists concerning recruitment of diplomats and government officials that had earlier been the subject of RCE scrutiny: one that Ivan Pakhamov handed over to Petrov, another compiled by Valentin Sadovnikov, and a third carried to Canberra by Philip Kislitsyn. All three Russians were attached to the Soviet embassy in the early 1950s and all three were senior MGB-MVD officers. On none of these lists was Throssell or FERRO named. The only document on which his name could be found was on Petrov's cryptic note (in G.14, mentioned earlier) for which "we have not the author of it, and we have not the author's sources". What there was, Louat maintained, was a cable from Moscow attributing to FERRO the provision of valuable information (which Kislitsyn recalled) sometime during the latter years of the war, when Throssell was stationed in Moscow. Louat dissected the word "valuable" and questioned "what could be valuable, what one might expect to be valuable" to a wartime ally. Justice Owen, the RCE chair, conceded the point: "Information [that] may have been regarded as valuable was in no sense a State secret". Most likely this occurred during Throssell's friendship with Lidia Mertsova, who was "very kind" (Throssell's words) when his first wife was dying. Unbeknown to Throssell, she worked for the NKVD as well as in publishing and "would have mingled with her friendship whatever notes she wanted to make in the service of her own superiors". But Throssell, then in his early twenties, was "too chivalrous, too generous-minded" to believe her assistance was provided in anything other than "pure friendship"; this, said Louat, "reflects no discredit whatever on Throssell".⁶³

In Throssell's twelve long years of honourable service, Louat concluded, there had never been a whisper of complaint. If there had been, "we would have heard it here; he would have been asked about it". There was no suggestion, moreover, that any leakage of classified information could be ascribed to him. The important thing, he stated ominously, is that "hearsay evidence" should not destroy his career. Louat then appealed directly to the commissioners:

But if Your Honours cannot say something, however slight...unless some restraining word is said, something at least to indicate that no-one should draw any inferences against him...my client will suffer...[T]he world, the Australian public – that includes governments, superiors, and everyone else – will treat this Commission as having tried him in effect.

⁶³ Ibid., 2103.

One of the three commissioners, Justice Ligertwood responded: “Dr. Louat – I am not speaking for my colleagues – I do not mind saying that there is no evidence of impropriety against Mr. Throssell. There has been none before us that I have seen.”⁶⁴ This was entirely contrary to ASIO’s view. Their report in large measure exonerated Throssell and, again, it is reasonable to suggest that Louat’s submissions were influential:

There are only remote hearsay allegations that, without his knowledge, information said to have come from Throssell reached the Soviet. There are no particulars of the nature of the information, except that the Moscow Centre regarded it as important or valuable; and there is nothing to show why the Centre so regarded it. It is true that it was said to have been given to ‘Klod’, but whether directly or indirectly or unwittingly is left in the air. There are no particulars as to when it is said to have been given, except that it was during the war. Having regard to the inadequacy of the probative force of these indefinite hearsay assertions, and in face of Throssell’s denial, it would be wrong to hold that he had been a member of ‘Klod’s Group’ or that he had wittingly given any information.⁶⁵



Dr Louat and Ric Throssell leave the Petrov Royal Commission in 1955

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 2099, 2103-5. Justice Philp was less charitable: “we have no direct concern with the effect on his career”.

⁶⁵ *Report of the Royal Commission on Espionage*, 1955, para 505, 141-2. As Throssell later told ASIO officers, “How does one know whether you give information unwittingly?” Transcript of interview, 12 December 1972, NAA: A12694, 10, folio 24.

