

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

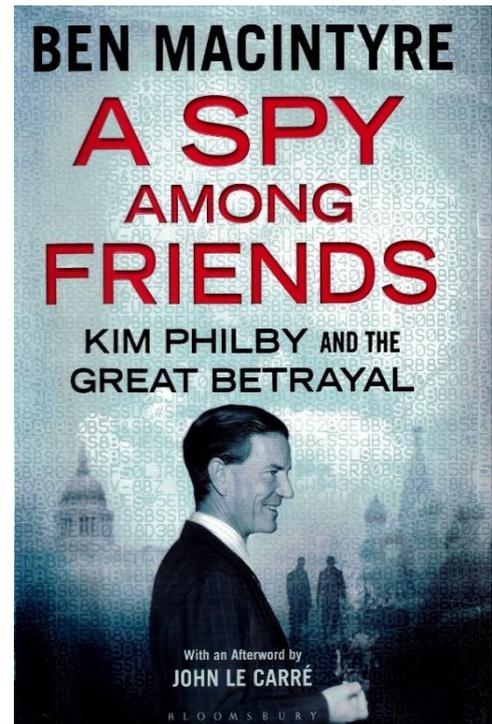
39 – *Spy Among Friends*
(10 April 2019)

A SPY AMONG FRIENDS – Kim Philby and the Great Betrayal

Author: Ben Macintyre

Publisher: [Bloomsbury](#), 2014
(available on Amazon, [click on cover image for link](#))

Descriptor: The Philby story retold as friendship betrayed, with the dupe being his colleague, Nicholas Elliott.



RusRoL relevance: *Explains why the British (and American) secret services threw the baby of human trust out with the bathwater of betrayal. Spying must be one of the purest forms of STATUS assertion, so when secret services get modishly CONTRACTual ideas it is time to worry. As the author says: "The new-style MI6 did not do jokes."*

Reason to read: Though there is much to be recommended in this highly readable book, I will concentrate on the issue of friendship. Apart from its intrinsic interest, the theme is worth examining as it raises the unfashionable subject of nepotism, which is an expression of friendship. Wrong-headed ideas about nepotism have bedevilled all discussion of the Philby case since he was first fingered as the possible "third man" in 1955. Ben Macintyre is absolutely right to focus on that issue in his retelling of this perennially fascinating story, but he is wholly wrong, in my view, to accept the censoriously self-righteous "liberal" line that the ideal organisation is one in which no-one arrives with any personal links to anyone already in it, nor develops them while working there. Preferably, apart from football supporters' clubs and permissible hobbies like steam engine restoration or bird-watching, the modern employee never develops any professional affections.

One potential consequence of social isolation is tunnel-vision ambition, which is not only uncultured but also potentially damaging to any organisation large enough that the top table cannot keep a daily eye on all the lonely operatives eating off trays in the self-service canteen. Ambition unrestrained by *esprit de corps* in the long run breeds disloyalty. The classic case in the secret world was Aldrich Ames, as noted in Macintyre's [Gordievsky book](#). Ames was a greedy, materialistic, mid-level CIA operative who sold his country's secrets for enough money to keep his snobbish Hispanic wife in diamonds, cars, designer shoes and all the other frippery that is valued in a society without either culture or *esprit de corps*.

The other approach is to rely on the inter-related network of contacts which usually—and that qualification is important—keeps organisations together and enables a discrete eye to be kept on any potential deviants. Philby was hired by SIS (or MI6) in the 1930s partly because Valentine Vivian, the deputy head of the service said, “I knew his people.”

Though Macintyre sniffs at this in a fashionably righteous manner, I think he is wrong to do so. The world of real power, of real STATUS, is not a place for lonely, unclubbable, open and transparent bird-watchers. A shared background is one of the main requirements of genuine trust. Why does Putin rely on the St Petersburg mafia? Why did Churchill stress to Roosevelt that he was, like the President, a “former naval person”? Why did George Washington say that, if forced to, he would make his last, defiant stand “among the Scots-Irish of his native Virginia”?

