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Michael Straight and the Cambridge Spy Ring

by Raymond E. Spinzia

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Since the days of the Revolutionary-era Long Island Spy Ring the Island's North Shore families have had a long and, for the most part, distinguished association both officially and unofficially in diverse aspects of intelligence gathering. With one remarkable exception, this is especially true of the Island's twentieth-century espionage agents whose participation in the nation's intelligence organizations can be traced from World War I through the Cold War.¹

During the early 1900s, three boys, August Heckscher II, Michael Straight, and James Lee, who grew up just miles apart in Old Westbury, Long Island, embarked on a most incredible journey through life wherein their paths would cross again as adults in a bizarre and ironic twist of fate in which Michael Straight would become a casualty of the Cold War.

August Heckscher II was the son of Gustav Maurice and Frances Louise Vanderhoef Heckscher, whose estate *Upland House* was located in Old Westbury, and the grandson of August and Anna P. Atkins Heckscher [I], who resided at *Wincoma* in Huntington Bay. In 1936 the younger Heckscher graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Yale. He received his master's degree in political science from Harvard in 1939 and taught political science at Yale from 1939-1941. During World War II he served as an intelligence officer in the Office of the Coordinator of Information (OCI) in Washington, DC, and, later in North Africa, as a member of its successor, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). After serving as a delegate to the 1945 United Nations Conference in San Francisco, Heckscher became the chief editorial writer for *The New York Herald Tribune*, and a critically acclaimed author of several books.

From 1957 to 1962 he served as New York City's Commissioner of Cultural Affairs and, as such, came to the attention of President Kennedy, who, in 1962, appointed him Coordinator of Cultural Affairs for the White House and, subsequently, the administration's special consultant on the arts. Heckscher went on to cap his distinguished public career as New York City's much-beloved

Commissioner of Parks from 1967 to 1971. In contrast to the mercurial Thomas Hoving, whom he replaced as parks commissioner, or the imperial Long Island State Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, Hechscher was known as “Good King Augie” because of his kindly and vigorous leadership as commissioner.²

Michael Straight was also the scion of a prominent North Shore family. His parents Willard Dickerman and Dorothy Payne Whitney Straight, whose country estate *Elmhurst* was located in Old Westbury, were co-founders of *The New Republic* magazine.³ His father, who died in 1918 at



Elmhurst

age thirty-eight, had served his country with distinction as vice-consul general and private secretary to the United States Ambassador to Korea, private secretary to the United States Minister to Cuba, United States Consul General to Mukden, China, and Acting Chief for the State Department's Division of Far Eastern Affairs. Michael's grandfather William Collins Whitney, also of Old Westbury, was Secretary of the Navy in the Cleveland and Benjamin Harrison administrations.

Straight was a graduate of Dartington School, Devon, England, an extremely unconventional, experimental, preparatory institution founded by his mother and stepfather Leonard Knight Elmhirst. His enrollment in Trinity College at Cambridge University in 1930 to study economics under John



Anthony Blunt, 1935

Maynard Keynes coincided with an intensive campaign by the Communist Party to recruit idealistic members from the university's student body. While at Cambridge, Straight was befriended by two Communist agents, Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt. He joined the Communist Party and was recruited by Blunt to spy for the Soviet Union. Returning to the United States in 1937, Straight was given a job as an unpaid volunteer in the State Department's Office of Economic Advisor writing papers on Nazi Germany and its economy. While at the State Department, he was contacted by a Soviet agent wanting access to secret government docu-

ments. According to Straight, the only documents he gave to the Soviets were those which he himself had written including one critical of the Nazi–Soviet Pact of Steel. He also claimed that he left the State Department to negate his usefulness to the Communist Party and to disassociate himself from

Communism. Straight worked in a succession of jobs as FDR's speech writer, Eleanor Roosevelt's assistant, and as the Washington editor of *The New Republic*. During World War II he trained bomber pilots while his former Cambridge associates continued their espionage activities in Great Britain for the Soviets.

Eighteen years would pass before Heckscher, as Kennedy's special consultant on the arts would play a pivotal role in the life of his Old Westbury contemporary. In May 1963, at August Heckscher's suggestion, Straight was called to the White House for a meeting at which he and Kennedy's special assistant and former OSS member, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., offered him the chairmanship of the Fine Arts Commission. Because of the possibility that his daughter's arm would have to be amputated, Straight declined the position.

