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Review of A SPY NAMED ORPHAN. THE ENGIMA OF DONALD MACLEAN
By Roland Philipps, The Bodley Head, £20.00, 440pp.

Alan Judd, February 2019

The so-called Ring of Five spies – Philby, Burgess, Blunt, Maclean and Cairncross, young men at Cambridge recruited in the 1930s by the Russian intelligence service to penetrate the British bureaucracy – have been so much written about that it is with a heavy heart that one picks up yet another book about them. It is, after all, over 80 years since they were recruited by the NKVD, as the Cold War KGB was then styled, and about 70 since they ceased spying. For how much longer will they feature almost as contemporary news? Will they make it past their own centenary?

Probably not, partly because such subjects have a natural half-life and partly because MI5 is gradually releasing its files of the period. Once their contents are known there will be nothing else to say. Most of it is known already, of course, although because MI6 does not release its files some writers will continue to speculate that the 'real' story is still withheld. Happily, that does not apply to Roland Philipps whose *A Spy Named Orphan, The Enigma of Donald Maclean* is a thoroughly researched account which makes sensible use of all available material and largely eschews speculation.

Donald Maclean was born in 1913 into a hard-working, non-conformist – the religion is important - Welsh/Scottish family which stressed the obligations of duty, honesty, patriotism and obedience to the dictates of conscience. His father was a respected Liberal MP. Young Donald learned to dissemble early, finding, as Philipps notes, that regular family prayers 'to a God one could not believe in would be a good working description for when he had formed his own views.' He was sent to public school, Gresham's, whose ethos reflected his family values reinforced with a disciplinary code that, in the words of W.H. Auden, another pupil, turned many boys into 'remote introverts, perpetuating those very faults of character which it was intended to cure.' His nascent left-wing views began at Gresham's but it was at Cambridge that they hardened into Communist ideology.

It requires an effort of historical imagination now to appreciate the appeal of Communism in the 1930s, especially to intellectuals. There was a widespread belief that capitalism was dying and that Communism was the inevitable future; most were ignorant of – though some ignored – the murderous coercion required to enforce it. Maclean's fairly open espousal of Communism at Cambridge was not uncommon. He was lucky, perhaps, that his intention to teach English in Russia after graduation never came to fruition. As it was, he was persuaded by Philby to work secretly for the Comintern, the Party organisation for spreading Communism worldwide. In fact, he was being recruited by the NKVD but wasn't aware of that at the time. Philby introduced him to his own recruiter, Arnold Deutsch, a gifted Austrian agent of the NKVD who was able to inspire idealistic bourgeois young men with a heady mixture of just cause, secret endeavour, sexual liberation and swimming with the tide of history. Maclean agreed to tone down his Communist sympathies and work secretly for the Party from within the British political establishment. A brilliant student, personable and attractive, he was a natural for the Foreign Office.

Foreign Office attitudes to security were not then what they later became. There was no vetting and in some senior staff there was positive resistance to the idea of security; secrecy was grubby, something for second-class people, and it was perfectly acceptable to take secret documents home. Bright young graduates who had made it joined a trusted elite for whom treachery was unthinkable. As the Foreign Office's head of security remarked, "It is inconceivable that any senior member could not be trusted." On the whole, they were right: the overwhelming majority of officials were trustworthy, even if sometimes negligent. But not all, and thus it was that between joining the Foreign Office in 1935 and the evacuation of the Paris embassy in 1940 Donald Maclean supplied his Russian case officers with 45 boxes, comprising 300 pages of secret documents. He was a very productive spy who, two years before it happened, warned the Russians of a likely German invasion.

One of his case officers was a woman, code-named Norma, with whom he had an affair. Although strictly against NKVD rules, this was permitted because she helped stabilise a valuable but nervously intense agent who was already drinking too much. As well as helping him emotionally, she gave him belief in what he was doing. Later he married Melinda, an American. It seems to have been an uneasy marriage in which Maclean was sometimes violently badly behaved, yet they seem to have loved each other, on and off. He soon confessed his espionage to her. She interpreted it as a way of making himself seem more important, and kept quiet.

He continued spying during the early post-war years, exploiting a series of high-profile posts to give the Russians advance knowledge of British and American negotiating positions, an accurate assessment of Western reactions to the Russian blockade of Berlin (which arguably persuaded Stalin to back down when confronted by the Berlin airlift) and details of the founding of NATO. Yet his career – his British one – was beginning to founder. Although his abilities were widely admired it was at last noticed that he was intolerant of criticism of the Soviet Union, was anti-American, was drinking heavily even by the standards of those times and was increasingly prone to violent verbal or even physical outbursts. These culminated in his trashing of the Cairo flat belonging to the secretary of the US ambassador, after which he was withdrawn to London. His behaviour was probably attributable to the strain of leading a double life but it was interpreted as a nervous breakdown, worsened by alcohol. A lower-ranking official would have been sacked but Maclean was given gardening leave and referred to a psychiatrist.

Meanwhile, clouds were gathering. The Venona transcripts – duplicated pages of Russian cipher books obtained by the US from the Finns – were gradually deciphered. They revealed extensive penetration of US and British establishments (e.g. the atom spies) including references to a Foreign Office agent who looked increasingly like Maclean. The intelligence exchange was handled in Washington by the MI6 representative, Kim Philby. When Philby realised that Maclean was coming under suspicion he knew that his own days were numbered, since he had recruited Maclean and he doubted – rightly – that the unstable Maclean would have withstood interrogation. Coincidentally, another Foreign Office spy whom he knew well – Guy Burgess – was serving in Washington and about to be sent back for abusive behaviour. Philby told Burgess to warn Maclean (the two had known each other at Cambridge) and urge him to defect to Russia.

As is well known, they both defected. That was never Philby's – nor the Russians' – intention, especially as Burgess's flight increased suspicions beginning to gather around Philby himself. Maclean died in Moscow in 1983, having been joined by Melinda, who had an affair with Philby after his defection and later returned to the US.

Questions asked about the Ring of Five often centre around their motives and how they got away with so much for so long. The former were the usual mixture of personal and political, their faith in Communism outlasting that of many of their contemporaries who were repulsed by the Soviet Union's alliance with the Nazis for the first two years of World War 11. By then the spies were too committed to the excitement of spying, to the thrill of feeling special and making a secret contribution; also, renunciation – as often with faith – would have felt like a renunciation of their own lives.

They got away with it partly through good luck – there were various occasions when each might easily have been discovered or given away – but largely because the lack of sustained counter-espionage effort directed against the Soviet Union. In 1936 the NKVD deployed about 24,500 staff against a range of targets, internal and external; MI5 comprised about 40 officers, plus ancillary staff, with Germany as their priority. For most of World War 11 they and MI6 were banned from spying against the Soviet Union (a fact the Russians rejected when it was reported to them by their own spies). There was also complacency, not only in the Foreign Office – "Soviet activity in England is non-existent" the head of MI5 asserted in 1938. Philipps has written a comprehensive and thoughtful account which tells us much about the period as well as the man. There'll probably be no need for another.

Alan Judd is a novelist and author of The Quest for C*, the authorised biography of the founder of MI6. His latest novel is* Shakespeare's Sword*.*