



Portrait of a Secret Agent who Knew Kim Philby

Tina Tamman

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The biography of a British intelligence agent, Brian Giffey (1887-1967) is also a fascinating love story. 2nd Lt Giffey married a German girl at the start of WWI, divorced her in 1937, having met an Estonian girl half his age. When he, now Major Giffey, married the Estonian girl, Anni, he insisted that she should befriend his first wife, and she acquiesced.

Brian Giffey spent 11 years in Estonia, collecting information on the Soviets for MI6. In 1940 he and Anni were forced to leave the country because of Soviet occupation. Having spent a couple of years in London, they were posted to Iraq where Brian was abruptly and mysteriously dismissed in 1944, possibly because of his connection with the notorious traitor Kim Philby.

It is really a book about belonging, loyalty and identity.

Portrait of a Secret Agent who Knew Kim Philby Details

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From Reader Review Portrait of a Secret Agent who Knew Kim Philby for online ebook

Ann Andrews says

I received a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Finding the happy medium between inserting all the detailed information you can while still maintaining an interesting and easy to read biography is a delicate thing.

Tina Tamman pulls it off well with Portrait of a Secret Agent who Knew Kim Philby. Every chapter contained interesting information that flowed well and kept me highly intrigued.

This is an extremely well written book and I strongly recommend it for anyone who enjoys biographies or is particularly interested in intelligence officers.

Allyson Abbott says

Although a non fiction book, the author made the tale of Brian Giffy, extremely interesting and easy to follow. I became fascinated with his comings and goings and that of his wife Anni. I am not a history buff, nor particularly do I have an interest in the secret service, but Tina Tamman is an extremely talented writer and fills each chapter with facts about his services, interlaced with his womanising ways and fanciful ambitions.

He worked for many years doing his duty to his country and has now, quite rightly, been his recognition. Well done Tina Tamman.

Pamela King says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book because I love reading interesting, historical non-fiction and Portrait of a Secret Agent spans years of particular interest to me. While I have read extensively about WWI, it includes history I was not familiar with which made it more interesting.

It is basically a biographical story about a British spy and a delightful love story on an interesting historical background. The wonderful part about the biography is that it is a true story. The full synopsis is at the end of this review

Most book reviews are subjective; with this book, it is very much the case me.

I am currently researching my next book, a biography. In Portrait of a Secret Agent Tina Tamman demonstrates her easy writing style and comprehensive research skills; weaving together information from personal letters, diaries, and her own research. At times she found incomplete information but has skilfully intertwined her sources so we have a clear picture of the life of Brian Giffey.

I am also relying on both personal reminiscences and research. Ms Tamman's skills have been an inspiration for me.

Ms Tamman has demonstrated how to deal with incomplete research. I smiled when I read that Brian himself put down titles for biography chapters that were never written. I have the same problem and it is oh so frustrating.

Of additional personal interest was that Brian's wife, Anni, was Estonian and the town in Australia where I live was a settlement for Estonian refugees. They contributed greatly to the region and many of their descendants still live here today.

This is an extremely well researched and well-written book with a story that is somewhat different to what you might expect. I highly recommend it to history buffs.

My rating 4*

Synopsis

This is a book about belonging, loyalty and identity – a biography of a secret agent called Brian Giffey who wrongly believed that he was Welsh, but his mother was actually Canadian and his father German. Born illegitimate as Otto Chester Kurt Brian Petersen in London in 1887, he was brought up in Germany. On his return to Britain he obtained a degree from Oxford and, with the help of an unscrupulous lawyer, a military career became possible. Brian joined the Worcestershire Regiment in 1911. His intelligence career with MI6 started in 1928; he served in Tallinn, London and Baghdad. In 1944, however, he was mysteriously dismissed from the secret service, but in post-war years he represented Britain in Berlin on the denazification committee and, back in London, worked for the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain.

Brian was a specialist in Soviet affairs who knew the notorious Kim Philby. His biography helps us to understand how the Soviets used the information obtained for them by Philby. The book is also relevant today as Russia flexes its muscles. What happened in Crimea in 2014 is reminiscent of the annexation of Estonia in 1939-40 experienced first-hand by Brian.

The book is also an unusual and moving love story. How was it possible for this middle-aged womaniser to fall in love with an inexperienced and immature Estonian girl to whom he remained faithful for the rest of his life?

Annette says

Portrait of a Secret Agent by Tina Tamman was a Goodreads first reads win

A great deal of research has gone into this book, about the life of Brian Giffey, and how he fitted in with the countries he worked in – first in the military, and then as an agent.

There was so much information, I found my mind glazed over and it was difficult to follow. I found the first section, about his early life and the last section about the end of his life were the easiest to follow and relate

to.

I was especially interested in Estonia, having recently visited the country. I heard from a guide about the history of the country, which had been invaded lots of times, most recently by Germany and Russia, and what a struggle it was to gain independence. A museum we visited had a photograph of a fishing boat cut in two by the Russians, so people could not escape by sea. Everywhere there was evidence of occupation – military buildings and bunkers and a deserted village in a forest where the inhabitants were sent to Siberia and never returned.

I think my enjoyment of the book would have been enhanced by more stories about people and less detail about jobs and dates. It felt a little like a family history document rather than a social history story. . The whole book must be of great interest to anyone following European events during and after the second world war

Barbara White says

Portrait of a Secret Agent Who Knew Kim Philby is a fascinating biography of secret agent Brian Giffey. This book has great secondary sources for the history buff. Not only does the reader learn about Giffey's life, the reader learns about other spy organizations around the world. Photographs keep your mind in check as they bring realism to your imagination. I would definitely recommend this book. Thanks to Goodreads First Reads for a copy of this book.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Portrait of a Secret Agent who Knew Kim Philby, Tina Tamman

Harmony Kent says

Reviewed on behalf of The Review Board by Harmony Kent.