One month later Straight was again summoned to the White House. This time he was offered the chairmanship of the Advisory Council of the Arts and its administration agency, the National Endowment for the Arts. Realizing that the job necessitated an FBI security check, Straight erroneously concluded that if he volunteered the information that he had been a Communist, there was still a slim possibility he would be given the chairmanship. He again met with Schlesinger, told him that he had been a Communist, and offered to tell his story to the FBI. Schlesinger immediately telephoned Attorney General Robert Kennedy. Straight subsequently met with William Sullivan, the Deputy Director of the FBI, who in turn introduced him to the FBI agent who was to take his initial deposition. Straight was mortified; the agent was former Old Westbury resident James Lee, the son of the head gardener at his mother's Old Westbury estate, to whom as a youth Straight had given his cast-off clothes.⁴ With Lee's entrance into the room, the saga of the three youths from Old Westbury had come full circle. In subsequent debriefings by other FBI agents, Straight's identification of Burgess and Blunt as Soviet spies eventually revealed the Cambridge Spy Ring of Burgess, Blunt, Maclean, Philby, and Cairncross.⁵

Their espionage activities for the Soviets disclosed, Burgess, Maclean and, later, Philby defected to the Soviet Union. In 1964, confronted with Straight's testimony, Blunt made a secret confession to British agents. He was neither publicly exposed nor tried as a spy and was allowed to continue in his role as advisor for the Queen's art collection. However, in 1979 Blunt's role as a Soviet spy was revealed in Andrew Boyle's book, *The Fourth Man: The Definitive Account of Kim Philby, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean and Who Recruited Them to Spy for Russia*. Once his activities became public knowledge, all Blunt's social and academic honors granted to him over the years were stripped from him, including his knighthood. He died in Great Britain at the age of seventy-two in disgrace, but was never indicted.⁶

Authors have long theorized that Straight was the fifth man in Cambridge's notorious spy ring, which was known by the Soviet KGB as the "Magnificent Five." In reality, Blunt in his secret 1964 testimony had named John Cairncross as the fifth man in the ring. During the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, Cairncross, who eventually would become chairman of the Romance Language Department at Case Western University in Cleveland, Ohio, had held key positions in the British Foreign Office, Treasury Department, and intelligence service before coming to the United States in 1964 as a British intelligence agent. Almost immediately upon his arrival in the United States, Cairncross was confronted by British intelligence with Blunt's testimony and confessed to being the fifth man. It was not until 1991 that his confession became public. He died in 1995 at the age of eight-two without ever having been indicted.⁷

In 1969, just six years after confessing his Communist Party affiliation, Straight was appointed by President Nixon to the position of Deputy Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. Like Blunt and Cairncross, his activities on behalf of the Soviets had not been immediately revealed to the public. Indeed, Straight's espionage activities would not become public knowledge until 1981 when London's *Daily Telegram* published an article entitled "American Kept Blunt's Secret for Twenty-six years."⁸ Like Blunt and Cairncross, Straight was never indicted.



*Straight testifying before
Select Committee on Foundations, 1952*

ENDNOTES

1. For a more comprehensive discussion of members of North Shore families involved in espionage, see Raymond E. Spinzia, "Society Chameleons:" Long Island's Gentlemen Spies. *The Nassau County Historical Society Journal* 55 (2000), pp. 27-38.
2. *Who Was Who in America*, v. 12, p. 105.; *The New York Times*, April 7, 1977, section B, p. 9.
3. The original name of the Straight estate was *Elmhurst*. It was changed to *Apple Green* after Dorothy Payne Whitney Straight married Leonard Knight Elmhurst. See Jane Brown, *Beatrix: The Gardening Life of Beatrix Jones Farrand, 1872-1952* (New York: Viking Penguin Books, 1995), p. 213.
4. Michael Straight, *After Long Silence* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1983), pp. 134-35, 137, 157, 159, 189, 309-12, 314.
5. Ronald Payner and Christopher Dobson, *Who's Who in Espionage* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), pp. 165-66.
6. Vincent and Nan Buranelli, *Spy/Counterspy: An Encyclopedia of Espionage* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1982), pp. 38-40.
7. Tom Mahl, "Fifth Man' Spy Lived Here." *The Plain Dealer* October 35, 1995, section B, p. 11.
8. Straight, p. 307.

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