

The Spy They Left Behind

CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE

The Secret Life of Anthony Blunt.
By *Barrie Penrose and Simon Freeman.*
Illustrated. 616 pp. New York:
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By Stephen Koch

WHEN he died in 1983, Anthony Blunt was probably among the most famous spies in the world. At various times, before Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher exposed him in the House of Commons in 1979, he had been Sir Anthony Blunt (he was stripped of his knighthood in 1979), an art historian of the premier rank, the world's leading authority on Poussin, director of the Courtauld Institute in London, Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures and a core member in the infamous ring of espionage agents now known as the Cambridge Conspiracy, which the Russians had ingeniously laced through the upper levels of British society and Government in the 30's and 40's.

The Cambridge Conspiracy was an intelligence operation established for recruiting idealistic young leftists in the British elite universities to be covert agents of influence, subversion and espionage in the British establishment they were preparing to enter. As John le Carré's accountants can testify, this exceptionally effective bit of intrigue has something like a permanent grip on the political imagination of our time, a grip now tightened almost to numbness by two hard-working investigative reporters in London, Barrie Penrose and Simon Freeman of *The Sunday Times* of London, who have produced in 616 pages the first — but surely not the last — biography of the brilliant, cold, duplicitous man whom George Steiner in a dazzling essay called "the cleric of treason."

It is occasionally claimed that the betrayals of the Cambridge spies were politically marginal and therefore in some way excusable as being insignificant. That is simply not the case. The network's services to Stalin were many, large and lethal — involving among other things the wholesale theft of secrets, including British and American atomic secrets; the steady undermining of the liberal democratic position during and after World War II; and the systematic betrayal of anti-Stalinist resistance in Eastern Europe, including the conscious dispatch of a great many people to torture and death. But in 1951, the network began to unravel, and two of its members, Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess, prewarned by fellow conspirators, jumped the night ferry to St.-Malo only a hop ahead of arrest — a flight that led to four of the Cambridge spies becoming as famous as any bunch of moles could ever hope or fear to be.

The four included Burgess and Maclean themselves — Maclean tall, anguished, self-doubting, crucially placed in the British Embassy in Washington; and Burgess, a dissolute homosexual dazzler, amusing, insufferable, brilliant, unfocused, self-defeating, the perfect dilettante (before drink got him) of both subversion and the intellect, the man who knew everybody as he shuttled between the Foreign Office and the BBC. Then came Kim Philby, a ruthless adventurer disguised as an ideally competent British bureaucrat and journalist, systematic, stammering, alcoholic, murderous and ideally located in counterintelligence. At least two of these men were headed to the top of the British establishment. There is nothing fanciful in picturing an undetected Maclean as a Kennedy-era British ambassador to the United States, or Kim Philby directing British counterintelligence in the 60's. Faced instead with exposure and arrest, all three (Philby in 1963) defected to Moscow and retired to their K.G.B. promotions, their dachas and the bottle.

The man they left behind was Blunt. How Blunt came to lead his life of duplicity, especially in view of his great intellectual distinction, is a still largely unan-

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Anthony Blunt in 1962, when he was known as an art historian and Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures.

swered question to which the common answer — that Blunt saw himself as a secret soldier in the war for the working class — is not very satisfactory, as this biography makes abundantly clear. Kim Philby once remarked that the first job of a secret agent is to develop his cover personality. Blunt's cover personality was that of a genteel, discreetly homosexual, almost invisibly Marxist esthete and scholar. Wearing his mask, he performed indisputably distinguished work, playing a significant role in shaping the discourse of art history.

Possibly, in the end, the mask became the face, but behind it swarmed very different passions. These included a rigid resistance to the large emotions, covering a deeper current of fastidious rage and an almost pathological snobbery (which Communism more assisted than inhibited), along with an obsession with the working-class men whom he used for sex. Though he was noted for demanding the most exacting standards of scholarly accuracy, his life swam in falsehood. He once remarked, in an "electrifying" aside to an intelligence colleague near the end of the war, "it has given me great pleasure to have been able to turn over the

names of every MI-5 officer to the Russians." His one visit to the Soviet Union, incidentally, filled him with distaste. The prospect of living there filled him with horror. He worshipped the Royals, fearing especially the contempt of Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. He drank like a fish.

