

“Cunning Passages, Contrived Corridors”: Wandering in the Angletonian Wilderness

David Robarge

Angleton was CIA's answer to the Delphic Oracle: seldom seen but with an awesome reputation nurtured over the years by word of mouth and intermediaries padding out of his office with pronouncements which we seldom professed to understand fully but accepted on faith anyway.

—David Atlee Phillips¹

There's no doubt you are easily the most interesting and fascinating figure the intelligence world has produced, and a living legend.

—Clair Booth Luce²

Mr. A. is an institution.

—William Colby³



Whatever genre they work in—history, journalism, literature, or film—observers of the intelligence scene find James Angleton endlessly fascinating.⁴ The longtime head of counterintelligence (CI) at the Central Intelligence Agency has been the subject, in whole or substantial part, of dozens of books, articles, and films, including five in the past three years. Beyond the vicarious appeal of looking at the shadowy world of moles, double agents, traitors, and deceptions, the enduring interest in Angleton is understandable, for he was one of the most influential and divisive intelligence officers in US history. He shaped CIA counterintelligence for better or worse for 20 years from 1954 to 1974—nearly half of the

¹ David Phillips, *The Night Watch* (New York: Atheneum, 1977), 189.

² Tom Mangold, *Cold Warrior: James Jesus Angleton: The CIA's Master Spy Hunter* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 30.

³ *Ibid.*, 307. At the time Colby was head of CIA's Directorate of Operations (DO).

⁴ The title of this article is derived from one of Angleton's favorite poems, “Gerontion” by T.S. Eliot: “After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think Now/History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors/ And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions/Guides us by vanities. Think now.” Angleton took his signature phrase “wilderness of mirrors” from this poem.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

Agency's Cold War existence—and his eccentricities and excesses have been widely portrayed as paradigmatic of how *not* to conduct counterintelligence.

Angleton's career ended abruptly amid controversy over damaging disclosures about Agency domestic operations that forever changed the place of intelligence in the American political system. Angleton's real and perceived legacy still influences counterintelligence practices in the US government and public perceptions of CIA.

Yet the lore about Angleton is more familiar than his ideas, accomplishments, and true shortcomings because much of the publicly available information about him is highly partisan, generated by a range of intelligence veterans, scholars, journalists, and fiction and film writers who have maligned or embellished his career to the point that much of what is supposedly known of him is a mix of fact and fiction.

Delving into the Angletonian library is a Rashomon-like experience. As one scholar of Angleton has written with only mild exaggeration, "One could ask a hundred people about [him] and receive a hundred lightly shaded different replies that ranged from utter denunciation to unadulterated hero worship. That the positions could occupy these extremes spoke of the significance and the ambiguity of the role he had played."⁵

What do we know, and what do we think we know, about perhaps the Agency's most compelling and caricatured figure, and what else can we reliably say until still unrevealed information about him becomes available?

Biographical Backdrop

Before venturing into an analysis of how others have depicted Angleton, the salient facts of his biography should be presented.⁶ Angleton was born in Boise, Idaho, in 1917 and grew up mostly in Italy, where his father owned the National Cash Register subsidiary. He attended an English preparatory school before entering Yale in 1937. He majored in English Literature and edited a poetry review called *Furioso* that published the works of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and others. He entered Harvard Law School and then joined the Army in 1943.

Angleton was recruited into the Office of Strategic Services and first worked in the super-secret X-2 counterintelligence branch in London. It was here that Angleton learned to be so hyperconscious about security. X-2 was the only OSS component cleared to receive raw ULTRA material, intercepted German military communications sent via the Enigma encryption machine. He also knew about the DOUBLE CROSS and FORTITUDE deception operations that were paving

⁵ Robin W. Winks, *Cloak and Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939–1961* (New York: William Morrow, 1987), 437.

⁶ One persistent misunderstanding about Angleton to dispense with straight away involves his middle name, Jesus. Practically everyone who writes or talks about Angleton uses it—to what end is unclear—but he never did, and as an Anglophile, he avoided calling attention to that prominent reminder of his half-Mexican parentage. He always signed documents just with "James Angleton," in a crabbed, slightly shaky script that would fascinate graphologists.

the way for the Normandy invasion. The success of these operations was one reason for his later belief in Soviet “strategic deception.”