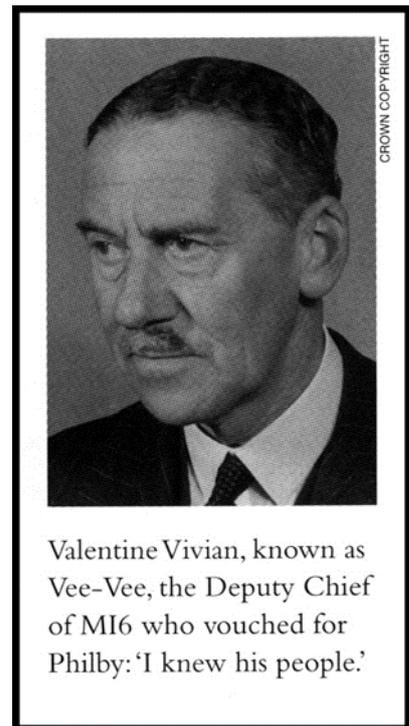
One of the reasons for the leathery resilience of Russian society in the face of assaults from all sides, including the Winter Palace and the Kremlin, has always been that it is unashamedly nepotistic.

Powerful people prefer to employ members of their own family because they can trust them implicitly. Next in line are old friends, especially those with whom they have gone through unpleasant experiences, like serving in the army. Then there are friends of friends, and servants of friends and so on outwards. The idea of letting a complete unknown, especially one who interviews well, into the charmed circle is considered idiotic, or evidence of moral weakness.

Nonetheless, human nature being what it is—i.e. varied—this does not obviate the need to keep an eye on anyone who has keys to the company safe, so to speak. We owe our freedom from socialism today in part to the fact that at the time of the greatest shoot-out in European history since Hitler raised his revolver to attack his own brain, Ronald Reagan instinctively understood this principle. He saw that the Russians were, at bottom, people like us and that he had to extend the hand of trust to Mikhail Gorbachev—*yet in a cautious way*. The Americans had a motto when dealing with the Soviets which they liked to express in Russian: “Доверяй, но проверяй” (doverai no proverai): “trust but verify”. It worked. The Soviet menace is no more. The British problem with the Philbys of this world was that they forgot the second half.

SIS was *not* wrong to trust people like Kim Philby, but it *was* wrong not to verify. The failure in this case, and many others like it, was essentially *managerial*. To draw the conclusion that the so-called “old boy network” was, in itself, a bad thing is to miss the point. The reason why Britain failed in this and so many similar cases is not explored by Macintyre, yet it is of critical importance if any sort of trust is to be re-established within the corridors of power, and if national *esprit de corps* is to be resurrected. Essentially, he swallows the liberal orthodoxy that the problem was class, in particular the toffish nature of MI6.

This is the MI5 view, and Macintyre puts the distinction well when he compares the distinction to that between the FBI and the CIA. “MI5 tended to recruit former police officers and soldiers, men who sometimes spoke with regional accents, and frequently did not know, or care about, the right order to use to use the cutlery at a formal dinner.... MI6 was more public school and Oxbridge; its accents more



Valentine Vivian, known as Vee-Vee, the Deputy Chief of MI6 who vouched for Philby: ‘I knew his people.’

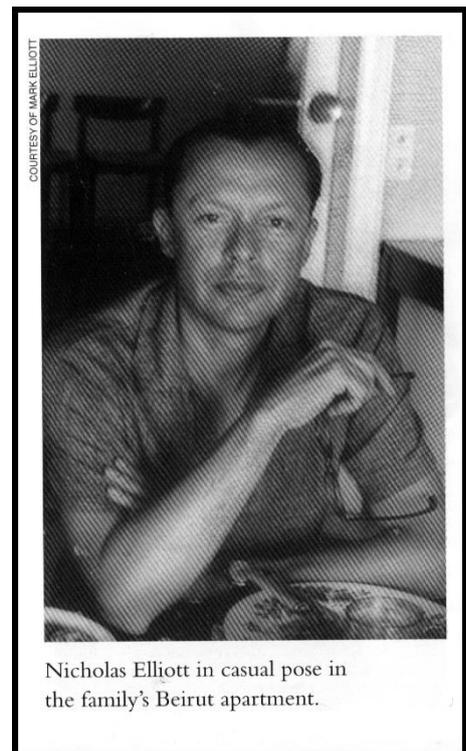
refined, its tailoring better... MI6 was White's; MI5 was the Rotary Club... MI5 was 'below the salt', a little common, and MI6 was gentlemanly, elitist and old school tie." (p. 159, emphasis in original)