This, of course, did not save Throssell for, as we know, his “honourable service” was blackened and his career derailed. The caveat in the commissioners’ report (“unwittingly”) was in itself sufficient for ASIO to recommend, successfully, continued denial of a high-level security clearance. Spry explicitly cited a subsequent speculative remark in the Report that stated “It is quite possible that in the circle in which Throssell lived in Canberra he may have let drop information which he himself did not regard as important” (which echoes Louat’s dissection of “valuable”) as the basis on which he was judged a security risk.⁶⁶ Nor did the conclusion of the RCE Report dissuade or deter ASIO or MI5 from their conviction that Throssell was guilty. After the Report was issued, a senior MI5 officer commented: “There can be no reasonable doubt that Throssell was at one time an active and conscious agent”.⁶⁷ Similarly, a Foreign Office official wrote that “It may be taken as certain that THROSSELL ...[is] guilty of espionage”.⁶⁸ The explanation advanced by the British for the RCE’s exculpatory finding was, however, highly questionable: “The Royal Commission could hardly have contradicted ASIO’s written conclusions which were favourable to Throssell (manifestly mistaken though they were)”.⁶⁹

The Venona cables

Louat was not privy to the Venona decrypts; the royal commissioners (Justices Owen, Philp and Ligertwood) and, of course, ASIO and MI5 were. Although these decrypted cables directly implicated Clayton, Jim Hill and Ian Milner (and others in the DEA), they are, at best, circumstantial in the case of Throssell. As Spry privately acknowledged, “Throssell was

⁶⁶ Spry to Tange, 22 May 1956, NAA: A6119, 364, folio 179. Again citing this paragraph, Spry tellingly wrote that “any attempts by THROSSELL to obtain a position of access” should be “neutralised” by ASIO. Memorandum, Spry to Regional Director, WA, 13 January 1958, NAA: A6119, 365, folios 4-5. The same paragraph was also cited by an ASIO officer interviewing Throssell in December 1972; NAA: A12694, 10, folio 30.

⁶⁷ Memorandum, 13 October 1955, para 11, “Vladimir Mikhailovich PETROV/Evdokia Alexeyevna PETROVA: Russian”, TNA: KV 2/3451, folio 575a. An accompanying Minute Sheet (C.P.C. de Wesselow to D.I.A., 13 October 1955) recorded Throssell as “Probably conscious agent...Under study for reactivation”.

⁶⁸ Letter, “Top Secret and Personal”, G.R. Mitchell to A.J. de la Mare, 15 April 1955, TNA: KV2/3449.

⁶⁹ “Office of the High Commissioner for the UK, Canberra, to Peter [Wright, MI5]”, 23 January 1955, TNA: KV2/3453, folio 663a. MI5 was obviously aggrieved by the RCE Report, in which “certain of the suspects ... have come off very lightly, notably THROSSELL”. Note, J.C. Robertson, Minute 18 October 1955, TNA: KV2/3451, folio 580.

not known definitely to be a spy but suspicion against him was strong”.⁷⁰ The most incriminating Venona cable, sent in 1948, requested “Viktor” (Lieutenant-General Vladimir Fitin) to ascertain from “C” (Clayton) the following: “Is it advisable to bring ‘FERRO’ into our work in view of the fact that his mother is well known in the Commonwealth [Australia] as an influential ACADEMICIAN?”⁷¹ The only other cable, from 1945, that mentions Throssell by name (he was not then assigned a cover name) concerned a discussion between “Claude” [Klod] and Prichard about Throssell’s diplomatic posting to Moscow. There was no hint by Clayton or his handler, “Viktor”, of recruitment or intelligence exploitation. Instead, the cable reads, “THROSSEL [sic] is described by “CLAUDE” as a person of limited intelligence. His relations with his mother are normal”.⁷²

It was this source, the still-classified Venona cables, that thwarted all attempts by Throssell to understand or resolve the continued security restriction.⁷³ At an interview with ASIO officers Griffith and Ross-Perrier on 14 December 1972, he pleaded:

