



A Very Principled Boy: The Life of Duncan Lee, Red Spy and Cold Warrior

by Mark A. Bradley.

New York: Basic Books, 2014. Pp. xvii, 348. ISBN 978-0-465-03009-5.

Review by David Cullen, Arkansas Tech University (dcullen@atu.edu).

Duncan Lee, a descendant of Revolutionary War hero Richard Henry Lee and Confederate general Robert E. Lee, was a Rhodes Scholar, an officer in World War II, a successful corporate lawyer, and a multimillionaire. He was also a spy for the Soviet Union. Readers with interests in Soviet-era espionage will recognize the names Elizabeth Bentley, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Aldrich Ames, Robert Hanssen, and “Cambridge Five.”¹ In *A Very Principled Boy*,² former CIA intelligence officer Mark Bradley³ tells the story of a secret agent whose background gave no clue that he would betray his country. Relying on archival material, FBI documents, family papers, and files from the Venona Project,⁴ he explains in detail how Lee was recruited by and worked for the Soviets, yet managed to escape arrest and, ironically, take advantage of American capitalism to become a very wealthy citizen.

Duncan was born (1913) in China to Edmund and Lucy Lee, who worked there as missionaries from 1911 to 1927. Both instilled in their son a belief in Christ’s Second Coming and an idealistic need to embrace selfless public service. Always bright and hardworking, Lee attended Yale and Oxford universities, where he was exposed to radical interpretations of pressing issues of the day, especially the Great Depression and the Spanish Civil War.

At Oxford, Lee met Isabella (“Ishbel”) Mary Ann Scott Gibb. Like himself, she had been born overseas, in India, where her father served as a commissioner in the Excise Service. They immediately bonded over their shared political beliefs and joined radical student groups, especially supporting the anti-Franco forces in Spain, which included communists. Both came to believe the Soviet model provided the best hope to end the fiscal crisis of the 1930s and create a more just and equitable world.

In many ways, Lee and Ishbel meshed perfectly: both were in revolt against their respective missionary and colonial pasts and in rebellion against their fathers’ unyielding faiths. Lee knew he could never share Edmund’s unquestioning belief that Christianity would save the world from all evils, and he wanted to rely on his own intellect and experiences instead. Similarly, Ishbel did not share her father’s unshakable belief in the British Empire’s goodness and grace. Only the Left seemed to her a replacement for it. (28)

In 1937, the couple visited the Soviet Union and returned exhilarated, announcing to their parents that only communism could save the world from itself. They married in 1938 and moved

1. Viz., Kim Philby, Donald Maclean, Guy Burgess, Anthony Blunt, and John Cairncross.

2. Winner of the 2015 George Pendleton Prize for best book by a federal historian.

3. Bradley (MA Oxford, JD Virginia) is currently Director of the US Information Security Oversight Office.

4. “A counterintelligence program initiated by the United States Army’s Signal Intelligence Service (later the National Security Agency) that ran for nearly four decades, spanning 1943 to 1980”—*Wikipedia* s.v. “Venona Project.”

to America, where Lee attended Yale as a Sterling Fellow. The next year, they joined the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA). After graduation, Lee joined a law firm run by Maj. Gen. William ("Wild Bill") Donovan (ret.), who had won a Medal of Honor for his service during World War I. In 1941, the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration created the Office of the Coordinator of Intelligence, the country's first peacetime intelligence agency and selected Donovan as its director. When the United States entered the Second World War, Donovan asked Lee to join him at the agency, now titled the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Lee worked in the Secretariat office, reading cables sent between the OSS and the State Department, rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel. He also became a spy.

Joseph Stalin's purge of perceived enemies in 1937-38 reduced the numbers of Soviet agents in the United States from ninety-two to nine. After Pearl Harbor, the USSR ordered the CPUSA to direct espionage operations and recruit individuals in sensitive positions within the US government. Duncan Lee fit that description. Mary Price, a CPUSA member and secretary to noted columnist Walter Lippmann, convinced him to become an agent for the Soviet Union. Lee cooperated but shrewdly refused to smuggle physical documents out of the office or make copies of them; instead he memorized them. In the long run, Bradley observes, this likely saved him from an eventual prison sentence.

In 1943, Elizabeth Bentley became Lee's "handler." Within a year, however, both were having misgivings about their roles. Lee was feeling the pressures of secrecy, a failing marriage, and a growing sense of guilt, given his admiration for Donovan. Bentley was mourning the death of her lover Jacob Golos, the Soviet director of espionage operations out of New York. The news that Louis Budenz, editor of the CPUSA's *Daily Worker* newspaper, had publicly rejected communism led her to leave the spy business. Budenz knew of her activities for the Soviet Union, and it would only be a matter of time before he revealed them to the authorities. Bentley forestalled that by approaching the FBI herself.

The information she provided the bureau led to a thirteen-year-long investigation of Duncan Lee's actions. He appeared before a grand jury and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and was interviewed by the FBI in 1945-46. Unlike others accused of espionage, he did not invoke the Fifth Amendment, but denied all accusations. Bradley maintains that Elizabeth Bentley's drinking problems and erratic behavior in public hearings undermined her statements against Lee. Also, the Alger Hiss case diverted attention from Lee in the late 1940s. But, when Sen. Joseph McCarthy accused the State Department of being infested with Soviet spies, the FBI once again turned their attention to Lee, whose name, and those of 350 others, appeared in the Venona documents listing persons who had aided Soviet intelligence services during the war. But no paper trail linked Lee to espionage activities, and his mentor, Bill Donovan, remained convinced that he would never have undertaken such actions, given Lee's postwar work for an agency that helped support Chiang Kai-shek's anticommunist government. Eventually, the FBI dropped the case against Lee.

What harm Lee's treachery may have caused is unclear, since he memorized the cables that came to his desk and kept no diary or journal revealing his work as a spy. To his dying day he denied ever working as a Soviet agent.

Unlike many future spies for the Soviet Union, Lee was never motivated by money. Bradley believes the idealism inculcated by his father best explains Lee's actions. "Both father and son wanted to save and remake mankind.... The self-sacrifice and the righteousness of their causes aroused both men. Their family's bold heritage, showcased in the American Revolution and Civil War, of taking great risks and making bold stands demanded no less of them" (35). Mark Bradley's

gripping story of a “very principled” boy’s misguided idealism and quest for personal redemption is a forceful reminder of how easily the Soviet Union penetrated the highest branches of the US government during the Second World War.