Angleton next served in the X-2 unit in Rome, where he was codenamed ARTIFICE.⁷ He was an innovative field operative and rose to be chief of all X-2 operations in Italy by the end of the war. When the OSS disbanded in 1945, Angleton stayed in Italy to run operations for the successor organizations to OSS. After he moved into CIA's espionage and counterintelligence component in 1947, he became the Agency's liaison to Western counterpart services. In 1954, he became the head of the new Counterintelligence Staff. He would remain in that job for the rest of his career.

Separating Fable and Fact

From this biography, Angleton's portrayals have drawn frequently contradictory and unverifiable information and assertions that almost seem too great for one person to embody. Angleton, some of them say, was a paranoid who effectively shut down Agency operations against the Soviet Union for years during his Ahab-like quest for the mole in CIA. He received copies of all operational cables so he could veto recruitments and squelch reports from sources he delusively thought were bad. He had a “no knock” privilege to enter the DCI's office unannounced any time he pleased. He ordered the incarceration and hostile interrogation of KGB defector Yuri Nosenko. And he had a bevy of nicknames that included “Mother,” “Virginia Slim,” “Skinny Jim,” “the Gray Ghost,” “the Black Knight,” “the Fisherman,” and “Scarecrow.” None of these claims is completely true or demonstrable.⁸

What is known for sure about Angleton is more complicated and captivating. He looked like a character in a spy novel and had unconventional work habits and mannerisms. A magazine profile of him aptly stated that “If John le Carré and Graham Greene had collaborated on a superspy, the result might have been James Jesus Angleton.”⁹

Angleton possessed a brilliant intellect and extensive knowledge of current and historical Soviet operations, although his sometimes convoluted descriptions of case histories affected people differently. While his colleague William Hood said that he “would sometimes add a full dimension” to an operational discussion, former DCI James Schlesinger recalled that listening to him was “like looking at an Impressionist painting.”¹⁰ Angleton was fervently anti-communist, continually discoursing on “the nature of the [Soviet] threat,” and ardently supported Israel; his control of that country's account at CIA, an administrative anomaly,

⁷ See Timothy J. Naftali, “ARTIFICE: James Angleton and X-2 Operations in Italy,” in *The Secrets War: The Office of Strategic Services in World War II*, ed. George C. Chalou (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1992), 218–45.

⁸ The only nickname that others are reliably said to have used for Angleton was “the Cadaver,” by some men in his unit just after World War II ended, referring to his gaunt appearance. Winks, “Artifice” 372.

⁹ David C. Martin, *Wilderness of Mirrors* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 216.

¹⁰ Working Group on Intelligence Reform, *Myths Surrounding James Angleton* (Washington, DC: Consortium for the Study of Intelligence, 1994), 15; Mangold, 153.

was one of the foundations of his influence. The two qualities were interrelated operationally, as he saw Israel as a bastion against the Soviet Union.

Secretive and suspicious, Angleton had a compulsive approach to anything he took on—whether hunting spies, raising orchids, or catching trout—and surrounded himself and his staff with an aura of mystery, hinting at dark secrets and intrigues too sensitive to share. Some of that mystique carried over from his OSS days, and some of it he cultivated as a tactic to advance his interests at CIA. He ran vest pocket operations and compiled extensive files that he kept out of the regular Agency records system. He believed the values of Western democracies left them vulnerable to intelligence attack—especially deception—and so he sat on some actionable information if he thought it was unverifiable or counterfeit.

Angleton often was arrogant, tactless, dismissive, and even threatening toward professional colleagues who disagreed with him. Outside the bounds of Agency business, which for him were expansive and caused his family life to suffer, Angleton could be charming and had many close and loyal friends and a wide assortment of interests. One way or another, he always left a lasting impression on those who met him.

An even-handed assessment of Angleton's career would discern two distinct phases to it, although most of his detractors concentrate on the second. From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, he and his staff provided a useful voice of caution in an Agency seized with piercing the Iron Curtain to learn about Soviet intentions and capabilities. For roughly the next 10 years, distracted by unsubstantiated theories of Soviet "strategic deception," Angleton and his staff embarked on counterproductive and sometimes harmful efforts to find moles and prove Moscow's malevolent designs.

