

Sir John Masterman



John Masterman was elected as a member of Hampstead Hockey Club on 14 September 1923. He was introduced and proposed for membership by club stalwart and Olympic gold medal winner, Jack Bennett and probably through Oxford University connections. John Masterman was highly competent across at least six sports, gaining four international caps for England in hockey, representing England in tennis (and playing in the Wimbledon Championship at the All England Club). He was virtually a scratch golfer and equally skilled at squash. He won a blue at Oxford in Athletics, where he competed in the High Jump. His greatest passion was, however, for cricket, in which he played four first class matches, as well as minor counties cricket for Oxfordshire and he toured frequently overseas.

He became a Vice President of Hampstead HC after the club was re-formed in 1950 after World War Two and is remembered particularly for the players he introduced to Hampstead in those reformatory years, when such referrals were vital to the growth in playing numbers and in forming a viable basis for the Club's survival.

He was a guest of honour at the Club's Annual Dinner on 1 December 1961, held at Pimm's Red House Restaurant in Bishopsgate, renowned as a speaker of high quality. Bill Fletcher was Club President and recalled that with Sir John's reputation and after whom he had to speak as President that year, he was more nervous than usual. However, having spoken, he later said that "the evening was quite made" by Mr J M Ross of Purley Hockey club, in reply "with an excellent speech for the guests and thanking Sir John *Wolfenden*, which our honoured guest took in good part". (Sir John Wolfenden was probably best remembered for chairing the Wolfenden Committee, whose report in 1957 recommended the decriminalisation of homosexuality).

John Cecil Masterman was born on 12 January 1891 in Kingston upon Thames to a naval family and destined from a young age to follow in his father's footsteps. He was educated at the Royal Naval Colleges of Osborne (on the Isle of Wight) and Dartmouth. However he then became convinced that a naval life was not for him and in 1908 dropped out, much to the dismay of his parents. He won a scholarship to Worcester College, Oxford, where he read Modern History.

He later studied on a post graduate course at the University of Freiburg. In 1914, he was also an exchange lecturer and remained based there when World War I broke out. Consequently he was interned as an enemy alien for four years in a prisoner-of-war camp in Ruhleben outside Berlin, where he spent much of his time polishing his German.

On his return from captivity, he became tutor of Modern History at Christ Church, Oxford, where

he was also censor from 1920 to 1926.

In the 1920s he became a very good cricketer, playing first-class for H D G Leveson-Gower's XI, Harlequins, the Free Foresters, and also for Oxfordshire in the Minor Counties Championship and the MCC. He toured North America with the Free Foresters in 1923, Ireland with the MCC in 1924, Egypt with H H Martineau's XI in 1930 and 1931 and Canada with the MCC in 1937. As a result of his sporting prowess he was acknowledged as a master gamesman in Stephen Potter's book *Gamesmanship*.

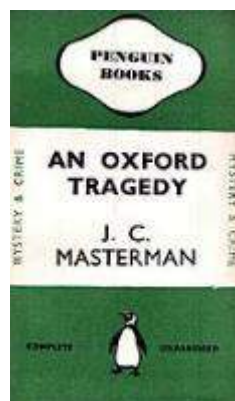
He made his first class cricket debut for H D G Leveson-Gower's XI against Oxford University in May 1926 that the University won by 186 runs. In 1927, he played for Harlequins also against Oxford University in the Parks but on the winning side, after the visitors reached 358-6 dec in their first innings. Later that year, also against the University but now playing for Free Foresters, he was on the losing side. He took 2-124 opening the bowling in a University first innings score of 520-8 dec., the Oxford captain, E R T Holmes, scoring 236, including four consecutive sixes off Masterman and I P F Campbell in consecutive overs. Masterman did share 10th wicket stand of 59 (scoring 17) in that game.

His final first class match was also for Free Foresters, in June 1939. Douglas Jardine scored 112 for the Free Foresters, in a first innings total of 361. However, Oxford University replied with 445-9. In their second innings, Free Foresters had reached 258-6 at the close of play and the match was drawn.

He had a long and beneficent influence with the Free Foresters. In his autobiography, *On the Chariot Wheel*, he wrote, "I hope I put back into the Free Foresters something to compensate for all that I had had from the club - for I was on the committee for 31 years. The record shows that I proposed or seconded 177 candidates".

He did not rate I Zingari so highly in his days on the IZ committee but added that "nowadays it has regained all its old prestige and panache".

He wrote a crime novel, *An Oxford Tragedy* that was published in 1933 and was his first work. He followed this almost 25 years later in 1957 with his second and final crime novel, *The Case of the Four Friends*.



An Oxford Tragedy is a classic murder mystery, with Brendel at its centre as a master of hypothesis and deduction.

Francis Wheatley Winn, Senior Tutor at St Thomas's College, is ready for a cosy night of dining, port, and pleasant company. Ernst Brendel, Viennese lawyer and crime specialist, has come to Oxford to lecture in Law. The regular residents of St Thomas's are pleased to have such an interesting guest to liven up their after dinner chat. Talk soon turns to murder, and Winn finds the subject altogether unpalatable, even if his colleagues seem to relish the details of past cases Brendel has worked on. But then real Murder breaks the

cosy calm of the evening, shocking the inhabitants out of their frivolous talk. Now Winn must overcome his distaste to work with Brendel in uncovering the perpetrator of this terrible crime.

Brendel is again the central figure in *The Case of the Four Friends*, the distinctive feature of which (as the title page says) is that it is "a diversion in pre-detection".

One night, after a game of bridge, Brendel is persuaded by a number of companions to tell the tale of how he "pre-constructed" a crime, rather than reconstructing it in the detective's normal fashion. As he says, "To work out the crime before it is committed, to foresee how it will be arranged, and then to prevent it! That's a triumph indeed, and is worth more than all the convictions in the world".

