



# Agent M: The Lives and Spies of MI5's Maxwell Knight

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**Agent M: The Lives and Spies of MI5's Maxwell Knight** Henry Hemming  
**Spying is the art of knowing who to trust-and who to betray.**

Maxwell Knight was perhaps the greatest spymaster in history, rumored to be the real-life inspiration for the James Bond character "M." He did more than anyone in his era to combat the rising threat of fascism in Britain during World War II, in spite of his own history inside this movement. He was also truly eccentric--a thrice-married jazz aficionado who kept a menagerie of exotic pets--and almost totally unqualified for espionage.

Yet he had a gift for turning practically anyone into a fearless secret agent. Knight's work revolutionized British intelligence, pioneering the use of female agents, among other accomplishments. In telling Knight's remarkable story, *Agent M* also reveals for the first time in print the names and stories of some of the men and women recruited by Knight, on behalf of MI5, who were asked to infiltrate the country's most dangerous political organizations.

Drawing on a vast array of original sources, *Agent M* reveals not only the story of one of the world's greatest intelligence operators, but the sacrifices and courage required to confront fascism during a nation's darkest time.

## Agent M: The Lives and Spies of MI5's Maxwell Knight Details

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## From Reader Review Agent M: The Lives and Spies of MI5's Maxwell Knight for online ebook

### Susan says

Maxwell Knight was twenty three in 1923, a young man who was talent spotted at a meeting of the British Empire Union. The son of a spendthrift father, Knight had been given an allowance by his Uncle Robert. However, his uncle was less than forgiving of Knight's life at that point and cut off his money. Knight was obsessed with animals and jazz and had been recently kicked out of the civil service. He was directionless when he was approached by Sir George Makgill at an exclusive gentlemen's club and asked to join his intelligence agency. Makgill based this agency on his own fears and ambitions – his customers were mainly factory owners and industrialists – and he required secrecy and shared political views from his new agent. Knight was asked to infiltrate an organisation called British Fascisti and it was a task he threw himself into with gusto.

Much of this book takes place in the period between the wars; culminating in the early years of the Second World War. Although we do follow Knight's life past this point, certainly the bulk of his life in the secret service took place during these years. In England, and in Europe, there were conflicting political views, with the rise of both communist, and fascist, parties. In the early years, Knight was learning the skills of espionage; firstly as a spy and then running agents and becoming a spymaster.

Through his early years investigating fascist groups, Knight met several men who he felt loyalty towards. One of them was William Joyce, who later became notorious as Lord Haw-Haw. His personal loyalties were obviously important to Knight and would cause him issues in later years, when he found conflict between his feelings towards people he knew personally and loyalty to his country. In his professional life he would be faced with difficult choices and dilemmas, which would also cause him to have to explain his actions.

Knight was a man who also had conflict in his personal life. Despite a spy (or spymaster) being someone you feel would relish anonymity; Knight actually seemed to relish standing out. He loved exotic pets, he published novels based on his own experiences and, when Makgill died, he was obviously keen to get back into the game of spying. When he was approached by MI6 to root out Russian espionage in 1929, he began to set up his own secret agent network. He always made himself available to his agents, but, although married three times, he kept secrets from his wives and failed to consummate his marriages (the reason for this is unclear, although the author puts forward theories).

Politically, it seems that Knight was more sympathetic to the right than the left. It was the Soviet menace which seemed the most dangerous to Knight in the early years. However, with the rise of fascism in Europe, gradually it dawned on Knight that fascism was more dangerous than communism. When war was declared, this led to him having to make some difficult decisions and taking risks. Certainly, he was very adept at what he did and it is fascinating to read of how he coaxed and persuaded and supported his agents, with immense patience and without pressure, to get results. This is a fascinating account of the early years of the intelligence service and how it evolved and of Maxwell Knight's important part in it.

### **Alice says**

Interesting and very accessible biography of exactly the kind of person one likes to imagine running bits of the British Secret Service. Efficient runner of agents and eccentric collector of animals; M seems almost too good to be true.

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### **Greville Waterman says**

This was an unexpected treat. A beautifully written and forensically researched account of on of MI5's great spymasters, Maxwell Knight. He was a wonderful British eccentric and true polymath who also became a noted writer and broadcaster and an animal collector.

He overcame a mixed, confused and conflicted political background and specialised in infiltrating hard left and right groups in the confused years leading up to World War 11 and gleaned much vital information. He had a gift for recruiting and running agents and the book outlines many of the espionage cuops he was responsible for as well as his friendship with William Joyce.

I learned much and was royally entertained.

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### **Rick says**

Well-written book, based on lots of research; fascinating biography of a major spymaster in UL's MI5.