What makes Angleton such a conundrum for the historian and biographer is that he was losing his sense of proportion and his ability to live with uncertainty right around the time, 1959–63, when it became startlingly evident—agents compromised, operations blown, spies uncovered—that something was seriously amiss with Western intelligence and more aggressive CI and security were needed.¹¹ Given the Soviets' record of success at penetration and deception operations going back to the 1920s, and with no current evidence to the contrary, Angleton was justified in presuming CIA also was victimized. However, there was no other source, human or technical, that he could use to guide him on the molehunt—only his favored source, KGB defector Anatoli Golitsyn, and their symbiotic relationship soon became professionally unbalanced as the manipulative and self-promoting defector's allegations of international treachery grew more fantastical.

Overall, Angleton's negatives outweighed his positives. First, among the latter: While he was running CIA counterintelligence, there were no known Soviet penetrations of the Agency besides "Sasha" (the extent to which Angleton deserves credit for that is arguable). Information from, or assistance by, him and the CI

¹¹ The defection to the Soviet Union of Angleton's erstwhile friend, MI6 officer "Kim" Philby, in 1963 confirmed years of suspicion that he was a KGB agent and certainly reinforced Angleton's sense that Western intelligence had been pervasively betrayed to Moscow.

Staff helped uncover, or prepared the way for later discovery of, Soviet espionage operations in several Western countries. He maintained good relations with the FBI at the working level, helping mitigate longstanding interagency hostility fostered mostly by J. Edgar Hoover. And he contributed to the establishment of counterintelligence as an independent discipline of the intelligence profession with resources and influence at CIA.

The negatives preponderate, however. By fixating on the Soviets, Angleton largely ignored the threat that other hostile services posed—notably the East Germans, Czechs, Chinese, and Cubans. His operational officers were so deeply involved with defensive CI (molehunting) that they did not contribute nearly enough to offensive (counterespionage) operations. He became far too dependent on Golitsyn and consequently mishandled some cases (although in two of them, in Norway and Canada, the real spies were found eventually). He held to his disinformation-based interpretations of certain world events—the Sino-Soviet split, Tito's estrangement from Moscow—long after they were discredited. His skill at bureaucratic infighting belied his administrative sloppiness. Lastly, he grew too isolated later in his career, and his security consciousness became self-consuming and stultifying for his staff.

Even without the sensational *New York Times* front-page story by Seymour Hersh in December 1974 about CIA domestic operations that prompted Angleton's dismissal, it was more than time for him to go, as even his longtime defender Richard Helms came to admit.¹² Many people will remember Angleton only for two of his last publicized appearances: drunk, disheveled, and disoriented when a media mob confronted him at his home the morning after he was fired; and cagey, elusive, and defiant while testifying before the Church Committee several months later.¹³ Very quickly after he left Langley, an anti-Angleton orthodoxy set in at the Agency and coincided with the intelligence scandals of the mid-1970s and a public backlash against CIA that profoundly influenced subsequent interpretations of Angleton.

The "Real" Angleton

Historians and journalists have produced what seems in overview to be a workable bibliography on Angleton,¹⁴ but it has gaps in coverage and flaws in scholarship and lacks focus. This nonfiction corpus began appearing after Angleton's

¹² Seymour Hersh, "Huge CIA Operation Reported in US Against Antiwar Forces, Other Dissidents in Nixon Years," *New York Times*, 22 December 1974: A1; Richard Helms with William Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (New York: Random House, 2003), 284.

¹³ It was in the latter circumstance that Angleton confirmed that in a deposition he had asserted "It is inconceivable that a secret intelligence arm of the government has to comply with all the overt orders of the government," and then backpedaled from it, saying, "If it is accurate, it should not have been said...I had been imprudent in making those remarks...I withdraw that statement...the entire speculation should not have been engaged in." *Hearings before the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities of the United States Senate, 94th Congress, First Session, Volume 2, Huston Plan* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976), 72, 73.

¹⁴ This writer's previous foray into the subject was "Moles, Defectors, and Deceptions: James Angleton and CIA Counterintelligence," *Journal of Intelligence History* 3:2 (Winter 2003): 21–49, posted on cia.gov, along with this issue, with the journal's permission.

high-profile firing generated extensive interest in the mysteries of counterintelligence, and pro- and anti-Angleton voices made themselves heard. Because most of the documentation for the cases Angleton worked on remains classified, these accounts rely heavily on interviews—many of them unattributed—and unsourced information from former US intelligence officers who generally agree with the authors' perspectives. There are at least several dozen nonfiction works that deal with Angleton in some detail, so only those that are about him principally or exclusively will be described here.¹⁵

