

‘The trouble with treachery nowadays’:

Revisiting the Age of Treason in *Philby, Burgess and Maclean* (ITV, 1977) and *Blunt* (BBC 2, 1987)

Dr Joseph Oldham

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The scandal of the Cambridge spy ring has held an iconic status in British Cold War history. Recruited to work for Soviet intelligence whilst attending Cambridge University in the mid-1930s, this group, which included Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean and Anthony Blunt, would become ‘the ablest group of British agents ever recruited by a foreign power’ (Andrew 2010: 420), assuming key positions in SIS, MI5, the Foreign Office and the BBC over the late 1930s and 1940s. Much of the fascination with this topic lies in how the facts have become known to the public only incrementally. The case first came to public attention with the disappearance of Burgess and Maclean in May 1951, the pair becoming known as the ‘missing diplomats’. In February 1956 it was publicly confirmed that both had defected to Moscow. The preceding October, speculation that Philby had been the ‘third man’, playing a key role in their escape, was prematurely denied by Foreign Secretary Harold Macmillan in the House of Commons. However, in January 1963 new evidence compelled Philby to defect to Moscow from his journalistic posting in Beirut, and this was only revealed to the public in the following July. Initially it was publicly assumed that Philby had been a relatively low-ranking diplomat, yet over autumn 1967 the *Sunday Times*’ Insight Team published a serialised exposé on his treachery, describing his rise to much higher and more sensitive levels within SIS than had previously been revealed. (This account was expanded into the book *Philby: The Spy Who Betrayed a Generation*, Page *et al* 1968).

Over the decades a rich vein of television drama has explored this topic, initially tending to take an allegorical form, with fictional traitors in the place of the genuine historical figures. This began with Dennis Potter’s *Traitor* (BBC 1, 1971), which depicts a group of Western journalists interviewing the exiled double agent Adrian Harris (John Le Mesurier) in his Moscow flat, whilst flashbacks illuminate episodes from his history. John le Carré’s novel *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (1974) reworked Philby’s exposure into a whodunit narrative, with spymaster George Smiley working to uncover a mole within British intelligence, and this was adapted into an iconic television serial (BBC 2, 1979). Later works would increasingly set aside allegory in favour of depicting the ‘real’ spies, most famously two later plays by Allan Bennett; *An Englishman Abroad* (BBC 1, 1983), which depicts Burgess in his Moscow exile in 1958, and *A Question of Attribution* (BBC 1, 1991), which depicts the later revealed ‘fourth man’ Blunt in the lead-up to his own exposure in 1979. These works were central to a previous study of Cambridge spy dramas by Simon Willmetts and Christopher Moran (2013).

Yet barring *Tinker Tailor*, the above works are all character pieces set long after the traitor's career as a double agent has ended. Another branch of this tradition is a group of dramas representing the real agents at the peak of their careers in Cold War espionage, drawing substantially on biographical accounts, and these receive much less attention in Willmetts and Moran's analysis. There have been three such dramas on British television: the standalone films *Philby*, *Burgess and Maclean* by Ian Curteis (ITV, 1977) and *Blunt* by Robin Chapman (BBC 2, 1987; retitled *Blunt: The Fourth Man* in the US), and the four-part serial *Cambridge Spies* by Peter Moffat (BBC 2, 2003). This article will examine the first two of these, also considering Chapman's stage play *One of Us* (1986) from which *Blunt* was loosely derived. This comparison will illuminate wider changes in how this scandal was understood over the 1970s and 1980s. This is particularly enabled a key structural similarity between the 1977 and 1987 films, which both centre on the 1951 defection, placing this at the midpoint of the narrative and dramatising both build-up and aftermath. However, they adopt almost entirely contrasting approaches in terms of timescale, geographical scope and character perspectives.

The difference in how these productions represent the Cambridge spies is linked to wider socio-political shifts, for the case has often been positioned as symbolic of changing social currents. For instance, the Insight Team argued in 1968 that 'the affair tells us a good deal about the role of privilege in our society, and the degree to which irrelevant insignia of social and economic status can be fatally mistaken for evidence of political acceptability' (Page *et al* 1968: 291). Chapman's film, however, followed the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, which mounted a radical project over the 1980s to replace the post-war social-democratic consensus with a new hegemony oriented around enterprise and free markets (Gamble 1994: 10) and framed by a resurgent nationalism (Corner and Harvey 1991: 45). This agenda rejected both the socialist politics underpinning the spies' initial ideological commitments and the 'old-school-tie' amateur culture often blamed for giving them cover under which to operate. This government also fiercely upheld a national security agenda, most evident in the sharp increase in prosecutions under Section 2 of the Official Secrets Act (Vincent 1998: 262), and in this context the Cambridge spies scandal and the investigative journalists who sought to expose their activities continued to prove a lingering embarrassment.

The shift in representation is also linked to determinants within the television industry. *Blunt* was produced by the BBC, the UK's primary public service broadcaster, whilst *Philby*, *Burgess and Maclean* was produced by Granada Television, one of the commercial ITV franchise holders. Both productions have claims to the status of drama-documentary, a valuable genre in the British public service tradition, fulfilling obligations to inform, educate and entertain (Goodwin and Kerr 1983: 6). Although such values have more commonly been associated with the BBC, commercial ITV franchise-holders also had public service duties enforced through regulation. Granada specifically aspired to compete with the BBC in prestige areas like drama and documentary (Hallam 2003), and as I will illustrate *Philby*, *Burgess and Maclean* was developed in a production culture characterised by a serious documentary ethic.

