# How MI6’s green ink tradition keeps Sir Mansfield Cumming’s legacy alive



The tradition within the UK's Secret Intelligence Service, commonly known as MI6, of referring to its head as "C" and that chief's use of green ink in official correspondence, stems from its first director, Sir Mansfield Smith-Cumming. Contrary to the misconception that "C" abbreviates "chief," the designation originated with Cumming, who habitually signed his letters with a "C" in green ink. This personal quirk set a precedent that endures over a century later, with each successive MI6 chief adopting the letter "C" as a title and maintaining the distinctive green ink signature.

Sir Mansfield Cumming, a naval officer before helming MI6, established this unique identity marker which has become emblematic of the role. The consistent use of green ink not only serves as a nod to tradition but carries a symbolic weight within intelligence circles, underscoring continuity and the legacy of the service's origins. This practice has been noted repeatedly by recent MI6 chiefs, including the current incumbent, Richard Moore, who continues the legacy of signing documents in green ink, a detail highlighted in various media interviews and features.

The naming convention and ink choice have also attracted public interest, illustrating how small idiosyncrasies can cement themselves as institutional rituals, linking present-day intelligence work with its historical roots. Sir Mansfield Cumming's role and his impact went beyond administrative customs; he is also famously cited as a real-life inspiration for the fictional character “M” in the James Bond series. This cultural connection further entrenches the symbolism of the green ink "C" in popular imagination alongside its official intelligence service significance.

Understanding these nuances clarifies misconceptions around the MI6 chief’s title and highlights the importance of tradition in national intelligence. Such practices help preserve a sense of identity within the secretive world of espionage, even as the organisation evolves to meet contemporary challenges.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/19/why-mi6-chief-is-c-and-uses-green-ink), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/19/why-mi6-chief-is-c-and-uses-green-ink)
* Paragraph 2 – [[3]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/mi6-chief-messages-green-ink-b1966774.html), [[4]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/richard-moore-aston-martin-james-bond-nick-robinson-bbc-radio-b969121.html), [[5]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-32126061.amp)
* Paragraph 3 – [[6]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1057318/james-bond-real-mi6-chief-inspired-m-character-mansfield-smith-cumming-spt)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/19/why-mi6-chief-is-c-and-uses-green-ink), [[3]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/mi6-chief-messages-green-ink-b1966774.html), [[4]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/richard-moore-aston-martin-james-bond-nick-robinson-bbc-radio-b969121.html)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/19/why-mi6-chief-is-c-and-uses-green-ink> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/19/why-mi6-chief-is-c-and-uses-green-ink> - An article from The Guardian discussing the tradition of MI6 chiefs being known as 'C' and using green ink, originating from Sir Mansfield Cumming, the first head of MI6, who signed his letters with 'C' in green ink.
3. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/mi6-chief-messages-green-ink-b1966774.html> - An article from The Independent detailing MI6 chief Richard Moore's use of green ink, a tradition established by the first 'C', Sir Mansfield Cumming, who was a naval officer and wrote in green ink.
4. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/richard-moore-aston-martin-james-bond-nick-robinson-bbc-radio-b969121.html> - An article from the Evening Standard discussing MI6 chief Richard Moore's use of green ink, a tradition dating back to Sir Mansfield Cumming, the first head of MI6, who was a naval man and wrote in green ink.
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7. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/richard-moore-aston-martin-james-bond-nick-robinson-bbc-radio-b969121.html> - An article from the Evening Standard discussing MI6 chief Richard Moore's use of green ink, a tradition dating back to Sir Mansfield Cumming, the first head of MI6, who was a naval man and wrote in green ink.