I received a mobi copy of this book, in exchange for an honest review.

This book is written well, and it is clear that the author has undertaken meticulous research. The life of Brian Giffey is chronicled in its entirety, including his service in the British forces, his becoming an agent for MI6, his many affairs and eventual falling head over heels in love with a young Estonian girl. Kim Philby used to be a British Secret Service agent, who subsequently defected to Russia, taking a lot of secrets and sensitive information with him. Brian Giffey knew Kim Philby, and was apparently deeply affected by his defection. The author, in her research, appears to have been faced with missing diaries, papers, and information, but does a sterling job of piecing together this interesting life. The material is presented in a linear, orderly, and

easy to follow manner, and plenty of references are given. This biographical account gives the reader a glimpse into old empire, life and service through both World Wars, and on into the Cold War years. The book contains direct excerpts and quotes from both Brian Giffey's personal documents, including his poetry, and from accounts of those who knew him.

If you are interested in non-fiction biographies, and history, then you are likely to find this an intriguing read. It has a scholarly feel to it, and contains a wealth of information, and would be suitable for use as a research reference in its own right. I award a solid 8 out of 10 TRB stars, which equates to 4 out of 5 stars on other rating scales.

Gianna says

Towards the end of her book, the author states, "History...is all about human beings." I personally cannot think of a better way to truly understand events in a historical context than through the recollections of someone who lived through them. And Brian Giffey, who worked as a covert government agent at a particularly volatile time in history, certainly lived an extraordinary life.

The author does an excellent job of piecing together personal, and sometimes fragmented, information to weave a fascinating narrative full of love, strife, cultural and political observations and above all, human connection. I would recommend this book to those interested in history or the secret service, but would also urge anyone who enjoys a good story from a uniquely human perspective to buy this book. You won't regret it.

David Boyd says

The quality of the author's research is impeccable and the results are as close as possible to comprehending who Brian Giffey was. The scrupulous attention to time and place provides a sound base upon which the author is able to bring her protagonist to life. Giffey's own poetry and prose, as well as the photographs provided, make for an enriching experience. The title intimates that the notorious Kim Philby plays a larger role than he actually does, but it is true that Philby provides a key clue in a case of British Intelligence still submerged in a fog of secret documents. Of note is the author's common sense approach in unravelling Giffey's private and public affairs, resulting in a well-paced, informative, and delightful read. I recommend it.

Steve Lee says

Received free via Goodreads giveaway

Really quite intriguing.

Vanessa Hill says

I won this book in a goodreads giveaway and am really glad I did.

I love history, and the lives of spies has always intrigued me, this book was well written, giving one a sense of what it was like during the cold war in different countries.

I can highly recommend this book to lovers of factual history.

I have passed it on to my sister, who is also enjoying it.

M.A. Lossl says

This well written book is a delight. The reference to Kim Philby in the title helps to reference the era the story covers. Tamman has deduced a history of an incredible man, Brian Giffey. The poems and letters, reveal a charming love story between Brian and his wife Anni. Brian was a hero, womanizer, spy: his life would make a fascinating film-- the real James Bond. *Portrait of a Secret Agent* gives a unique insight into the era and I can recommend it for research reference as well as a darn good yarn.

Kevin says

As impressive as this book is I realised when I finished it that I felt I'd read something different to what I expected. I was expecting "Portrait of a Brian Giffey - Secret Agent", but in truth the book is "Portrait of Brian Giffey, who happened to be a Secret Agent". The addition in the listing here of "who knew Kim Philby" to the title on the cover is actually disappointing because I came away from the book thinking how it was a shame that there wasn't more about the interactions and relationship with Kim Philby.

Unfortunately Brian seems to have left such scant information about himself, yet somehow Tamman manages to pull something together. For me Brian drifted into the background when Anni arrived on the scene; certainly by the end I felt a warmth towards her that eluded me with Brian.

Part of this shift in focus comes from the sources. We mainly see events through Anni's diary and Brian's letters to her. There is a wonderful tenderness between them; at one point Brian highlights the fairly mundane nature of their daily letters, not as a complaint but as testimony to how in love they are, which will resonate well with anyone who has spent any significant time away from a loved one.

Their relationship is the cornerstone of the book, the secret agent lifestyle is definitely secondary. Whilst I wasn't expecting a James Bond action adventure I certainly hoped for more insight into the life of an agent on the eastern front. The mentions of Kim Philby tease us with that world, but they are fleeting and leave you hanging. Tamman has done in depth research into Brian Giffey the man, but facing the silent wall of the secret service we gain little insight into his career.

Overall a decent read about a couple living through significant times in Europe.

I received my copy through First Reads.

Aly says

When I saw the name of this book, I thought 007. lol This book is nothing like that but it was interesting to read. I don't read many book about just one person was I wasn't quite sure what I would think. I was surprised how much I enjoyed it. You see read it for yourself and decide. * I received this book from the author in exchange for an honest review*

Helen says

Brian Giffey was indeed a secret agent, but he was much more, too. This biography is definitely a labour of love, meticulously researched and carefully written by an author who is clearly fascinated by the subject matter. The huge amount of factual content is presented in an organised and logical fashion and it is also an enjoyable and interesting read.

Due to the nature of the source material, there is much focus on Giffey's second wife, Anni. This is wholly appropriate, though, as their relationship was a lasting one, and their many adventures together shaped the latter half of Brian's life.

As the author explains from the outset, there are substantial gaps in the diaries and correspondence available, leaving many questions unanswered. However, the story told is sufficiently comprehensive for readers to wonder for themselves and attempt to draw their own conclusions.
