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THE SPHINX AND THE SPY

The Clandestine World of John Mulholland

By Michael Edwards



At mid-century *The Sphinx* stood as America's oldest and most prestigious magic magazine. Over its five-decade history, it had become part of the lifeblood of the conjuring world. Then, on June 29, 1953, John Mulholland wrote a letter to journal's subscribers. "This is to inform you that as of June 1, 1953, the publication of *The Sphinx* has been suspended. The immediate cause is that my health does not permit me to do the necessary work. My Doctor orders me to confine my efforts at this time to the shows by which I earn my living." [1]

It was true that Mulholland's health was not good. An inveterate smoker, he suffered from ulcers, stomach disorders and arthritis. Editing *The Sphinx* for twenty-three years had taken a physical and financial toll. But rather than limiting his activities to his live performances, Mulholland had actually embarked on a new endeavor...an endeavor far more secretive than anything in the realm of conjuring. He had entered a world of covert operations, espionage, mind control, drugs, and even death. John Mulholland had gone to work for the CIA.

At the time, John Mulholland was one of America's most highly regarded magicians. An outstanding stage as well as close-up performer, he had become a noted author, lecturer, historian, collector, editor, and world traveler. In many ways, he had helped make magic intellectually respectable.

Mulholland was born in Chicago, Illinois, on June 9, 1898. As a five-year old, he sat enthralled by a performance of Harry Kellar's. It would begin a lifelong love of conjuring. His family moved to New

York when he was quite young and it was there that he began to learn the techniques of the craft. At age 13 Mulholland began taking magic lessons from John William Sargent at \$5 an hour. Known as “The Merry Wizard,” the gray-haired, goatee’d Sargent had been President of the Society of American Magicians in 1905-6 and would later serve as Harry Houdini’s secretary from 1918 until 1920. He was a true mentor to young Mulholland and instilled in him not only an appreciation of the art of magic but of its theory, history, and literature.

Mulholland learned his lessons well. He made his debut as a performer when he was 15. While he would be later regarded as one of magic’s great scholars, his academic achievements were somewhat limited. He took a number of courses at both Columbia University and at New York’s City College, but did not attain a degree. From 1918 to 1924, he taught industrial arts at the Horace Mann School in New York. He sold books for a while and then taught at Columbia University before embarking on a career as a full time professional magician.

Over the years, Mulholland developed an enormous range of presentations. He was equally at home performing close-up magic, entertaining a society dinner, or working the mammoth stage at Radio City Music Hall. In 1927 Mulholland gave a lecture in Boston about the magicians of the world, illustrating each vignette with a trick from that nation. It added a new genre for him and for the profession: the magician as lecturer.

After the death of Dr. A. M. Wilson in April of 1930, he took over editorship of *The Sphinx*. For the next 23 years he would oversee magic’s most influential periodical. He was a prolific writer. Aside from the vast number of articles he penned, he authored such books as *Magic in the Making* (with Milton M. Smith in 1925), *Quicker than the Eye* (1932), *The Magic and Magicians of the World* (1932), *The*

Story of Magic (1935), *Beware Familiar Spirits* (1938), *The Art of Illusion*, (1944) reprinted as *Magic for Entertaining*, *The Early Magic Shows* (1945), *John Mulholland's Book of Magic* (1963), *Magic of the World* (1965) and *The Magical Mind -- Key to Successful Communication* (with George Gordon in 1967). He had also co-wrote a 1939 magic-detective novel, *The Girl in the Cage*, with Cortland Fitzsimmons.

Over the years, he amassed one of the world's finest collections of magic books and memorabilia. His library housed some 4,000 volumes related to conjuring.

His knowledge of tricks seemed inexhaustible, as was his familiarity with the performance, theory, psychology, history, and literature of magic. He served as the consultant on conjuring to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the Merriam-Webster dictionary and at one time was the only magician listed in *Who's Who in America*.

As America entered the 1950's, the world around John Mulholland was changing. The Cold War was at its height. U.S. foreign policy had gone from trust to terror. In June of 1950, over one hundred thousand soldiers from Communist North Korea crossed the thirty-eighth parallel, invading the republic to the South. The previous year, Soviet Union had detonated its first atomic bomb. The stakes had become enormous. The consequences of military confrontation could well be global thermonuclear war.

American policy-makers decided that other means – covert means — would have to be instituted to stop the expansion of communism. As a secret study commission under former President Hoover put it:

"It is now clear we are facing an implacable enemy whose avowed

objective is world domination by whatever means and at whatever cost. There are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable longstanding concepts of 'fair play' must be reconsidered. We must develop effective espionage and counterespionage services and must learn to subvert, sabotage, and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated, and more effective methods than those used against us."

The vehicle for this effort was the Central Intelligence Agency.

Within the Agency, there was a concern – almost a panic – that the Russians had developed a frightening new weapon: a drug or technology for controlling men's minds. A new term had entered the lexicon: "brainwashing." At show trials in Eastern Europe, dazed defendants had admitted to crimes they hadn't committed. American prisoners of war, paraded before the press by their North Korean captors, "confessed" in Zombie-like fashion that the US was using chemical and biological warfare against them. When George Kennan, the US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, made some inexplicably undiplomatic remarks at a press conference and was declared *persona non grata* by the Kremlin, American intelligence officials wondered if he had been hypnotized or drugged.

The CIA leadership feared a "mind control gap."