

CAMBRIDGE SPIES

The making of a BBC drama which revived the bitter subject of Britain's most notorious spy ring

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Four days into filming BBC2's new spy drama, there is real-life skulduggery afoot. Last night a truck loaded with props was stolen from outside a Cambridge hotel and emptied of its contents. 'It's never happened on any production I've worked on before,' says the bewildered producer, Mark Shivas, 'and I've worked on a lot. Heaven knows what they're going to do with a heap of old bicycles. But at least they didn't get the portrait of Henry VIII.'

This morning, the portrait (a reproduction, needless to say) hangs against the intricate panelling of a magnificent dining hall, identifying the scene as Trinity College. In real life, though, we are in quite another college, which has agreed to double for Trinity – *alma mater* of Anthony Blunt, Kim Philby and Guy Burgess – on condition that it remains unidentified. The idea of an entire building being misattributed on the basis of a fake painting would no doubt have delighted Blunt, the Soviet mole who earned a knighthood as Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures.

'Trinity,' explains *Cambridge Spies*' director Tim Fywell, 'were *not* keen on us filming there. They're still sensitive about this subject 70 years on – which tells you a lot.' The college's embarrassment is easy to understand: this, after all, is where the Oxbridge dream went over to the dark side. While Oxford has Sebastian Flyte and Zuleika Dobson for ever swanning through its streets, its East Anglian cousin has Blunt, Philby, Burgess and Maclean skulking in its cloisters. Here, in varsity mythology, punting parties gave way to tete-a-tetes with Russian handlers, and teddy bears to attaché cases stuffed with stolen documents.

The hall's gorgeous interior may be misleading, but it makes its point well enough. With its gilded arches, splendidly carved royal coat of arms, stained-glass heraldic devices and stern Victorian marble busts, this is a bastion of Empire if ever there was one. Nothing could better sum up the system in which the spies grew up, and which they later betrayed in the name of international Communism.

The scene being filmed is the first meeting between Kim Philby and Guy Burgess, played by Toby Stephens and Tom Hollander. The pair are seated together at breakfast while, in a complex piece of choreography, young men with tweed jackets and slicked-back hair parade among the surrounding tables. (Two, whose heavy tramping is deemed to be muffling the dialogue, have their shoes confiscated by the wardrobe mistress). A strong smell of incense fills the air as a technician wanders past with a smoke canister, enveloping the hall in an atmospheric haze ('Fill this with skank,' he remarks, 'and we'd all be well away.')

One thing which seems not to have changed since the early Thirties is the nature of student toast, which – pale and slightly soggy – sits piled high on the crested college plates.

The contrast between Philby and Burgess is immediately established: Philby clean-cut, intense and serious; Burgess a brilliant, witty ragamuffin with a bottle of whisky always at hand in the pocket of his duffel coat. Both, however, are likeable and good-looking, and when they square up to a proto-Fascist Old Etonian who takes a dim view of their socialist stance, there is no doubt whose side we are intended to take.

This sympathetic approach to its subjects is likely to make *Cambridge Spies* one of the most contentious dramas of the year. Following Philby, Burgess, Blunt and Maclean's story from their initial recruitment by the Soviet intelligence services, it culminates in the flight and defection of Burgess and Maclean in 1951. In particular, it sets out to create a context for the spies' behaviour, evoking a pre-war Britain in which successive governments seemed unwilling to tackle the problem of appalling poverty at home and Fascism abroad. 'It's not a whitewash,' says Tim Fywell: 'the four are very flawed characters – but one of the most striking things is realising the passion with which they went into it all. I got a pleasant shock reading Peter Moffat's script and finding that nowhere was he talking about "these dreadful traitors".'

Clearly, the end of the Cold War has made it possible to view the spies' story more dispassionately. There are nevertheless still many people to whom Philby in particular is – in the words of his biographers Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville – 'a byword of reproach, a symbol of a peculiarly odious treachery...a favourite son who lived only to destroy his country.' Even before filming started, the BBC was receiving letters accusing it of squandering licence-payers' money on aggrandising scoundrels.

