*Thomas Munch-Petersen*

# Colin Alexander Mackenzie, a British Agent at Tilsit

Just over one hundred years ago, in 1901, John Holland Rose published an article entitled 'A British Agent at Tilsit' in the *English Historical Review*. In this article, Rose argued that the so-called 'secret intelligence from Tilsit' was transmitted to the British government in 1807 by a British agent called Mr. Mackenzie.[1] Subsequent research has shown that Rose was mistaken, but Mackenzie's activities contain other points of interest. Before we look at how Mackenzie came to be at Tilsit in June 1807, a few words on the international background are called for.

## *The secret intelligence from Tilsit*

When the year 1807 began, Britain and Russia were allies at war with Napoleonic France. French armies had occupied northern Germany in the last months of the previous year and during the winter of 1806-1807 the main fighting took place in Poland between French and Russian forces. It was a bitter and protracted struggle in which for a long time neither side could gain the upper hand, but on 14 June 1807 Napoleon inflicted a sharp defeat on the Russian army at Friedland. As a result, the Russian emperor, Alexander I, concluded that Russia would have to make peace with France. It was conceivable that, once she had made her separate peace with France, Russia would withdraw into a subdued but still fundamentally anti-French neutrality. In fact, the celebrated meeting between Alexander and Napoleon on a raft in the river Niemen at Tilsit on 25 June 1807 proved to be the opening stage of negotiations which led to the conclusion a few weeks later, on 7 July, not only of a peace treaty but also of a secret treaty of alliance between France and Russia.

In the early hours of 22 July 1807, a letter was delivered to George Canning, the British foreign secretary. He had just finished a private letter of his own to his friend, the British

[1] J. Holland Rose, 'A British Agent at Tilsit', *English Historical Review*, vol. XVI (1901), pp. 712-718.

ambassador to Russia, Lord Granville Leveson Gower. It had been a long day, and Canning's handwriting was a scrawl in the postscript which the letter he received in the witching hours prompted him to add:

> Since I finished my letter to you at two o'clock this morning I have received intelligence which appears to rest on good authority, coming directly from Tilsit, that, at a conference between the Emperor of Russia and Bonaparte, the latter proposed a maritime league against Great Britain to which Denmark and Sweden and Portugal should be invited or forced to accede. The Emperor of Russia is represented not indeed to have agreed to the proposition but not to have said anything against it. He preserved a profound silence which is attributed in the report made to me to the presence at the conference of persons before whom he probably would not like to open himself.[2]

This is the much-debated secret intelligence from Tilsit, but it is not confirmed by the actual wording of the treaties signed at Tilsit on 7 July. The secret treaty of alliance anticipated that Russia would make common cause with France by the end of 1807 and that Denmark, Portugal and Sweden would be compelled to close their ports to British shipping and declare war on Britain, but there was no mention of a maritime league. There is, in other words, no independent corroboration of the secret intelligence from Tilsit, but it certainly captures the deeply anti-British spirit in which the negotiations between Alexander and Napoleon were conducted.[3] In this limited sense, at least, it gave the British government a valuable insight into the true state of affairs.

During the debates in parliament in the early months of 1808, the British government divulged the existence of confidential information about the secret agreements reached between France and Russia the previous summer, and there has

---

[2] Canning to Gower, 21 July 1807. The original of this letter, in Canning's hand, is in Gower's private papers, which are in the Public Record Office, London [cited as PRO] – PRO 38/29/8/4. There is another copy in fine secretarial hand in Canning's private papers, Leeds District Archive, George Canning Papers [cited as LDA], HAR/GC/42; and the postscript is printed in A. N. Ryan, 'Documents relating to the Copenhagen operation, 1807', *Publications of the Navy Record Society*, vol. 125, *The Naval Miscellany*, vol. 5 (1984), pp. 307-308.

