

# WASHINGTON'S SPIES<sup>1</sup>

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“How beautiful is death, when earn'd by virtue! Who would not be that youth? What pity it is that we can die but once for our country!”<sup>3</sup> This particular line from Joseph Addison's play “Cato” is the likely basis for the final words attributed to one of America's first spies, Nathan Hale—“I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”<sup>4</sup> We may never know Hale's actual last words, but Alexander Rose has brought to life the deeds of the American Revolution's best known spy, as well as chronicling the role played by other colonial secret agents in *Washington's Spies*.<sup>5</sup>

The use of scouts and the gathering of intelligence has always been a part of military operations.<sup>6</sup> For the military forces of our nation during the American Revolution, the art of spying was anything but art. In *Washington's Spies*, Rose takes his reader down the shadowy and winding roads of early-American espionage, shedding light on those who silently served this nation in its infancy.<sup>7</sup> While the journey is an interesting one, Rose needlessly takes us down many side roads, eventually winding back to the starting point. If you do not mind the occasional detour, the drive to the destination is not otherwise too unpleasant.

*Washington's Spies* is a well researched and documented account of American and British intelligence gatherers of the 1700s. Within the book's 280-plus pages, Rose uses more than 750 endnotes, citing to his nearly 300 listed sources of information.<sup>8</sup> It appears that the primary sources detailing the activities of these early “intelligencers,”<sup>9</sup> known as the Culper Ring,<sup>10</sup> are the surviving letters transmitted between General George Washington and his field operatives.<sup>11</sup> It is from these written accounts that Rose tells the story of the Revolutionary War's sun-sung heroes.

The thoroughly documented *Washington's Spies* reveals a new chapter in the otherwise well-known history of the American Revolution; however, the overall work is not without its shortcomings. These flaws, while not fatal to the readability of the book, may further narrow the likely audience of early American military history and/or espionage buffs.

At nearly 300 pages of primary text, *Washington's Spies* is hardly a lengthy read, but at times it proves to be a somewhat difficult one. Within the first chapter it becomes apparent that average readers may want to keep a dictionary handy, and not just for the quoted passages from the 1700s.<sup>12</sup> Rose's writing style, at times, reads as if the book was actually authored in the eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup> There are also specific references made by Rose throughout the book which, when left unexplained,

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<sup>1</sup> ALEXANDER ROSE, *WASHINGTON'S SPIES: THE STORY OF AMERICA'S FIRST SPY RING* (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Florida Army National Guard. Written while a student in the 55th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

<sup>3</sup> JOSEPH ADDISON, CATO act 4, sc. 4, available at [http://www.constitution.org/addison/cato\\_act4.htm](http://www.constitution.org/addison/cato_act4.htm) (last visited Sept. 17, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> ROSE, *supra* note 1, at 31.

<sup>5</sup> According to Rose, the “I regret” quote was attributed to Hale years later by “William Hull and others.” ROSE, *supra* note 1, at 31-32. However, the Nathan Hale Official website acknowledges that his final words are not known, but that Hale paraphrasing from the popular play *Cato* would not have been unusual for an educated military officer of this era to have uttered such a line. Nathan Hale website, available at, <http://ursamajor.hartnet.org/als/nathanhale/Chronology.htm#words> (follow “Those Famous Last Words” hyperlink) (last visited Apr. 18, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> ROSE, *supra* note 1, at 96, 199.

<sup>7</sup> ROSE, *supra* note 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 283-361.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 96.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 75.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 88.

<sup>12</sup> Rose describes Benedict Arnold's betrayal as having “poleaxed Washington.” *Id.* at 196. Being unfamiliar with this term, I later found that “poleaxed,” as used by Rose, likely meant “to strike down or kill.” See WEBSTER'S UNABRIDGED DICTIONARY 1496 (2d ed. 1998).

