◈ **Dreyfus, Suelette and Assange, Julian -** *Underground*, **William Heinemann, London, 2011 (pp. 324) ISBN-10: 1863305955**

Reviewed by Catriona Menzies-Pike

In 1997 an Australian journalist Suelette Dreyfus and a young geek called Julian Assange wrote a book about the subculture of hacking in the 1980s and 1990s. While noticed by some journalists, the book attracted the attention of hackers, internet activists and technology watchers. Indeed, it acquired cult status not only for its documentation of the work of hackersinternationally, their subversions, achievements and disruptions, but for its equally dogged depictions of the law enforcement services lagging behind them. Hackers on the run from the law: a story now ubiquitous.

The young geekis of course now better known as the founder of WikiLeaks and the re-release of the book by William Heinemann this year sparked a great deal more notice than it did the first time around. The international media attention accorded WikiLeaks, particularly in light of the release of US diplomatic cables, and the number of books written about Assange himself mean that hacking has a very different profile compared to when *Underground* was written. Readers may still be unclear on the technical details, but the notion that hacking can be a political activity is now a familiar one – and the response of authorities to the activities of WikiLeaks, LULsec and Anonymous has revealed how seriously such an activity is taken. If hacking has a public face, the face looks like that of Julian Assange. The thing about hackers, though, is they generally don't have public faces. Dreyfus calls them "the world's most secretive people". Almost all the hackers profiled in *Underground* appear under their online pseudonyms (there is speculation that one of these pseudonyms belongs to Assange). While the ethics of hacking described in the book advocates no damage to systems, the activities described had, and still havea shadowy legal status at best. This was the case in 1997 when authorities were struggling to name the crimes being committed by the hackers, and it's certainly so now. Given the zeal with which Assange, as the public face of WikiLeaks, and Bradley Manning, the alleged source of the US diplomatic cables, have been pursued, it's unlikely that the mantle of anonymity willbe thrown off by hackers anytime soon.

When Dreyfus and Assange do provide details about hackers with handles like Phoenix, Nom, Anthrax, Mendax and Theorum, they are at pains to emphasise how ordinary and unglamorous their lives are otherwise. In other words, how the casual networks of shared interest which emerged inthe late 1980s on bulletin boards were developed in suburban living rooms, sharehouse bedrooms, and spare rooms in family homes. From such ordinary surrounds they broke into US military computer systems to have a look around. They lobbed the infamous Worms Against Nuclear Killers virus into NASA's computers. They hacked into universities, big corporate systems, phone companies. There's plenty of excitement to be had reading how rogue individuals stayed two encrypted hops ahead of systems administrators and law enforcement. Dreyfus and Assange are cheering the hackers on and it's hard not to get swept away with them. At its best, *Underground* reads like a pacy thriller.

The subjects of the book got into phreaking too –gaining access to free phone calls in order to dial into international bulletin boards and break into systems overseas. This sub-genre of hacking may now be obsolete. Indeed, 1997 was a long time ago and so there are plenty of retro-technological specs in the book for those who relish such things. The hacks are relayed with plenty of technical detail – and Dreyfus credits Assange with getting this aspect of the book right. Such detail might be a bit much for some readers but it serves an important authenticating purpose.

To keep things moving, Dreyfus and Assange work hard to personalise the stories of the hackers – without compromising their anonymity. Most of the hackers who feature in *Underground* are young men, and the personalities that emerge from behind the pseudonyms are variously socially awkward, rebellious, intelligent, paranoid, messianic and geeky. Where there's interpersonal drama between the hackers, the authors ramp up the emotional quotient of the prose. Techno-thriller gives way to soggy cyber-melodrama. That's a shame, and it's a bit unnecessary because the raw ingredients of *Underground* are so compelling, and the research which drives the book, so thorough.

All the hackers in the bookhave encounters with law enforcement agents on some level and one of the repeated motifs of the book is the emotional and material costs of these encounters. Difficult courtroom scenes are followed up by accounts of drug abuse, mental illness and social isolation. The punishments do not seem to fit the crimes. Hackers, the booksuggests, who have done no damage, are damaged by the law. It's an argument which merits some attention, but it's repeated so many

times in *Underground*, and so uncritically, that it becomes less persuasive.

This narrative of innocence is one that has been considerably rehearsed in light of the WikiLeaks cable release. Technically speaking, the release of cables doesn't exactly qualify as a hack but the issues about illegal access and distribution of privileged information are very similar. On the one hand, the political, legal and corporate establishment speak as one: these are criminal activities and they threaten our security. Elsewhere, Assange and hack culture have been applauded as crusaders for freedom of information and as promoters of transparency. Their activities have been represented as victimless, their targets institutions rather than individuals, and their goals lofty. Dreyfus and Assange in *Underground* certainly side with this last camp. It's a shame, but perhaps no surprise that they do not enter into discussion of the limits of the free speech imperatives of hack culture.

This new edition featuresan additional introduction by Dreyfus which reflects on her co-author's change of fortune. It also includes a "where are they now" section which serves to underscore how damaging prosecution was for many of those involved in the hacking culture of the late 1990s. Just as WikiLeaks creates a new context for reading *Underground* which mandates its re-release, *Underground* provides readers with a new context for understanding the WikiLeaks project and more recent manifestations of hack culture.

About the Reviewer

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