To which finding do you give importance, the finding of the Royal Commissioners or ... an un-named source of information I can’t answer anything about. I don’t know who it is. I don’t know what the precise information is. I’m back in the situation that I started with. I don’t know explicitly why for eighteen years that I’ve suffered from this disability, you people [ASIO] have taken this position ... [I]t is no good coming to me again and saying our firm and reliable source says something which I don’t know anything about, expecting me to respond to it. If you want me to respond you’ve got to give me something to bite on. What specifically is the nature of the information that I have to answer to? I can’t answer to it unless I know, can I?⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Telegram, Spry to Director, GCHQ [Government Communications Headquarters], 24 May 1955, TNA: KV2/3475, folio 40a. Similarly, the British Foreign Office noted that Throssell “has long been suspected by ASIO but they have been unable to obtain sufficient evidence against him”. G.R. Mitchell (FO) to C.G Costley-White, CRU, 2 November 1956, TNA: KV2/3447, folio 396c.

⁷¹ Cable, Moscow to Canberra, “‘C’ [KLOD] to Report on Various Agents (1948)”, 5 June 1948, National Security Agency, *Fifth Venona Release*, October 1996, vol. 3, 139-40. The NSA explanatory comment reads ‘ACADEMICIAN: Probably a member of the Communist Party’.

⁷² Cable, Canberra to Moscow, “‘CLAUDE’ Reports on Throssell (1945)”, 30 September 1945, *ibid.*

⁷³ His papers contain details of his numerous unsuccessful appeals against denied promotions, and his failed attempts to find alternative employment; see Papers of Ric Throssell, NLA: MS 8071, Box 20, Files 138, 140.

⁷⁴ Transcript of interview, 12 December 1972, NAA: A12694, 10, folios 19, 24. The full 30-page transcript of this recorded interview, to which Throssell was initially denied access, can be found in *ibid.*, folios 16-45. At

This was echoed 17 years later in his memoir:

There was no new information, no indication who had made the charges, no answer to my question why. Only now it was said not to have been connected to Petrov or the Royal Commission. It was a ‘firm and reliable source’ [Venona], which I could not question, could not challenge. I was fighting the same shadows that had faced me for eighteen years.⁷⁵

Similarly, the secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Alan Renouf, complained to the ASIO Director-General, Peter Barbour, that “Mr Throssell is placed in an impossible position, because he has not had access to the material which casts doubt on his loyalty”.⁷⁶

If it were only Venona – and not the Petrovs, the RCE or the guilt-by-association (with his mother) – that explains the damage done to Throssell, then some comment on Venona is necessary. A small team of cryptanalysts inside the US Army Security Agency in Arlington Hall, Virginia decrypted, to varying degrees, 2900 intercepted Soviet intelligence cables and telegrams. They were sent mainly between 1940 and 1945 and most were decrypted in the late 1940s. But decryption was fragmentary. Only a small fraction of the hundreds of thousands of Soviet cables was deciphered and sometimes only a few words were recoverable. However, the main flaw in Venona lies in the subjective interpretation of the portions that can be read. Because Venona is raw intelligence data, we do not know how important the cable-receivers in Moscow regarded the information, what they did with it, and to what extent the cable-senders provided lopsided or exaggerated information. Venona,

one point a clearly frustrated Throssell stated, “Okay. I am sorry for becoming heated” (folio 27). The interview was also attended by John Ryan (First Assistant Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs), whose interpolations were usually supportive of Throssell. The ASIO officers’ names inadvertently escaped redaction.

⁷⁵ Throssell, *My Father’s Son*, 369. Elsewhere, he lamented the ‘impossibility of fighting shadows’, *ibid*, 374. As David McKnight eloquently wrote, ASIO’s adverse security assessments “locked him in a Kafkaesque labyrinth of intangible (and hence unanswerable) allegations for the rest of his career”. McKnight, *Australia’s Spies and their Secrets*, 89.

