THE MEINERTZHAGEN MYSTERY: THE LIFE AND LEGEND OF A COLOSSAL FRAUD. By Brian Garfield. Potomac Books Inc., Washington, D.C., USA. 2007: xiv + 353 pp, 14 black and white photographs. ISBN 978-1-59797-041-9. $19.25 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-59797-160-7. $12.57 (paper).—Richard Meinertzhagen (1878–1967) spurned a career in the family banking business to join the British military, attaining the rank of colonel, and in 1921 was transferred to the Foreign Office, where he fancied himself to have been engaged mainly in espionage. Most of his postings in both capacities were overseas in Africa and Asia, and he boasted and wrote expansively on his exploits as a warrior and spy. Along the way he nurtured a passion for natural history, amassed a large personal collection of birds, and published books and papers in ornithological journals. He also stole specimens of birds from museum collections, fabricated label data for them, and published deliberately falsified information about birds in scientific journals—facts that have only been brought to light in recent years through painstaking research and scientific investigation. Many of us in the museum community who had long been aware of Meinertzhagen’s ornithological perfidies had come to wonder if the rest of his history might prove to be just as grand a prevarication.

Brian Garfield set out to answer exactly that question because, in his words: “The precision and energy that scientists invested in re-examining his zoological cons were not replicated in other circles. There was no effort to verify and collate his separate parallel paths.” In short, as the subtitle makes clear, Meinertzhagen’s entire legacy proves to be a gigantic lie. Although he was “a noted figure in science, war, and espionage . . . in all three fields he also was a fantasist who perpetrated colossal deceptions.”

Garfield, according to his rather robust web site, is mainly a prolific American writer of crime and mystery fiction whose considerable success hinges on his insistence on entertaining the reader. That is not necessarily the best qualification for a historian, even though Meinertzhagen’s egregious outrages make his history more entertaining than most. One will find attributions for which no source is cited and conclusions based on evidence that at times seem less than satisfactory. But this is partly due to the nature of lies themselves, as it is much more difficult to prove that someone didn’t commit a particular act than to prove that he did. Thus, much of Garfield’s case against Meinertzhagen rests on the fact that no corroboration can be found for practically any of his alleged major deeds as a warrior and spy.

As might be expected, Garfield has little understanding of ornithologists or what they do in museums. He confuses taxonomy and taxidermy. Hugh Whistler (whose bird skins numbered some 17,000) and other scientific ornithologists are referred to as “birder.” Meinertzhagen’s activity in museums in London, Tring, and Berlin is said to have been “cataloging birds.” It should be Erwin, not Irwin Stresemann, etc.

Meinertzhagen was a compulsive chronicler of himself. But his in-law Malcolm Muggeridge considered that Meinertzhagen’s “copious diaries . . . in elegant leather [that] adorned the walls of his study . . . would prove to be a monument to his fantasy self.” And so it appears. There seem to have been no original journals kept in the field, at least none that survived, and only the fictitious fantasies remain.

One very interesting document that Garfield cites is a 66-page typescript entitled “Conquisitio Mea. A Record of my Ornithological Activities and Collections.” In 1942, Meinertzhagen sent this to Alexander Wetmore, then Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, with a view towards having it published in the United States. “Conquisitio” is Latin for “a bringing together” but can also mean “collecting.” The first 11 pages consist of a brief history of Meinertzhagen’s collecting, his methods of preparing and storing