



Sunday, December 01, 2002 :

Maxwell the spymaster
Sunday, December 01, 2002

By Stephen McMahon

Conspiracy theories are back in vogue. Books promising to unravel webs of intrigue are sure to be big sellers, especially when they involve business, politics and crime. And if they centre on names such as Robert Maxwell, they're guaranteed a place at the top of the bestseller lists.

The title to the latest tome on Captain Bob, *The Assassination of Robert Maxwell -- Israel's Superspy*, suggests that this conspiracy theory will be racier than most.

The book, which claims to lift the lid on a powerful cocktail of deception and reverse mirrors, reads like a Boys' Own adventure that mixes the fanciful with the factual. And here -- as is so often the case -- fact is more unbelievable than fiction.

Last week the book became a literary cause céle bre, with its controversial claims at the centre of a verbal tug-of-war between the Maxwell family and the authors.

The book claims to tell the true story behind Maxwell's decade of service for Mossad, the Israeli secret service.

It unveils his amazing dexterity in balancing his spying activities with his global business empire of over 400 companies -- before what the book controversially claims was his assassination at the hands of a right-wing cabal within Mossad.

The web of intrigue that surrounded Maxwell throughout his life only began to unravel after his death in November 1991.

He disappeared overboard off his yacht, moored near the Canary Islands, just as the first whisperings of financial intrigue began to emerge. The complex trail moves from banks in Switzerland to meetings in the Lubyanka, headquarters of the KGB, and even features the assassination of a United States Republican senator and his family.

Along the way, the Mirror Group chairman and €1 billion pension thief was involved in a \$40 billion international money laundering operation with the Russian mafia, Chinese triads and the Mafia. He was close to conspirators in the coup against Russian president Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991, and was on the periphery of the Iran-Contra affair.

At the same time, he moved with ease among the world's power-brokers with access to the most secretive places in the world: the Oval Office in the White House and the heart of the Kremlin.

He was friends with Margaret Thatcher and close to Ronald Reagan and George Bush Snr.

No wonder he made the perfect spy.

Authors Gordon Thomas and Irish journalist Martin Dillon interviewed former Bulgarian, British and US intelligence officers to substantiate their claims that Maxwell acted as a conduit for information about his high-level business and political contacts.

Dillon and Thomas chased Maxwell's circles of money and documents across the world. They interviewed former Mossad agents and chiefs, including David Kimche, a former assistant deputy director-general of the organisation. Many of the sources within the book were previously unknown, and the top secret documents listed and provided at the back of the book all lend serious credibility to the story.

Retired FBI agent John O'Neill was one of the authors' best sources of information. He contributed invaluable insights into Maxwell's influence within the Reagan and Bush White House.

O'Neill, a leading expert on the growing links between terrorists and organised crime, died in the World Trade Center on September 11 last year. He had been chief of security at the Twin Towers for only a couple of months at the time of the terrorist attack.

The duo's most sensational claim is that rogue Israeli agents killed Maxwell.

The death has all the hallmarks of a Mossad operation. The authors say agents boarded his private yacht, *The Lady Ghislaine*, under cover of darkness and plunged a needle filled with a lethal nerve agent into Maxwell's neck. They then lowered his body off the deck and into the sea, says the book.

Maxwell did not raise the alarm when the agents boarded the yacht, the authors say, because he had been expecting a secret package -- which would offer him a way out of his financial problems -- to be delivered to him on the yacht shortly before dawn that day.

The book asserts that figures within Mossad decided to get rid of Maxwell because he

Sunday Business Post - 2002/12/01: Maxwell the spymaster

was threatening to expose his knowledge of Israel's secrets unless the Israeli government helped him to prop up his failing empire.

In the last half century, Mossad has built up quite a track record -- from the storming of hijacked planes at Entebbe in Uganda to the assassination of Islamic terrorists in the heart of Pakistan.

But the authors claim Maxwell was the central figure in Israel's greatest ever intelligence gathering coup -- the theft of the computer program Promis.

The Israelis stole the technology for Promis in 1982 from US firm Inslaw. The program was developed to help law enforcement officers narrow down a list of suspects by inputting information and getting a logical answer, rather than an emotive one.

The Israelis saw the potential of this program to monitor intelligence operations, agents and targets around the world.

And in a joint venture with the committed Zionist, Maxwell, the state of Israel set about selling the product to the market -- with a variation.

They installed a top secret back door that allowed them to access information within the database of rival intelligence firms around the globe.

Maxwell was the front man and master salesman for this scam. Promis was sold to intelligence services in countries from Chile to Zimbabwe, as well as to financial institutions such as Credit Suisse.

Vitaly, the KGB -- and Sandia Laboratories, which was at the heart of the US's nuclear defence system -- agreed to buy it.

Maxwell was also responsible for giving Israel access to the internal thinking at the highest and most secretive level of most major governments in the world.

Sensationally, the authors have discovered that -- via Maxwell -- Promis fell into the hands of al-Qaeda, which is using a modified version without the backdoor trap.

Maxwell sold it to Russian mobster Semyon Mogilevich, the head of the Rising Sun crime syndicate, for stg£3 million.

Mogilevich then sold it on to Osama bin Laden for an undisclosed sum.

The authors claim that Maxwell was Mogilevich's bagman for nearly five years. He even organised Israeli passports for the gangster and 23 of his associates in 1988.

Long-serving US senator John Tower and his family lost their lives through the fallout from the Promis project -- along with 20 other passengers on the private plane that exploded over New Brunswick in the summer of 1991, just months before Maxwell's death.

