

# Books

## The Double-Cross System in the War of 1939 to 1945 by J. C. Masterman

(Yale University Press; 224 pp.; \$6.95)

Robin W. Winks

The publication of *The Double-Cross System* is a considerable coup for a university press, and if it does not quite rank with the Viking Map and its publication on Columbus Day, it presents enough curiosities to entertain even the most jaded spy fan. The book also affords a unique opportunity for those two acerbic British historians, Hugh Trevor-Roper and A.J.P. Taylor, to have at each other again without either gentleman mentioning the other's name. Above all, it proves that one can give the reader the real thing, a straight statement of events without embellishment, which is as good a read as most spy fiction.

But first, what the book is: It is a top-secret intelligence report written by Sir John Masterman in 1945 for the Director General of the Security Service. In the report Sir John explains how, almost by accident, British counterespionage came to run and to control the German espionage system in the United Kingdom. For, beginning in July of 1939, the British sought to "turn around" every German agent known to be operating in Britain, so that each would send back to the *Abwehr* misleading information while retaining credibility in German intelligence circles. In time, Sir John says, virtually all of the German agents had agreed to work for the British, and a remarkable appendix lists thirty-nine such operatives under their code names, beginning with "Snow," the first to be turned. As a result, the

British established a committee—known to some as the Twenty Committee, or XX, but actually the Double-Cross Committee—to coordinate the information that should be given to the enemy (for some of it had to be accurate to win acceptance of the red herrings to follow) and to decide which garden paths might be most attractive to the Germans.

Sir John's claims are expressed modestly and, if we are to accept the substance of this report, the British ran their double agents so well they not only kept Germans happy with the information they received but were able to mislead them systematically on three crucial occasions. Keeping the Germans happy would alone have been worth the candle, for a double agent who is accepted fills a slot into which the enemy would otherwise place someone else who might not be turned around. There were larger fish to fry, however, and the Double-Cross system helped to mislead the Germans into thinking that the Sicilian landing would occur in Greece or Sardinia—the famous case of the Man Who Wasn't There; to withdraw U-boats from areas believed to be awash with mine fields, thus leaving vital lanes open to Arctic convoys; and to expect the heaviest of the D-Day landings to occur in the Pas de Calais and not in Normandy.

This is spy stuff in the best tradition—ironic, understated, grittily factual. No reader can fail to enjoy the "Snow" job. The Germans, and es-

pecially Admiral Canaris, director of the *Abwehr* before his displacement, would appear to have been as ploddingly dull as the British have always said they were. The Germans paid over £85,000 toward their own destruction, and they awarded one of the double agents, "Tate," an Iron Cross for his services to the Fatherland. Often, Sir John suggests, he thought his agents were blown, only to find the Germans accepting explanations that bordered on the inane. As he concludes, ". . . we had a combination of circumstances of quite extraordinary good fortune. Circumstances, aided by German miscalculation or absence of foresight, so fell out that the bulk of the German intelligence system in this country fell into our lap and secret sources permitted us to observe that the reports of our double-cross agents were transmitted to Berlin; that they were believed; and that competing reports were not . . . equally efficacious."

To Americans, the principal revelation of Sir John's report is contained in an appendix, which consists of a questionnaire given to one "Tricycle" before his departure for America, a questionnaire which contained five very specific questions about American naval strength at Pearl Harbor. Had the Americans taken the questionnaire more seriously, Masterman observes—or had the Twenty Committee been prepared to insist upon its significance more directly—the U.S. might have had a further warning of what was to come in December, 1941.

Masterman's work has fueled England's most persistent, if elaborately choreographed, academic feud, for Hugh Trevor-Roper has praised the book highly in the *New York Times Book Review* while A. J. P. Taylor, in the *New York Review of Books*, called it trivial, misleading, and even silly. Taylor makes it clear that Sir John was among those who blocked his appointment to the Regius chair which he, and many others, felt Oxford owed him, a chair which went to Professor Trevor-Roper. Thus from behind the scenes does Sir John appear ever more as an

*éminence grise*, maker of bishops and professors, destroyer of the best-laid plans of the Hamburg and Bremen *Abwehrstellen*.