Public service values in the documentary tradition encouraged an ethical commitment to accuracy and impartiality, fairness and objectivity. However, the drama-documentary has long attracted controversy over its ostensible power to distort history through mixing 'fact' with 'fiction'. This often connected to claims that a partisan 'vision' had been smuggled into

a piece ostensibly making claims to ‘objectivity’, with the BBC particularly vulnerable to this criticism due to its publicly-funded status. Yet often this arose as the product of another public service imperative, the romantic valuation of the individual author’s ‘vision’, which had long provided an alibi for some of television drama’s more politicised material (Gardner and Wyver 1983: 123). This would prove a significant issue in relation to *Blunt*, with Chapman using his authorial position to craft a more speculative portrait than Curteis’ film.

‘An exercise in journalism, not dramatic art’: *Philby, Burgess and Maclean* (ITV, 31 May 1977) by Ian Curteis

Philby, Burgess and Maclean depicts a period from 1945 to 1955 during the first phase of the Cold War. It opens with a sequence in which Philby (Anthony Bate) arranges the ‘disappearance’ of Soviet defector Konstantin Volkov whose information threatens to expose him. The film therefore immediately highlights the violent consequences of treachery, not always so clearly emphasised in later accounts. The film then jumps to 1949, introducing Burgess (Derek Jacobi), in disgrace with his employers at the Foreign Office after a drunken excursion to Gibraltar, and Maclean, experiencing a breakdown whilst serving as Head of Chancery at the Cairo Embassy. Philby moves to Washington D.C. to serve as chief British intelligence representative and is soon joined by Burgess who has been posted as Second Secretary at the British Embassy. Maclean returns to London, promoted to Head of the FO’s American Department, but soon comes under suspicion from the authorities who have intercepted information regarding a high-level Soviet mole codenamed ‘Homer’. Due to his high-level access, Philby discovers of the investigation and plots with Burgess to help Maclean evade capture. It is arranged for Burgess to be sent home for ‘bad behaviour’ in May 1951 so that he can supervise Maclean’s defection. Burgess then elects to join Maclean, and the ‘missing diplomats’ are last seen departing the UK on a midnight channel ferry on Friday 25 May. In the final act, Philby is recalled to London under suspicion of having aided the defection. His career stalls and he is subjected to interrogations from Helenus Milmo (Barrie Cookson) and William Skardon (David Markham). Nothing is proven, however, and the film concludes with his erroneous exoneration in late 1955.

Philby, Burgess and Maclean was produced by Granada Television, which had developed a strong tradition of drama-documentaries, particularly based around Cold War themes. Producer Leslie Woodhead was the leading practitioner of the form at Granada, formulating the public service-infused ‘Woodhead Doctrine’:

The aim of a dramatised documentary is to recreate as accurately as possible history as it happened. No invented characters, no invented names, no dramatic devices owing more to the writer’s (or director’s) creative imagination than to the implacable record of what actually happened. For us, the dramatised documentary is an exercise in journalism, not dramatic art.’ (Boulton 1983: 29).

Research for these productions was underwritten by ‘an employees-only library, an archive of film and video tapes, journalists’ own newspaper cuttings collections and personal contacts, plus the usual public information services’, arising from a close connection to Granada’s much-admired current affairs series *World in Action* (ITV, 1963-98) (Paget 2011: 23). *Philby*,

Burgess and Maclean largely adheres to the revelations 1967 Insight Team exposé, still a definitive account at the time. Indeed, Phillip Knightly, a member of the team and leading journalist in national security issues, was employed as advisor, the display of his name in the credits serving as a guarantor of the strong factual basis. As result of this ethic, although settings and costumes are period-accurate, the film is less inclined to revel in the aesthetic ‘heritage’ pleasures of these by comparison to later works, most notably *Cambridge Spies*.

The script was provided by Ian Curteis, a writer who had developed an interest in 20th century historical topics through plays in the anthology series *Biography* (BBC, 1970) and *The Edwardians* (1972-74). *Philby, Burgess and Maclean* marked a shift into prestige pieces focused on military and security topics. Two years later he authored the similarly-themed *Atom Spies* (ITV, 1979) for Anglia Television, dramatising the case of Klaus Fuchs, Bruno Pontecorvo and Alan Nunn May (including a second depiction of Skardon, who had conducted a more successful interrogation of Fuchs’ in 1950.) The same year he authored two dramas for the BBC, *Churchill and the Generals* (BBC, 1979) and *Suez 1956* (BBC, 1979), focused on the war room activities of politicians and military leaders. *Philby, Burgess and Maclean* can be situated alongside *Atom Spies* and *Suez* as works set early in the First Cold War (1947-62). By the late 1970s this had long since given way to *détente*, a relaxing of geopolitical tensions, making the paranoid atmosphere of this period seem more of a historical curiosity.

Although not a regular collaborator with Granada and indeed resistant to the label ‘dramatised-documentary’ for his work (Curteis 1987: 11-13), Curteis’ priorities in depicting history had a substantial overlap with their vision through a similar adherence to the ‘implacable record’. His BBC war room epics are closely bound to documented events, largely composed of leaders expositing at each other, limiting the actors ‘to a recreation of surface reality’ (Reeves 1993: 157). *Philby, Burgess and Maclean* features two such re-enactments at the conclusion. Firstly, Labour MP Marcus Lipton (Hugh Morton) is shown asking about ‘the dubious third man activities’ of Philby in relation to Burgess and Maclean’s defection in the House of Commons on 25 October 1955, the question which forced Macmillan to clear Philby. Subsequently, the Philby’s valedictory press conference on 8 November 1955 is restaged to closely resemble genuine newsreel footage of the event. For the most part, however, the Cambridge spies case is perhaps less constrictive for a writer than Curteis’ war-room dramas, the specific detail of events being inevitably less well-documented and more mysterious.

