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Seeking Truth and Finding Oil

Book Review

By Greg Guma
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In a new political detective story, set in the Middle East, Charlotte Dennett combines oil pipeline politics, relentless journalism and a revealing family biography to unravel the Great Game

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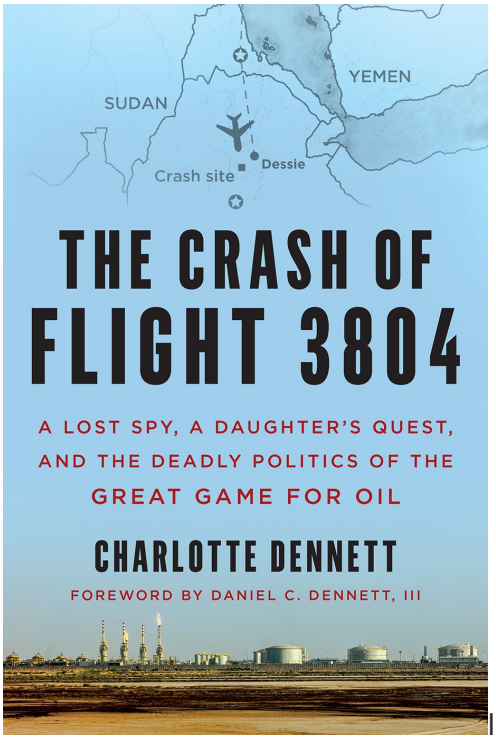
All families have unsolved mysteries, stories lost or rarely told. But few if any have a storyteller as prepared or as dogged as Vermont lawyer and journalist Charlotte Dennett — or a family saga so entwined with the politics of oil and pipelines in the Middle East.

In a new book, The Crash of Flight 3804, Dennett melds two narratives, the personal and the geopolitical. The subtitle suggests its scope: A Lost Spy, a Daughter's Quest, and the Deadly Politics of the Great Game for Oil. It's an epic yet intimate voyage full of dark discoveries, suspenseful, brave, ambitious and detailed.

Let's look at those four qualities, beginning with a bit of the suspense. In 1943, Charlotte's father, Daniel Dennett, went from a life of teaching and scholarship to wartime espionage. A Harvard-educated Mideast specialist who spoke Arabic, French and German, he taught English in the 1930s at the American University in Beirut. That made him a good catch for either the State Department or the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), precursor of the CIA.

But as the Agency proudly points out on its website — now that it has finally recognized Dennett as its "forgotten first star" — he chose intelligence over diplomacy.



In 1944, Dennett became the OSS chief of counterintelligence in Beirut, re-assigned to the Strategic Services Unit (SSU) once the war ended. By 1946, at age 36, he was running Beirut intelligence operations, just as the Central Intelligence Group (CIG) was morphing into the CIA. Dennett's CIG code name was Carat. His cover was cultural attache, but he felt engaged in cultural warfare, and not only with the Russians but also with some allies, notably the British and French. Financier Bernard Baruch had just named the unfolding struggle: "We are in the midst of a Cold War."

On March 19, 1947, Dennett boarded Flight 3804, a C-47 army transport plane, bound from Jeddah in Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia. At this point one part of his job was helping to negotiate the route of a new, US-controlled Trans-Arabian oil pipeline that would run across Arabia to either Lebanon or Palestine. Where it would end was becoming a key sticking point. In his last correspondence, Dennett talked about US oilmen arguing over a final terminal on the Mediterranean, and Syrians balking over transit rights.

The stated mission was to deliver top secret communications equipment, take and deliver aerial photos, and meet with Sinclair Oil officials. On board, along with Dennett and the flight crew, were Donald Sullivan, a US petroleum attache inspecting holdings and projects, and John Creech, the intelligence agency technician responsible for the equipment. The plane never landed, instead slamming into a mountain north of the capital.

The first person to reach the crash site was an unnamed British officer. The official explanation was a weather-related accident.

Charlotte Dennett, less than two months old when her father died, has spent much of her life searching for the truth about what happened, and the bigger picture surrounding that personal loss. Among the more revealing documents she found along the way was Daniel Dennett's 1944 "analysis of work" for the OSS, in which he acknowledged that Saudi Arabia's oil deposits were so enormous "that we must control them at all costs." That phrase, "at all costs," resurfaces frequently, and headlines the last chapter.

The book opens with a brief foreward by another Dennett, Charlotte's older brother, also named Daniel. He is known as one of the "the four horsemen," thought leaders of the new

atheist movement. The others are Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens. If the four horsemen were a rock band, Dennett would be the quiet one.