That the manuscript is closely based upon a confidential report written in 1945 seems clear. As Sir John writes, the report "differs somewhat from what it would have been had I been still a serving officer when I completed it"—that is, as written it is no longer the report of an officer in British intelligence but already takes on some of the aspects of a history written by a trained historian, for such Sir John was and is. We are told by the publisher that the only changes made were the substitution of certain identifying particulars for the various double agents in order to prevent their identification now, twenty-five years later. Thus where the manuscript refers to a "mechanic from Bristol," the original report may have said a "clerk from Gloucester." Sir John's Preface also admits to "a few excisions" and "verbal amendments." There were, in fact, only thirty-one in all, and that there were not more is due to the persistence of Sir John and of his publisher, who personally discussed nearly eighty alterations requested by Her Majesty's representatives, going over the proposed changes one by one.

What we have, then, is a true report, a virtually unadorned lily for historians of World War II. This fact may explain the unattached and incomprehensible footnote on page 3, and the naming of thirty-nine agents by code while one is given what was presumably his real name. It may explain the odd tendency to repeat the same relatively simple points time and again (on three occasions we are asked to read the Creed of the Twenty Committee, twice more is it quoted to us, and yet once again does Norman Holmes Pearson bring it forth in his Foreword), for reports written for submission upward through a bureaucracy must assume a low order of intelligence.

The drama of the book arises from just this low-keyed repetitiveness, however. And because the drama is

catching, only afterwards does one want to raise a question or two. Sir John nowhere claims what Trevor-Roper asserts for his system, that "every spy who came to Britain during the war" was controlled by the British, but as a whole the book does imply this. Would an old history tutor really be prepared to assume that there were not some who escaped his net, and some among those whom he caught who were turn-and-turn-again experts? Do his veiled references to stories that cannot even yet be told (as in the Middle East) refer to an "even yet" of the 1970's, or to that of the 1940's? And if to the latter, when may those stories be revealed to us? Did Sir John really need to tell his superiors that a "full stop" was a "period"? As he says, "Nuance became all," and no more so than in his recounting, without comment, how the British sent information to the Germans which "corrected" their tendency to overfire central London—V-8 rockets were landing in the West End—so that they landed instead in the East End, an area of working-class slums. One is also intrigued by Sir John's dedication of the book to the Earl of Swinton, chairman of Security Executive (who is thought to be the prototype for William Haggard's fictional Russell of Security Executive).

Some interesting questions are posed about Sir John too. This is his first published history, although he took a First Class degree in Modern History at Oxford in 1913. His *Who's Who* entry reads simply: "interned in Germany 1914-18; Major (Local) and specially employed, 1941-45; educated Osborne and Dartmouth, Worcester and Freiburg; chairman of the Committee on Political Activities of Civil Servants after the war; Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, 1957-58; long-time Provost of Worcester College, 1947-61; Fellow of Eton; represented England at international lawn tennis, hockey, and cricket; knighted in 1959." There is a period as "personnel consultant" to Birfield, which (it is not stated) makes transmission systems, forged steel plates and parts for aircraft. There is an OBE given in the

midst of the war itself. There is a Royal Order of the Crown of Yugoslavia (3rd class), given in 1945—when the Crown was in exile and the awards were generally for anti-Communist activity. There is the curious fact that long before publication of *The Double-Cross System* Sir John lists it, without date, among his publications in his *Who's Who* entry: perhaps a quiet effort to force Her Majesty's Government to allow him to publish the report?

Sir John's other publications merit examination in relation to *The Double-Cross System*. He began in 1933 with an unexceptional and donnish murder mystery, *An Oxford Tragedy*, a widely read Penguin paperback. Barzun and Taylor think it "a masterpiece," although today it reads awkwardly. What is interesting about *An Oxford Tragedy* is that it shows a preoccupation with method, with how to mislead apparent observers present within the College at the time of the crime. What is more, the narrator, Francis Wheatley Winn, appears to be Sir John himself, vice president and senior tutor of modern history, although Masterman later denied this and clearly would rather be identified with his scholarly Austrian professor of law, Ernst Brendel, amateur detective.

