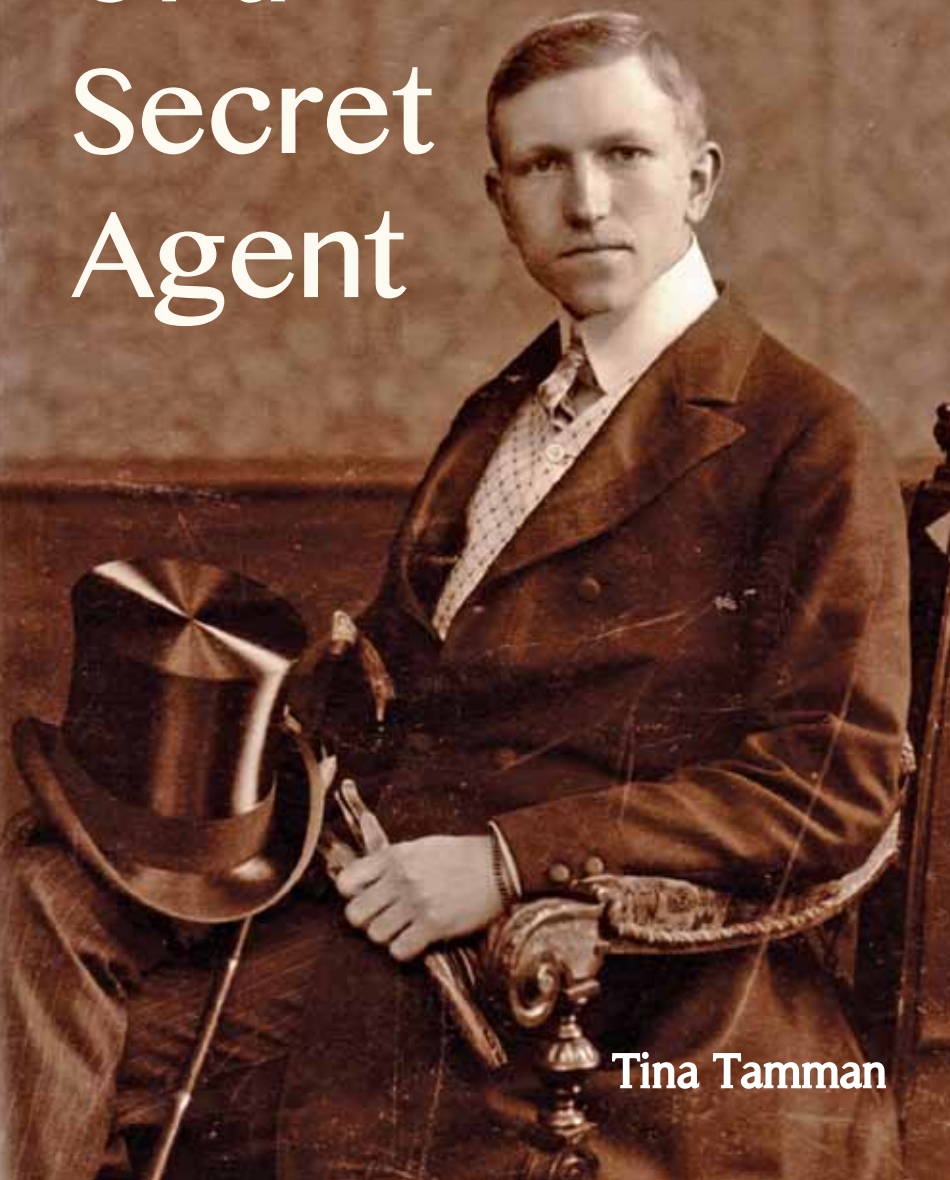


Portrait of a Secret Agent

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хозяинъ, начальни
работодатель, Билл.



Tina Tamman

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Chapter 2

Wounded in Flanders

Having completed his degree course at Merton in 1911, Brian Giffey became a regular army officer (2nd lieutenant). He joined the Worcestershire Regiment, and this gave him what he wanted – a sense of belonging. “The Regiment is a unit, intensely clan, family conscious, wherever it goes,” he said, proud to have been accepted. “I, without a Public School or even an English Education behind me, very poor at games in consequence, without County roots or background anywhere and finally coming in

at the age of 24 could hardly have hoped to last out at any more conventional Corps until the beginning of the War. Finally I had no influence whatever and knew nobody.” The regiment he had chosen was very much to his liking – unpretentious but one of the best. The standards were high but “unusually tolerant”. Only the pay was poor at £120-150 per annum.



*11. 2nd Lieutenant
C.K.O.B. Giffey.*

*Courtesy of Mercian Regiment
Museum (Worcestershire).*

The years leading up to the First World War were spent in Egypt which Brian absolutely loved. The regimental history views this period as “two pleasant years” during which the “most notable events of military importance included minor riots at Alexandria, the organisation and training of successive Camel Corps troops at the Central School in Cairo, and the manouvres of the little British Army of Occupation in heat and dust across the desert near the Pyramids. Besides those events, the tour in Egypt was notable for much hospitality at Alexandria to the visiting warships of many nations.”¹

Brian’s reminiscences recall the musical pleasures of Cairo. “Peter Ruck and I went to see ‘Madame Butterfly’ at the magnificent Opera House on the Place Mehemet Ali. We were both terrifically impressed by a gorgeous show. I have always tremendously admired Puccini, but remember telling Peter that I would never see Mme Butterfly again – it was too grievously harrowing – never, never, never,” he repeated for effect. “Some of Peter’s and my happiest hours were spent at a large open-air music-hall on the same bank of the Nile. There was one particularly delightful turn by two Frenchmen as a Sergeant and a Trumpeter, ‘Sonnez la Soupe’.” Already a homemaker, Brian bought wall hangings and lamps to make his quarters more comfortable. At one stage he even hired a piano.