Yet the adherence to historical records may nonetheless account for a particularly striking feature. Here there is no single scene in which Philby, Burgess and Maclean are all present together, and relatively few scenes featuring private conversations between any given pairing. The film instead adopts a more ‘external’ perspective, tending to privilege the spies’ interaction with other historical figures around them. This may be a product of the source material, as the Insight Team’s account was largely assembled from the recollections of ‘hundreds of retired officials’ who had encountered the spies over the years (Moran 2013: 165). Nonetheless, this is a significant contrast with both *Blunt* and *Cambridge Spies* which both concentrate enormously on personal relationships between those within the spy ring.

This approach can, of course, be attributed to how the spies were generally located on different continents during the timescale depicted, although the selection of a post-1945 timescale is itself significant. Notably there is no depiction of the circumstances in which the

spies first met and were recruited at Cambridge. These events remained relatively mysterious as of 1977, and to dramatise this would have therefore taken the story into more speculative territory. Instead, Cambridge not mentioned until the final act when Skardon raises it during his interrogation of Philby, but the evasive spy will not be drawn on the topic. Thus, the ambiguity is actively highlighted. The origins of the ring, although alluded to in other representations, would not be directly depicted until *Cambridge Spies* in 2003.

The avoidance of ‘dramatic art’ may also account for the film’s disinterest in finding moral failures in the Establishment. This is a significant feature of many accounts, which often emphasise failures in detecting the spy ring and recurrent cover-ups. A generation later, *Cambridge Spies* repeatedly exaggerated the complacent, amateurish image of the Establishment for comic effect. Here, however, this image is only fleetingly acknowledged when SIS Chief Stewart Menzies (Richard Hurndall), issued a list of those suspected of being ‘Homer’, remarks in surprise, ‘they’re our sort of chap’. However, this is not dwelt upon, and Menzies immediately adapts to the situation, showing good professional conduct as a spy-catcher. There is similarly a hint at the beginning of Philby’s interrogations that Menzies naively assumes his innocence. By the end, however, all involved are under no illusion about Philby’s guilt, and simply lack the evidence with which to incriminate him. Furthermore, the historical decision of SIS to reemploy Philby as a field agent in Beirut from 1956, often interpreted as a startling lapse of judgement, is here depicted as a deliberate trap on the part of SIS to trick the agent into revealing himself. This is therefore a much more charitable portrayal of British intelligence by comparison to other versions of this narrative.

The few scenes showing interaction between the spies do, however, offer glimpses into more speculative territory. One shows Burgess and Maclean discussing the looming possibility of the defection whilst strolling through the autumnal English countryside. This anticipates the aesthetics that the televised *Tinker Tailor* would later apply more extensively to the theme of betrayal within elite cultures of espionage (Oldham 2017: 94-95). Here they bond over their solitude, Maclean bemoaning that ‘there’s no one you can tell, talk to, discuss the most passionately important thing in your life, no one. I’ve sometimes felt the sheer loneliness and lack of human contact was cracking my head open.’ This is a rare moment to indicate a sense of the intimate friendship between the agents. Burgess had been an adherent of E.M. Forster’s famous nostrum, that ‘if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country’ (1951:78), and later portrayals would use this as a basis for partially romanticising their actions, particularly *Blunt* (see below). This sequence thus provides a glimpse of more redemptive portrayals to follow.

Two other speculative scenes hint at a less politically detached engagement. These both centre on the wives of Maclean and Philby, who are, in different ways, positioned as outsiders who become uncomfortably implicated in the activities of the group. One occurs as Burgess arrives to pick Maclean up from his home on the evening of Friday 25 May 1951. Maclean’s wife Melinda (Elizabeth Seal) is still reeling from her husband’s confession of his work for the Soviet Union which, in this version, has occurred (off-screen) just the night before. Left alone with Burgess, she quizzes him about his political beliefs, to which he responds by reiterating passages of Marx and Trotsky verbatim. To this Melinda contemptuously declares, ‘I bet you’ve been quoting that ever since you and Donald first read it in some cheap little

pamphlet at Cambridge. Have you never progressed beyond? Always second-hand, Guy, never an original thought!' This sounds a dismissive note in Curteis' otherwise detached scripting style, casting Burgess as man robotically devoted to undigested political dogma.

Rather different is a later scene between Philby and his own wife Aileen (Ingrid Hafner) where they discuss the 'revelation' that Burgess and Maclean were likely Soviet agents. The loaded tone of their words makes it clear that Aileen has come to realise Philby's involvement, and that the conversation is a heavily coded way of talking about his own position. In contrast to Burgess, there is a strong implication that Philby may regret his political commitments:

AILEEN: Once recruited there's no turning back? However much the world might change? No matter how much we might discover what really goes on inside the Soviet Union?

PHILBY: Once you've said yes, and the door clangs behind you, that's it. For life. I imagine.

AILEEN: Until you're caught.

The sense of entrapment on Philby's part seems entirely speculative. Long after the spy's death, Knightley described how Philby had consistently 'presented his career with the KGB as one seamless web of dedicated service, with never a moment of doubt until the stultifying years in Moscow under Brezhnev.' Later access to KGB files, however, indicated that he had indeed 'wanted explanations about what had been happening in the Soviet Union' and been disillusioned by the Hitler-Stalin pact, (Knightley 1994: xi). Yet such information would not have been available to Curteis in 1977, and so appears to be an imaginative conclusion.