Much later came *The Case of the Four Friends*; in this 1956 work we are given a story of "preventive detection" in which four men are not what they seem, and then, in truth, turn out to be what they had seemed. In between the two mysteries came a play based on the figure of Marshal Ney and a book, *To Teach the Senators Wisdom*, subtitled "an Oxford guide book." The entire "guide book" is actually a work of fiction, down to its elaborate footnotes (including a reference to Harrod's life of John Maynard Keynes quoted two years before it was written). It argues that "guidebook truth bears the same relation to historical truth as an impressionist portrait does to a Victorian likeness." As a writer, historian and administrator, Sir John has carefully woven a "fabric of fictions" in all of his books, each of which is a different exploration of the ways in

which men may be misled.

And whom might he mislead with *The Double-Cross System*? No one, he assures us. After all, anything that might mislead or be damaging was omitted from his report as he wrote it—in the most interesting case because “the argument is too long to be developed here,” interesting because nowhere does he provide an analysis of why a double-agent system should be run by Intelligence rather than by Operations. He does suggest that his report may be useful in what it will show for the Next Time, but later he makes it clear that the Next Time will be different because electronic means of surveillance have rendered the wireless telegraphy of Germany’s agents—many of whom were planted on English soil for no more sinister purpose than to send back to Germany dependable weather reports—into the dark ages. The techniques described by Sir John could now only be used in an underdeveloped country, and only in that sense can this report be called, as Sir John suggests he hopes it may be, a “useful manual.”

A useful manual, probably not; a fascinating glimpse into the spookish world of the 1940’s, definitely; a report and historical document, certainly; above all, a new exploration of how men may be deceived, a Brendel-gone-to-the-wars, a Report on more than its title suggests. Perhaps Sir John Masterman was right in his choice of title for his most nearly autobiographical work, *Fate Cannot Harm Me*.

#### STUDENT RATES

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## My Land Is Dying by Harry M. Caudill

(E. P. Dutton; 144 pp.; \$6.50)

### Jonathan Eisen

It’s not just Harry Caudill’s country that is dying. It’s not as though no one knows that America is being chewed up by the strip mining companies. Certainly the studies have been made, the facts are in and the cry has been raised. In some cases action has been taken, but in most cases the remedies have not cured. And because they have fallen short, more and more people have become alienated from the political process—which leaves the corporations still greater leeway to wreak their havoc upon the land.

There seems to be a process at work whereby issues are raised over and over again until people become bored or alienated primarily because there are absurdly simple solutions to problems that stem from a system that permits venality to operate on a large institutional scale. What kind of a civilization is it that permits . . . ? and you can fill in the blank with the horror of your choice. People often find themselves getting together in various forms of outrage which may be exhilarating but are nonetheless debasing to the human spirit and which leave the reformer with a sense of weariness, isolated moments of transitory victory and a considerable number of blind spots. And he forces himself to turn away from contemplating the basic corruption of a civilization that decreasingly attends to anything but the barest minimum requirements of human happiness and spends the greater portion of its collective energy in various forms of rape and pillage.

The coal companies of which Harry Caudill writes are but the most flagrant manifestation of a greed that sees terricide being carried on in part through the auspices of the Tennessee Valley Authority, whose mania for the cheapest coal possible has returned millions of dollars to

the Federal treasury while actively helping to transform hundreds of square miles of beautiful land into desert. Which, to my mind, indicates how absurd it was to think that agencies like the TVA would protect the “public interest” when that is defined in a capitalist framework. Legislatures are all purchasable; every man has his price and the coal and other mining companies have plenty of money to meet any man’s price—more money than “the people” have influence, even in mass aggregate.

Interesting also are the ways in which American capitalism continues to treat its own land as existing simply for immediate exploitation. Only when it is profitable to enjoy conservation practices does it do so, and sometimes not even then if the ideology of corporate hegemony is threatened. Vast sums are spent convincing Washington that strip-mining is a problem for the states, and vice versa. To say nothing of the huge public relations campaigns designed to deceive the people into believing that strip mined land can be reclaimed. Which it can be in some instances—when it is mostly flat and care is taken to save the three layers separately, as is done in England and some European countries; no such care is taken in this country, even in Iowa which has some of the finest and deepest topsoil in the world and, unfortunately, a huge reserve of coal which is now beginning to be exploited.

Caudill’s book is factual, and angry. It details the history of mining in Kentucky and the bordering coal states, a history that at present has seen the increase of the mining death rate. The mineowners are almost unparalleled in their willingness to proceed completely unmindful of any value other than immediate prof-