Edward Jay Epstein, *Legend and Deception*.¹⁶

Epstein, a journalist and currently a columnist for *Slate*, became Angleton's most prolific ally in his post-dismissal, behind-the-scenes campaign for vindication. In *Legend*, Epstein first publicized the clashes inside CIA over the bonafides of Yuri Nosenko and drew attention to the deception and penetration theories of Angleton and his prize source, Anatoli Golitsyn. Angleton and like-minded former Agency and FBI officers provided Epstein with much unsourced, still-classified information for *Legend*. He acknowledged their assistance in *Deception*, published two years after Angleton died in 1987. In later articles, Epstein continued with most of the same apologetic themes but did become more skeptical of the Angleton-Golitsyn interpretation of Soviet foreign policy. Most recently, he noted that the observation of Aldrich Ames's KGB handler that Angleton's suspicions about a mole inside CIA "has the exquisite irony of a stalker following his victim in order to tell him he is not being followed."

David C. Martin, *Wilderness of Mirrors*.¹⁷

Martin has been a national security reporter for CBS News since 1993 and had covered intelligence affairs for the Associated Press and *Newsweek* when this seminal book was published nearly 30 years ago. Despite its age, *Wilderness of Mirrors* remains the most balanced treatment of Angleton and CIA counterintelligence. It helped deflate the emerging Angleton mythology and established a more objective frame of reference within which to evaluate the merits of the dueling defectors Golitsyn and Nosenko. The book is not solely about Angleton, however—it examines in parallel, and sometimes disjointedly, CIA covert actions against Castro and the career of FBI agent and CIA officer William Harvey—and it lacks sourcing—there are no footnotes or bibliography, and Martin does not identify where he got much of his specific information. Angleton initially cooperated with Martin but cut off contact when he learned that the author also was in touch with some of his critics. One of them was Clare Petty, an ex-CI Staff officer who had come to believe that Angleton was either a fraud or a KGB asset.

¹⁵ Turn to the end of this article for a list of other books, articles, and a Web site for materials on Angleton that are worth noting for their facts and often starkly varying perspectives.

¹⁶ Edward Jay Epstein, *Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978) and *Deception: The Invisible War Between the KGB and the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989). See also Epstein's articles "The War Within the CIA," *Commentary*, August 1978; "Who Killed the CIA?," *ibid.*, October 1985; "Was Angleton Right?," *Wall Street Journal*, 30 December 2004; and "Through the Looking Glass" (undated), all posted on his Web site, www.edwardjayepstein.com. The quote that follows comes from the *Wall Street Journal* piece.

¹⁷ New York: Harper and Row, 1980. The 2003 paperback reprint adds the overwrought subtitle *Intrigue, Deception, and the Secrets That Destroyed Two of the Cold War's Most Important Agents*.

Yuri Nosenko, *KGB*.¹⁸

An unusual early entrant into the nonfiction (with an asterisk) category was a made-for-television movie that appeared on BBC-TV in the United Kingdom and HBO in the United States in 1986. It tells the Nosenko story through the eyes of the CIA case officer who initially ran him but, when confronted with Angleton's Golitsyn-inspired suspicions, turns on the defector and tries to "break" him through hostile interrogation and solitary confinement. The well-staged docudrama avoids emotionalism, gets most of the atmospherics and personalities right, and features remarkable look-alikes for Angleton and Helms. Some minor historical and tradecraft errors will be apparent to knowledgeable viewers. Epstein served as a "program consultant," which explains the film's pro-Angleton slant.¹⁹

Robin Winks, *Cloak and Gown*.²⁰

In a chapter titled "The Theorist," the late Yale history professor presented the most insightful biographical sketch of Angleton yet written (in part derived from conversations with its subject). Winks avoided the sinister allusions and arm-chair psychology that mar other accounts. His detailed examination of Angleton in the OSS captured the formative effect that fighting World War II from the cloister of X-2 had on the fledgling operations officer's conceptions of CI theory and practice.