The lazy assumption behind this is that it is naïve and, as I am sure he would say, lazy-minded to trust public school boys above former policemen. Does Macintyre not know how rife corruption is in the British police? Who trusts *them*? Macintyre is clearly a product of what one might call the "Shirley Williams generation". He seems unaware that true class ignores accents and doesn't give a fig for formal dinners. But at least the former policemen trusted *someone*. Today, we trust nobody. Instead we rely on the algorithm, on machine-readable, multiple-choice interview responses and on the rule that all human friendship is potentially suspect. However, algorithms are not, and never can be, people, much less "people like us". I'd prefer to be ruled over by bent coppers than omniscient computers in the hands of solitary saddoes who would have to use Google Translate™ to understand the meaning of *esprit de corps*.

What virtuous liberals like Ben Macintyre fail to realise is that *all* power is tribal. The only question is which tribe: the machine-minders who believe in Data Protection, the retired policemen who believe in "positive vetting", or the people who know how to use a knife and fork properly, and are clear about which laws a cultured person should be happy to break?

Smile: Here is a conversation between an MI5 security officer and Philby's closest friend in MI6, Nicholas Elliott (Eton and Cambridge, and the man who finally interrogated his old colleague in Beirut in 1963). The subject was the MI5-ish idea that you should keep secrets even from your own family:

- Does your wife know what you do?
- Yes.
- How did that come about?
- She was my secretary for two years and I think the penny must have dropped.
- What about your mother?
- She thinks I am in something called SIS, which she believes stands for the Secret Intelligence Service.
- Good God! How did she come to know that?
- A member of the War Cabinet told her at a cocktail party.
- Then what about your father?
- He thinks I am a spy.
- Why should he think you are a spy?
- Because the Chief told him in the bar at White's. (pp. 85-6)



Nicholas Elliott in casual pose in the family's Beirut apartment.

Collateral knowledge: Claude Dansey, the assistant chief of MI6 who was the subject of a [review of a book called *Colonel Z*](#), was described by Hugh Trevor-Roper as "an utter shit, corrupt, incompetent, but with a certain low cunning." (p. 50) Nicholas Elliott described Trevor-Roper as "wet and useless", but agreed that Dansey was an "utter shit; stupid too. But tough and rude.... Carried on feuds. I mean a real shit." (p. 296) Elsewhere we read that "Dansey hated Vivian, and Vivian hated Dansey; Philby's boss Felix Cowgill feuded with both, and was detested in turn." (p. 51) How very MI5 of them! However, the

head of counter-intelligence at MI5, Guy Liddell, was a “refined, cello-playing” individual, a “rumped, genial figure who looked more like a country banker than a spymaster.” (p. 51) How very MI6 of him! It is hardly necessary to point out that an algorithm, however sophisticated, would make a worse fist of sorting all that out than a whole pub full of retired policeman. What is really needed is a smoking room full of utter shits.

Style: Journalistic, often clichéd—as in the solemn statement that there was “a generation of Englishmen who believed that feelings are a sign of weakness, to be suppressed, ignored or laughed off.” (p. 245) There is a lot more in that vein. We are, Macintyre implies, all emoters now. How very Shirleyish of him!

Publishing quality: Fine. Good pictures.

Author: Ben Macintyre is a columnist for *The Times*. He has written many books about espionage in the twentieth century. He tweets, which is what makes me think he is “unsound” on class. Gentlemen do not advertise. However, he did write the excellent biography of [Oleg Gordievsky](#) referred to above.

Link(s): Fascinating film about Philby which includes the Elliott interrogation in Beirut, made by Macintyre’s competitor in this field, Philip Knightly, but which also concentrates on the personal aspects of the story: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pw_0cgO2JKE

Overall recommendation level: HIGH, despite the author’s fashionable prejudices

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including [Isles of the West](#) and [The Justice Factory](#). He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “RusRoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: ianbookrec@gmail.com. For other reviews in this series, see [Ian Mitchell’s Book Recommendations](#).