

## Book Review: A Spy Among Friends: Kim Philby and the Great Betrayal by Ben Macintyre

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**Macintyre, Ben, *A Spy Among Friends: Kim Philby and the Great Betrayal*. Toronto: Signal, McClelland & Stewart, 2014. 368. \$21.64.**

It can be tempting for “serious” historians to dismiss works that are aimed at a more general audience and achieve popular success. Often these dismissals are valid; historiography sections and extensive endnotes detailing primary sources do not usually make for page turners. However, a recent generation of historians—and many of them are trained journalists rather than history PhDs—are writing solid historical narratives that can be found not just on the shelves of university libraries but at Barnes & Noble (or, more realistically, Amazon distribution centers) as well. Chief among these historians is Ben Macintyre.

Ben Macintyre’s 2014<sup>1</sup> *A Spy Among Friends: Kim Philby and the Great Betrayal* is not his first book. One of his earlier works, *The Englishman’s Daughter*, (2003) helped inspire me to examine life in occupied France during the First World War for my dissertation. His speciality is spies: including 2008’s *Agent Zigzag: A True Story of Nazi Espionage, Love, and Betrayal*, and 2011’s *Operation Mincemeat: How a Dead Man and a Bizarre Plan Fooled the Nazis and Assured an Allied Victory*. In *A Spy Among Friends*, he brings back to life Kim Philby, often hailed (or condemned) as the greatest double agent of all time. A man many in the know once assumed would someday head MI6, Kim Philby duped his wives, friends, and colleagues in the British spying business for decades, acting as a mole for the Soviet Union. Recruited while still at Cambridge along with two other students, the *raison d’être* for his spying career was to help the Communist cause. He fooled everyone for decades. In 1951, when two of his fellow “Cambridge” spies were outed and defected to Russia and voices at MI5 and the CIA were calling for Philby’s arrest, he convinced the world through a brilliant media conference and his MI6 friends through his pedigree, that he was innocent. While forced to resign his high-level position, he became a journalist in Beirut and quickly became an agent for MI6 and a double

agent for the Soviets once again. When in 1963 the evidence became unsurmountable that Philby was a spy, lax surveillance by his former friends allowed him to defect to Russia, most likely on purpose to avoid the embarrassment of a trial.

Prior to this book there was no dearth of works dedicated to Philby's life; this book adds some detail thanks to newly available British intelligence files and personal family letters. Moreover, *A Spy Among Friends* introduces the Philby case to a new generation, the second to not know his treachery as frontpage news. This is not the work's greatest contribution, however. Rather, that is bringing to life the important supporting figures of the saga: James Jesus Angleton, CIA intelligence chief, and above all, Nicholas Elliot, a senior operative "central to pretty well every major operation that the Service had undertaken since the outbreak of the Second World War" (p.296). Elliot, a few years behind Philby in school, at first worshiped him, then became his greatest friend, leading Macintyre to note, "They were as close as two, heterosexual, upper class, midcentury, English could be." (p. 230). However, once Elliot realized Philby was a spy, he wanted to be the one to bring him down, and, as Macintyre convincingly suggests, allowed him to escape for the good of the British Empire, and not out of any remaining loyalty. An afterword by John Le Carré, which includes his impressions and excerpts from his 1986 interview with Elliot, supports this supposition.

Beyond what it reveals about the world of British, (and to a lesser extent) Soviet and American espionage and its characters, this book can be categorized as a social history of upper-class society men that came of age during the Second World War. It is a world that gave us James Bond; indeed, Ian Fleming, alongside Graham Green and P.G. Wodehouse, makes an appearance. It is a world where a word from the right friend got you a job in the elite MI6 and

alcohol consumption was a prerequisite. If you came from this world, no one would ever believe you could be anything but loyal to the British flag.

In terms of pedagogy, *A Spy Among Friends* often reads like a novel, however it is too long and too focused on a specific a group to be assigned in most undergraduate courses. The work is appropriate for graduate students examining espionage from World War Two through the Cold War. Since the writing is manageable for undergraduate students, it could be offered as a title for a book review assignment, as it will show students that best historical practices can still be interesting and accessible.

<sup>1</sup>Full disclosure: The *International Social Science Review*'s guidelines state that books must be published in the last five years for it to be considered for review. The rules were bent for this book (by a few months). In fact, Macintyre has even published another book since then, 2018's *The Spy and the Traitor: The Greatest Espionage Story of the Cold War*, the story of Oleg Gordievsky, the Russian who helped bring the collapse of the USSR.

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