[3] For an account of events in Europe leading up to and surrounding the Tilsit alliance, see Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 305-331. The text of the treaties is printed in many publications, for example, *Sbornik imperatorskogo russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva* (St. Petersburg, 1892), vol. 89, pp. 50-62; and Albert Vandal, *Napoléon et Alexandre 1er. L'alliance russe sous le premier empire*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1896), vol. 1, *De Tilsit à Erfurt*, pp. 499-507.

been sporadic historical discussion as to its source ever since. It was in this context that Mackenzie appeared on the scene in the article Rose published in 1901. In the 1970s, Canning's source was finally identified, when a letter to him from the comte d'Antraigues, dated 21 July 1807, was located in Canning's private papers.[4] D'Antraigues was a French émigré who had served many European governments since leaving France in 1790. Between 1802 and 1806, he had been attached to the Russian legation in Dresden, but he had been resident in London since September 1806 and was in receipt of pensions from both the Russian and British governments. D'Antraigues's letter contains the secret intelligence from Tilsit and claims that he had derived it from a prominent Russian who held a position close to Emperor Alexander. In a recent article, I have demonstrated that d'Antraigues's Russian informant must have been one of Alexander's aides-de-camp, Prince Vassili Troubetzkoi, and that it reached d'Antraigues by courier via northern Germany, but that d'Antraigues's letter to Canning contains large elements of embellishment and fabrication.[5]

It is therefore clear that Mackenzie was not the source of the secret intelligence from Tilsit. However, he could have been: Mackenzie was at Tilsit in June 1807 and he was some kind of agent of the British government. How did that come about?

## *Colin Alexander Mackenzie*

Colin Alexander Mackenzie (?1778-1851) was the son of a certain Colin Mackenzie of Dingwall.[6] According to d'Antraigues, his family was extremely rich.[7] Mackenzie undertook a kind of grand tour between 1803 and 1806 of northern, eastern and central Europe. In 1804 he served as a volunteer with the Russian army based at Tiflis and participated in the unsuccessful attempt to take Erivan from the

[4] Peter Dixon, *Canning. Politician and Statesman* (London, 1976), pp. 111, 172

[5] Thomas Munch-Petersen, 'The secret intelligence from Tilsit. New light on the events surrounding the British bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807', [Danish] *Historisk Tidsskrift*, vol. 102, part 1 (2002), pp. 55-96.

[6] These details about his birth and parentage come from his great great nephew – see E. C. Mackenzie, *Notes and Queries*, 10th Series, vol. VIII, 28 Dec. 1907, pp. 511-512. However, I am indebted to Mr. Harry Watson for the information that a Colin Alexander Mackenzie was born in March 1777 at Dingwall to Kenneth Mackenzie – perhaps he was a different man with the same name, but perhaps not.

[7] Czartoryski Library, Cracow, Czart. Mss., vol. 5481 [cited as Cracow 5481], d'Antraigues to Czartoryski, 13 May 1807.

Persians. During this campaign, he struck up a friendship with Count Michael Vorontsov, the son of Simon Vorontsov, the long-serving Russian ambassador in London, who retired in 1806, but remained resident in Britain. On his way home through Germany in 1806, Mackenzie passed through Dresden, where he became acquainted with d'Antraigues, who was still attached to the Russian legation in Saxony at that stage. On reaching Britain, Mackenzie was anxious for employment in government service and sought the assistance of Sir John Macpherson, through the intermediary of his father. Macpherson introduced him to yet another Scot, the Marquis of Douglas and Clydesdale, the newly appointed British ambassador to Russia, shortly before Douglas set out for St. Petersburg in late November 1806. This prompted Mackenzie to suggest to Macpherson on 26 December 1806 that he might be of 'essential service' to Douglas if he joined the Russian army in Poland as a volunteer and kept Douglas informed of 'the various events and decisions taken & resolved upon to regain and save the North of Europe'. He added that he hoped for a good reception at Russian headquarters, because of his personal acquaintance with many Russian officers, especially Michael Vorontsov, who was now adjutant to the commander-in-chief of the Russian army in Poland.[8]

Macpherson passed this suggestion on to Lord Howick, the foreign secretary in the short-lived Grenville administration, but nothing came of it. Macpherson was not the happiest choice of patron that Mackenzie could have found. His main claim to fame was a brief stint as acting governor-general of Bengal in the 1780s, but he was widely regarded as a foolish busybody. Canning went further and called him 'a mad politician, the correspondent (so far as that term applies to a man who writes letters, but receives no answers) of all the crowned heads of Europe, and for aught I know in all the other quarters of the globe'.[9]

Mackenzie had more luck after Canning succeeded Howick as foreign secretary in the new Portland administration in late March 1807. Canning decided to send Mackenzie to Russia along with Gower, whom he had appointed to replace Douglas as ambassador. On this occasion, it was his acquaintance from Dresden, d'Antraigues, who introduced Mackenzie to the

[8] Durham University Library, second Earl Grey papers [cited as DUL], GRE/B40/14, Mackenzie to Macpherson, 14 Nov. & 26 Dec. (quotation) 1806 and Macpherson to Howick, 5 Jan. 1807.