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### **Steve says**

A great read as well as interesting. This reads like a spy novel, But in real life!!! This is the story of British spymaster Maxwell Knight, who was the inspiration of one of his agents Ian Fleming to write about in his James Bond books and was the character "M". Maxwell Knight became Britain's spymaster during World War II and recruited men and women for Britain's spy agency MI5, who infiltrated Britain's most dangerous enemies.

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### **Max Gwynne says**

A fantastic biography of one of MI5's greatest spymasters.

More gripping than any spy novel you'll read!

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### **Rob Thompson says**

#### **A fleeting peak into the life of a cryptic spy-master**

The subtitle of this fascinating biography proclaims that Maxwell Knight to the MI5's greatest spy-master. While this may or may not be the case, Knight - a leading light at MI5 between the 1930s and 1950s was incontrovertibly the strangest. Charismatic, funny and possessed of an instinctive talent for the arcane act of running spies, Knight was also an animal obsessive who in his 50s became a well known BBC natural history presenter. He shared his home with a reeking menagerie - with various exotic pets including a Himalayan monkey and a bear named Bessie. He had three marriages, but consummated none of them, probably because he was terrified of sex. And despite helping them break up Nazi spy rings during the War, he was himself an enthusiastic fascist who maintained such sympathies until at least the 1930s. Henry Hemming has done a superb job of peeling back the layers covering this most veiled of spies, even if he doesn't quite solved the conundrum posed by his subject.

Knight's espionage career had unlikely origins. After a stint in as a dissolute jazz musician, he was recruited in his early 20s by a private intelligence agency, who set him the task of infiltrating the British Fascisti, the UK's first self-proclaimed fascist party. Knight rose quickly, becoming the party's director of intelligence and helping to recruit a young William Joyce (later the Nazi propagandist Lord Haw-Haw). The fact that he sympathized with the views of those on whom he reported must have made his rise easier. In 1931, aged 31, he was recruited by MI5, and negotiated permission to run his section - M section from his flat, with his monkeys in attendance Hemming's thoughtful biography brings to life an endearing figure whose fame within MI5 lasted well into the Cold War.

Actually, despite his reputation as a master spook, Knight's record was patchy. He was easily distracted by his hobbies, which also included writing pulp fiction and dabbling in the occult. And as section head at MI5 he failed, for instance, to expose the Cambridge spies recruited by the Soviets. While Hemming's biography is rich in sub-plot and cameo characters, its main character remains shadowy. Ironically, it is only in fiction that Knight today stands in plain sight. As one of the models for Ian Fleming's 'M' and for Jack Brotherhood in John le Carré's A Perfect Spy.

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## Heleen says

Wauw! Wat een goed geschreven boek. Klopt door de opbouw vanaf de eerste pagina tot de laatste. Een grote hoeveelheid personages betrokken, maar dusdanig duidelijk en gedetailleerd geschreven dat er geen onduidelijkheden mogelijk zijn!

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## Moray Teale says

I received a free advance copy of this work through netgalley and Random House UK in return for an honest, unbiased review)

Henry Hemming presents a unique portrait of the man reputed to be part of the inspiration for the famous "M" in Ian Fleming's James Bond. Charles Henry Maxwell Knight began as a boy whose main interest was in animals, gathering a small, exotic menagerie of pets, an interest (and a habit) he would maintain all his life. Indeed, in his final years he would even work with David Attenborough. He would also write several (poor) pulp spy novels and a number of works on animals. He was briefly a pub landlord. But his main contribution was his long association with various intelligence agencies both private and official. Eventually he would run his own spy ring, the so-called "M-Division of MI5, which would provide vital intelligence for the British Government during the Second World War and the Cold War. Perhaps the most interesting aspect

of his life and work was his relationship with the fascist activist William Joyce, better known as the infamous Lord Haw-Haw.

It was a complex relationship, Joyce's first wife was even Knight's former fiancée. Part friendship, part trust, part suspicion, part grudging respect. Indeed, it illuminates one of the most difficult-to-assess aspects of M's career, his long and close involvement with the British fascist movements. Maxwell Knight cut his teeth infiltrating the British Fascisti (BF), an early right-wing organisation that emerged between the wars, and really before there was any clear fascist ideology or idea of what fascist even meant aside from opposition to the spectre of a worldwide communist revolution. Maxwell Knight was certainly more suspicious of communist groups than proto-fascist groups, a fact that was true of many of his contemporaries even after Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. The history of British Fascism is difficult to pin down. It is certainly true to say that the ideals of the BF bore little resemblance to the fascism which would later claw its way across Europe, indeed the original BF would reflect a proposal to join Mosley's more recognisable Blackshirts.

