

BOOK REVIEWS

Sawatsky, John. *For Services Rendered: Leslie James Bennett and the RCMP Security Service*. London: Penguin, 1983.

Leslie James Bennett joined the RCMP Security Service, Canada's counter-intelligence agency, in 1954, and very rapidly rose to a position of some power and influence within its ranks as Head of the Russian desk, before retiring on a medical pension in 1972. Later in the decade it came to light that Bennett had retired under a rather spectacular cloud — under suspicion, in fact, of being the “Canadian Philby.”

John Sawatsky is an Ottawa journalist and author of a previously published history of the RCMP Security Service.¹ He has made the question of the nature of the suspicions about Bennett's loyalty and his conduct of intelligence work the central theme of this biography. He does this by tracing Bennett's background in search of clues to his beliefs and by surveying a variety of counter-espionage operations in which Bennett was involved during his years with the Force. The story is certainly worth telling, but there are methodological problems. Sawatsky evidently has access to a range of “inside sources” in the RCMP; unfortunately a condition placed upon his investigations seems to have been that such sources must remain uniformly and totally secret. The reader, therefore, has to take the author's account of Bennett and his years in Canadian counter-intelligence on faith. Such a condition is never palatable, but in the circumstances must be weighed against the value of having some little knowledge of a controversial arm of government power.

Bennett certainly did not fit the ideological or social pattern evinced in the careers of such real-life KGB moles as Philby, Burgess, Maclean and Blunt. A child (born 1920) of working class parents in depression-racked Wales, Bennett managed to escape a life in the coal fields, but never went to University. The Second World War, as all wars since Napoleon's day have done, brought with it “careers open to talent” and gave the young Bennett his chance. He found himself inducted into, and excelling in, the army's Signal Corps. Later he was transferred to intelligence duties in the Radio Security Service (an intercept service run initially by MI5 but transferred to SIS control in 1941). Bennett's career continued to prosper and at the end of the war he joined the British government's signals intelligence unit, GCHQ, at Cheltenham. There he remained, occupying various responsible posts and conducting overseas assignments, until 1954, when he decided to emigrate to Canada and look for similar employment with the Canadian equivalent of GCHQ, the communications intercept service run under the cover of the National Research Council and known as CBNRC. No KGB mole-handler in his right mind would have allowed a prize agent like Bennett to leave the heart of British intelligence operations for the relative backwater of Ottawa. No convincing trace of ideological commitment to communism, or of a carefully plotted infiltration, can be discerned in Bennett's life story, at least as it is told by Sawatsky.

It is here that the second branch of Sawatsky's story comes usefully into play. The real nub of RCMP suspicion about Bennett was a product of frustration felt over the indifferent record of Security Service counter-intelligence operations against the Russians. Sawatsky's handling of this material is anecdotal and confusingly episodic, but the patient reader will find that a clear enough story emerges in the end. The story, on the evidence presented and despite all temptations to find a conspiratorial thread, leads to the unmistakable conclusion that Bennett was made a scapegoat of a particular kind. He was not the victim of personal malice nor of a competition for power, but he did possess all the liabilities of an "outsider"; he was British, a civilian rather than a commissioned Mountie, a man of some intellect, a tireless worker, and characteristically aloof. Once more, the Philby "identikit" does not fit this man, for Philby, unlike Bennett, owed his success to his very ability to gain the unquestioned acceptance of his professional colleagues in MI6. Bennett, a vulnerable outsider, was a scapegoat for something almost impersonal — namely a failure by the RCMP hierarchy to arrive at a realistic understanding of the nature of counter-intelligence work.

This failure has its historic side. The RCMP were forced into the counter-intelligence game by the exigencies of Canada's participation in two world wars. The government simply handed the task to the Mounties, who had no previous experience of it, no training for it, and who were allowed no additional resources to meet it. Not surprisingly, given such amateurish improvisation, Canadian security was haphazardly protected and many phantoms were chased (German saboteurs out to dynamite the CP railways in World War One, Bolshevik revolutionary cells in the inter-war period). The legacy of this formative era of counter-intelligence work was two-fold. First, the RCMP continued to treat counter-intelligence as simply another branch of detective work with the spy equated with the criminal. Second, the RCMP showed a distinct inability to make realistic assessments of the nature of the various threats supposed to endanger Canadian security. Exaggeration seemed to alternate with neglect. Above all, there was the persistent lack of resources, and a lack of interest in the work shown by both the government and RCMP chiefs. The only thing that prevented the situation from being truly dangerous was the lack of any serious and sustained threat.

Then along came the Gouzenko affair. Gouzenko, a young cypher clerk who defected from the Russian embassy in Ottawa in late 1945 with some 109 documents taped to his body, provided the West with a startling picture of unfriendly espionage conducted by an erstwhile ally, helped to accelerate the forces of the Cold War, and briefly launched Canada onto centre stage in the spy world (much to the annoyance of Mackenzie King). Most unfortunately, the Gouzenko affair provided the RCMP with an unrealistic model for all their future intelligence operations. There were loose ends in sufficient profusion to ensure that the Gouzenko case would remain tantalizing to the RCMP well beyond 1945. Gouzenko may have defected of his own accord and caught the RCMP completely by surprise. Next time they would be ready, perhaps even able to engineer a defection. Gouzenko, furthermore, had identified many

Soviet agents who could not be traced beyond their code-names. Suspicion that there were traitors at large, fed hope among the RCMP that they would eventually be able to achieve further arrests and amend the rather sorry record of the Gouzenko-related trials, where a full fifty percent of the suspects were ultimately acquitted.

This was the milieu Bennett entered in 1954 when he joined the RCMP Security Service (the CBNRC had no position open for him). Measured against the Gouzenko windfall, the subsequent operations of Bennett's Russian desk provided mediocre returns indeed and some cases went sour. The Gouzenko model was, of course, absurd and RCMP expectations were pitched far too high. The RCMP Security Service did not have anything like the resources available to the KGB and GRU, operating from the Russian Embassy in Ottawa. But the Western powers were keen on finding more Gouzenkos and alarmed about the possibilities of moles within their midst. The United States counter-intelligence community was under the influence of, first, McCarthyism, and then the tenacious mole hunting of James Jesus Angleton.² With British traitors popping up almost annually, and with the United States urging vigilance by example, it was hard for the Mounties not to take the cue. Frustration inside the Security Service about its anti-Soviet operations led to suspicion, and as soon as suspicion hit on Bennett the outsider, the certainty of guilt followed.

While Sawatsky's account lacks much historical or analytical weight, he has performed a service for those interested in the debate over the role and future of Canada's counter-intelligence agency. The narration of this unflattering tale of RCMP operations lends impetus to the case for a separate, civilian-run security service, which the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau moved ever so slowly to create. Whether this new service will be sufficiently different from the old, only time will tell.

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Footnotes

1. John Sawatsky, *Men in the Shadows: The RCMP Security Service* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1980).
2. David E. Martin, *Wilderness of Mirrors* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980).

Newman, Peter C. *True North: Not Strong and Free*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983.

In September 1984 Robert Coates, the new Conservative Minister of National Defence, announced that one of his first priorities was to