⁷⁶ Renouf to Barber, 7 January 1974, NAA: A12694, 10, folio 63. Both Renouf and his DEA predecessor, Arthur Tange continued to believe that Throssell had been treated unjustly but, as departmental secretaries, chose not to override ASIO’s recommendation – in Renouf’s case “with the greatest reluctance” (Throssell, *My Father’s Son*, 380).

therefore, should be treated with caution and circumspection. This is not to deny its authenticity nor its identification of several hundred Soviet agents in the West. But it must be said that Australian intelligence agencies regarded Venona with such uncritical reverence that Klod's comment that Katharine Susannah Prichard "very much wanted her son to go to the Soviet Union and had her way"⁷⁷ was regarded as *prima facie* evidence of Throssell's complicity, direct or indirect, in espionage.

Aftermath

Throssell, meanwhile, kept fighting those shadows. His fight was quixotic. It was only in 1999, when he committed suicide,⁷⁸ that an ASIO officer's comment that there was "never a closed door" was rendered redundant.⁷⁹ The door, however, was kept ajar by newspaper columnists and other commentators. This article cannot slam it shut. For there is still the problem that Throssell himself faced in his search for answers – "the reports that remained unrevealed, the undisclosed sources, the evidence that could not be questioned, could not be seen".⁸⁰ But I am suggesting that the weight of evidence presented here, and which questions ASIO, Desmond Ball, the Petrovs, and Venona, leans heavily towards one inescapable conclusion: Throssell was a victim, not a perpetrator. There seems no reason to revise the comment I made in 1999 that none of the accusations in *Breaking the Codes* made against Throssell by ASIO and accepted by Ball "is supported by source citation; indeed they epitomise the innuendo that has blighted Throssell's life".⁸¹ More telling, perhaps, are the words of John Burton, the departmental secretary of External Affairs (1947-1950) who, astonishingly, has also been accused of involvement in espionage.⁸² When interviewed in 1995, Burton stated:

⁷⁷ Cable, Canberra to Moscow, "'CLAUDE' Reports on Throssell (1945)", 30 September 1945.

⁷⁸ See Richard McGregor, "'Spy' and wife die as one", *The Australian*, 22 April 1999, 3.

⁷⁹ Throssell was still the subject of intense ASIO surveillance in 1972; see NAA: A12694, 10, folios 8-11, 99-116, 120-121.

⁸⁰ Throssell, *My Father's Son*, 399.

⁸¹ Phillip Deery, "'A Clayton's Cold War'", *Overland*, 155 (1999), 89-91.

⁸² Rob Foot, "The Curious Case of Dr John Burton". *Quadrant*, November 2013, 44-53; Rob Foot, "Was John Burton Australia's Alger Hiss?" *Quadrant*, June 2016, 52. Ball also claimed that Burton was "probably" an "agent of Soviet intelligence"; see Desmond Ball, "The moles at the very heart of government", *The Australian*, 16 April 2011 and cited in Ernst Willheim, "Sex, spies and lies? The spurious case against ex-department head John Burton", *The Australian*, 4 November 2014.

Well, I think what happened to Throssell was absolutely disgusting and tragic and I think ASIO should be sued for it ... He just ... he just felt destroyed. Imagine a person like Throssell doing anything that would prejudice Australia in any sense. It's just absurd.⁸³

Stripped of its almost visceral outrage, Burton's comment captures the essence of this article. Inference, supposition and speculation are an insufficient basis for establishing culpability. Thomas Gradgrind's famous injunction that "we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!"⁸⁴ sets an excessively high standard for investigating the murky, duplicitous world of espionage, but it underlines the age-old importance of historical evidence, or facts, when making clear-headed judgements about an individual's innocence or guilt.

⁸³ John Burton, interview by Michael J. Wilson, Canberra, 23 August 1995. Australian Diplomacy 1950–1990 Oral History Project. NLA Oral History Collection, ORAL TRC 2981/23, 39, cited in Pamela Burton with Meredith Edwards, *Persons of Interest: An Intimate Account of Cecily and John Burton* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2022), 219.

⁸⁴ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969 [first pub. 1854]), 47.