

Lord Lexden

Conservative peer and historian

Drawing on recently declassified secret service files, Alex Grant has written a definitive account of a sensational scandal and its terrible repercussions

Sex, Spies and Scandal The John Vassall Affair

By **Alex Grant**
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A good-looking man stares rather flirtatiously from the dust jacket of this excellent book. The beguiling stare was reserved strictly for other men.

John Vassall, a sociable, well-mannered but not high-flying Admiralty clerk, enjoyed gay sex and had a great deal of it, finding lovers readily wherever he went. He always kept a suitcase packed, ready to answer an urgent summons from a lusty foreign friend.

Few, if any, realised that they were sleeping with a significant Soviet spy until scandal broke in September 1962. In that horrible homophobic period, captured so well here, several civil servants, diplomats and officers in the armed services had their careers damaged or ruined just because they had had sex with Vassall. None of them had compromised Britain's security.

The popular press mounted a grotesque witch-hunt with articles such as "How to spot a homo". It could all have been avoided if the Wolfenden Report of 1957, calling for the decriminalisation of homosexuality between consenting adults, had not been shelved.

Vassall's many lovers included at least one Conservative MP, without any competition from left-wing gays who never came his way (he undoubtedly voted Tory). Drawing on recently declassified secret service files, used very effectively here, Alex Grant shows that MI5 had "no doubt" that Vassall had had an affair with Fergus

Montgomery, a flamboyant MP who later became Margaret Thatcher's parliamentary private secretary and was charged with a shoplifting offence.

Vassall, however, denied it, telling MI5 that his Tory lover was Harmar Nicholls, a man best-known for narrowly surviving as an MP with tiny majorities, who subsequently wrote to him from prison, saying "it would be nice to see your happy and cheerful countenance again".

The relationship was not resumed. Elegant in appearance, Vassall did not know how to write an elegant or engaging letter.

The names of these two MPs did not emerge publicly, and their reputations were unscathed. But grave damage was done to a rising junior minister, Tam Galbraith, widely tipped for high office. Vassall had worked for a time in his private office. A few wholly innocent letters from the minister got into the hands of the *Sunday Pictorial*. Passages from them were published in such a way as to suggest there could have been a relationship between them.

It was contemptible. With characteristic ruthlessness,

Harold Macmillan forced Galbraith to resign in the hope of lessening the pressure on the government as a whole. Prime ministers in a panic often do not think twice about sacrificing able colleagues.

Gang-raped, set up and photographed by the KGB in Moscow in 1954, Vassall was blackmailed into spying at the age of 30. His conscience never seems to have troubled him. For six years he calmly removed and photo-

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graphed documents from the Admiralty, where security was almost non-existent.

Amazingly, he did not seem to think he had done anything seriously wrong. It never occurred to him that he would go to prison for a long time. He was an efficient, unemotional spy, happy to have Soviet money to spend on himself. He had no British accomplices.

Alex Grant has written a definitive account of a sensational scandal and its terrible repercussions. He treats Vassall himself with sympathy and understanding. A model prisoner, he was released after 10 years, and lived for another 24 years in contented obscurity. 📖