The drama is the latest addition to an already impressive body of work inspired by the spies – and above all by Blunt. Alan Bennett captured Burgess's champagne Communism

in *An Englishman Abroad* and Blunt's inscrutability in *A Question of Attribution*; Julian Mitchell used a public-school setting to analyse their spirit of rebellion in *Another Country*;

Brigid Brophy and John Banville put Blunt-like figures at the centre of two easily confused novels, *The Final Touch* and *The Untouchable*. This is not to speak of non-fiction accounts such as Miranda Carter's prize-winning biography, *Anthony Blunt: His Lives*. The question is, why do we continue to be fascinated by these quadrangle quislings forty years after their spy ring was broken, and fifteen after the last of them died?

It is one of those riddles to which everyone seems to have a different answer; but the spies' extraordinary success is certainly part of it. Not only did they penetrate the heart of the British Establishment – Philby in the Secret Intelligence Service, Maclean at the Foreign Office, Burgess in both of these *and* the BBC, Blunt at Buckingham Palace – but they remained unmasked for a bafflingly long time. Burgess and Maclean had been spying for two decades when they defected; Philby did not make a run for it until twelve years later, in 1963; Blunt, though rumbled by MI5 the following year, was only publicly outed in 1979. Even then, to the disappointment of those who hoped to see him hung, drawn and quartered, he was punished merely by being stripped of his knighthood. In the words of Sam West, who plays Blunt in *Cambridge Spies*, 'A lot of people, even if they don't share their political beliefs, admire the fact that they managed to get away with it.'

The slow unravelling of the story over the years – Was there a third man? A fourth man? A fifth? – has added to its allure. The fifth man, Roger Cairncross, makes only a fleeting appearance in the BBC's drama, and though Peter Moffat defends this on the grounds that Cairncross had little contact with the other four, Miranda Carter considers his relegation significant. 'It does rather suggest that what people are fascinated by is gilded youth gone wrong,' she says. 'Cairncross was as prolific a spy as Blunt, but he was working class. Because the others were posh, and betrayed their country when they seemed to have been given it all on a plate, they're very easy figures to hate.'

Cambridge Spies may not be a sophisticated title – Peter Moffat admits that he racked his brains for a better one – but it does unite two potent types of glamour: *Brideshead* and James Bond. How important is the miniature-camera, secret-rendezvous element of the story? Very, Moffat believes – at least to men: 'When Blunt faced the press in 1979 and was asked why he did it, he replied, "Cowboys and Indians" – which was a ridiculous and

chilling and hopeless answer. But there is an element of truth in it: spying *is* thrilling, and having a permanent secret gave him in his own mind a kind of status.'

For Toby Stephens, the challenge of living a double life is at the heart of the story's appeal. 'Everyone, in their fantasies, wants to be a subversive,' he argues. 'But most of us don't become one, and that breeds a kind of fascination: "How did they manage it? Why would I never have the wherewithal to do that?" The reality must have been very, very complex for them, and at times boring – writing down and photographing all that stuff – and pretty neurotic. They all made sacrifices, and *Cambridge Spies* is about what it cost them on an individual level.'

The price was particularly high because it involved losing their friends twice over: instructed by the Russians to sever all political ties in order to infiltrate the Establishment, the four were initially looked upon as traitors to the Left. Maclean (played in the BBC production by Rupert Penry-Jones) proved the least able to cope with the strain, becoming an alcoholic and suffering a nervous breakdown – though this did not deter the Foreign Office from given him a senior posting in Washington, with access to nuclear secrets. The others, especially Blunt, were better at compartmentalising their lives: when they were finally exposed, many of their friends found it impossible to square such treachery with the characters they thought they knew.

Along with this disbelief came a question which still reverberates today – *why?* If the four had been recruited by blackmail or bribery, they could have been dismissed as old-fashioned traitors; but the fact that their motives seemed entirely ideological put them in a new, perplexing category. 'The thing about the British Establishment is that it can never really understand why people dislike it,' says Julian Mitchell. 'It was a tremendous shock that these characters from Eton and Marlborough should turn upon it as they did, and some people have never managed to come to terms with that.'

The four's initial devotion to Communism is not difficult to fathom: it was a fashionable position in Cambridge, and particularly at Trinity, which in 1930 ran the following jingle in its college magazine:

We're the Trinity Soviet-ski

You bet-ski!

Just let-ski

Us sing u our little song-i-vitch

Not long-i-vitch

But strong-i-vitch...

