Scholar, gentleman, prig, spy

Miranda Carter's dispassionate life of Anthony Blunt shows how effortlessly he slipped between roles

Anthony Blunt
Miranda Carter
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When I was at school, Sir Anthony Blunt was regarded as the very model of the eminent old Marlburian: the son of the chaplain to the British Embassy in Paris, he had had an exemplary school career, winning a scholarship in mathematics to Trinity College, Cambridge, before going on to become director of the Courtauld Institute, surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, a knight of the realm, and a great expert on French art of the seventeenth century, particularly Poussin.

But even then, long before Blunt was unmasked as a spy, there were dissenting voices. Historian John Edward Bowle, who had been at the school the year above Blunt, regarded him as an intellectual prig, too preoccupied with the realm of ideas. He thought Blunt had too much ink in his veins and clearly differentiated between his own generation at Marlborough and Oxford - inclined towards hedonism - and Blunt, who belonged to a world of rather prissy, cold-blooded, academic puritanism.

Blunt's first book, Artistic Theory in Italy, 1450-1600, published on the outbreak of the Second World War, and with its enthusiastic dedication to his friend Guy Burgess, was easy to admire for its analysis of the ideas of the principal writers on art in Renaissance Italy, but lacked any warmth of engagement with the art itself and is perhaps too clearly the result of time spent in the stacks of the library of the Warburg Institute, rather than in Italy. Rebecca West was contemptuous of Blunt, having known him in the 1930s, and regarded him then as intellectually lightweight, a known Communist, always sporting a red tie and frequently drunk.

In November 1979 he was unmasked as a traitor. It is hard now to reconstruct the amount of debate that this caused in the scholarly world and in the newspapers and I am not sure that Miranda Carter, in her generally well researched biography, quite does justice to it. In particular, she alludes to, but does not quote from, a letter to the Times from former pupils, drafted by Giles Waterfield, the then director of the Dulwich Picture Gallery, and Mark Jones, now Director of the V & A whose final sentence was: 'For us he remains a scholar and a gentleman.'

This was the intellectual and moral issue that Blunt's exposure raised in its most extreme form: should his eminence and undoubted contribution to scholarship exculpate him from any blame for having traded secrets to the Russians? Most art historians were inclined towards lenience.

Now that Blunt is long dead, remembered at least as much as a spy as an art historian, his own testament locked away in the British Library, Carter has taken the opportunity to write a biography that provides a dispassionate account of his life.

As a young don, Blunt was converted from the idea of art for art's sake as espoused by his friends in Bloomsbury to an intellectual form of Marxism, which much influenced his critical writings in the Spectator. The issue as to what made him work for the NKVD (later the KGB) is necessarily complicated. Some of it was based on his generation's intense dislike for the way of life of the orthodox upper class, its unthinking patriotism.

Blunt had always been more cosmopolitan than his contemporaries, having been brought up in France, and seems to have appreciated the contact that Marxism gave him with European refugees. Above all, the cell established by Kim Philby in Cambridge in the mid-1930s appealed to his desire to belong to the same club as his homosexual friends.

How much spying did Blunt actually do? On the evidence of this book, not much until the war. He was recruited to recruit others and signed up a number of undergraduates with left-wing sympathiesas agents, including Michael Straight and Leo Long. He probably did not think he was doing anything wrong.In the late 1930s he lost contact with Moscow and concentrated on his teaching at the Courtauld Institute, his editorial work for the Warburg Institute, and his work on Poussin and Italian art theory.

In the war he was recruited to MI5, which was desperate to abolish its old-fashioned and amateur character by the recruitment of academics - Blunt was well qualified, if only as a linguist. It was then

that he was again approached by Moscow to hand over secrets, which he did conscientiously, but without much apparent enthusiasm.

Later in life, when asked why he did it, he would describe it as being like a game of cowboys and indians, suggesting a high degree of intellectual and emotional detachment from the moral consequences of his actions. It is always possible that he was subject to blackmail. Ironically, his contact in the Kremlin was suspicious of the amount of material he was passing over, suspected him of being a double agent, and, much later, he was described by a KGB officer (rather accurately) as 'ideological shit'.

After the war, he slipped effortlessly into all the highest places in the art establishment, with a flat on the top floor of the Courtauld Institute and a friendship with the Queen, a distant cousin. There is no evidence that he ever felt the faintest twinge of guilt - rather the contrary - but he did fuss endlessly that he might be found out.

It is possible that he let his activities be known to the authorities shortly after the war. He was certainly on friendly terms with Sir Dick White, the Head of MI5 and MI6, in the 1960s, and they used to spend Christmas together with Victor Rothschild in Rothschild's house in Cambridge. I like to imagine the three of them, the purple of the British establishment, one of them a former spy, tucking into the turkey.

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