Tom Mangold, *Cold Warrior*.²¹

A BBC correspondent at the time, Mangold produced what still is the most factually detailed, thoroughly researched study of Angleton. *Cold Warrior* is not, however, a cradle-to-grave biography and does not cover all aspects of Angleton's CIA career. Rather, it is the "prosecution's brief" against him for the molehunt. Mangold is unsparingly critical, rendering all either/or judgments in the negative. He concludes that counterintelligence in several Western services suffered at Angleton's hands—notably during his later years—when its practitioners most needed to exhibit intellectual honesty and operational discernment. Journalistic flourishes, such as clipped prose and catchy "sign-off lines" that more properly belong on a newscast, and a derogatory designation of Angleton and his kindred spirits as "fundamentalists" detract from an otherwise readable book. More overdrawn but still worth watching is the spin-off documentary *Spyhunter* that aired on the Public Broadcasting Service's "Frontline" series in May 1991.

David Wise, *Molehunt*.²²

The doyen of intelligence journalists, Wise started a biography of Angleton, but when Mangold beat him to it, he salvaged his project by focusing on the search for "Sasha"—the alleged Soviet mole inside the CIA. Wise drew on many of Martin's and Mangold's sources but also turned up new information from previously

¹⁸ Directed by Mick Jackson; screenplay by Stephen Davis; US release 7 September 1986.

¹⁹ The movie set off a spirited exchange among some Agency veterans—Mark Wyatt, Leonard McCoy, "Steve Daley" (the screen name for Nosenko's handler, Tennent H. Bagley), and Joseph Evans—in the pages of the Central Intelligence Retirees Association newsletter during 1986–87.

²⁰ See note 5.

²¹ See note 2.

²² *Molehunt: The Secret Search for Traitors That Shattered the CIA* (New York: Random House, 1992).

silent Agency officers and in formerly classified records, including about compensation provided to victims of the molehunt. Wise also revealed details about the penetration agent, who did not damage CIA nearly as much as Angleton feared or as the molehunt itself did—although he goes well beyond the facts to claim that the search “shattered” the Agency.

Cleveland Cram, *Of Moles and Molehunters*.²³

Cram was a career CIA operations officer who returned to the Agency after Angleton was gone to write a lengthy, still-classified history of the CI Staff. In public remarks and writings based on his research, Cram strongly disparaged Angleton. That attitude sometimes is displayed in *Of Moles and Molehunters*, a unique and valuable historiographical survey of counterintelligence publications from the late 1970s to the early 1990s.

**Robert M. Hathaway and Russell Jack Smith,
Richard Helms as DCI.²⁴**

In this formerly classified publication of the CIA History Staff, then-Agency historian Hathaway wrote a highly unfavorable chapter on Angleton based not on in-depth archival research but mainly on critical internal surveys prepared in the years soon after his dismissal and on interviews mostly with CIA retirees unfavorably disposed to him. Another limitation of Hathaway's treatment as a contribution to Angleton scholarship is that, in keeping with the focus of the book, Helms's attitudes toward the CI chief and the practice of counterintelligence get as much attention as Angleton and the prominent cases he was associated with at the time. The MHCHAOS domestic espionage program, for example, is handled in that matter, so Angleton's limited role in it—overstated in Hersh's exposé—does not get emphasized.

**Working Group on Intelligence Reform,
Myths Surrounding James Angleton.²⁵**

Underscoring the bipolar nature of perceptions about Angleton, two former CIA officers and an FBI senior manager who knew and worked with him—William Hood, Samuel Halpern, and James Nolan—offered mainly sympathetic observations of him at a symposium held the same year that Hathaway's critique was published. In the discussion afterward, their undocumented recollections and assessments got a mixed reception from the intelligence professionals in attendance—many of whom likewise knew and worked with Angleton.

²³ *Of Moles and Molehunters: A Review of Counterintelligence Literature, 1977–92* (Washington, DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1993). The monograph is available on cia.gov at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/index.html>.

²⁴ *Richard Helms as Director of Central Intelligence, 1966–1973* (Washington, DC: CIA History Staff, 1993); declassified in July 2006 and available on CIA's public Web site at www.foia.cia.gov. The book carries the disclaimer that “while this is an official publication of the CIA History Staff, the views expressed...are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the CIA” (ix).

²⁵ Washington, DC: Consortium for the Study of Intelligence, 1994.

Gérald Arboit, *James Angleton, le Contre-espion de la CIA*.²⁶

Arboit, a historian at the University of Strasbourg, has written the only book about Angleton in French. Beyond that and some thoughts on portrayals of Angleton in popular culture, its stereotyped depiction of him and CIA counterintelligence as deranged—Arboit uses “paranoid” and “madness” liberally—adds little to an understanding of a complex story.