By the time Moseley (with funding from Mussolini) was pursuing his ultimately doomed attempts to create a worthwhile Fascist party in Britain the establishment was growing increasingly uneasy with their movements and, in particular, their relationship with the Fascist parties in Italy and Germany. As the focus switched from communist to fascism M-division garnered intelligence by infiltrating potential fifth-column fascist groups. This switch in official policy makes it easy to assume that Knight had no real connection with the far right but this would be a gross simplification. A potential sympathy with the far right doesn't make M unique, or even unusual, among his contemporaries but while Hemming tentatively touches on the personal leanings of his leading man, hinting at some measure of genuine sympathy he doesn't tackle this issue with any particular focus or insight. The present climate in which alt-right represent a newly "socially acceptable" face of modern fascism even tentative apologism is a little unpalatable and the failure to deal directly with this issue is a considerable weakness in Hemming's work.

His focus is also unclear in other areas. Though Knight's early career was as a spy himself his main contribution was in recruiting and managing his own spy ring, placing him often on the periphery of the action. Knight becomes less and less the focus as his Hemming delves into the lives of his spies, particularly Olga Gray. His role and character become indistinct and hers (as well as those of her fellow spies) is never quite given the attention it deserves resulting in a feeling of superficiality that isn't entirely deserved. There is some impressive scholarship here and Hemming's research appears thorough and exhaustive, presenting the identities of several of M's agents for the first time. Unfortunately, there are certainly many "may have been"s and qualifiers that make the whole project uncertain and tentative. Definitely readable and Hemming's experience as a screen writer very clear with a keen eye for a powerful scene and an apt quote but it is also uneven and not entirely convincing. Perhaps not for the serious historian but it is an evocative, if flawed, glimpse into the life of an enigmatic character.

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## Emma says

### 4.5 stars

Written with the kind of flair to which espionage thriller writers aspire, this entertaining and well researched investigation in to 'M' Maxwell Knight opens up the world of an MI5 spymaster. After reading the book, I'm not convinced by the appellation 'greatest' given in connection to the man; his personal desire for recognition frequently overcame the need for secrecy- not only did he tell people he worked in the business, he wrote novels using thinly disguised characters based on both the agents he was running and those they were investigating. There are more anecdotes that but I'll leave those for the reader to discover. Nevertheless, he had a genuine ability of running people, talent spotting, finding the means to infiltrate political groups, and

ensuring a long term loyalty from agents. As a result, he was able to manage a large team that collected essential information from a variety of sources.

His life and work is interesting, of course, but the real value of this book for me is the way the changing political climate is interwoven in the tale- after all, it's this that determines who we are watching and why. Early in his career (1920s) Knight was sent into the British Fascisti movement, but not to bring them down... At this point, Communism was seen as the true evil and the red scare meant that few people in this book saw the far right as a threat until the mid-1930s. Certainly Knight took a lot of persuading to put as much effort into investigating Fascist groups, even after the significant revamping of the movement by Mosley. Considering what we know came after and the stunning rise of the far right now, it's hard reading.

All the big names of the period are here, there's political and espionage based manoeuvring, violence and subtlety, secret meetings and blatant lies. I've read fiction that isn't this exciting, but this is stuff that you can fact check. A genuinely thrilling read.

ARC via Netgalley

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### Jess says

A shockingly sedate and tedious biography given Maxwell Knight's extraordinary achievements and the real perils of espionage.

Whilst this is evidently well researched, it's just as equally clear that Hemming hasn't been entirely discriminating with that research. The biography lacks *economy* which made this a real slog; I was skim reading from the halfway mark. The crude and piecemeal writing compromised the authority of the material, especially where the book skews into a shade of free indirect style, speculating in digressive and fanciful ways how each agent reacted to recruitment etc. At these times, the biography reads like a bad thriller. A thriller that fails to thrill.

I did however thoroughly appreciate the time dedicated to championing the female agents who rejected 'the Mata Hari approach', women who possessed admirable qualities (intelligence, reasoning, courage, discretion) rather than relying on their sex appeal to lend them agency. More importantly, Maxwell Knight recognised these qualities and advocated them, as he did with the incredible Olga Gray. You can't end wars with your face.

Ultimately this was a less than compelling look into British Fascism rather than gritty espionage that turned the tide of the war. Surprisingly, it didn't offer any particular insight into Maxwell Knight himself, either. Interesting in some facets but repetitious, expounding and not entirely commanding.

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### Bettie? says

Seven British spies uncovered in new biography of real-life M

Guardian review

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## Nooilforpacifists says

Maxwell Knight wasn't the first "M" in Britain's MI5 (charged with counter-espionage at home), but he's the one on which Ian Flemming modeled his fictional "M" in the James Bond series. This account of his life, supposedly the first since declassification of most WWII and cold war files, tries to separate the man from the legend.

It does an excellent job explaining M's separate structure, not really reporting to MI5. Instead, Knight created his own fiefdom, run from his flat or a leased flat. If it was the former, agents were confronted with a zoo-- Knight kept curious pets, from birds to monkeys to bears. Agents beware!