The film received a generally positive critical response, broadly similar in publications ranging from tabloid to quality papers, and across the political spectrum. Reviews frequently reiterated some of the widely accepted history surrounding the spies, but generally with no view towards contesting Curteis' interpretation. Ian Hamilton of the liberal political magazine *New Statesman* was unconvinced by the thesis that Philby's Beirut posting was a trap, although freely admitted being 'no expert on the ins and outs' of the affair. Indeed, the lack of 'expert' comment in mainstream papers is notable by comparison to the later reception of *Blunt*. Philip Purser in the right-wing broadsheet *Sunday Telegraph* even claimed to know the identity of a 'fourth man', although this point was presented more as gossip to enhance the film's depiction rather than as a serious counter-argument with which to contest it.. Overall there was little overt attempt by papers to bring their specific politics to bear upon the drama (see also Knight 1977; Ratcliffe 1977; Usher 1977), and indeed at this time rows over drama-documentaries were more common in relation to more explicitly 'radical' histories such as Ken Loach's *Days of Hope* (BBC 1, 1975). In the following decade, however, controversy would increasingly attach itself to a wider range of material, and this would eventually lead to *Blunt* receiving a reception both more politicised and more conscious of historiography.

Guy Burgess vs. the Falklands War: Revisionist and Redemptive Interpretations

Interest in the Cambridge spies was renewed in 1979 by the revelation of Sir Anthony Blunt, Keeper of the Queen's Pictures, as the 'fourth man'. Blunt's role had been exposed by the authorities in 1964, but he had been granted immunity from prosecution in return for a full confession. His identity was first strongly implied in a new book by Andrew Boyle, *The Climate of Treason* (1979). Boyle concealed Blunt's identity under the name 'Maurice', derived from E.M. Forster's homosexual romance novel and referring to Blunt's own position as a leisure-class homosexual, but the clues were sufficient for others to deduce the truth. This forced the newly-elected Thatcher to confirm Blunt's role in Parliament on 15 November 1979. This coincided with the onset of the Second Cold War (1979-85), marked by rising superpower tensions, with Thatcher playing a leading ideological role (Gamble 1994: 115). Thus the wider cultural potency of the Cold War theme was enhanced, even though the distant 'conspiracy of the thirties' seemed increasingly 'remote and unreal' to younger generations (Boyle 1979: 451).

The media frenzy over Blunt inspired potential new productions exploring the Cambridge spies, with the deaths of Maclean and Blunt in March 1983 stirring up further interest. That month the *Standard* reported that Thames Television had purchased the television rights to *The Climate of Treason*, whilst David Puttnam's company Enigma Productions had purchased the film option on a new book by Barrie Penrose and Simon Freeman, provisionally titled *The Apostles* (eventually published as *Conspiracy of Silence*, 1986). Neither project was ultimately produced. The BBC was reported to be developing a major series entitled *The Age of Treason* which would 'trace the historical patterns and Establishment gullibility which supported Blunt and Co' (*Standard* 1983: 6). This was initially envisaged as a six-part series produced by Martin Thompson, with BBC staff researcher Cherry Hughes assigned to the project. She conducted various interviews around this time, including with art critic Brian Sewell, Blunt's close friend and former pupil (Honan 1987: 18-19).

In the meantime, however, Burgess came into the foreground in two notable works. Firstly, Julian Mitchell's play *Another Country* (1981) depicted formative experiences of a teenaged 'Guy Bennett' (a thinly-disguised Burgess) attending an English public school. This was subsequently adapted into a feature film (Kanievska, 1984). Secondly, Alan Bennett's *An Englishman Abroad* (1984) dramatised an encounter between the exiled Burgess and the Australian actress Coral Browne in Moscow in 1958. First made as a television film (BBC 1, 29 November 1983), this was later adapted into a stage version. Collectively, these pieces mark a significant and influential change in representations of Burgess. Shifting the focus to opposite ends of Burgess' life and avoiding his time as a double agent, they demonstrate a more interest in exploring character rather than 'serious' intrigues of Cold War history.

This enabled the emergence of more charitable images. *Another Country* dramatizes Guy's growing awareness of his homosexuality and its incompatibility with elite snobbery, suggesting the temptations that revolutionary Marxism may have offered in such circumstances. Mitchell was not alone in this interpretation, for in a 1987 study of treachery, journalist Chapman Pincher suggested that for Blunt and Burgess 'homosexuality may have been a factor in inducing them to rebel against a society which not only disapproved of their habits but regarded them as criminal' (103). In *Englishman*, meanwhile, McKechnie describes how 'Burgess' character and characteristics are given much more attention than the politics of

his case' (2007: 93), the conversation with Browne endlessly circling 'serious' politics with frivolous high-society gossip.

The partial redemption of Burgess carries potentially subversive undertones. Despite its apparent avoidance of 'issues', *An Englishman Abroad* was written against the backdrop of the Falklands War, a 'popular triumph' which enhanced the popularity of the Conservative government (Gamble 1994: 121). Over the 1980s representations of the war would provoke much controversy, which Derek Paget argues 'betrayed a society deeply troubled by, and unable to resolve, antithetical views of this conflict' (2011: 83). Commissioned by the BBC to write a war room drama on the war, Curteis described Britain's participation as 'the dramatic rising to the surface once more of values and issues that we on these islands have cared about most profoundly down the centuries, and on which our civilised freedom rests' (1987: 15). Many were more sceptical of this rhetoric, however, with Bennett recounting that 'the Falklands War helped me to understand how a fastidious stepping-aside from patriotism could be an element in the make-up of characters as different as Burgess and Blunt' (1994: 211). In this context, sympathetic readings of a figure like Burgess had subversive potential, albeit in a lighter and more impishly provocative form than the sustained political critique of conspiracy dramas like *Edge of Darkness* (BBC 2, 1985).

