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Donald Maclean, a Traitor From the Upper Classes

By WOLFGANG SAXON

Donald Duart Maclean was a principal actor in Britain's most sensational and longest-running espionage drama.

He fled to Moscow when British counterintelligence caught on to his duplicity, becoming a Soviet Government official under the alias of Mark Petrovich Frazer. He was 69 years old.

He had been suffering from cancer and pneumonia and had been ill for some time, apparently with prostate trouble.

The spy scandal involving Establishment figures like Mr. Maclean built for nearly three decades. It started furtively in 1951 when Mr. Maclean, a trusted Foreign Office official of high rank, and Guy Burgess, a discredited diplomat, vanished from Britain. Their espionage work seriously damaged Western interests in World War II and at the height of the cold war.

The case riveted the public as a taciturn British Government doled out scant facts under persistent questioning. It led to charges that the Establishment, taking refuge in official-secrets statutes, was bent on taking care of its own.

Quest for the 'Third Man'

But the likelihood that Mr. Maclean and Mr. Burgess had been tipped off by a fellow insider led to a quest for the "third man." This ended with the equally abrupt flight in 1963 of H. A. R. (Kim) Philby, a British journalist and double-dealing former counterespionage agent for the Foreign Office who joined the two in Moscow.

The loudest outcry in Parliament, however, did not come until 1979. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, hard-pressed by the publication of a book on the spy scandal, confirmed the identity of a "fourth man." He turned out to be a member of Queen Elizabeth's entourage, Anthony Blunt, an art historian and former top-ranking official in the security services.

All the known accomplices in the Maclean-Burgess scandal had things in common beyond their ruling-class background and intelligence. One bond was Cambridge University, where Mr. Maclean, Mr. Burgess and Mr. Philby were students in the 1930's and Mr. Blunt was a don.

It was a decade, as the historian A. J. P. Taylor noted, "with mass unemployment at the beginning and the menace of fascism at the end." Industrial Britain was a sea of misery for the working class, the Spanish Civil War loomed on the horizon, and many of the well-to-do, impressionable young men in college saw the only answer in Marxism and its self-anointed workers' paradise, the Soviet Union.

A Scholarship to Cambridge

Mr. Maclean was the son of Sir Donald Maclean, a universally respected Member of Parliament and Liberal Party leader who, at his death in 1932, was a Cabinet minister in Ramsay MacDonald's Government. The death left his wife, Lady Gwendolyn Margaret Maclean, with little financial resources. Still, the son had won a scholarship the year before to Trinity College, Cambridge, and was able to finish his studies with the help of friends.

On graduation in 1935, Mr. Maclean entered the Foreign Office. He spent three years in Whitehall before joining the embassy in Paris as third secretary, the start of what appeared to be a brilliant career.

In Paris, he toured West Bank spots and, at the Flore cafe, met an American student, Melinda Marling. They married during the German advance on the French capital and escaped to London, where Mr. Maclean returned to the Foreign Office.

In a break for himself and Soviet espionage, Mr. Maclean was assigned to Washington in 1944 as acting first secretary, acting head of chancery and secretary of the Combined Policy Committee on Atomic Development.

Tall, handsome and sandy-haired, with an attractive wife and conversational charm, Mr. Maclean seemed the prototypical diplomat. But the stress of a double life began to show. He fell to drinking heavily and, when drunk, often became physically violent and evidenced repressed homosexuality.

At the time, Guy Burgess moved from the BBC to the Foreign Office in London before being transferred to the embassy in Washington in 1950.

Mr. Maclean was posted to Cairo in 1948, where his drinking and fits of violence became so bad that he was recalled to London two years later for psychiatric treatment. He was back at work after six months, seemingly well, but soon again turned to the bottle.

The Two Vanish

By 1951 Mr. Burgess had been ordered back from Washington because of his own indiscretions. Mr. Maclean headed the American Department in the Foreign Office. Hidden in the dark-room of a pharmacy near his home in suburban Kent, he developed microfilm of the documents he passed on to the Soviet Union.

The British had found only in 1949 that their diplomatic secrets were leaking eastward. Investigators whittled down the number of suspects until they came up with one: Donald Maclean. On the very day they intended to question him, he was gone.

The night of May 25, 1951, his 38th birthday, Mr. Maclean and his wife were joined at their home by Mr. Burgess. After dinner, the two men drove to Southampton, boarded a steamer to St. Malo, took a taxi to Rennes, then probably a plane to Paris, and vanished.

The case of the missing diplomats grew into one of the most baffling mysteries in British history and led to one of the biggest manhunts by all the Western security services. With Conservative and Labor Governments sharing the embarrassment, Downing Street conceded the results, including the extent of the damage, grudgingly and piecemeal when there was no other choice.

Such an occasion arose, for example, from the tales told by a knowledgeable Soviet agent, Vladimir Petrov, who defected in Australia in 1955. His information prompted the first coherent, though far from complete, account of what the British Government still portrayed simply as the Maclean-Burgess affair.

Third Man Heads East

Mr. Maclean and Mr. Burgess surfaced in Moscow in 1956, protesting they were not spies and had defected for purely ideological reasons. Mr. Burgess died in Moscow in 1963, the year Mr. Philby, about to be marked as the "third man," also headed for the Soviet Union.

An echo of the affair is heard in a newly published book, "After Long Silence," by Michael Straight, an American who was also recruited by Mr. Blunt while at Cambridge University. Mr. Straight, who abandoned his Communist affiliations, writes of meeting Mr. Burgess in Washington in 1951 before his flight and warning him, "If you're aren't out of the Government within a month from now, I swear to you, I'll turn you in."

Mr. Maclean, who had been joined in Moscow by his wife and their three children, went to work for the Soviet Foreign Ministry as an editor of English texts.

Living comfortably in an apartment building for Soviet officials and intellectuals near the Moscow River, Mr. Maclean preserved his English upper-class appearance by importing his clothes from London. His wife left him for Mr. Philby after the latter turned up in Moscow, but she reportedly made up with Mr. Maclean, returned to the United States for a long visit with her ailing mother in 1976 and remained there.

At his death, Mrs. Maclean was believed to be living in New York along with their daughter, Melinda, and a granddaughter. Their two sons, Fergus and Donald, were believed to be living in England.