‘The spies,’ Peter Moffat points out, ‘were recruited in 1933 to ’34, which was after the burning of the Reichstag: Hitler had made his intentions plain, and our government was doing nothing about it. There were three million unemployed in Britain. Stalin was not yet presenting the ugly face he would later, and one can at least understand if people attached themselves to something that looked as if it would stand up to Fascism.’

But while this view persuaded many young men, such as George Orwell, to risk their lives in the Spanish Civil War, it did not lead them to betray their country – or to continue to do so even when Russia had taken the wrong side in the Second World War by signing a non-aggression pact with Germany. The question, says Miranda Carter, is whether the spies had a deeper, psychological motive: ‘Did they act the way they did because they were emotionally messed up and hated their fathers?’

This may be a rough-and-ready summary of a classic Freudian proposition, but it is not to be dismissed lightly. Philby in particular had a difficult relationship with his father – a maverick colonial administrator who embraced life in the Middle East so fervently that he converted to Islam. Maclean, the son of a Liberal Cabinet minister, grew up in a strict Presbyterian household, which – according to his biographer Robert Cecil – gave him both a longing to rebel and a deep need for a disciplinarian creed, making Communism the ideal path for him. Burgess was 13 when *his* father, a naval commander, died; his mother then married an army officer whom Burgess detested. With Blunt, says Miranda Carter, ‘Homosexuality plays a great role: he wants to be part of the Establishment and a success, but he always feels left out because he is gay and his family is not as grand as he would like.’ But in the end, she admits, we may never understand his precise motives: ‘There is just something fundamentally enigmatic about him.’

Another puzzle is exactly how damaging the spies’ work was to Britain. ‘We know what secrets they betrayed, because they’re in the Russian archives,’ explains the biographer Andrew Lownie, who is currently writing a life of Burgess. ‘What we don’t know is when the Russians got them, or how they used them – though it’s likely to have been pretty devastating.’ Maclean’s reports on the American nuclear programme certainly put him in the first rank of traitors, and Philby was undoubtedly responsible for the deaths of dozens of agents sent into Albania; how much blood was on the others’ hands is as yet unclear.

There is further reason for the spies' continuing fascination: the questions that their actions raise about the nature of patriotism. 'There's a dichotomy in Burgess and Blunt,' says Toby Stephens, 'where they feel patriotic towards England as a place – they love the landscape, they love the literature, and Blunt loved the royal family – but they don't feel patriotic towards the government: and I think a lot of people have that duality in their relationship with their country.'

Alan Bennett wrote in his preface to *An Englishman Abroad* that the Falklands War had helped him to understand Burgess and Blunt's position – and it is likely that the Iraqi crisis will do the same for at least part of *Cambridge Spies*' audience. 'Burgess,' says Sam West, 'refers to the spies as "double patriots", loyal to England and loyal to Communism – and I suppose I don't necessarily see that as a contradiction. They thought that they were fighting for a greater truth than the narrow bounds of patriotism.'

The four, though, had another loyalty – to each other. The world of espionage is, for eminently practical reasons, dominated by loners; as friends who helped recruit each other, and who remained mutually dependent throughout their undercover lives, the Cambridge spies were something rare and different. Many people have quoted, as Blunt famously did, E.M. Forster's dictum that given the choice between betraying his friend and his country, he hoped that he would have the guts to betray his country; few have had that resolve actually put to the test. The fact that the spies *lived* dilemmas which remain hypothetical for most of us contributes to their near-mythical status.

The final ingredient in this Cold War cocktail is the fact that, although the spies got away scot-free, they had the good grace not to live happily ever after. *An Englishman Abroad* hinges on the loneliness of Burgess's exile; Philby, for his part, felt bitter that the KGB showed insufficient appreciation for his work; Maclean – whose wife left him for Philby – was so disappointed by the Soviet Union that he allied himself to the dissident movement; Blunt, stripped of his honours, lived out an isolated life in a sparse Bayswater flat. Had they ended their days cavorting in sunny villas on the Black Sea with lithe young apparatchiks, their laughter would have been too galling to bear; instead, they cut pathetic figures for whom one can, at times, almost feel sorry.

What do the spies mean to the present generation of Cambridge undergraduates? I put this question to one of the student extras kicking his heels in the incense-filled dining hall. 'Not much,' he admitted, as we watched the young Burgess spreading garlic on his toast.

'My dad told me a bit about them when he heard I was doing this. It was a pretty big deal, though, wasn't it?'