Tennent H. Bagley, *Spy Wars*.²⁷

The CIA operations officer who had the dubious fortune of handling Nosenko has written a combative and sometimes confusing rebuttal to the criticisms of how Angleton and others approached that case—the presumption that Nosenko was a false defector dispatched to discredit Golitsyn and assert that the KGB had nothing to do with the JFK assassination. Bagley denies the oft-repeated charge that he initially believed Nosenko was bona fide but then fell under Angleton’s and Golitsyn’s sway and embraced their conspiratorial world view that would later be called “sick think.”

Instead, in a detailed and often hard-to-follow case review, Bagley insists that Nosenko’s first contact with CIA in 1962 was designed to conceal the presence of Soviet penetration agents who had been operating in US intelligence since at least the late 1950s and that his reappearance barely two months after the JFK murder was a risky change in the operation. Bagley unsparingly attacks the defector’s defenders, who he believes have besmirched his own reputation, and he has challenged them to answer 20 questions about the case, claiming that a “no” to any one of them would be enough to discredit Nosenko and substantiate Angleton’s view that the defector was dispatched. Critics of *Spy Wars* have noted Bagley’s reliance on unnamed former KGB officers as sources for essential (some would say convenient) information.

Michael Holzman, *James Jesus Angleton, the CIA, and the Craft of Intelligence*.²⁸

Holzman is an independent scholar with a doctorate in literature who, he says, set out to write a study of an interpretive school of literary thought called the New Criticism that was prominent at Yale when Angleton attended, and then decided to use it as a way to divine the meaning of Angleton’s approach to counterintelligence. In essence, Holzman contends that only people trained in the New Criticism, which emphasized ambiguity and multiple simultaneous levels of meaning, could think they really understood all the nuances and intricacies of CI. Whatever the intellectual cause and effect the school had on Angleton, Winks deals with it more economically and less esoterically.

Holzman offers some new information on Angleton’s personal life and poetic interests, but his recounting of Angleton’s intelligence career follows the usual well-worn

²⁶ Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2007. Translated, the title reads “James Angleton: CIA Counterspy.” Arboit has distilled most of the book’s discussion of Angleton’s notorious molehunt in an article, “In His Defector He Trusted: How the CIA Counterintelligence Staff Broke the Western Intelligence Community for Ten Years,” posted on the Web site of the Centre Français de Recherche sur le Renseignement, www.cf2r.org/fr.

²⁷ *Spy Wars: Moles, Mysteries, and Deadly Games* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2007).

²⁸ Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008.

tracks. He does, however, give the earlier years their due instead of hurtling into the 1960s like most other writers. Holzman's research is reasonably thorough,²⁹ but for a literary critic he uses secondary sources with a surprisingly unquestioning attitude, and he makes many careless mistakes with dates, organizations, and people. The narrative is cluttered with several pedantic or politically loaded asides and digressions into CIA and FBI activities that Angleton was aware of but not directly involved in, such as anti-Castro plots and COINTELPRO. The extensive treatment of MHCHAOS repeats much of what has been known since the Church Committee report of 1976 and serves as a set piece for Holzman to express his moral outrage at the "STASI-like mentality" (44) behind the US government's post-9/11 counterterrorism and internal security measures.

The Fictional Angleton

Angleton looms so large in modern American intelligence that he has transcended mere history and entered the realm of book and film fiction. One reason why the conventional wisdom about him is so tenaciously held is that the clichéd image of him purveyed in several novels and films has reached a wider audience than nonfiction works. Literary license has obscured historical reality and made achieving an understanding of him all the harder. Characters in some novels, such as Norman Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost* and David Morrell's *The Brotherhood of the Rose*, are loosely based on Angleton, and he appears postmortem in Chris Petit's *The Passenger*.³⁰ This discussion will look only at novels and movies in which Angleton clearly is portrayed as a major character, whether in fictional or true name, in a realistic setting.

Aaron Latham, *Orchids for Mother*.³¹

One reviewer's blurb on the paperback edition of this roman à clef declares that "some things can only be said in fiction, but that doesn't mean they are not true." The problem with that statement is that little the book says about its main character is true. Latham's often outrageous novel about the bureaucratic feud between counterintelligence chief "Francis Xavier Kimball" and DCI "Ernest O'Hara" (William Colby) is the source of more misconceptions about Angleton than any other work—starting with the title containing his supposed nickname, which nobody ever used for him.³²

Arnaud de Borchgrave and Robert Moss, *The Spike*.³³

The writers—friends and admirers of Angleton—place him in this conspiracist tale in the role of a counterintelligence sage, dismissed from service, who uses

²⁹ Although he cites some, Holzman appears unfamiliar with the publications of the Center for the Study of Intelligence, which he claims "can be relied upon as accurate depictions of what the Agency wishes to be known and thought about its activities" (337 n. 92). Regular users of CSI products know that they often are critical of CIA's performance in many areas.

