

Book Review

James Hanning (2021) *Love & Deception: Philby in Beirut*. London: Corsair, 408 pp., ISBN 978-1-4721-5595-5

Ben de Jong

bendjong1976@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0183-8895>

Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs, Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Turfmarkt 99, 2511 DP, The Hague, The Netherlands

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Books on the subject of arguably the best-known KGB spy ring in the West during the Cold War, the so-called Cambridge Five, continue to roll off the press.¹ The Cambridge Five were five British students who were recruited as agents by the NKVD, a forerunner of the KGB, in Cambridge in the 1930s. All five would occupy key positions inside British government agencies during World War II and in the years following its conclusion. In 2015 and 2016 alone, two excellent biographies were published about the man who was undoubtedly the most colourful of the five: Guy Burgess.² It was his flight to Moscow in May 1951 with Donald Maclean, his fellow diplomat at the British Foreign Office, that sparked the unravelling of the network. Their flight took place once Maclean realised he was in acute danger of being interrogated and arrested for his spying. That in turn caused the suspicion of the British authorities to fall on Kim Philby, another one of the five, who since 1949 had been the liaison of the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, also known as MI6) in Washington DC. This meant he was in close contact with the FBI and the CIA and was therefore in a position not just to transmit British secrets to the KGB, but many American secrets as well.

The remainder of the Philby saga is fairly well-known. He was dismissed from the service in 1951 and the KGB broke off contact with him for several years because he was under close surveillance by the British authorities, even though they were not able to prove his

¹In the order of their recruitment by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), the five were Kim Philby, Donald Maclean, Guy Burgess, Anthony Blunt and John Cairncross. They were not a spy ring or a network in the sense that they cooperated in their spying. They knew that each of the others was passing secrets to the Soviet Union, but with the exception of Philby and Burgess on some occasions, they mostly operated on their own.

²According to many people who knew him, Burgess had a very sharp mind, but he was also a very promiscuous homosexual and an alcoholic, who indulged in all kinds of eccentric and risky behaviour, including very dangerous car driving (Lownie, 2015; Purvis and Hulbert, 2016).

guilt. There followed a few financially dire years for Philby and his family with their young children, during which he was barely saved by the support of some of his former colleagues at MI6 who were still convinced of his innocence. Then, in the summer of 1956, Philby arrived in Beirut to work as a Middle East correspondent for two important British publications, *The Observer* and *The Economist*. In this period of his life, until his flight to Moscow in January 1963, MI6 again employed his services, this time as an agent, and the KGB also resumed its contact.

Philby's Beirut years are the subject of a meticulously researched and well-written book by James Hanning, *Love & Deception: Philby in Beirut*. In between, the author also discusses many of the earlier and later episodes of Philby's career and shows that he is clearly knowledgeable about the intelligence business. For one thing, he doesn't make the mistake of calling Philby a "double agent" as is often done by other authors and which even happens in one of the blurbs inside this book. Philby was not a double agent like, say, Juan Pujol Garcia aka "Garbo" of World War II Double-Cross fame, who was an agent of both the British Security Service MI5 and the German Abwehr with a primary loyalty to the former. (Garbo, in other words, was never a regular employee of any of those two services.) Philby was a KGB agent and an MI6 officer, which in itself is also quite something. His value for the KGB was immense and can barely be overestimated. Hanning quotes John le Carré to this effect at the beginning of the book: "The scale of Philby's betrayal is barely calculable to anyone who has not been in the business. In Eastern Europe alone, dozens and perhaps hundreds of British agents were imprisoned, tortured and shot."

Next to Philby the central character in *Love & Deception* is the American, Eleanor Brewer, who would become Philby's third wife. Her husband, Sam Brewer, was an American correspondent in Beirut and a journalist of some repute with the *Chicago Tribune* and later *The New York Times*. Eleanor and Philby met in December 1956 and they clearly hit it off fairly soon after. Philby's second wife Aileen, whom he had left behind in England with their five children, died a year later and he married Eleanor in January 1959, once she had divorced her American husband.

The author's focus on Eleanor in the book is especially satisfying. Often in the Philby literature, the whole Beirut episode doesn't get the attention it deserves to begin with and Eleanor, in most cases, is an almost neglected figure whose personality remains largely in the shadows. The way Hanning pictures their relationship, there was genuine love between Philby and his third wife, especially on her part. It probably also helped that by all accounts, Philby was a man of great personal charm. Eleanor was in many ways in a fraught situation because she had a young daughter from her marriage with Sam Brewer, who got caught up in the friction and tension between her parents after their divorce. Eleanor also took care of several of Philby's young children when they came to stay with their father in Lebanon after their mother's death.

In the early 1960s, MI6 received new clues from several sources about Philby's ultimate loyalty and his past as a KGB agent started to catch up with him. The book suggests that by the end of the 1950s, the strain of Philby's double life and his treachery became too much for him—as it often does with spies in the end. His intake of alcohol had always been prodigious, but it grew even larger. It is telling in this context that all of the Cambridge Five, with the possible exception of John Cairncross, were heavy consumers of alcohol. Indeed, heavy drinking could be called an occupational hazard for spies. Eleanor managed to keep up with Philby in this regard for quite a while, especially in the happy early phase of their marriage, but in the end she clearly couldn't. Philby's life in Beirut was one characterised by heavy drinking, then some heavier drinking and often a drunken

stupor at the end of the day. Eleanor was completely in the dark about her husband's spying and didn't have a clue as to what contributed to his drinking.

Love & Deception paints a very vivid and convincing portrait of an extremely distraught Eleanor who has no idea why her husband Kim, the great love of her life, so suddenly disappeared without a trace in early 1963 and then later, through KGB intermediaries, implores her to follow him to Moscow. That was another heart-wrenching decision she had to make. There was always a possibility that the KGB would not allow her to leave the Soviet Union ever again once she was there and contact with her young daughter in the United States would be very hard to maintain from Moscow as well.

Love & Deception: Philby in Beirut is a terrific read and a very valuable contribution to the literature on Philby and the Cambridge Five. As is often the case with books about spies, this one also ends on a rather sad note, especially when it comes to Eleanor's fate. A few months after Philby's disappearance from Beirut, she decides to follow him to Moscow which for the average citizen from the West, certainly in those days, offered a very drab and inhospitable existence. Before she decided to end her marriage with Philby and return to the West in 1965, she had to suffer another one of his affairs, which had been numerous throughout his life. This one was with Melinda Maclean, who had been living in Moscow with her husband Donald, who had fled to Moscow with Guy Burgess in 1951. Three years after leaving Moscow, Eleanor passed away in the United States at the age of 55. In Moscow, with his Russian fourth wife by his side in his final years, Philby would survive Eleanor by 20 years.

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