

The Eitingons - A Twentieth-Century Story by Mary-Kay Wilmers.
faber and faber 2009.

In some ways this is not an obvious choice of book for an enthralling read, the cover giving little away about the riches that lie within, but enthralling it certainly is, as well as being full of passion, pain and the atmosphere of the period it describes.

The Eitingons were/are a Jewish family originating in Russia of which Mary-Kay Wilmers, editor of the London Review of Books, is a scion. As with many other Jewish families in the twentieth century the Eitingons were widely spread, with branches in Russia, Europe and the New World. Ms Wilmers writes about family relationships between the branches, but the book is also in large part a quest to identify the true nature and role of key members of the family, notably Motty the furrier in New York, Max the psychoanalyst and close friend of Freud in Europe, and Leonid the KGB assassin and possible planner of the assassination of Trotsky in Mexico in 1940.

One of the key threads that runs through the book is the links that individual members had or didn't have with the Soviet regime, and the sometimes confusing messages they left about the true nature of their activities.

In many ways the most powerful and enigmatic figure in the book is Leonid the assassin, a man with much blood on his hands who enjoyed the crucial protection of Stalin himself, a womaniser of prodigious enthusiasm, a domestic tyrant and a man who kept his secrets to the end.

This is an extraordinary biography of an extraordinary Jewish family as well as being, in microcosm, yet another facet of the twentieth century Jewish experience.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh