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Turncoat: Benedict Arnold and the Crisis of American Liberty
Stephen Brumwell (Yale University Press, 2018), ix + 372 pp., notes, index.

A Spy Named Orphan: The Enigma of Donald Maclean
Roland Philipps (Norton, 2018), 440 pp., notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

It is hard to imagine two spies more unalike than Benedict Arnold and Donald Maclean. Even allowing for the fact they lived some 150 years apart, the two were completely different—one was a classically ambitious American who sought wealth and military glory, while the other was an upper-class Englishman who worked in the shadows of modern bureaucracy; one was impulsive and reckless, the other was restrained and methodical; one embraced his role, the other was repelled by it. Their motives, too, were as different as can be imagined but, at the same time, they had one important thing in common—both got away with it. Arnold and Maclean both, too, are the subjects of new biographies, and looking at them side by side makes for an interesting look at spying across the centuries.

In *Turncoat*, independent historian Stephen Brumwell paints a fascinating portrait of Arnold. He was born in 1741 to a prominent and prosperous Connecticut family that, by the time Benedict was in his teens, had fallen on hard times. Determined to restore the family fortunes, by his early twenties Arnold was an established shopkeeper in New Haven. Expanding his interests, Arnold soon owned a small flotilla of trading ships that sailed from Canada to the West Indies, often with himself at the helm. The early 1770s found Arnold married, with a family, and becoming a strong opponent of British rule over the colonies. As a prominent and respected citizen of New Haven, he joined a newly-formed militia company in early 1775 and in March, just before the start of the Revolution, was elected captain.

War revealed Arnold to be a talented soldier. He participated in the capture of Fort Ticonderoga and then quickly proved himself an aggressive commander, organizing and leading troops in the invasion of Canada, and gained a well-deserved reputation for bravery on the battlefield. Wounded at Quebec, Arnold soon recovered and put his nautical experience to good use fighting the British on Lake Champlain. His greatest moment, however, came in 1777 at Saratoga, where he played a crucial role in the American victory that convinced France to enter the war against Britain. Arnold was badly wounded in the battle—surviving two wounds was little short of miraculous, considering the quality of 18th-century medicine—and his lengthy recovery relegated him to secondary roles. The highlight of the next two years was his service as military commandant of Philadelphia after the city was retaken from the British. It was during this time that, widowed since the summer of 1775, he met his second wife, Peggy Shippen.

Mere recognition of his successes was never enough for Arnold, who craved the acclaim he

believed was his due. In addition, Arnold had a powerful streak of self-righteousness and never could admit he might be in the wrong. In his business career he had been known for, on the one hand, not paying his debts while, on the other, pressing anyone who owed him, and these traits became even more pronounced during the war. Arnold demanded not just promotion but seniority, and quarreled with other generals (he and Horatio Gates feuded constantly). On top of that, he was angry with Congress, which failed to support the army adequately, and engaged in profiteering, which led to a drawn-out court martial that he demanded to clear his name.

Overall, Brumwell's portrait is of a greatly talented man who was astonishingly vain, completely lacking in self-awareness, and always cash-strapped. Little wonder, then, that Arnold became more and more alienated from his colleagues and superiors. The alliance with Catholic France—the historic enemy of Protestant England and its colonists—and Congress's failure to respond to a British overture for talks, Brumwell argues, pushed Arnold over the edge. These "converging grievances that alienated Arnold from the Patriots," moreover, came at a low point in American fortunes and so led him to justify his defection as a noble act. The war had become futile, Arnold convinced himself, and therefore his espionage was a step toward reconciliation with the mother country and healing the "gaping fratricidal wound between Crown and colonies." (163–4)

Arnold volunteered to the British in May 1779. From then until September 1780, he provided intelligence on American military plans and negotiated to hand over the fortifications at West Point. Anyone who has handled a difficult asset will appreciate Brumwell's account of this period; Arnold's information generally was only of marginal value, in part because of slow communications, but he kept asking for more money and promising the British he would make it all worthwhile. In the event, of course, the plan unraveled and he narrowly escaped capture. Once on the British side, Arnold led troops in Virginia and Connecticut, before he had to leave North America for good at the end of 1781. The British never trusted him enough to give him another command, though he returned to the Indies as a merchant in 1794, and had a close call there with the French. King George provided him with a land grant in Canada in 1798, finally solving Arnold's money problems, and the exiled spy died in 1801.

