

The Purloined-Letter Syndrome

J O H N R U S S E L L

The Fourth Man, by Andrew Boyle, *New York: Dial Press, 1979. 504 pp. \$12.95.*

CALLED *The Climate of Treason* when it came out last year in England, Andrew Boyle's *The Fourth Man* owes its changed title to the recent notoriety it has effected. Really about the trio of spies from the British Establishment who fled to Russia—Philby, Maclean, and Burgess—it made enough stir about the “fourth man” who abetted these traitors to cause his identity to be revealed via parliamentary enquiry. Now stripped of his title, this turns out to have been Sir Anthony Blunt, advisor on art these many years to the Queen.

The Fourth Man stands as a good title anyhow, if taken allegorically (even though Blunt has but a small role in the text)—for it can represent the whole governing class of England, almost incarnated as one composite person, who stood aside and allowed brazen catch-me-if-you-dare antics to go on for years in front of its imperturbable face. The figures of Burgess and Maclean and Philby cried out for detection and the detectors simply would not oblige—becoming themselves the “fourth man” writ large, who took every trouble to endorse the traitors’ “safe conduct” and speed them on their way.

Of course the Foreign Office and the Secret Intelligence Service did not *want* the men they harbored to betray them, so that early on one is apt to feel “this can’t be true.” In other words, one may be led to suspect Mr. Boyle’s objectivity: he sounds so caustic. When Guy Burgess was recruited by the Communists in 1932 (right out of Cambridge, just like the others), Boyle reports that “the conversion of Burgess unleashed a wilful and sometimes malignant demon on the University.” Even a hundred pages in, the demonic note

keeps seeming to produce overstatements about Burgess and Maclean: “For Burgess had already introduced Maclean, the emancipated Calvinist-turned-Communist, to the sad pleasures of sodomy, the irrepressible Guy wryly boasting about it as if he had thereby earned the Victoria Cross for valour beyond the call of duty.” Why all these tags, it might be asked. Why the sneer-words “emancipated” and “irrepressible”; why the editorial “sad pleasures” (plain “sodomy” would have done); why the egregious reference to the Victoria Cross?

Yet in the last analysis, this language is accurate. Boyle has only barely begun to document his principals’ doings, and they will indeed attain heights of repulsiveness that warrant hyperboles like “beyond the call of duty.” Not by design, the extravagant *social* behavior of the three men turned out to be their “cover.” It was the classic case of Poe’s “purloined letter”—hide the evidence by displaying it flagrantly under the investigator’s nose. For instance, one of Burgess’ desks at the Foreign Office literally stank: he kept there “a half-gnawed clove of garlic” and he himself reeked along with the detritus on his desk. If he happened to have a tapeworm—and he did—he would let everyone know how he intended to blackmail an innocent restaurant on account of it. So the refrain develops, and what applies to Burgess comes to apply to all three: “The likelihood that any self-respecting foreign intelligence service would ever have stooped to recruit [them] was utterly preposterous.”

For this extraordinary reason the three spies remained unsuspected—it was inconceivable that anyone would have tapped them for work requiring, above all, continued discretion. Yet the collective “fourth man,” respectable Great Britain,

in both public and private guises, *did* employ them and condoned their wallowing in positions of trust. This amazing fact supplies a full excuse for Boyle's legitimately caustic tone. If no self-respecting spy network could have risked them, how could any self-respecting and above-board agency have countenanced such employees? The attack in this book, in the end, is not on a nation's leadership that has let itself be duped, but on one that has—in its permissiveness—lost all connection with self-respect.

Before the war, as the most reluctant Communist agent of the three (but still a Communist agent), Maclean had begun his career in the Foreign Office. He would ultimately reveal the most important secrets, connected with atomic experimentation and stockpiling, because he'd risen to First Secretary rank in the American Embassy (1944-1948). Burgess and Philby, also agents since 1932, were originally freelancers, but their "cover" was just as impeccable, Burgess working for BBC and Philby as a *Times* correspondent. Both were taken into the secret service in the war, and while from then on Burgess oscillated among mainly propagandistic jobs, Philby was elevated to the two most ironical SIS posts imaginable for a Communist spy: he was first in charge of anti-Soviet counter-espionage, and during the cold war sent to America as chief liaison man with our CIA and FBI. It was these agencies who had begun to smoke out the treachery of Maclean (by now transferred to Cairo), and so Philby was in a position to warn him and to depute Burgess to effect Maclean's escape in 1951—Burgess accompanying the latter to Moscow. Twelve years later Philby would make the same bolt, when evidence had finally been garnered—as though by smoke signals taking twelve years to reach Whitehall—that would condemn him.

But to return to dissoluteness: the first half of the book tends to dwell on the excesses of Burgess, a violent homosexual, and Philby, just as arrant a womanizer. (He efficiently put his first two wives aside, the second drugging herself to death after

being abandoned.) Maclean, who married but a single wife and sported the remnant of a conscience, is by contrast kept under wraps. But two hundred pages in we learn of a "stage managed orgy" of Burgess' which enabled him to get blackmail photographs of Maclean and other males participating in erotic acts. And it eventuates that Maclean thenceforward went on periodic homosexual drinking binges ("bouts of almost uncontrollable schizophrenia"), providing Burgess with leverage for later bullying whenever Maclean wavered as a Communist. "Maclean, the waverer," we are told, "had to be driven in-line under the lashing tongue of Burgess. The treatment worked."

The most miserable of the three—and it could be the most despicable—was this half-conscienced man Maclean. Anthony Powell, in his own recent memoir *Messengers of Day*, describes meeting him, and his underlying theme is no different from Andrew Boyle's. Powell was disturbed by "an emanation of shiftiness positively creepy" on their first meeting, which was borne out after the war. By then Maclean

had become quite a talked-of personality. His drunkenness and violence were referred to with awe as an example of what you could not only get away with, as a member of the country's diplomatic corps, but actually turn to good account in augmenting your reputation as a rising man. I can vouch for the fact that Maclean broke a colleague's leg...[so does Boyle vouch for it, giving chapter and verse on this ugly matter from which Maclean escaped unscathed on his last mission in Egypt].

Powell also met the young Burgess, "well known in London as a notorious scallywag, to whom no wholly baked person, among those set in authority, would ever have dreamt of entrusting the smallest responsibility...."

Does there seem to have been a death-wish among constituted English authorities, when to these men's proclivities there had to be added their undisguised Communist sympathies that ac-

accompanied them throughout their careers? Men sick of their country and demonstrably sick as well? Of their ends there is little to say. Burgess dying, supposedly nostalgic for England, evokes about as much sympathy as Kim Philby abandoned by his third wife, who fled back to the free world after she discovered that Kim was cuckolding his comrade David Maclean in Moscow. That cuckolding presumably still goes on. Burgess might have found a way to take pictures of it had he not died. Meanwhile, one of the extra signs of intelligence in *The Fourth Man*, congruent with its acerbic tone, is the fact that it is not illustrated. One can't conceive of a reader wishing to know what at any point in their careers these chameleons would have photographed up as. Presumably an editorial decision was made not to illustrate Boyle's text, and if so it was right. Graphic erasure suits them.