

Books

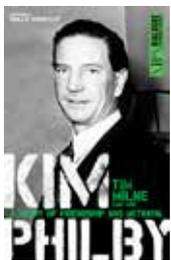
Reviews



Kim Philby: a story of friendship and betrayal

By Tim Milne

Biteback Publishing, 285pp, £9.99



Even at school in the 1920s, Kim Philby stood apart. According to this memoir by his schoolfriend and MI6 colleague Tim Milne, the future spy was a “fearless” loner, so secretive that he was never seen going to the lavatory. At cricket, Philby liked to field at deep cover, a remote position ideal for observing the game he loved.

If Philby seemed born to be a spy, Milne says we can only speculate on what made him a traitor. He claims to have been as shocked as anyone when Philby defected to Moscow in 1963. Even when Philby was forced to resign over the defection of Guy Burgess in

1951, Milne’s faith in his old friend never wavered. “It seemed impossible to believe he had done anything worse than act a little unwisely,” he writes.

As Milne shows, the same qualities that made Philby a top MI6 officer in the first place enabled him to avoid suspicion for so long: the nerves of steel required to live a double life for decades, the charm to make people believe what he wanted them to and overlook what he didn’t, and the ruthlessness to betray those closest to him.

If you don’t know the story of the Cambridge spy ring, this isn’t the place to start. Written in the late 1970s but banned from publication until last year - three years after Milne’s death - these memoirs combine an intimate but very fragmented portrait of Philby, with illuminating insights into how post-war

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intelligence services worked – or didn’t.

Controversially, Milne plays down the impact of Philby’s treachery, even suggesting he may have helped the war effort by convincing the Soviets of Britain’s commitment to the anti-Nazi alliance. While it was a huge coup to have MI6’s anti-Soviet operation run by a Soviet agent, Milne argues the need to maintain Philby’s cover limited his usefulness: “For 99% of the time the only safe way he could help the Russians was to tell them what was happening, give advice where he could, and leave the rest to them.”

While loftily dismissing spy fiction, this book is drenched in the same sadness and tragic sense of futility you find in John Le Carré’s novels, especially *The Looking Glass War*. Wartime military intelligence brought huge benefits, but Cold War spies seemed to exist mainly to spy on each other, with the efforts of both sides cancelling each other out. Perhaps the real reason this book was suppressed for so long is the unwitting suggestion that both Philby and Milne were wasting their time.

So why did Philby do it? It certainly wasn’t for the glamorous life – he never got any serious money from the Soviets and ended up in a grotty flat in Moscow, permanently cut off from the things he loved most: cricket, his friends and foreign travel.

Milne’s conclusion that Philby was simply a convinced communist who never wavered, even when Stalin’s crimes were exposed, seems fair. Once he had chosen both communism and a clandestine career there was no turning back. “A man of Kim’s pride and chilling certainty of his own rightness could not recross either of these Rubicons without destroying something of himself,” Milne writes. In his egotistical and ideological stubbornness, Kim Philby perhaps succeeded in deceiving himself most of all.

Reviewed by Craig Ryan