³⁰ Winks, an aficionado of spy fiction, identified many others in *Cloak and Gown*, 539 n. 14.

³¹ Boston: Little, Brown, 1977.

³² Some Web sites, including until recently Wikipedia, say that Angleton's CIA cryptonym was KUMOTHER, but no such term existed. The pseudonym used for him in Agency cable traffic was Hugh N. Ashmead. Wise, 32.

³³ New York: Crown Publishers, 1980.

revelations from a high-level KGB defector to save the United States from an evil Kremlin plot that employs Soviet agents infiltrated throughout the US government. The book is as far-fetched and misguided about Angleton from its right-wing perspective as *Orchids for Mother* is from Latham's leftist viewpoint.

William F. Buckley, Jr., *Spytime*.³⁴

Buckley—oddly, given his conservative views—appropriates most of Latham's motifs and perpetuates some of their inaccuracies in this clumsy and contrived work that is far inferior to the entertaining Blackford Oakes tales. Whereas some of Latham's off-the-wall statements can be attributed to parody, Buckley's approach is too sober to allow that excuse. His Angleton is dull and unappealing, and he resuscitates the unoriginal idea that Colby, who fired Angleton, is the long-sought Soviet mole in CIA (and, more imaginatively, the "Fifth Man" in the Cambridge spy ring). As one reviewer wrote, "Both deserve better treatment than their reputations receive in this book."³⁵

Robert Littell, *The Company*.³⁶

Reviewers have touted Littell as "the American le Carré," and although his prose is far inferior to that of George Smiley's creator, he generally displays a sophisticated sense of tradecraft in his usually stark plots. However, in this bloated saga of the Cold War CIA, Littell propagates much folklore and misinformation about Angleton, who appears in true name along with other Agency luminaries such as Frank Wisner, Allen Dulles, and Colby. Littell's portrayals of Angleton's idiosyncrasies occasionally border on the (unintentionally) comical, and the idea that the CI Staff chief could order the imprisonment and torture of an Agency officer suspected of being a Soviet mole is preposterous. The TNT television network's film version of the book by the same name that appeared in 2007 is much better.³⁷ Some suspension of disbelief is required to watch Michael Keaton in a trench coat and homburg instead of a Batman costume, but he captures Angleton's quirky habits and often obsessive personality just about right.

***The Good Shepherd*.**³⁸

This 2006 film was marketed as the "untold story" and "hidden history" of CIA, unlike other movies that used the Agency as a vehicle to present a transparently fictional plot or as part of a historical backdrop for made-up characters acting in real-life settings. However, as the CIA History Staff has indicated in this publication,³⁹ *The Good Shepherd* is a "propagandamentary" similar to Oliver Stone's *JFK* that mangles and fabricates history for political purposes. Its lifeless main character, "Edward Wilson," purportedly is based on Angleton—when the plot requires he also stands in for other Agency operatives—but to borrow from the standard movie disclaimer, any resemblance between Wilson and persons living or dead is mostly coincidental.⁴⁰

³⁴ *Spytime: The Undoing of James Jesus Angleton* (New York: Harcourt, 2000).

³⁵ Benjamin B. Fischer, review of *Spytime* in *CIRA Newsletter* 26 (Spring 2001), 55.

³⁶ Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2002.

³⁷ Directed by Mikael Salomon; teleplay by Ken Nolan; released 5 August 2007.

³⁸ Directed by Robert DeNiro; screenplay by Eric Roth; released 22 December 2006.

³⁹ *Studies in Intelligence* 51, no. 1 (2007): 47–54.

What's Left to Say?

Michael Holzman has perceptively pointed out that the open literature on Angleton

is narrowly focused on the Great Molehunt, which is an indication, among other things, of the interests of his former colleagues, the ultimate source of much of that literature. It is, in its way, insiders' history, concerned with the internal history of the Central Intelligence Agency, concerned with continuing bureaucratic battles among the file cabinets and between the covers of books, some scholarly, some not. It is, ultimately, not the history of the winners, but simply that of the survivors."⁴¹

His comment addresses the perennial challenge for those who approach any historical topic: the inadequacies of the available evidence. Documentation is incomplete and not fully trustworthy, and memories are fallible and subject to bias.

