

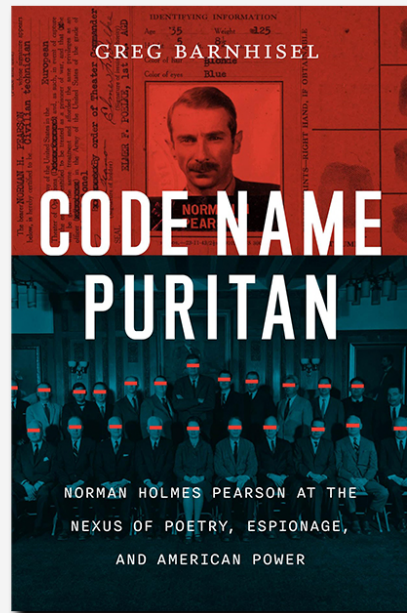
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Double agents

Espionage in the English department

By [Michael Holzman](#)



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CODE NAME PURITAN

Norman Holmes Pearson at the nexus of poetry, espionage and American power

392pp. University of Chicago Press. £26 (US \$32.50).

Greg Barnhisel

Norman Holmes Pearson was a familiar mid-twentieth-century academic: a popular teacher, active committee member and organizer of conferences who never quite finished his major book. He spent his life in the Yale English department, and collected rare books and manuscripts, while fostering relationships with poets, colleagues and students at home and abroad. Born into New England's upper-middle class, he married into the wealthy Winchester rifle family. When Greg Barnhisel began this biography, a colleague asked: "Why would you want to write about *him*?"

And until chapter eleven the answer remains elusive. Pearson's scholarly focus was American literature, from Nathaniel Hawthorne to H. D. (for whom he acted as an informal literary agent). During the Second World War he mentored James Angleton, later head of CIA counterintelligence, and worked alongside the British spy Kim Philby at X-2, the counter-espionage branch of the Office of Strategic Services. After the war Pearson went back to Yale, pursuing an extraordinary social life – a sort of academic Chips Channon – and seemingly no longer in the world of secret intelligence, except for a bit of talent-spotting among the undergraduates, while gradually building up the organized wing of American studies, finally becoming president of the American Studies Association. His contemporaries in X-2 became those whom Angleton called the grand masters of the American cold war, while Pearson lived in New Haven, still teaching courses on Hawthorne and Melville. That was his cover.

Chapter eleven, then, finally reveals Pearson's deeper role. The American Studies Association, under his guidance, was not just an academic body, but also an instrument of US government influence. Its summer schools provided opportunities to connect with foreign students who might later recall Yale – and the US – favourably when assuming positions of power in their home countries. This was part of the CIA's covert strategy, which Frank Wisner, its operations chief, called the “mighty Wurlitzer” of psychological warfare.

Not that Pearson was ever an agent. He had been, and in effect remained, an influential member of the intelligence community. The difference is crucial. One follows orders. The other has a hand in the formation of policy, in this case that of using the institutions of American academic life as a vital part of the cultural cold war. Barnhisel tells us that in this way “Pearson became one of the most important academic figures in the collaboration between academia and the national-security state”, to the benefit of the latter.

Code Name Puritan, scholarly and immensely thorough, will be the basis for all future work at that nexus.