His story is of four men, each a potential victim, each a potential murderer. Events unfold quite slowly and the narrative is interrupted from time to time by discussion between Brendel and his listeners.

Critics said that Masterman retained a firm grip on the reader's interest throughout and the originality of his approach was regarded as commendable. There is the added bonus of an introduction at the end of the book and in which the author gives a brief glimpse of his ability to argue the case that "reality has little to do with detective fiction".

He also wrote a novel, *Fate Cannot Harm Me*, a play *Marshal Ney*, an Oxford Guide Book, *To Teach the Senators Wisdom* and his autobiography, *On the Chariot Wheel* that was published in 1975.

When World War II broke out, he was called up in June 1940 and was soon employed as secretary of a War Office committee. Concerned about his lack of military background, he replied, when asked by a general "Can you write the King's English?" that this was almost his only qualification.



He later became chairman of the Twenty Committee, a group of British intelligence officials who were responsible for the *Double-Cross System*, which turned German spies into double agents working for the British. Apparently its name was a pun based on the Roman numeral XX and its double-cross purpose.

Simply defined, a double agent is an agent in simultaneous contact with two (or more) intelligence services but working for (or under the control of) only one of them. No case, or few of them, turns out to be so readily delineated but this statement sets out the essential element of every double agent case.

British Security services distinguished a number of categories of double agents in World War II:

- (a) the classic double who was in personal, physical contact with two (or more) sides during his case — like *Tricycle* or *Snow* in Masterman's later account. One of the consequences of this predicament is that the double agent is in control of his own operation for longer. Such double is to be distinguished from
- (b) the double agent who is not in personal physical contact but uses intermediary communications that are under control (such as radio, or secret writing). Both categories are distinguished from
- (c) the penetration agent, namely a double who worked solely against other intelligence services to obtain information on their organisation, personnel, methods, and operations. And all of these were to be distinguished from
- (d) the special agent, who was a double used solely for planting information on an enemy service (a *feeder*).

This nomenclature that probably is now archaic reflected the evolution of the use to which double agents were put by MI5 from 1939 to 1945, ranging from the purely defensive early in the War to a very specialised offensive use in the later years.

The Twenty or XX Committee was created on 2 January 1941 and charged with the *nuts-and-bolts* work of co-ordinating the build-up, management, and oversight of the *Double Agent* teams.

This system grew and evolved and not simply developed overnight. Masterman piloted the XX Committee through meetings on Wednesday and Thursday each week — some 226 meetings in all — until it was disestablished on 10 May 1945. Masterman called the committee an institutional anomaly but it appears to have worked. Beginning with the 1939-40 accumulation of doubles and controlled enemy agents, the XX Committee ran more than 120 such cases up to 1945.

Everything paid off when a mere handful of agents played an unexpectedly decisive role in putting across the highly commended cover plan (*Fortitude South*) of Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force that tied down German reserves in the Pas-de-Calais not only before but well after D-day.

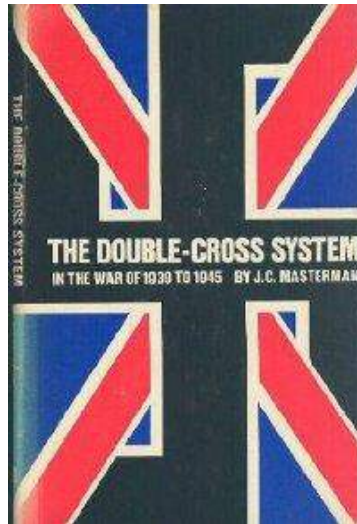
In 1945, John Masterman had privately published a history of his time working on the double-cross system, *The Double-Cross System in the War of 1939 to 1945*. The Government objected to its publication under the Officials Secrets Act. It had been written between July and September 1945, before Masterman left MI5.

Only 125 copies were printed. 100 were immediately destroyed. Masterman retained Copy No. 3. He made successive efforts, in 1947, in the mid-1950's, in the early 1960's, and in 1967, to get the text released for publication. He was driven, he said, by the desire to reflect deserved credit on the intelligence and security professions, which he believed needed it.

The text was vetted and then re-vetted, it has been reported, from Prime Minister to Foreign Office, to the Home Office, to MI5 and MI6 and the Chiefs of Staff. All agreed to publication at one time or other but never did all of them agree together.

Some original solutions were devised to contain Masterman's pressure to publish. The last was an idea to incorporate the study in a larger, projected work about British Intelligence in World War II. Masterman regarded this as a ploy "to give him time to die", because he knew that no such work would ever be authoritatively done, at least not in his lifetime.

He therefore immediately went ahead to publish his work abroad and was placed in touch with the Yale University Press. The University Press regarded it as a lucrative scoop. Once Masterman's determination was registered in a firm intent to publish abroad, the objections to internal publication evaporated. The Government abandoned the Official Secrets Act argument and licensed Yale University Press to include publication in the United Kingdom, as well as overseas.



John Masterman's book is essentially regarded as being about counterintelligence, the part of intelligence work that is concerned about what *other* peoples' spies and spy services are doing to you, using those spies to find other spies, to gain intelligence information, and to deceive the spy masters and those dependent on them.

The book's thrust is that counterintelligence is a co-equal professional activity with espionage and political action activity and on that rests its underlying significance. The codification of operational principles that accompanied Masterman's double agent case facts made the book unique in the public arena.

After World War II, John Masterman returned to Oxford University. He became Provost of Worcester College from 1946 to 1961. He was appointed Vice-Chancellor of the University from 1957 to 1958. He was knighted for his wartime services in 1959. He did not marry and died in Oxford on 6 June 1977.