[9] R. G. Thorne (ed.),. *The House of Commons 1790-1820*, vol. IV, *Members G-P* (London, 1886) in *The History of Parliament*, pp. 515-517.

foreign secretary. D'Antraigues must have mentioned Mackenzie to Canning and received an encouraging response, because he wrote to Canning on 27 April 1807 that he would present Mackenzie to Maksim Alopeus, the Russian ambassador to Britain, and advise Mackenzie to call on Canning the next day.[10] We do not know what transpired at that meeting, but Canning rapidly concluded that Mackenzie should be sent to Russia. The Russia dossiers of the foreign office contain an undated summary by Mackenzie of his previous experiences in Russia, endorsed with the statements that the summary had been received on 16 May and that Mackenzie was 'employed on a military mission to the Russian army'.[11] Canning gave Mackenzie a private letter of introduction to Gower in which he said that he had already spoken of Mackenzie to Gower and expressed a hope that Gower could find room for him on the frigate taking him to Russia.[12]

On 17 May, he recommended Mackenzie to Gower's protection in a public despatch. Mackenzie's previous experience of Russia and his many Russian acquaintances 'will enable him, no doubt, to be employed by Your Excellency on many occasions where his services may prove of the highest advantage ... It is left to Your Excellency's discretion to select those points to which Mr Mackenzie's abilities and experience may best be directed: and Your Excellency will transmit such information as he may be able to collect' to the British government.[13] Mackenzie was also furnished with instructions authorising him to reclaim such expenses as he might incur during his stay with the Russian army from Gower or, once Gower was no longer close to that army, from the foreign office in London.[14]

It is clear from these documents that Mackenzie's intended function was to use his position as a volunteer with the Russian army to provide the British government with independent information on the progress of military operations. As Britain and Russia were still allies at this stage, this hardly made him a spy, but Gower's discretionary power to employ him anywhere he thought fit might have turned Mackenzie into a spy in some circumstances.

---

[10] LDA, HAR/GC/59B, d'Antraigues to Canning, 27 April 1807.
[11] PRO, FO 65/72, Mackenzie to Canning, undated, but received 16 May 1807.
[12] PRO 30/29/8/4, Canning to Gower, 16 May 1807.
[13] PRO, FO 65/69, unnumbered desp., Canning to Gower, 17 May 1807.
[14] PRO, FO 65/69, Draft instructions to Mr. Mackenzie, 17 May 1807, and second unnumbered desp., Canning to Gower, 17 May 1807.

As it happened, Mackenzie's second stay in Russia was painfully brief. Emperor Alexander was at Tilsit, close to his main field army, and Gower's frigate therefore made for Memel rather than St. Petersburg. Mackenzie arrived at Memel with Gower on 10 June, and reached Tilsit on 14 June.[15] He therefore missed the battle of Friedland, but caught up with the defeated Russian army some days later. Mackenzie was introduced to General Bennigsen, the Russian commander in chief, by Prince Troubetzkoi (d'Antraigues's informant) and Dr. James Wylie, a Scottish physician in Russian service. On presenting Vorontsov's letter of introduction, Mackenzie was given a general invitation to dine at Bennigsen's table, and on 23 June he was able to write to Gower with some details of the condition of the Russian army. His most interesting observation was that 'the disposition for continuing the struggle is not very lively here. [Bennigsen] declared yesterday he would undertake to beat the enemy again & again with 60,000 men, but no one replied.'[16] He also wrote a friendly, private letter to d'Antraigues from Russian headquarters with an equally gloomy assessment of the state of the Russian forces.[17]

Mackenzie's letter to Gower on 23 June was his one and only report. He witnessed the first meeting between Alexander and Napoleon on 25 June from the shore of the Niemen, but returned to Memel the following day.[18] By 3 July Mackenzie had been transformed into a courier as the bearer of a group of despatches and private letters from Gower to Canning. Gower had no thought that he might return:

> I send home Mr. Mackenzie because I do not feel myself justified in retaining him here at the public expense, when there is no possibility of his returning to the Russian Army; he seems to be zealous & active, and he might perhaps be usefully employed in some out of the way sort of mission.