Blunt was the extremely bright son of a fancy clergyman who was chaplain to the British Embassy in Paris and on friendly terms with King George V and Queen Mary. He was educated at Marlborough College, after which he went to Cambridge in 1926, already initiated into what Mr. Steiner calls homoerotic "adolescent arcadia," absorbed in art and mathematics (in which, oddly, he did not do well). He was already a tutor in 1930 when the decisive encounter of his life came sauntering down Cambridge High Street in the person of Guy Francis de Moncy Burgess.

The standard version of events, which Blunt himself promoted and Mr. Penrose and Mr. Freeman more or less tacitly accept, is that Blunt was seduced down the primrose path to espionage by Guy Burgess. The cold-blooded esthete went out of his senses over the more vivid, reckless, politically committed man and Burgess, flake supreme in a flaky business, kept Blunt under his thumb right up until the moment he jumped that night ferry to St.-Malo.

As Lenin used to ask, with which party did the real power lie? This standard version of Burgess running Blunt may be accurate. Many suspect the reverse — and though the authors rake up vast amounts of absorbing information, they do not solve the mystery. Others, including very well-informed people, see this version (and Mrs. Thatcher's statement to Parliament, which is not fundamentally challenged in "Conspiracy of Silence") as covering some altogether more nasty truth. In any case, exactly who brought Blunt or any of the Cambridge spies into the Soviet apparatus, and when, remains one of the most sensitive and least successfully explored of all the many mysteries this whole story raises.

Blunt was a busy spy. At Cambridge he was (at least) a recruiter and middleman. The novelist and editor Michael Straight, in his autobiography, "After Long Silence," recounts the icy tale of what it was like to be lured into the network by this prestigious young don. Clearly Blunt's spy connections, like all his connections were top drawer; he seems to have had direct access to Stalin himself. During the war, Blunt got himself placed in British counterintelligence, where he ingratiated

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The Thrill of Secrecy



THE SUNDAY TIMES OF LONDON
Simon Freeman.

LONDON
Barrie Penrose and Simon Freeman joined *The Sunday Times* of London in 1980, when the London dailies were still full of news about Anthony Blunt and his exposure as a spy for the Soviet Union. Both wanted to write "Conspiracy of Silence" because, as Mr. Freeman said in a recent interview of the two men, "the questions kept piling up. Names were leaked and there was clearly a lot more going on than anyone thought." Mr. Penrose said he wanted to write the book out of "curiosity about how much more secrecy there was." Mr. Freeman said he and Mr. Penrose were "intrigued because so little was known about M.I.5 and M.I.6," the British secret service branches.

The book examines beliefs and attitudes in Britain in the 1930's, and the allegiances men had to one another and to their old-boy networks and schools. It studies an all-male society of intellectual and sexual radicalism that nourished deception in an elaborate form — espionage. "It's a

book about Britain as well as a book about spies," according to Mr. Freeman. He said he and Mr. Penrose received criticism from the homosexual community because, in its account of Blunt's early life, the book portrays his homosexual relationships. Mr. Penrose calls Blunt's sexual preference important because homosexuality was illegal at the time and homosexuals had a "passion for secrecy. The thrill of secrecy. It is an integral part of the relationship between Blunt and Guy Burgess. The key to Blunt is his admiration, love and respect for Burgess."

Mr. Freeman added that one of the most important aspects of the book is that "Britain is a country which is decaying. It is in direct contrast with America and the open Congressional hearings like Irangate and Watergate. We still play the elaborate game of 'we don't have a secret service and if we do, we don't mention it.' And so the conspiracies silently continue."

KATHERINE ARMS



THE SUNDAY TIMES OF LONDON
Barrie Penrose.