The book gets high marks for describing Knight's huge stable of agents and sub-handlers, the most famous of which were M's long-time friend William Joyce and, later in his career, David Cornwell. M warned the former, the author claims, hours before he was to be interned as a Fascist Enemy of the State--Joyce escaped Berlin, where he re-invented himself as the smoothly effective Nazi propagandist Lord Haw-Haw. The latter took the pen name John Le Carré and went on to greater literary fame...

Also well laid-out are M's espionage triumphs, which often involved female agents, who he thought more trustworthy. That wasn't true for any of his three wives: It's unclear whether he consummated any of his marriages. Knight seemed to have a fear of sex (as opposed to being homosexual, like the famous Cambridge set.)

Yet that's the weakness of this book. Because Knight kept no diary, most everything about M as a human is MIA. Oh, sure, Hemming lists his exploits, but has a more difficult time unearthing the man behind the mask. The closest he comes is late in his career and after retirement, Knight published several popular zoology books, and appeared on BBC radio and TV frequently. But that was for money: early retirement due to health issues cost M his civil service pension.

So Knight could be avuncular. All his agents also said he gave each full attention and encouragement, despite running at least twice the normal stable of agents. But the "twentieth Century's finest Spymaster" left little traces of his true self. Which just shows how good Knight was. It's a shame Hemming couldn't find more about this fascinating man.

Added Sept. 28:

Link to review in "The Weekly Standard", which provides a better flavor of the "Was he a Fascist or a Patriot"? theme:

<http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-spy...>

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## Adina says

I requested this biography from Netgalley on a moment impulse and I do not regret it one bit. I was pleasantly surprised how much I enjoyed learning about the Maxwell Knight and of his agents

Full Disclosure: I do not read a lot of non-fiction in general and this was my first Historical Biography in a very long time which means I am an amateur reader of these kinds of books. I cannot compare it with similar

efforts or confirm the accuracy of the facts so my opinion is mainly based on the enjoyment factor.

What made me read M was that the famous Bond character seems to have been inspired by the spymaster and that Bridge of Lies screenwriter is planning to create a TV series based on this book which for me is a serious endorsement.

M starts with an incursion into Maxwell Knight's childhood and his love for animals. Since he was a little boy he kept adopting a wide range of wild animals and showed an extraordinary talent to earn their trust and domesticate them. Later, he would use this talent to recruit and manage spy agents. His first job as a spymaster was for a private intelligence agency in 1923 where he was told to infiltrate the British Fascists. What I found interesting was that back then Fascists were not considered evil. The movement started in UK as an opposition to Communism which was considered to be the greatest threat back then. This was not the only revelation for me; the pages were full with interesting and unexpected ins and outs of the spy world and not only, such as the fact that Mussolini worked for the British Intelligence for a short while. In the mid 1920's Maxwell plays a double role as a member of Fascists and spymaster for the Mi-5. His main focus was to infiltrate his agents in Communist organizations and he used agents from different kind of background. In addition, he was the first to successfully recruit women agents. His many years with the Fascists and the friendship he had with different members made him reluctant to investigate the movement when it was apparent that they became a threat. He manages to get past his personal (with some controversy) and is instrumental in eliminating the Fascist threat in the UK.

His sympathy for the Fascists, the lack of clear procedures and an appearance of amateurism makes it hard to believe he was really "the greatest spymaster", as the title suggests. Still, without any doubt he possessed a rare talent to understand and gain respect of people which is key asset for a successful spymaster.

The writing was engaging, in an investigative tone and I was not bored for one second. The chapters are sprinkled with interesting trivia and compelling characters. I have to admit that the writing was uneven at times and some parts of M's career were better developed than others. Sometimes the side stories of the agents were more interesting than the main plot. I also believe that it might not be the book of choice for a serious historian and I find it better suited for amateur readers interested in spy stories and the history of the WWII and the Cold War.

PS. I also found out that Maxwell Knight was John le Carré's spymaster and that one of the characters in a Perfect Spy is inspired by M.

Thanks to Henry Hemming, Random House UK, Cornerstone, and Netgalley for this copy in exchange for an honest review.

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## **Manchester Military History Society (MMHS) says**

### **Fascinating espionage history**

Henry Hemmings has put together the fascinating story of the legendary "M". A complex individual who flirted with Fascism, an expert in animals and a pub landlord, but most famous for his espionage career.

Hemming weaves a story that's as good as a novel. This isn't a dry read, but an entertainingly put together story of the early days of British espionage against communist infiltration and it's swing towards concentrating on fascism as Hitler rises to power.

Some great nuggets in here and well worth a read.

I received this book free from Netgalley and was not required to write a positive review.

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