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Spymistress: The Life of Vera Atkins: The Greatest Female Agent in World War II

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William Stevenson. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2007, 354 pages.

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Another book on World War II by William Stevenson, the author of the phenomenally successful but utterly unreliable A Man Called Intrepid, will surely make the cognoscenti wonder whether Stevenson learned anything from the slings and arrows so cruelly aimed at his earlier book, himself, and the late Sir William Stephenson. They need not wonder long. This William ("Bill") Stevenson, journalist, TV producer, and author of 16 books, and someone I know, have lunched with, and like personally, is the same Stevenson who in his Intrepid book and in this one persistently gets history and fiction distressingly commingled. Consider three samples.

Vera Steals the Donovan Show. Colonel William J. ("Wild Bill") Donovan's historic fact-finding mission to London in July 1940 on behalf of President Franklin D. Roosevelt is well known to historians generally and to Donovan biographers like Anthony Cave Brown, Richard Dunlop, Corey Ford, and me. With the red carpet rolled out for him Donovan met, so reported the US military attaché, "an extraordinary list of well-posted people," including the

king, queen and prime minister. But in Spymistress, the hitherto unknown Vera Atkins, a covert operations officer, got the sole role, in fact the starring role, in the grand encounter. She took him over. He was so "impressed" by what she told him, about covert operations and code-breaking, that he personally gave FDR "his strong Impression of her" and that was "a key factor" in convincing FDR of "the Allies ultimate success." With no trace of evidence, this brand new rewrite of history challenges belief.

Vera Takes Donovan Riding. A Special Operations Executive (SOE) officer working with the French Resistance, Vera allegedly needed Donovan's support in battling MI-6 opposition to SOE. One day she took him off from London business. They went riding "in a series of cars" older than she (then 32) "from Marble Arch for 47 miles" through "a country side enjoying rare sunny weather...onto Bletchley Road." There was "an unspoken understanding between them. He liked her steely beauty, her long lustrous black hair...her athletic figure." With "her smoky eyes," runs the blurb, "she was overwhelmingly seductive." Then they "paused for a pub lunch...in Old Bletchley so he could catch the authentic flavor of the country's largest clandestine operation." He had "an overview of work...around Enigma." The stories are difficult to accept when it is recalled that Atkins joined SOE months after Donovan had returned to the United States. The excerpts also illustrate Stevenson's penchant for dropping Donovan's name in contrived contexts and without footnotes.

Vera Hobnobs with Intrepid. No less often dropped by Stevenson was the name of Sir William Stephenson. One day in 1935 Vera "was...in Stephenson's office" in London when Donovan "called in" on business; she heard Donovan say FDR could do nothing about the Nazi menace unless he stayed in power. In 1936, in New York, she attended one of "the Stephensons' private dinners" where Wallace B. Phillips, an American businessman of no account then or now, decried some Americans' susceptibility to Nazi "con" artists. After the fall of France when Vera described to Stephenson a "silence" in Whitehall that was "sinister," he said "Powerful Whitehall influences" say Churchill's hatred of Hitler "stops...peace with Germany" To counter this, Stephenson moved to New York to form an organization in support of Churchill against the appeasers. Late in 1940 Stephenson told Donovan that "no woman in the history of espionage has exercised such power" as that wielded by Vera. In 1941 "Vera missed Bill Stephenson's presence in London." She "also missed Billy...because he mixed the deadliest martinis." All this, including the startling new reason for Intrepid's establishment of British Security

Coordination, again appears without any proof.

Inevitably one asks about Stevenson's sources. In addition to criticizing the traditional British secrecy record, he faults the internecine SOE-SIS hostility for blocking access to records. He laments the destruction of SOE's records in "a mysterious fire" in its Baker Street headquarters in1946. (Incidentally no such fire is mentioned by M. R. D. Foot in his SOE In France.) In France Stevenson "found many records unavailable in London," but his unimpressive 16 pages of endnotes show no trace of them. The Swiss Intelligence Agency "opened" files for him, and "Americans" "gladly allowed" him to examine records of the Office of Strategic Services, but here again his footnotes reveal no trace of his findings. Instead of official documents, there are secondary sources, often skimpy and inadequate, including Begin's, The Revolt, Goebbels', Diaries, and Holocaust Encyclopedia.

Most in evidence are references to interviews, conversations, and letters, which by their nature are clearly beyond the reader's reach. Because there are persons who were tied up in that SOE-SIS struggle, persons he calls "our Mutual Friends," they "need" anonymity. And hence one encounters source notes indicating "Identity not made public." Noticeable are many references to "notes" kept by Intrepid, and the many, yes the many, conversations he had with Intrepid's wife, Lady Mary Stephenson. As one who has specialized in the Stephensons, I can say these "notes" and "conversations" are new gems, if genuine.

Then there is Stevenson's most important informant, Vera herself, who refused throughout her life to talk publicly about her wartime job. She appears early in the book as an obviously bewitching female who befriended our author in 1940 in London when he was "a small, bare-headed, bare-kneed boy," in "a Boy Scout uniform," bicycling between a police station and emergency posts. According to his text, she became his "close friend," who so greatly admired his Intrepid book that she would let no one else write her story, and that he could do so only after she died, which happened in 2000. Thus, much of this book depends on the testimony of a partisan quartet: Vera, the Stephensons, and author Bill Stevenson.

One like me can only try to explain why Stevenson writes as he does. There is no question of his honesty or suspicion of motives. He has been a man of strong and passionately held convictions about World War II, especially the conflict between Churchill and appeasers and between

Intrepid and Donovan on the one hand and Lord Halifax on the other. When confronted by a mass of facts, he finds them, as does any historian, embedded in unknowns and uncertainties, in probabilities and impossibilities. Seeking the whole truth and trying to present it to the public, Stevenson surely lets his obviously creative imagination recreate the missing facts, resolve the doubts, and fill in the blanks. Thus his portrait of Sir William Stephenson, a man and friend I greatly admired, not only made him A Man Called Intrepid but also made him larger than life.

What then of Vera Atkins? By the title of this book, Stevenson has also made her larger than life. He has her spending "much of the 1930s running countless espionage missions" for some obscure organization. She never seems to have had any official rank, but Stevenson wants us to know that she reached SOE's "leadership echelon" and enjoyed a "commanding role" that was never acknowledged because of anti-feminism. Yes, she had a "nominal" boss. She had a finger in every wartime pie. For example, she was on hand to give parachuting Rudolf Hess "something to ensure he didn't wake up until morning," and "she selected" Reinhard Heydrich to be assassinated in 1942 and "she found" two young Czechs to do the job.

Again, what then of Vera Atkins? Stevenson would have us believe that she was a remarkable woman, an independent leader in a man's world. That she worked in an especially dangerous wartime role--recruiting, training, and dispatching to Nazi-occupied France secret agents who had 50-50 chances of escaping capture, torture, and execution--is beyond cavil. While full of admiration for her, Stevenson gives no intelligible personal chronology, little on her job, staff, and functions, and no discernible record of accomplishments. When encountered, she is flitting in and out of major events with little relevance to her work. When not flitting, she is either in deep talk with luminaries or reading their minds and vice versa, without, however, much connection with action. In short there is here too much of the old Stevenson's mixing of fact and fancy. Whatever her achievements, Stevenson's account hardly proves her a great agent, much less "the greatest female secret agent in World War II."