

And now for something completely different...

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When I was (much) younger and living in England in the 1950s and 1960s, the defection of British spies to the Soviet Union was one of the big scandals of the day. (The other was probably the Profumo affair and Christine Keeler, currently being aired on BBC/DSTv). First in 1951 there were Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean who managed a clean get-away, just. The press repeatedly stated there was a Third Man, and indeed there was, HAR (Kim) Philby who escaped from British clutches while in Lebanon in January 1963. (Over the succeeding years, and for completion, there was even a Fourth Man, viz. Sir Anthony Blunt who confessed to British authorities in 1964). All of them were undergraduates at Cambridge University, which at the time had a vibrant Communist Club. (I started my academia at Oxford University, which also of course had a Communist Club. Who wasn't a young Communist in those days?).

The point of the story is that Kim Philby's father was Harry St John Bridger Philby (1885-1960), who eventually became an expert on Arabian affairs, between the two world wars. He has been described as a "freebooting explorer, courtier and adviser to kings in Arabia" (Seale & McConville 1978: 17). He left British government service and moved to Arabia, establishing himself in Jidda in 1926, leaving his family in England. Like all red-bloodied Englishman he caught malaria there. In August 1930 he converted to Islam, and had an all-consuming admiration for Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud who was one of the big native players on the peninsula at the time. Apart from politics he was a great and curious explorer

and naturalist, taken to roaming "about the desert in a Ford V8 station wagon ... collecting ... rare ... fauna" (Seale & McConville 1978: 34). He crossed the Empty Quarter, but was beaten into first place by his rival Bertram Thomas. He followed this up with a book of his exploits, *The Empty Quarter*, published in 1933.

On 26 May 1934, he shot two Rüppell's Griffons *Gyps rueppelli* at Taif, which is close to Jidda (and Mecca). One of these is in the Natural History Museum, Tring, England, the other was not skinned. Jennings (2010: 247) says that the specimen "was not properly labelled, leading some to question its authenticity later." I examined this specimen at Tring in September 1991, certainly a Rüppell's Griffon, and gave it something of a description much later (Mundy 2013). It has a yellow bill, a 'powder-puff' ruff still with a hint of feathering, many pointed contours, and altogether a rather dark plumage; I call it a sub-adult, i.e. just before becoming an adult. With museum specimens I take several measurements: wing length 670 mm, tail 275 mm, bill 50.5 mm, tarsus 107.6 mm, toe 105.4 mm. These are all very close to the average for the species (Mundy *et al.* 1992: 103) and decidedly smaller than for the Eurasian Griffon *Gyps fulvus* (*op. cit.*: 115). An additional label on the bird states that it is "Almost certainly" Philby's specimen; this is written in G.L. Bates's handwriting (F.E. Warr *in litt.*). But as Mrs Warr queries, was Philby at Taif in May 1934? Will Philby's book *Arabian days* answer this for us?

With the assistance of my friend Clive Slater, I got a copy of this book. And indeed, according to Philby (*Arabian days*, p. 301), he was hunting in

the “Rakba plain” (now Sahl Rakbah plain) in “that summer at Taïf” [1934], and was also making a “collection of Arabian birds”. So the probability is there. G.L. Bates wrote some papers on Philby’s collections, and in one of them Philby asked him not to forget the “Abyssinian Griffon” (= Rüppell’s)(Bates 1937: 60-61), so the probability becomes a certainty. The species has

not been proved in the Arabian peninsula since then; the width of the sea crossing at the Bab-al-Mandab is about 30 km and this may be too much for a griffon to cross (Bildstein *et al.* 2009).

I thank Mr David Emmerson for giving me a copy of Seale & McConville’s book, which revived my interest in the Philbys.

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