Tower was a senior figure in Reagan's Republican Party before he retired and started working as a consultant for Maxwell. Maxwell's murderers are believed to have been the same men responsible for putting the bomb on Tower's plane.

Only weeks before, another central figure in the murky skulduggery surrounding Promis -- a man called Amiram Nir -- was killed in a plane crash in Mexico.

All of this increased Maxwell's paranoia. He became highly secretive and delved further and further into the criminal world. His behaviour within his penthouse on the ninth floor of Maxwell House became increasingly demented.

By the time of his death it seemed there was no way out. Maxwell was being crushed by the secrets within secrets.

Externally, all was still well for the enterprising tycoon. He was using his talents to line his own pocket at every opportunity.

It was said of him that he thought in billions, while his self-made contemporaries Rupert Murdoch, Lord Rothermere and Lord Sainsbury, thought in millions.

The book's co-author, Martin Dillon, began working in the world of espionage in his native Belfast during the 1970s and 1980s.

He describes Maxwell as the most connected man of his generation. "This was a highly intelligent person. He spoke nine languages and he was clever.

"There was a tendency to describe him as a big buffoon and nasty piece of work, but he was one of the brightest," he says.

Dillon was issued with two warnings during the writing of the Maxwell book, and is himself an engrossing figure in this world of lone gunmen and shifting sands.

Everything about Maxwell's life is shrouded in enigma, from his childhood in 1930s Czechoslovakia to his escape to Britain.

The son of an impoverished Jewish family in Central Europe, he ended up serving in the British army and as an MP before building one of the biggest business empires in the world.

His global connections were unequalled at the time. Many would say they remain unequalled to this day. His links with Russia ran all the way back to the Krushchev era of the 1960s, when Maxwell began buying scientific journals and publishing their findings in the west.

He was a close friend of Margaret Thatcher and Prince Charles, but also regularly dined with senior Communist figures, such as Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov, East German boss Erich Honecker and secret service figures including KGB supremo Vladimir Kryuchkov and East German superspy Markus Wolff.

Maxwell's close contacts within the KGB played a vital role in helping him to organise safe passage for 300,000 Russian Jews to Israel during the height of the Cold War in the 1980s.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, he was held in an almost unparalleled high esteem in Israel, where his body was buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, Israel's most sacred resting place. The funeral was attended by the country's leading statesmen. The prime minister of the time, Yitzhak Shamir, called him a "passionate friend of Israel".

But at home and in the office, he was a tyrant. His wife, Betty, was left isolated at Headington Hill Hall in Oxfordshire while Maxwell jumped in and out of his helicopter and regularly bedded secretaries and prostitutes provided by friendly governments.

By now the tangled web of his contacts made him deeply paranoid, and he had the offices of senior staff in the Mirror bugged.

As well as working for Israel, the authors claim, he was a conduit for the Communist security services. His previously undisclosed role in setting up hundreds of front companies headed by former members of the KGB, East German Stasi and Bulgarian secret service goes some way towards explaining the current close links between business and organised crime in former Iron Curtain countries.

Every time Maxwell closed a deal he got a cut, and this book traces the money trail better than any previous efforts.

It confirms Maxwell's success in teaching the intelligence and later the criminal fraternities, and shows his ability to play the world's banking system like a well-tuned Stradivarius.

It is suspected that either Eastern European crime bosses or governments swallowed up billions of Maxwell's laundered money -- lodged in banks across the region -- after his death.

Dillon credits Maxwell with an influence that stretches way beyond his death. "The long-term success of these money-laundering and corporate fronts can be seen in the way that Chinese military intelligence has copied Maxwell's blueprint so successfully in both Hong Kong and Canada," he says.

A number of the book's central figures have gone on to be involved in further controversy, says Dillon.

Ben-Menashe, who was close to Maxwell, was acquitted in the US in 1990 of illegally selling Israeli planes to Iran. He surfaced last year on a video supposedly showing Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the Movement for Democratic Change, plotting to have Zimbabwe president Robert Mugabe assassinated.

Admiral John Poindexter, a crucial figure in the plans to smuggle missiles to Iran, is now a major figure behind the scenes in George W Bush's war on terrorism.

But now it looks as though the book's authors themselves have become mired in controversy. Even before publication, the book was attacked in the Jewish press by Maxwell's daughter Isabel as "half-baked" and "hare-brained".

Unknown to the authors, the book's US publisher, Carroll-Graf, secretly delivered an uncorrected proof copy to Isabel. The US publisher has also put back the publication date and the authors claim the book is no longer being promoted.

All this, of course, will only feed conspiracy theorists' enthusiasm.

For Maxwell, death was an escape from the collapse of the Mirror Group. The pension fund swindle and the trial of his sons Kevin and Iain were his legacy in Britain. But do we now have to review the contemporary thinking of the former publisher? Was Maxwell's legacy so much more?

We may never know for sure. But there is one thing of which we can be certain: the row over the book's contents will gain strength in the coming weeks and make it a bestseller.

The Assassination of Robert Maxwell: Israel's Superspy was published in Ireland by Robson Books on November 28 (€28.38)

Conspiracy theories are back in vogue. Books promising to unravel webs of intrigue are sure to be big sellers, especially when they involve business, politics and crime. And if they centre on names such as Robert Maxwell, they're guaranteed a place at the top of the bestseller lists.

[\[BACK \]](#)