It also seems significant that Blunt's exposure was quickly followed by works about the other openly homosexual member of the ring, suggesting that Burgess may have served as a substitute whilst Blunt was still alive. Following key advances in gay rights, notably the Sexual Offences Act 1967, Burgess' historically discredited commitment to Stalinism could be displaced by casting him as gay pioneer. Richard Dyer lists the cinematic *Another Country* as one several heritage films from the period which 'seem pretty clearly inspired by a gay or sexually liberal political agenda' developed over later decades than the time depicted (2002: 206). By emphasising Burgess' famous wit and flamboyant character, the seedy, shabby figure of *Philby, Burgess and Maclean* could be readily recrafted as a figure more in the vein of Quentin Crisp whose biographical portrayal in *The Naked Civil Servant* (ITV, 1975) had received enormous acclaim.

Such progress was by this time encountering a backlash from the New Right politics of the 1980s. Stuart Hall positions sexual minorities as one of various 'enemies within' to a moral political agenda which mounted 'constant attempts to expel symbolically one sector of society after another from the imaginary community of the nation' (1988: 8). Sympathising with a homosexual spy therefore contributed another subtly subversive theme to these dramas. Allan Hepburn argues that 'the porousness of the gay spy points to a postmodern conception of identity (holding conflicting opinions and values simultaneously) and away from a modernist one (rallying behind doctrinaire cause)' (2005: 197). Against the renewal of hawkish nationalist politics under Thatcher, this rejection of the doctrinaire cause carried potentially subversive currents, if less overtly 'radical' than other oppositional movements of the era.

Later in the decade, the Burgess moment gave way to a Blunt moment. On its debut at the National Theatre in December 1988, the stage version of *An Englishman Abroad* was accompanied by a companion piece from Bennett, *A Question of Attribution*. This imagined Blunt's conversations with the Queen and an MI5 interrogator in the period shortly before his exposure. This ultimately afforded much sympathy to Blunt, and by this time Bennett was

even more direct in positioning this as an oblique comment on contemporary politics, writing that ‘the trouble with treachery nowadays is that if one does want to betray one’s country there is no one satisfactory to betray it to. If there were, more people would be doing it’ (1994: 214). This piece was later adapted into another television film (BBC 1, 10 October 1991). Given the prominence of redemptive and/or queer engagements with the Cambridge spies in the 1980s, the broader absence of Philby, the most assuredly heterosexual and unambiguously dangerous of the ring, is significant. This was most conspicuous in another stage-to-screen project which bridged the gap from the Burgess to the Blunt moment, reintegrating some of the themes raised in Mitchell and Bennett’s works into the ‘serious’ history of the First Cold War.

‘Less interested in the mind of a spy than in the heart’: *Blunt* (BBC 2, 11 January 1987) by Robin Chapman

Like *Another Country* and *A Question of Attribution*, Robin Chapman’s *Blunt* had its origins in a stage production, although in this instance the process of adaptation was less direct. Chapman’s play *One of Us* mixed the approaches of previous representations. On the one hand, it dramatises events surrounding the 1951 defection and is therefore engaged with ‘serious’ history, but on the other, it centres the action on a single location over several days, serving as a more contained character piece in the manner of Bennett and Mitchell’s plays. As in other works from this period, Burgess and Blunt appear as major characters, with Maclean and Philby unseen and only referred to. Yet *One of Us* does not position one of the canonical members of the Cambridge spies as its central protagonist, but instead adopts the perspective of a more marginal figure typically absent from other dramatised representations.

Goronwy Rees was one of Burgess’ closest friends over a period of nearly two decades, following their first encounter in 1932 when Rees was a young Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. Rees became publicly associated with the ‘missing diplomats’ scandal in 1956 when exposed as the pseudonymous author of a series of salacious articles about Burgess in *The People* (Purvis and Hulbert 2016: 324-327). Over time more information about this connection had come to light. The Insight Team’s exposé described an incident in 1938 when Burgess had drunkenly declared to Rees that he was a Comintern agent and tried to recruit his friend. Rees claimed to have declined but to have been sworn to secrecy by Burgess (Page *et al* 1968: 75).

Rees’ memoir *A Chapter of Accidents* (1972) provided a unique perspective on the events surrounding the 1951 defection. One night in the winter of 1950 he had been accosted by a drunken Maclean in the Gargoyle Club. Maclean, by then under suspicion and in a state of paranoia, declared accusingly ‘I know all about you. You used to be one of us, but you ratted’ (191). Burgess had then visited Rees in early May 1951, immediately after returning from his Washington D.C. posting. This was just weeks before Burgess’ final departure from England with Maclean. Rees indicates that nothing of this nature was discussed, although describes a sense that his friend ‘was labouring under a tremendous sense of excitement’ (197). On Friday 25 May, before leaving England for the last time, Burgess had telephoned Rees at home, only to find his friend was away at All Souls for the weekend. Instead he spoke to Rees’ wife Margie, declaring mysteriously that ‘he was about to do something which would surprise and shock many people but he was sure it was the right thing to do’ (205). Rees returned on

the Sunday night and, hearing this, deduced that Burgess was defecting to Moscow and arranged an interview with MI5. The following morning, somebody identified only as a 'friend of Guy's' visited and attempted to dissuade Rees from talking, arguing that this was not 'the act of a friend' and reminding Rees of Forster's precept. Rees, however, replied that:

Forster's antithesis was a false one. One's country was not some abstract conception which it might be relatively easy to sacrifice for the sake of an individual; it was made up of a dense network of individual and social relationships in which loyalty to one particular person formed only a single strand (207-208).