<sup>13</sup> For example, Rose provides this description of Nathan Hale: “Born on June 6, 1755, the sixth child in a large family, Nathan Hale was of good and middling, and most respectable, Connecticut stock.” ROSE, *supra* note 1, at 3.

leaves the reader wondering what the author is trying to say. For example, when Rose discusses Benedict Arnold, he describes Arnold as “a heroic and valiant soldier” but also as “a low, sly Iago among traitors.”<sup>14</sup> Readers unfamiliar with the Shakespeare play *Othello* will simply not appreciate the villainous “Iago” reference.<sup>15</sup>

A more contemporary remark that is equally vague is found in Rose’s comparison of two members of the spy ring, Townsend and Woodhull.<sup>16</sup> Townsend is described as “the tortured, flawed Oskar [sic] Schindler to Woodhull’s selfless Raoul Wallenberg.”<sup>17</sup> Many readers may know Schindler’s name from the film detailing his good works during the Nazi Holocaust of World War II.<sup>18</sup> Wallenberg’s name, however, is not as well known. While Wallenberg is credited with saving between 100,000 to 300,000 Hungarian Jews during World War II, the reference simply may be lost on some readers.<sup>19</sup>

When describing persons, places and events, Rose often pays careful attention to detail and leaves few facts to the imagination. In other areas, Rose presumes his reader’s knowledge level, sometimes leaving them in the dark. While Alexander Rose was born in the United States, it is likely that his years in Australia and his Cambridge University education provided him with intimate knowledge of Great Britain’s monetary system.<sup>20</sup> This frame of reference is one his American readers likely do not possess, but efforts to enlighten them are rarely offered.<sup>21</sup> The payments made to the American agents during the war were made in British pounds, rather than the nearly worthless Continental currency.<sup>22</sup> While his detailed accounts of the monies paid is accurately reflected in “pounds,” no frame of reference is given to the reader to put these facts in perspective. Most notably is a breakdown of the Culper Ring’s expenses, all reflected as pounds and further denominations from which most readers will come away wondering if these amounts were significant or not.<sup>23</sup>

Among the challenges posed to the reader is Rose’s effort to paint a vivid picture with generous details for each person who played any role in (or were even peripheral to) the covert missions featured in the book. While helpful in introducing the main figures, the background information included for the lesser players and events often proves to be more of a distraction. For example, five pages of text are dedicated to the “Great Fire” in New York City before we learn it is simply background information and not related to the story of the spy ring at all.<sup>24</sup>

These unrelated distractions are not isolated passages and occur throughout *Washington’s Spies*. Does it add to the tales of intrigue that a portrait of Culper Ring member Robert Townsend was sketched by a nephew in 1812, and the specific street address where the nephew studied art later in life?<sup>25</sup> Perhaps this fact would have carried a bit more importance if the sketch were included as an illustration, but inexplicably, it is not.<sup>26</sup> The inclusion of copious details not only extends to lengthy pedigrees tracing bloodlines back several generations, but also in real property descriptions of locations that were merely the backdrop of certain occurrences.<sup>27</sup> A more concise and to the point telling of this story would do much in holding a reader’s attention.

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<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 196.

<sup>15</sup> WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *OTHELLO*.

<sup>16</sup> ROSE, *supra* note 1, at 276.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., SCHINDLER’S LIST (Universal Studios 1993). See also *The Holocaust, Oscar Schindler: Rake – and Saviour*, <http://www.auschwitz.dk/Schindler2.htm> (last visited Sept. 18, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Jan Larsson, International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation, *Raoul Wallenberg’s Biography*, <http://www.raoulwallenberg.net/?en/wallenberg/raoul-wallenberg-s-biography.611.htm> (last visited Sept. 18, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Rose, *Biography*, <http://rosewriter.com/Alexander%20Rose/Bio.html> (last visited Sept. 18, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> It is finally explained that Benedict Arnold’s monetary payment for West Point was about \$500,000 in today’s dollars. ROSE, *supra* note 1, at 198.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 99.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 265.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 35-39.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 134.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 79, 135.