Donald Maclean was a completely different type of spy, an ideological recruit in it for the long haul. Born in 1913, his father, also named Donald, was an upwardly mobile lawyer who entered politics, was elected to Parliament, and eventually served in the Cabinet, which earned him a knighthood. Sir Donald, in Philipps's telling, was a deeply religious man, subscribing to a stern Presbyterian faith that he imposed on his family. Consistent with this, he sent his son to Gresham's, a boarding school with a strict honor code centered on "purity in thought, and word, and deed." It was the kind of place that sewed shut the pockets on the boys' trousers to prevent impure explorations and where normal adolescent behavior was cloaked in shame and secrecy. Donald impressed his teachers with his brilliance but learned, too, how to "hide any duplicity and resentment behind successful conformity." (16)

From Gresham's, Maclean went to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. This part of the story is painfully familiar to anyone who has read about intellectuals or spies during the 1930s—Maclean had been an undergraduate during the depths of the Depression and as Fascism gained power in Europe and, when he finished Cambridge in 1934 with honors in French and German, turned to Communism as the world's only hope. Moreover, Sir Donald died while Maclean was at Cambridge, which freed young Donald to reject his father's Presbyterianism in favor of the alternative religion of socialism. In August 1934, as Maclean was preparing to apply to the British diplomatic service, Kim Philby—he and Maclean knew each other from the Socialist Society at Cambridge—pitched him to spy for Moscow. Maclean accepted with a speed that

stunned Philby, and began a 17-year espionage career on the spot. (The titular "Orphan" was Maclean's first crypt, though he is best known as "Homer," his crypt in Venona.)

It was, by any measure, a remarkable run. Maclean was an immensely talented bureaucrat, with an enormous capacity for work, excellent organizational and writing skills, and a talent for pleasing his superiors. He rose quickly, serving in London and Paris—in Paris, he met an American woman, Melinda Marling (whom he told of his espionage), and they married there on the day the British embassy evacuated ahead of the invading Nazis. Maclean was posted to Washington from 1944 to 1948, and it was there that his career reached its peak. During this time, the United States and Britain negotiated their postwar policies, alliance, and atomic weapons cooperation, and his talents and tireless work made him indispensable to the ambassador, who ensured that Maclean saw all embassy traffic. Reflecting the importance of his work, he was promoted to first secretary and provided with unrestricted access to the headquarters of the Atomic Energy Commission as the United States and United Kingdom worked out their early nuclear weapons plans and strategies. Through all of this time, of course, Maclean was meeting his Soviet handlers and providing them with sheaves of documents and inside information on British and Anglo-American policies.

From Washington, Maclean went on to Cairo. There, he was promoted again, becoming the youngest counselor in the Foreign Service and thus marked as a man on his way to the top. But in Egypt it became clear that Maclean was an alcoholic wreck, and his life unraveled. He had long been a heavy drinker, and the strain of his double life—beyond the risks, he never liked the deceit inherent in clandestine work—combined with an aggressive streak of self-righteousness, made for frequent binges and outbursts in which he loudly denounced the US and British governments. Even worse, in a stunning display of ineptitude, the Soviets stopped meeting him and thereby deprived Maclean of support when he needed it most. The Foreign Office no longer could overlook Maclean's increasingly violent behavior, as it had for a decade, and he was sent home for treatment. Appearing to be on the road to recovery, he was appointed head of the American Department in September 1950. With the Korean War raging, he was again in the perfect spot to spy for the Soviets.

