

TO CATCH A SPY

How the Spycatcher Affair Brought MI5 in from the Cold

Tim Tate

London: Icon, h/b, £25

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The publisher sent me a pre-publication proof copy of this on spec and my initial reaction was: Is there really any need to go over this old ground again? Turns out, there is indeed. It's not that distance – almost 40 years! – has lent enchantment. It's more that when Peter Wright's book *Spycatcher* was published, I was so focused on the sections which supported Colin Wallace's story of secret state machinations against the Wilson government, I barely noticed Wright's Soviet-spies-in-MI5 story which has been so thoroughly analysed, retold and updated by Tate. And what a story it is.

To recap briefly: Peter Wright was an MI5 officer who believed that within MI5 there was a Soviet 'mole' in a very senior position. He believed this because MI5's ops against their Soviet opponents always went wrong. (That MI5 just weren't very good at it, or the Soviets were very good at detecting ops against them, does not seem to have been considered.) Wright had been appointed to a committee which investigated the putative Soviet 'moles' and he came to believe that the 'mole' was MI5 chief Roger Hollis. He did his best to get the system to deal with this, was rebuffed and retired to Australia. There he continued trying to get serious attention paid to his investigations into the 'mole' – or 'moles' – in the Security Service. Eventually he was steered towards the *Daily Express* journalist Chapman Pincher with whom he produced the book *Their Trade is Treachery* in 1981. Wright might not have done this had the British state not messed-up his pension, refusing to consider the years he spent in service of the state before joining MI5, and thus condemning him to (relative) poverty in old age.

As well as believing that Hollis was a Soviet mole, like James Angleton of the CIA, Wright believed that Harold Wilson was a Soviet agent. They believed this because a Soviet defector Golitsyn suggested that he was. There is a puzzle here, for Tate reminds us that Harold Macmillan had Downing Street. bugged and 'For the next 14 years, the Security Service were able to listen to

all decisions taken by prime ministers, their senior ministers and staff.’ (p. 89) This being so, why did the belief that Wilson was a Soviet mole persist in some sections of MI5? Is it simply that Wright (and others) were not privy to the recordings?

Initially Tate takes the reader on a journey through the post-WW2 history of Soviet espionage in the UK: Philby, Burgess and Maclean, Blunt etc. This is the necessary background to Peter Wright’s obsessive hunt for Soviet ‘moles’. Tate then steers us through two big events. The first is the preamble to and consequences of the publication of Pincher’s *Their Trade is Treachery*. It gets pretty complicated here because another senior retired MI5 officer, Arthur Martin, and James Angleton, former head of CIA counter-intelligence, were also talking to people — notably Jonathan Aitken MP — about Soviet moles in MI5. At this point the British state, in the shape of Cabinet Secretary and chief liaison with the secret services for Prime Minister Thatcher, Sir Robert Armstrong, looked for a way to take the sting out of this murky tale. They turned to Chapman Pincher, the *Daily Express* journalist who was the British state’s favourite outlet for leaks and smears. This contact is omitted from Pincher’s account in his memoir.¹ In his version, putting him together with Wright, and then getting the book published, was done by Victor Rothschild whose motive in so doing remains unclear. He was rich and certainly not on the same paranoid page as Wright and others, including PM Thatcher.²

So a version of Wright’s Soviet penetration story was written up and published by Pincher. It was here that things went wrong. The Armstrong plan was that Pincher would write a version which discussed the issue of Soviet ‘moles’ but reported that the issue had been investigated and Hollis was innocent. Alas Pincher told some of it as Wright had wanted, suggested Hollis was indeed the ‘mole’ and what Tate calls ‘an extraordinary plot by MI5 and the Thatcher administration’ (p. 3) back-fired spectacularly. Wright’s version, naming Hollis, got published by Pincher, creating enormous media interest. It is one of the great fuck-ups in the history of the British state.

And things got worse, as Tate recounts in the second half of his book. Learning nothing from the fiasco in the UK over *Their Trade is Treachery*, the British state – headed and fronted by Sir Robert Armstrong – tried to suppress the publication in Australia of Wright’s version of the tale, *Spycatcher*. Tate has fun reporting in detail the ordeal Sir Robert Armstrong endured in court in Australia as he tried to remember his script and recount it without quite lying

¹ Chapman Pincher, *Dangerous to Know* (London: Biteback, 2014)

² Pincher guesses that he was being subtly blackmailed by Peter Wright who had some dirt on Rothschild’s early years. Pincher (see note 1) pp. 311/2.

on oath.

Methodically and forensically, [Malcolm] Turnbull dismantled the government's arguments for silencing Wright, insisting that it had conspired with Rothschild to leak the Hollis scandal safely via Pincher, and then sought to cover up its part in midwifing *Their Trade is Treachery* — the prequel to *Spycatcher* — via the Cabinet Secretary's economies with the truth and his attempt to pin the blame on Havers.' [Sir Michael Havers, the then Attorney General.] (p. 271)

The *Spycatcher* charade, climaxing in Armstrong's public humiliation in Australia, was apparently done in the hope that opposition politicians in the UK would not grasp that Mrs Thatcher's original statement to the Commons on the Hollis matter in March 1981 was a lie. In those days lying to the Commons might have been a resigning issue. But since the leading Labour politicians of the time were afraid to go near any security issues, the Thatcher-Armstrong strategy wasn't necessary.

There is a wonderful German word, *verschlimmbesserung*, which means making things worse while trying to make them better. Those clever Oxbridge people at the top of the British state provided a wonderful illustration of the notion: trying to keep a political secret, they blew a huge hole in the Official Secrets Act, through which a vast literature on the British intelligence and security services has since poured.

This is nicely but unobtrusively written, and well documented. I'm grateful to Mr Tate for reminding us of this important and occasionally comic episode.³

³ Check him out at <<https://timtate.co.uk/>>.