

# The Gentle Obsession

One evening a mild, mouselike man arrived on our newly rented doorstep in Paddington. He was wearing wire-rimmed eye-glasses – a typical civil servant, probably in his sixties at the time.

“H. W. Wicks is the name, Mr Irving, and I want to tell you what they done to me.” That is how it began.

I can’t remember if his wife was with him or not – it was that kind of couple, I decided, going over it in later years, trying to remember the details of that evening; anyway, a kind of shadow was at his side and came in with him, and this may have been his wife. I invited them into my living room.

“Mr Irving,” he began, a faraway look in his eyes. “It’s about something they did to me thirty years ago.”

It was the start of a thirty-year lesson, a lesson in obsessions.

He had taken out an insurance policy with the Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada (••) back in 1935 and he had paid his premiums religiously until one day he had an accident and made a claim. The company now told him, in effect: “We don’t need you any more. You are a little man and we are a multinational company.” They refused to pay out, and this became his lifetime obsession.

Little Mr H. W. Wicks was British, and he decided to fight back. He became an object-lesson to me, a lesson in how an obsession can ruin a man's life. He stood outside the company headquarters in the City of London with a placard describing how that big company in the building behind him had swindled him – how they had welched on paying up – and he handed out pathetically typed leaflets to passers-by.

In England we still have a law defining Criminal Libel. Normally libel is a tort, a civil offence; it requires a civil suit brought by one person against another, and it is tried in the High Court. Criminal libel is much more rare, and obtains only where the police can make out a case that there is a danger of public disorder.

In fact the law of criminal libel has been used only three or four times in the last century. In the nineteen-twenties, I think, Mr Winston Churchill successfully sued Lord Alfred Douglas (the boyfriend of Oscar Wilde): his lordship had handed out leaflets, titled improbably *The Murder of Lord Kitchener and the Truth about Jutland and the Jews*, alleging that Mr Churchill had made a fortune out of foreknowledge of the outcome of the Battle of Jutland. More recently the law was applied by Sir James Goldsmith and Robert Maxwell against the magazine *Private Eye*.

The only other case in British legal history was the one brought against my new friend Mr H. W. Wicks, and he was sent to prison for five years. It ruined his life – not just because he was a decent gentleman being sent to jail at the outset of his professional career; but because he became consumed by a sense of grievance, and here he was at my doorstep thirty (••) years later, still looking for justice.

I listened to his story politely. I made a mental note about it, and I ushered him – or them, it may have been – out into the darkness of Paddington a couple of hours later, and I never saw him again.

That was in 1963, but it was not the last I heard of Mr Wicks. I was at the beginning of my writing career. For the next thirty years, as I went into the archives around the world, the ghost of H. W. Wicks

trailed along behind, wagging its bony finger, whispering: “Here I am, don’t let this happen to you. Whatever you do, don’t become obsessed in the way that I have become.”

In his opera *Die Fledermaus*, Johann Strauss has one character sing: “*Glücklich ist, wer vergisst / was doch nicht zu enden ist.*” Happy is she who can put behind her / what she cannot put an end to.

Mr Wicks was not happy. For him, the obsession never ended.

For me, the trail began in the British Public Record Office, in the collection numbered FO. 371, the Central Office files of the Foreign Office: I came across a letter from an H. W. Wicks to Anthony Eden, complaining about what the Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada had done to him.

That was not all however. In the records of the Führer and Reich Chancellor, Adolf Hitler, in Berlin – there was a letter from Mr Wicks, “Dear Führer.” It too complained about what the Sun Life Assurance Company had done to him. In the private papers of Robert Menzies, when I was working in the National Archives of Australia in Canberra, I found a letter from Mr Wicks telling him of how this Insurance Company had ruined his life. There was a similar letter in the Franklin D. Roosevelt archives. In the Archivio Centrale dello Stato outside Rome, in the private papers of Benito Mussolini – a letter from H. W. Wicks – “Duce!” it began.

So it went on, at intervals of three, four or five years, as I visited each different archives – oh boy, here was another letter from Wicks. In the *Schriftgutverwaltung* of Heinrich Himmler, the private archives of the Reichführer of the SS – a letter from H. W. Wicks, complaining about the Sun Life company. You couldn’t write a book about Himmler, or Rommel, or Mussolini, or Hitler – I drove to Ottawa, parked outside the Public Archives of Canada in Wellington Street, and sure enough, there in the private papers of William Lyon Mackenzie King, the Liberal prime minister, was the inevitable letter from H. W. Wicks.

It took me thirty years to tickle these letters to the surface, and I certainly did not find them all. In Moscow, in the KGB archives in July 1992, when I was the first to decipher the diaries of Dr Goeb-

bels on their captured glass microfiches, I found the record of a 1942 ministerial conference – and here was Dr. Joseph Goebbels announcing that he was considering giving wide coverage to “the case of an Englishman, a Mr. H. W. Wicks, who has written to him.”

I came to realize that I had not properly worked an archival vein until I had found the Wicks letter that was certainly buried somewhere within. He was a man obsessed, and the injustice of it all ruined his life.

That is the reason he had visited me; he had hoped for justice from me, just as he had wanted justice from Himmler, from Hitler, from Mussolini, and Mackenzie King, and Robert Menzies and the rest of them. Not one of them had paid heed to this little man, this insignificant figure in the rush of history. In all the sands of all his time, he found not one grain of justice; but I was the young idealist who had written about Dresden.

I often thought about H. W. Wicks and his obsession after that. “He’ll get justice in my biography,” I used to say, for thirty years. “Because I shall devote a chapter to him and his obsession.”<sup>1</sup>

As I worked in each archives, I used to wonder when I should come across the next letter from him. I regularly received a Christmas card from him, a minutely executed water-colour which he had painted himself. It ceased coming in the 1980s. He passed on to a place where, maybe, he would get some justice after all.

The little warning figure is still there, tapping on my shoulder, and saying: “See what it did to me, Mr Irving. Don’t let it happen to you.”

#### (Endnotes)

- 1 I have often related the warning lesson of Mr H W Wicks. See *e.g.*, <http://www.fpp.co.uk/speeches/speech281092.html> and [/speech011192.html](http://www.fpp.co.uk/speeches/speech011192.html)  
– “Let me tell you a story about a man who became obsessive . . .”