The Spy Left Behind

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himself with its leading official, a man named Guy Liddell, and saw vast amounts of highly sensitive information, all of which he stole. During the period of the Nazi-Soviet pact, incidentally, he supplied the Russians with information they may well have shared with their partners in that union. Blunt was never a merely well-intentioned anti-Fascist. The Soviet alliance with Hitler troubled him only slightly, if at all. It was not anti-Fascism that animated these men. Anthony Blunt served Stalin.

I don't want to nag Mr. Penrose and Mr. Freeman for raising questions they cannot answer. They answer as well as anyone, and theirs is a valuable book, to be read by anyone under the scandal's spell. Nonetheless, they do tend merely to heap up facts; they lack — they do not claim to have — any large historical perspective. They also lack, as does everyone, access to the crucial archives, though they produce absorbing interviews with some major players — Arthur Martin, the agent who cracked the Blunt case; Jack Hewitt. Guy Burgess's longtime lover, whose sharp chatter brings reality and Dickensian vividness to the two underworlds of espionage and homosexual promiscuity; and Sir Dick White, one of the most impressive and lucid figures in British intelligence.

Were higher-ups in British intelligence services protected, as Mr. Steiner suspects? The number of knowledgeable observers who think so is daunting. Was Roger Hollis, the senior official handling Blunt's interrogation, compromised? A claim that Hollis was him-

self part of the Soviet network has been made by a number of people; it has been made hysterically, under the most dubious auspices, and it is very far from proved. But it is not easily dismissed, either. These questions have not been put to rest here. Was Blunt properly offered immunity in return for his voluminous secret testimony? I am almost entirely convinced by Mr. Penrose and Mr. Freeman that he was. There are lesser mysteries. What was the role of the Welsh man of letters Goronwy Rees, a friend of Burgess and Blunt from an early stage? Rees plainly knew even more than the very large amount he publicly revealed. He was, incidentally, a principal source for the book that forced Mrs. Thatcher to expose Blunt, "The Climate of Treason" by Andrew Boyle, an indispensable book for understanding this spy ring and one that is more sophisticated than "Conspiracy of Silence."

THE strengths and weaknesses of the journalistic method used in "Conspiracy of Silence" can be measured by how much better it becomes when it approaches recent events. About what happened in the 30's and 40's, Mr. Penrose and Mr. Freeman don't say much more — in many places much less — than Mr. Boyle. It is in exploring the hardball politics surrounding Blunt's confession, and his interrogation by the British intelligence services, that their book breaks ground. One of the nastiest aspects of the Cambridge spies' nasty legacy is how much paranoia and fanaticism they left behind in a political culture that had often been admired for being resistant to those evils. The latest return of the repressed Cambridge monster is the rebellion provoked throughout the Brit-

ish Commonwealth recently when the Thatcher Government tried to suppress the memoirs of a British intelligence agent, Peter Wright, one of Blunt's interrogators. In addition to accusing Roger Hollis, Mr. Wright's book, "Spycatcher," purportedly reveals dangerous and outrageous illegalities within the intelligence service including the harassment of the Government of Harold Wilson by agents obsessed with fantasy and suspicion (chief among whom was himself). Of all this Mr. Penrose and Mr. Freeman provide an illuminating account.

When Blunt's treasons were revealed, it is said that his bewildered longtime companion, John Gaskin, asked, "Why? Why did you do it?" Blunt replied, "Cowboys and Indians ... cowboys and Indians." We must smile, albeit grimly, at this invocation of fanciful metaphors for heavy acts — though it was probably just another lie, certainly an evasion. But what were the large reasons? Before he died, Blunt attempted to write his memoirs, but abandoned the project, complaining that he couldn't accurately remember events without a diary. A scholar without access to the archives, he could not keep track of himself. So it would seem. For reasons we may never know, Blunt could not bring himself to articulate not merely archival facts, but the essential general truths of his life. He showed the uncompleted manuscript of his memoirs to his brother, who found them "dull." Dull? All the man needed for his memoirs to be among the most fascinating of his era would have been to provide truthful answers to four or five simple questions about events that are impossible to forget. That Blunt could not, or would not, speak those truths — perhaps not even to himself — forms, I suspect, no small part of the tragedy that left him damned.