Rees declared that he would reveal all he knew of Burgess to MI5, to the visitor's disapproval.

These incidents are recounted almost exactly in *The Climate of Treason*, for Rees was one of Boyle's main sources. One notable difference, however, is Boyle's explicit identification of the 'friend' as Blunt. Following Blunt's unmasking, an even more obvious motive for his attempts to dissuade Rees from telling all to the authorities became apparent. Rees had apparently been told of Blunt's role in the spy ring by Burgess back in 1938, and thus ensuring Rees' silence was important for Blunt's own security.

In writing the play, Chapman was evidently drawn to Rees as a man caught in the middle, facing a harsh choice between betraying his country and his friend. Forster's precept is presented as an epigraph to the published script, whilst the title is taken from Maclean's conception of belonging in the circle ('one of us'). Over the course of play Rees resists further attempts by both Burgess and Blunt to claim him as a full member of the spy ring.

The play is set entirely within the garden of Rees' house and is divided into three scenes. The sole scene of Act 1 depicts Burgess' visit in May (with references back to the unseen encounter with Maclean). Chapman takes liberties with Rees' account, presenting him as much more implicated, for Burgess talks openly to him about the roles of Philby and Blunt, and about the mission to help Maclean escape to Moscow. Act 2 Scene 1 takes place on 27 May, as Rees returns home to find Margie distressed following Burgess' phone call. In this portrayal, Rees is forced to admit his past involvement in Marxist politics and his knowledge of Burgess' spying. Act 2 Scene 2 depicts Blunt's visit the following day, in which he attempts to ensure Rees' silence to his own satisfaction. In contrast to Boyle's claim that this discussion 'never became discourteous' (384), Chapman presents it as antagonistic, with Blunt issuing coded threats via an allusion to the assassinated Soviet defector Walter Krivitsky. The disagreement over Forster's precept is particularly expanded, with Rees provoked to fury, grasping Blunt's lapel and berating him for 'twisting' Forster's words (68-69). This sequence echoes how Melinda mocked Burgess for his automatic recitation of political theory in *Philby, Burgess and Maclean*, although here the denunciation is given greater weight due to the passionate delivery and its position at the climax. With Blunt's approach having backfired, Rees elects to confess all he knows to MI5.

The published script of *One of Us* (1986) noted that Chapman had also written a 'companion piece' for television entitled *Blunt*, for broadcast the following year. Thompson, who had worked on the proposed *Age of Treason*, served as producer, suggesting *Blunt* was envisioned as either convergence with or replacement for the earlier project. Like the play, the film remains tightly focused on the events of 1951, featuring all three scenes from *One of Us*

in abbreviated form. However, Rees' story is incorporated into a dual-stranded narrative that juxtaposes his perspective with Blunt's, the scope expanded to locations beyond Rees' home.

Blunt (Ian Richardson) is introduced working as Keeper of the King's Pictures at Windsor Castle, and later shown lecturing at the Courtauld Institute of Art. Indeed, this profession proved something of a gift for writers, as when Blunt is shown speaking on Poussin's *Et in Arcadia ego* (1637–38), likening its utopian vision to Marxist politics. This anticipates Bennett's more complex and playful use of art metaphors in *A Question of Attribution*, 'a play where almost every scene has a double meaning or a hidden relevance to the themes of exposure, the secret self and forgery' (McKechnie 2007: 96). Blunt is also shown to hold an advisory role to MI5 Deputy Director-General Guy Liddell (Geoffrey Chater), who is on the trail of the Soviet mole 'Homer' in a role equivalent to that of Menzies in Curteis' film. The viewer is immediately aware that Blunt's interest in the case is far from innocent.

The narrative progresses to show Blunt's joyful reunion with Burgess (Anthony Hopkins) after the latter's return from the US; his role in arranging the defection of Maclean (Michael McStay) and assigning Burgess as escort; and his horror when he realises that Burgess has accompanied Maclean to Moscow. Maclean makes only fleeting appearances in this version, presented more as a problem for the other characters to handle rather than a protagonist in his own right. Philby remains entirely offscreen due to the action being restricted to London and the Home Counties during the time when he was based in Washington D.C., although references are made to his involvement. Blunt's story is intercut with the previously described events at Rees' home, and the narrative similarly climaxes with Blunt's visit to Rees (Michael Williams) to ensure his silence, although in this version the scene serves as the convergence of two narrative threads. Such is the transformative effect of replacing Philby, Burgess and Maclean with the alternative trio of Blunt, Burgess and Rees that *Blunt* almost entirely avoids duplicating any events shown in the Granada film. Indeed, this stands as a unique combination; the later *Cambridge Spies*, a four-hour account of the spy ring from recruitment right through to the 1951 defection with Blunt included, omits Rees entirely.