By then, however, Maclean was living on borrowed time. In Washington, the Venona intercepts had revealed the presence of a Soviet spy in the British embassy during the war, and investigators were closing in on Maclean. Philby, now the SIS representative in Washington, had access to Venona and the details of the investigation; in the spring of 1951, he sent Guy Burgess to warn Maclean, and the Soviets then exfiltrated the pair from Britain in May. Life in the Soviet Union at first was hard—arriving in the paranoid late-Stalin period, Maclean was kept isolated in Kuybyshev and not allowed to move to Moscow until 1955. Maclean, joined by the long-suffering Melinda and their children, worked as a writer and political analyst. His life was mostly contented, though marred by Melinda's affair with Philby after the latter defected, and then in the 1970s the departures of his children for the United Kingdom and Melinda for New York. Maclean died alone in Moscow in 1983.

Both *Turncoat* and *A Spy Named Orphan* are engaging and informative books about espionage, intelligence, and the personalities of spies, and each is well worth reading.[1] Philipps is especially good on the pathetic dynamics of Donald's and Melinda's marriage, Britain's ossified class system and its assumption that no one of Maclean's background could be a traitor, and the colossal ineptitude of MI-5's investigations. Still, if you have time for only one, *Turncoat* is the choice. Brumwell is the better stylist and, more important for today's readers, provides a great deal of information about the people and events in the Revolutionary era (of which most modern Americans, alas, know nothing about) that set Arnold's actions in context. Intelligence

practitioners will especially enjoy Brumwell's sympathetic portrait of Major John Andre, the talented and personable British staff officer who served as a combination desk officer/analyst/handler for the operation, only to be hanged by the Americans.

Brumwell, too, has much better material to work with. Arnold remains one of the great villains in American history, but he was clearly a man of many talents and Brumwell, while not excusing his treason, does much to humanize him. In particular, one comes away respecting his abilities and somewhat sympathetic to his frustration. Reading *Turncoat*, it is easy to believe that, had Congress not been so feckless, Arnold might have stuck with the Patriot cause and played a major role in the campaigns of 1780 and 1781. Alternatively, one can view Arnold simply as having been born too soon. Had he been born, say, in 1820, he could well have become a Civil War hero like Joshua Chamberlain, another civilian who turned out to have unexpected military talent and flourished in the service of a well-organized and supportive government.

Donald Maclean, in contrast, is a completely unattractive character. Other than pointing out the effects of Maclean's rejection of his father's religiosity and time at Gresham's, Philipps wisely avoids psychologizing his subject. Instead, he provides a straightforward, understated account and leaves Maclean's behavior to speak for itself. It gradually adds up to a damning portrait of a man who was universally considered, on the one hand, among the most gifted of his cohort, and on the other, a man so self-centered and blindly dedicated to his cause that he seems to have given no thought to the enormous damage he was inflicting on those around him.

It is hard to understand, however, why Philipps agrees that Maclean was so brilliant. Philipps portrays Maclean as a master bureaucrat, and so he may be been, but his main talent seems to have been doing what others told him to do, whether at school or in the Foreign Service. Philipps gives no evidence that Maclean ever took the initiative on anything or once had an original thought. Other than his atrocious behavior when drunk, he was completely bland, with none of Philby's love of intrigue for its own sake or Burgess's flamboyance. His political sophistication, too, was nil—he stuck with the Soviet Union through the purges, the pact with Hitler, and the crushing of the Hungarian revolt, though he did have some misgivings about the repression of the Prague Spring—and his ideology never advanced beyond repetition of the platitudes he had learned as an undergraduate. Perhaps it was less the strain of spying that drove Maclean to drink than it was the realization his life was a waste.

If Arnold is more likable than Maclean, it may say something about how the world has changed in the past 250 years. Arnold was a product of the premodern era, when loyalties were not considered absolutely linked to the state and for him, treason was just another sketchy commercial transaction. Arnold had to rationalize his treason, to be sure, but it required no deep ideological commitment. Maclean, in contrast, came from a far more regulated and bureaucratized world, where talent for staff work had become a safe path to the top, albeit at the cost of losing opportunities for heroism or excitement. Perhaps espionage filled this need for Maclean, offering a cause that brought meaning to his life in the humdrum world of a government office. His commitment was total, and so was his ruin.

Footnote

[1] Hayden Peake, reviewing *A Spy Named Orphan* in these pages in June 2018 noted some errors in Phillipps's account, but these do not detract from the value of his portrait of Maclean.

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