In spite of the occasional sidebar, for those with an interest in American history and the beginnings of our military intelligence operations, this book will not otherwise disappoint you. Rose's painstaking descriptions of trivial matters may add little to the story, but his attention to detail when focusing on the book's main topic and central characters is invaluable. The story of the heroic Culper Ring is one deserving of telling, and Rose does their stories justice.

Rose often lets the Culper Ring members tell their own story through the writings they left behind so many years ago. Several of these writings are reproduced as illustrations in the center of the book, and translated for the reader.<sup>28</sup> The exploits of these early agents demonstrate their courage, their fears, and the mistakes that were made along the way. At first blush, many of their tools and tactics may seem primitive, but when viewed in the context of the era, their accomplishments are remarkable. The development of invisible inks,<sup>29</sup> a code dictionary,<sup>30</sup> using secret couriers,<sup>31</sup> and dead-drops<sup>32</sup> all seem as if they came from the twentieth century, and not from the days of the American Revolution.

In addition to telling the story of the Culper Ring, Rose also provides an interesting look at George Washington and his role in their missions. Interestingly, Washington had served as an intelligence officer during the French and Indian War.<sup>33</sup> The correspondence between the Culper Ring and Washington illustrates his temperament (and occasional lack of)<sup>34</sup> as well as his foresightedness in the intelligence arena.<sup>35</sup> Although some of Washington's instructions to his operatives were somewhat shortsighted, such as those to Lieutenant Brewster in 1778: "[D]o not spare any reasonable expense to come at early and true information; always recollecting, and bearing in mind, that vague and uncertain accounts of things . . . is more disturbing and dangerous than receiving none at all."<sup>36</sup>

Outside of his role with the Culper Ring, Washington's leadership, intelligence as well as the evidence of the strain of command during these difficult years are all evident from his writings and actions detailed in the book.<sup>37</sup> During the early part of the war, Washington had lost his hold of the city of New York,<sup>38</sup> his Army had shrunk from 20,000 to 3,000 or so, and he had suffered losses in several battles.<sup>39</sup> However, it was during these dark times that his intelligence gathering activities as well as the covert passing of disinformation worked to his advantage.<sup>40</sup>

Beyond the story of Washington's Culper Ring, Rose also includes some of the known British intelligence operations. Most notably is the story of Benedict Arnold's betrayal of his country and the unfortunate demise of his British handler, Major Andre'.<sup>41</sup> Countering the dismal tale of Arnold's deceit is the humorous tale of the "Hiram Affair" and the cunning of this so-called "triple agent."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 178.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 107.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 121.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 102.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 199.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 96.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 265-66.

<sup>35</sup> For example, Washington saw the value of an invisible ink for his agents use and appropriated hospital supplies to accommodate that need. *Id.* at 108.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 67-68 (quoting a Letter from George Washington to Lieutenant Caleb Brewster (Aug. 8, 1778)).

<sup>37</sup> *E.g. id.* at 64-65.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 13-14.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 41.

<sup>40</sup> *E.g., id.* at 41.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 196-212.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 244.

*Washington's Spies* begins slowly devoting much of the first chapter to the best known spy of the Revolution, Nathan Hale, whose covert career ended almost as quickly as it began.<sup>43</sup> Rose continues to provide background information in the second chapter and it is not until the third chapter that we begin to learn the exploits of the Culper Ring.<sup>44</sup> While the interim tales of intrigue prove an interesting read, the book ends as slowly as it began, wrapping up loose ends and completing the life stories of America's first spies.<sup>45</sup>

The story told in *Washington's Spies* is not one just to be relegated to the dusty shelf with other history books. The current war on terror depends heavily on intelligence and while some of the methods have changed since the day of the Culper Ring, the goals remain the same today. While Rose's work is satisfactory overall, the slow pace and tedious details may prompt the casual reader to walk away before the spying gets underway. But for the student of military history, *Washington's Spies* should sufficiently hold their attention, in spite of Rose winding about to the historical, but anticlimactic, end.

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<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 1-34.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.* at 67.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.* at 273.