Perhaps the most significant way in which *Blunt* differs from *Philby, Burgess and Maclean* is how it places far more dramatic weight on private scenes between those implicated in the spy ring as opposed to more 'public' interactions with outsiders. Its content thus tilts more towards the speculative. Whilst Burgess is presented as an affable rogue recognisable from (and likely influenced by) *An Englishman Abroad*, Chapman's Blunt is a rather different figure from the remote older version of the character written by Bennett in *A Question of Attribution*. Here he is a competent and efficient operative, even lecturing his Soviet controller Vasily (Albert Welling) on appropriate tradecraft. He is portrayed as 'key to the whole operation' of helping Maclean to escape England, including arranging the recall of Burgess from Washington. This notion, mentioned in *One of Us* but much expanded here, has little basis in historical accounts (generally the leading role in planning the defection is attributed to Philby, as in *Philby, Burgess and Maclean*), although Chapman speculated that an 'unnamed agent' mentioned in Philby's memoir as being involved in the defection had been Blunt (Lawson 1986: 45). At times Richardson's performance anticipates his iconic role as Francis Urquhart in the *House of Cards* trilogy (BBC 1, 1990-95), shifting between seductive charm and icy malevolence. A coda, absent in *One of Us*, explains why Rees' testimony is not enough

to expose Blunt to the authorities, for here Blunt reaches Liddell first and seeds doubts in the spymaster's mind as to whether Rees can be trusted.

This Blunt is also far more emotionally expressive than Bennett's, showing bursts of joy, anger and sorrow in private. Chapman claimed to be 'less interested in the mind of a spy than in the heart', describing his narrative as 'two intertwined love stories – Burgess and Blunt and Rees and his wife' (quoted in Lawson 1986: 45). Indeed, the film takes the most obvious liberty available when focusing on the two openly homosexual Cambridge spies, implying a long-time love affair between them. They share a bedroom in Blunt's flat and exchange a brief kiss, whilst Burgess refers to Blunt as his 'missus'. These two sides of Blunt, the efficient and the emotional, collide most dramatically after his discovery of Burgess' unexpected departure. Without hesitation, he gathers all documentary evidence of association with communism from Burgess' flat, hurries to the Courtauld Institute, and burns the incriminating material in the basement furnace. Nonetheless, there is a poignant moment as weeps whilst committing their old university photographs to the flames, set to music from Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust* (1846), creating a mythic quality removed from a typical drama-documentary register.

The makers of *Blunt* evidently had some awareness they might be straying into contentious territory, as during filming in June 1986 Thompson remarked that he expected it would cause 'quite a stir' (quoted in Lawson 1986: 45). This may have been an allusion to former Assistant Director of MI5 Peter Wright's then high-profile struggle to have his memoirs published in Australia against a legal challenge from the British government. Amongst the embarrassing revelations within, it was known that *Spycatcher* (eventually published in 1988) would contain details of Wright's interrogations of Blunt from 1964 to 1970. Conversely, however, by this time the tensions of the Second Cold War had subsided with the USSR's new policy of *glasnost*, perhaps reducing the broader sensitivity of the topic.

Yet when *Blunt* appeared on 11 January 1987, it would become embroiled in a rather different ongoing row, one focused on BBC dramas representing historical events. The previous autumn, Alan Bleasdale's serial *The Monocled Mutineer* (BBC 1, 1986) had attracted controversy over its depiction of a British Army mutiny in the First World War. This was much debated in terms of 'accuracy', particularly regarding unflattering portrayal of the military establishment's conduct. This was followed by a row over Curteis' *Falklands Play*, which had been abruptly cancelled, prompting its author to allege corruption and political bias at the BBC. This was compounded by reports on the early production of another film, *Tumbledown* (BBC1, 31 May 1988), which mounted a more critical portrait of aspects of the war's conduct (Curteis 1987: 11-52). Much of this criticism came from the right-wing press who had a vested interest in seeing a rival organisation such as the BBC diminished, particularly as its publicly-funded status stood as anathema to their own politics. Middle-market right-wing tabloid the *Daily Mail* had led the charge in the *Mutineer* case, accusing the BBC of being 'engaged in a long-term operation to rewrite history' according to a left-wing agenda (quoted in Curteis 1987: 36).

Controversy over *Blunt* began on 6 January 1987, five days before transmission, with the *Daily Mail* again making the first intervention. An article by Corinna Honan interviewed Hughes and Sewell, claiming *Blunt* as the direct outcome of the earlier *Age of Treason* project on which both had been involved. Hughes and Sewell disputed key aspects of historical

interpretation, notably the claims of Blunt's significant role in Burgess and Maclean's escape, and the suggestion of a relationship between Blunt and Burgess. They also took exception to an enormous array of more cosmetic details, including Blunt's clothing, body language, physical handling of paintings, furnishings, alcoholic preferences and cooking abilities. Thompson was given the opportunity to reply, dismissing Hughes' objections as 'nonsense', but qualifying the film as a 'dramatic hypothesis' which sought to capture 'the spirit of the man'. Honan also claimed that Hughes' unused research had cost an estimated £500,000, implying wasteful use of licence-fee payers' money, although the BBC disputed this figure.

On 10 January, the day before transmission, the *Daily Mail* gave the BBC the opportunity to respond and Hughes and Sewell the final word, an exchange which largely centred on the Burgess-Blunt homosexual relationship and research costs. On the same day another middle-market tabloid, *Today*, printed a more balanced feature on the controversy, which it likened to the *Mutineer* case, featuring quotes from Sewell, Thompson and Richardson (Coen and Shannon). The debate expanded further following transmission on 11 January. The following morning Sewell penned a personal defence of Blunt in the *London Standard* (1987: 18), whilst Chapman and Thompson appeared on that day's edition of *Open Air* (BBC 1, 1986-90) to defend the film against accusations of distortion.