Coming to a reasonable degree of historical closure is more difficult in a case like Angleton's, where emotions are involved and reputations are at stake; where people and institutions have established unwavering positions on controversial subjects; and where evidence is sparse or no longer available,⁴² and what does exist is open to different interpretations. Declassification of the primary case files is essential to fully understand the Angleton era and its impact; synopses and analyses derived from file research are useful only up to a point. How, for example, can the Golitsyn-Nosenko dispute be resolved when scholars are limited to weighing Tennent Bagley's "The Examination of the Bona Fides of a KGB Defector" against John Hart's "Monster Plot"?⁴³ They are incompatible versions of the same information and events and cannot be compounded into a synthesis. Like chemistry, the historical imagination has its limits.

But the raw details of CI operations are among any service's most closely guarded secrets, and properly so. Angleton reportedly once said that "if you control counter-intelligence, you control the intelligence service."⁴⁴ The same may well apply to a historical understanding of CIA counterintelligence. Necessary restrictions on information about the enterprise that he considered the foundation of all other intelligence work probably will prevent us from seeing the reality of him and instead consign us to continue looking at shadows and reflections. Angleton may remain to history, as he fancied himself in life, an enigma.



⁴⁰ Most recently on film (2009), an Angleton-like character (tall, thin, trench coat, brimmed hat) appears as a senior CIA executive in *An American Affair*, which is loosely based on the real-life relationship between President John F. Kennedy and Mary Pinchot Meyer, ex-wife of Agency covert action chief Cord Meyer. Mary Meyer was killed in 1964 under strange circumstances, and Angleton had an odd role afterward in keeping the presidential affair quiet. See Nina Burleigh, *A Very Private Woman: The Life and Unsolved Murder of Presidential Mistress Mary Meyer* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), 245–49. Presumably in the same vein, Angleton is listed as appearing in a forthcoming (2010) documentary, *Murder on Fifth Helena Drive*, about the death of the Kennedy brothers' alleged paramour, Marilyn Monroe. See the Internet Movie Database at www.imdb.com/title/tt1083463.

⁴¹ Holzman, 224.

⁴² Many records on Angleton's freelance activities and the CI Staff's domestic operations were destroyed after his dismissal.

⁴³ The Agency has declassified both documents. John Hart was a former Agency operations officer who DCI Stansfield Turner brought out of retirement to review CIA's handling of Nosenko.

⁴⁴ Mangold, 47.

Also Worth Reading

- Gordon Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Birds: Soviet Post-War Defectors* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988)
- William Colby and Peter Forbath, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978)
- Roy Godson, *Dirty Tricks or Trump Cards: US Covert Action and Counterintelligence* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1995)
- John Hart, *The CIA's Russians* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2003)
- Richard Helms with William Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (New York: Random House, 2003)
- Burton Hersch, *The Old Boys: The American Elite and the Origins of the CIA* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992)
- Seymour Hersh, "The Angleton Story," *New York Times Magazine*, 25 June 1978: 13–18ff.
- Angus MacKenzie, *Secrets: The CIA's War at Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)
- Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone: Communist, Anti-Communist, and Spymaster* (New York: Random House, 1997)
- Thomas Powers, "Spook of Spooks," *New York Review of Books*, 17 August 1989: 40–43, reprinted as "The Riddle Inside the Enigma" in Powers, *Intelligence Wars: American Secret History from Hitler to al-Qaeda* (New York: New York Review Books, 2002), 109–25
- Mark Reibling, *Wedge: The Secret War Between the FBI and CIA* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994)
- Nigel West, *A Matter of Trust: MI5, 1945–1972* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982) and *The Circus: MI5 Operations, 1945–1972* (New York: Stein and Day, 1983)
- Peter Wright with Paul Greenglass, *Spycatcher: The Candid Autobiography of a Senior Intelligence Officer* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987)
- The Web site of the Centre for Counterintelligence and Security Studies (www.cicentre.org), which provides CI training to the federal government, contains a large variety of materials on Angleton—declassified documents, interviews, speeches, quotes, articles, book reviews, and reading lists—that is exclusively critical of him.