Brian’s 1st battalion was brought back to England in October 1914, by which time the war had started. In a surprise move Brian married a German girl at Stetchworth, his mother’s home, merely four days after docking at Liverpool. There may not have been the time for the banns, nor was there apparently an opportunity for Brian to reflect on the consequences of his actions. Claire Maria Eleanor Scholz-Leclere, his bride from Hamburg, was a family friend, possibly even a distant relative.

Brian had known her for a number of years. At the time of the 1911 British census Claire had stayed at Stetchworth and Helena, Brian's mother, who filled in the census form, duly declared her visitor. Now, on 20 October 1914, Helena attended her son's wedding ceremony but she, too, may not have fully realised the implications.

It took a local busybody by the name of Sherman to ask questions before the penny dropped. Sherman, an upright citizen, wanted to know whether Brian had obtained his commanding officer's permission to marry a German, and Brian had to admit that he had not. Much later, looking back, Brian concluded that he had been simply immature. "I was a pretty poor specimen of a young man, soft, self-centred and selfish, self-indulgent to a degree, a snob and an ass... I learnt little at Oxford... The Regiment taught me more."

Chapter 5

Secret agent in Tallinn

Brian joined MI6, the Secret Intelligence Service, in 1928 when he was 41 years old. "I have always looked upon life as a glorious adventure," he once remarked. Now he embarked on his new career with characteristic enthusiasm. Lloyds Bank was more down-to-earth when it sent him a standard letter: "Dear Sir, We have been advised by the War Office that you have been selected for appointment under the Foreign Office and pending further instructions regarding date of appointment your pay as from the 1st October becomes issuable in arrear."¹

What constituted Brian's "selection" is not known, but Arthur Leslie Nicholson, who joined MI6 two years later, has explained what happened in his case. He had similarly been in army service in Germany. While on leave in London, Nicholson contacted military intelligence to enquire about a possible job. "As a result of this chance telephone call, I met a 'plain clothes' intelligence man and, after several meetings, he suggested that I resign my commission and enter a new field. I remember being a bit surprised and blurting out something about lack of experience. I soon discovered that my friend was as well-informed on this as I was: I had been fairly thoroughly investigated."² Nicholson was duly appointed, first to Prague, in 1930, and then to Riga, in 1934.

Brian's first posting as passport control officer took him to Estonia in January 1929. New to intelligence, he felt at home in Tallinn whose Germanic architecture and way of life reminded him of Riga and Bingen that he was familiar with. As to his work, he was expected to be "under instruction of Capt A. Ross."³ Alexander Ross was one of Brian's predecessors in Tallinn.



20. *Viru Gate in central Tallinn in the 1930s.*

The idea of passport control officers had been operating since 1919 when the system was set up to gather intelligence on Bolshevik subversion. Soviet Russia remained the main target well into the 1930s. "Even when Anglo-Soviet diplomatic relations were established in 1924, Moscow remained too hostile an environment for a secure SIS station. SIS Soviet operations were conducted instead from states on Russia's borders, especially from Finland and the Baltic states."⁴ Brian's main job was to keep an eye on Russia while ostensibly issuing visas and passports. There was a lot of passing traffic.

Brian put much effort into improving his Russian, practically living in the language during his first years in Tallinn. One of his duties was the routine perusal of Soviet industrial and military publications obtained with the help of the Estonian embassy in Moscow. These were hard to come by without Estonian help, but often contained valuable information. The official MI6 history says that Tallinn focused on military intelligence, Helsinki looked after naval matters and Riga took on political and economic targets, while Tallinn also played a coordinating role.⁵

At first Brian lived in the house of Peter Baranov, a Russian emigre, at Toompea (Kohtu 10) where he practised his newly-acquired Russian. The substantial Baranov house, close to the seat of the Estonian government and parliament, was always full of people, some of whom "came and went like the characters in a Dostoyevskian novel," a visiting American observed. "Also of interest were Baranov's boarders, half a dozen British Army and Navy Russian students who lent a Slavified Oxford-cum-vodka atmosphere."⁶

A somewhat similar atmosphere was a few years later observed by the writer Graham Greene on his visit to Tallinn. Greene ran into Peter Leslie, the vice-consul, and they had dinner together. "It's all amazingly cheap here," Greene told his wife in May 1934. "We had for dinner, the two of us, 6 vodkas, a delicious hors d'oeuvres, a Vienna schnitzel with fried potatoes, & two glasses of tea. Total bill in one of the swell restaurants 3/6d." Sleepy after the vodkas, Greene added: "I'm leaving the night life for Major Giffey to show me. He is the standing joke here, as the hearty fellow, hard drinker, man-about-Tallinn."⁷ Brian had by then moved out of Baranov's residence to a flat in Hollandi põik. What Greene and Brian did together has not been described, but Greene's experience of Tallinn must have been memorable.