Although the debate was initiated in the tabloids, following transmission it would be taken up in a more serious and contemplative form by various quality newspapers, particularly the Sunday papers for the following weekend (18 January 1987). Byron Rogers in the centre-right *Sunday Times* pondered the ethical problems of dramatising such comparatively recent events 'when there are people alive who knew the *dramatis personae*'. In the centre-left *Observer*, Alan Rusbridger described how 'the problem for the average viewer is that he or she has no clue about which bits of the "dramatic hypothesis" are more hypothetical and which bits less.' His tone, however, suggests as much mockery towards the largely right-wing 'hoo-ha' surrounding BBC 'faction' (a portmanteau of 'fact' and 'fiction' popular in journalistic debates of the 1980s) than a serious engagement with the issues.

The discussion would be most extensively taken up by right-wing broadsheet the *Daily Telegraph*. The paper's first review by Ronald Payne, published on the day of transmission, was largely positive and dismissed Sewell's objections. Indeed, Payne, the author of several non-fiction books on espionage, wrote that 'for once I find myself praising the BBC for its dramatic reconstruction of fact and opinion which shows the traitors as they really were.' The following day, however, the *Telegraph* sourced a more critical review from leading intelligence scholar Christopher Andrew, who added several new criticisms derived from his expertise. These included the poor tradecraft of the on-screen KGB, the depiction of Blunt maintaining a close association with MI5 and easily manipulating Liddell, and Rees' description of the Comintern remaining active in 1951 when it had been dissolved in 1943. Otherwise Andrew's complaints were largely a reiteration of those offered by Sewell (Andrew 1987: 9). This is striking given their different perspectives; Andrew as a scholar whose understanding of national security issues was politically orthodox enough that he was eventually recruited into MI5 to write its authorised history, and Sewell as someone willing to put his reputation on the line to repair the reputation of one of Britain's most famous traitors.

Their consensus is indicative of an oddly apolitical nature to the controversy. Whilst much has been written about the ‘faction’ debates of this time, often linked to the forced resignation of Alasdair Milne as Director-General at the end of the same January, *Blunt* is generally overlooked (Brandt 1993: 11; Paget 2011: 83; Seaton 2015: 266-272). Notably, the rows of 1986 largely centred on portrayals of the British establishment’s conduct of war, whether critical (*Mutineer* and *Tumbledown*) or positive but ‘suppressed’ (*Falklands Play*). It is certainly understandable that shifting responsibility for the defection from Philby to Blunt might offend close associates or those invested in intelligence history, but overall this is far less transformative of the event’s public interest value (except perhaps to make granting Blunt immunity from prosecution seem even more dubious). Ferdinand Mount seemed to perceive this distinction in another *Telegraph* article on 16 January which, prompted by the *Blunt* controversy, surveyed the genre of ‘faction’ as a whole. Whilst showing concern over the ‘distortions’ of *Mutineer* and various stage plays, he concluded that *Blunt* itself was essentially harmless since Chapman was not ‘trying to teach us anything in particular. He was merely leaning on the crutch of historical characters to entertain us’ (1987: 12).

Throughout this debate, almost no reference was made to *Blunt*’s origins in *One of Us*. In fact, this omission obscured a subtle political shift between Chapman’s two engagements with this topic. If the original play was setting out to ‘teach us anything in particular’, its perspective seems ultimately aligned with Rees’ enraged denunciation of Forster’s precept. As such, it ultimately rejects a romanticised image of the Cambridge spies forged according to these terms. Yet this is entirely removed from the equivalent scene in *Blunt*, which instead places the dramatic weight onto Blunt’s threats and manipulations. Chapman’s narrative was thus arguably shorn of its ‘message’ by the time it reached the screen, the fascination with the ‘fourth man’ having grown to overshadow the original dilemma.

Conclusion

Produced and broadcast a decade apart, these films offer substantially different portrayals of the Cambridge spies and their associates. *Philby, Burgess and Maclean* offers a more detached and ‘external’ perspective on the actions of its titular figures. This is the product of its origins in the public service-oriented drama-documentary tradition of Granada in the 1970s, which upheld a strong commitment to the values of journalism over drama. As a result it largely evaded the controversies that would erupt around later portrayals. Yet an evident fascination with the ambiguities surrounding the spies causes the façade to slip towards the end, giving Curteis scope to offer speculative glimpses of their motives and private feelings.

This trajectory is much developed in 1980s representations, which enhance the story in ways beyond simply adding the new ‘fourth man’. *Another Country* and *An Englishman Abroad* evade ‘serious’ history to look at seemingly minor events from either end of Burgess’ life, developing an interest in the speculative exploration of private emotions amongst the spies. With *Blunt*, this approach is reintegrated into the ‘serious’ history of the early First Cold War in what was explicitly positioned as more of a ‘dramatic hypothesis’ than a journalistic account. This was to the extent of taking key historical liberties to fit Chapman’s personal sense of underlying ‘truth’ to these characters. Broadcast in the midst of wider battles over the BBC’s

engagement with history, this generated far more controversy, although the grounds for this were surprisingly apolitical. This trajectory led to the more romanticised, melodramatic and speculative *Cambridge Spies* in 2003, which proved no less controversial, complete with another denunciation from Sewell (Willmetts and Moran 2013: 60).

Thus, across these representations we can trace a significant transition, as a security scandal initially viewed in relatively straightforward terms took a more postmodern turn. In the 1980s redemptive interpretations of the Cambridge spies would increasingly emerge, albeit often heavily qualified and problematised, as with Chapman's initial rejection of Forster's precept. Such portrayals were often fundamentally intertwined with contemporary queer politics and radical perspectives, with the Cambridge spies mobilised in the context of socio-political currents very different to those in which they had operated during their own time.

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