It is also clear that Mackenzie had not transmitted any juicy information to Gower orally about what was happening at Tilsit. In the same letter, Gower observed: 'Though at only 70 English miles distant from the scene of negotiation, I have not

[15] PRO, FO 65/69, Mackenzie to Canning, 13 June 1807; Cracow, 5481, d'Antraigues-Czartoryski, 17 July 1807.
[16] PRO, FO 65/69, Mackenzie to Gower, 23 June 1807, enclosed in unnumbered desp., Gower to Canning, 26 June 1807.
[17] Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Fonds Bourbons, Paris [cited as AAE, FB], vol. 640, Mackenzie to d'Antraigues, (21?) June 1807.
[18] *Life of General Sir Robert Wilson*, edited by Herbert Randolph, 2 vols. (London, 1862), vol. 2, pp. 283-284.

been able to find means of obtaining any information as to the basis upon which they are negotiating.'[19]

Mackenzie reached London with Gower's letters and despatches on 23 July, more than 24 hours after the secret intelligence from Tilsit had been transmitted to Canning. Over the following years, he remained on very good terms with d'Antraigues, whose papers contain almost 30 letters or notes, mostly undated, in which Mackenzie addressed him as 'Cher Ami' or 'Mon cher Ami'.[20] What little is known about the remainder of his life suggests that he was indeed employed on a few 'out of the way' sorts of mission. He is almost certainly the Colin Mackenzie who acted as a confidential agent of the British government on Heligoland in 1808.[21] In 1810 he was sent to Morlaix in an unsuccessful attempt to negotiate an exchange of prisoners with the French government, and shortly afterwards he was appointed 'to receive and entertain' Lucien Bonaparte, who had been taken prisoner of war. After Waterloo, he presided for several years over the commission set up to investigate private British claims on the French government, and he was acting consul-general in charge of affairs in Portugal for just over a year between 1829 and 1830. He was one of the founders of the Travellers' Club and died unmarried in 1851 at the age of 73.[22]

There was no public suggestion during his lifetime that Mackenzie had any part in the murky business of the secret intelligence from Tilsit, but it was a family tradition that he had been involved. The story was first told by Mackenzie himself to his great nephew, the bishop suffragan of Nottingham, and ran as follows. Mackenzie had overheard the first conversation on the raft in the Niemen between Alexander and Napoleon, disguised as a Cossack, whose uniform he had acquired 'by means of gold and liquor', and had then brought the secret intelligence from Tilsit to London. The family, however, was ashamed of the story and it had been omitted from Colin's obituary in 1851 at the request of his sister, a Mrs. Wadd. It was the publication of Rose's article in 1901 that prompted the Mackenzie family to break cover.[23] There was no substance to

[19] LDA, HAR/GC/57, Gower to Canning, 3 July 1807.

[20] Mackenzie's letters to d'Antraigues are in AAE, FB, vol. 640, ff. 46-82.

[21] Elizabeth Sparrow, *Secret Service. British Agents in France 1792-1815* (Woodbridge, 1999), pp. 362-365.

[22] Obituary of C. A. Mackenzie, *The Times*, 26 Nov. 1851, p. 6 (quotation); S. T. Bindoff, E. F. Malcolm Smith & C. K. Webster, *British Diplomatic Representatives, 1789-1852, Camden Third Series*, vol. 50 (1934), p. 94.

[23] E. C. Mackenzie, *Notes and Queries*, 10th Series, vol. VIII, 28 Dec. 1907, pp. 511-512.

the story – it was a fairy tale told to entertain the younger generation.

One obvious moral of the story is the unreliability of family tradition, but in principle there could have been some truth behind it. Mackenzie did spend three or four weeks at or near Tilsit in the summer of 1807 and he was in the service of the British government. He was even well acquainted with d'Antraigues. It so happens that he was not the source or the bearer of the secret intelligence from Tilsit. What is more, there is no documentary evidence that he was able to obtain any particularly sensitive information while he was at Tilsit.

Mackenzie's journey to the Baltic in 1807 is interesting not for the information he obtained but rather for what it tells us about the haphazard and opportunistic way in which semi-official agents were recruited in this period. The importance of patronage in early nineteenth century Britain is notorious. Mackenzie presents a case where patronage (even when the patrons were such peripheral figures as Macpherson and d'Antraigues), when combined with some fortuitous contacts in a foreign country, could enable a young man to get his foot in the door and to go on to lead a life on the fringes of government service.