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Spy Story

Life and art so imitate each other in British spy stories that the borders between fact and fiction are easily penetrated. Nowhere else is treason so developed an art form, nor the spy story so intellectualized.

None of which helps one fathom what the public has learned that is useful from the revelations in the new book by the veteran Fleet Street security reporter, Chapman Pincher.

That Sir Roger Hollis, head of MI-5, the counter-intelligence agency, was suspected of being a Soviet agent. That Charles Howard (Dick) Ellis, a top man in intelligence, was thought to have served Nazi and Soviet masters. That Tom Driberg, the homosexual Labor Member of Parliament, rattled on his colleagues' affairs to KGB and MI-5 alike. That Bernard Floud, a Labor M.P., killed himself on being confronted with accusations of having recruited spies for the Russians.

What have these men in common? Members of "the establishment," is the answer from anyone schooled in these matters. Yes, of course, but one thing more: *Each of them, you see, is dead.* Ergo, dead men are suspect, or, dead men don't sue.

The statement to Parliament by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher confirms that Sir Roger Hollis was suspected and somewhat less than conclusively exonerated. That's all Mr. Pincher said, if less than he implied. Certainly the notion is strengthened—confirmed would be too strong a word—that the spy ring went further than Anthony Blunt, who was unmasked

secretly in 1964 and publicly in 1979.

A thoughtful American would wonder at possible American dimensions to all this. After all, American and English establishments have always intertwined. The most significant new public information, as it happens, is on this point. It comes from Robert A. Erlandson's telephone interview with Michael Whitney Straight in Thursday's *Sun*.

Mr. Straight, scion of a wealthy American family, told how he was recruited while a student at Cambridge in the Thirties into the Communist spy ring of Messrs. Blunt and Burgess. It was an emotional commitment, apparently, after his best friend died in the Spanish Civil War. Mr. Straight was hooked; he intimated to Mr. Erlandson, so he gave lousy information until he was dropped, and he kept his career away from state secrets, albeit in liberal opinion-making. It was he, he said, who provided the tip in 1963 that unmasked Blunt, after President Kennedy had invited him to head the National Endowment for the Arts.

What Mr. Straight told Mr. Erlandson brings this story closer to Americans. Any temptation to snicker at British discomfort has vanished. We don't know how much further this thing goes in British society, or American. That is the beauty of it for a novelist, the dismal horror of it for a citizen. More will come out before everyone concerned has died, but the one thing we can never ever know is whether the outer limits of conspiracy have been exposed.