“The Great Game for Oil is one of civilization’s dirty secrets,” he explains, one perhaps understood best by persistent journalists like his sister and master spies like his dad. And he introduces Kim Philby, who played a crucial role in post-war intelligence, a high-level British double agent who ultimately defected to the Soviet Union. Both Daniel and Charlotte Dennett see motives for Philby and British involvement in their father’s untimely death. As head of UK counterintelligence for the Middle East, Philby certainly had the opportunity and was linked to other sabotage.

But would the British make such a move? And why? Like many questions posed throughout the book, these can’t be definitively answered. But Dennett often presents a persuasive case, or admits to speculating when a trail runs dry. At one point, she bravely asks whether her father was tolerant and humane as a spy. Whose interest did he serve? Did he know or care, she wonders, “about what was happening to the Jews of Europe when he strove to make Lebanon safe for the Trans-Arabian Pipeline?” This is impossible to determine, but the question itself is laden with meaning. Sometimes she sees him as a victim of the Great Game, sometimes as a player and master spy.

In any case, if Daniel Dennett’s death wasn’t an accident, were the British directly implicated, or did Philby point the Soviets (or some other group) toward his activities in the region? That’s one type of question. The title of Chapter Five poses another: Is the Syrian War a pipeline war? As you might suspect, her answer to this one is yes. And although recent conflict has delayed projects involving that country, she predicts, “covert pipeline wars between the west (seeking to bypass Russia) and Russia (seeking to consolidate its hold over pipeline routes to Europe) will no doubt resume.”

At times The Crash of Flight 3804 reminds me of Fate is the Hunter, a 1964 aviation disaster film. The main storyline concerns the crash of a commercial airliner. Investigators initially point to pilot error (Dennett’s crash was blamed on uncertain weather.) But Glenn Ford, playing the airline’s Director of Flight Operations, won’t accept conventional wisdom and eventually discovers the real reason — a complex chain of coincidences. In the process, the film explores the lives of passengers and crew, the technical operations of aircraft, the process of investigation, and the pressures of relentless news media and industry politics.

Dennett employs a similar approach. After introducing her father and briefly describing the crash, she uses various chapters to chronicle oil politics in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Israel, along the way introducing journalists and others who have provided inspiration or uncovered key facts, while exploring her family’s connections to various events and places. The structure is ambitious but can prove frustrating at times, offering up recent history with only a tangential connection to the main narrative. But unlike the film, Dennett rarely equivocates. Rejecting fate or coincidence, for instance, she says British interests were the most likely outside factor in Daniel Dennett’s death, probably involving sabotage with Ethiopian participation, and possibly orchestrated by Kim Philby.

A British hand makes sense. In March 1938 the Standard Oil Company of California (renamed Aramco in 1944) had discovered vast oil deposits in Saudi Arabia. Britain still dominated the region, but was feeling the pressure. King Abdul Aziz Al Saud, known as Ibn Saud, thought his future might be with America and considered his 1945 meeting with

Franklin Roosevelt “the high point of my entire life.” By 1947, the US had replaced Britain as Saudi Arabia’s favored trading partner. Winston Churchill was furious about the loss of influence.

In his last letter home, Dennett expressed concern about British colonialism and the adoption of similar policies by Aramco. In addition, however, he was heading to a meeting with Sinclair Oil, which often broke step with the industry. According to Harvey O’Connor, who wrote a 1955 precursor to Dennett’s book called The Empire of Oil, Sinclair’s founder, Harry Sinclair, was the only oil magnate to sign an agreement with the Oil Workers International Union. “Repeatedly, he delighted in breaking the Standard of New Jersey wage program by giving advantageous terms to the union,” O’Connor wrote. Standard of New Jersey meant Rockefeller power.

After decades of research on the region, however, there are matters beyond her father’s case on Dennett’s mind. “Telling the truth had been drummed into me in childhood by my mother (despite the fact that my father was a spy who by profession, was taught how to lie!),” she writes. Nevertheless, she has often found herself “seeking truth and finding oil.” Looking back at seven decades, as well as recent violence in Syria, Iraq, Gaza and Yemen, she forcefully argues that “the timeworn quest for oil — to be pursued and protected ‘at all costs’ — lies at the heart of many of these tragedies.”

Dennett acknowledges that some may consider this conclusion an oversimplification, and allows room for other arguments. Some wars and violence in the Middle East do appear to have multiple causes. Despite the evidence she assembles, that looks like the case in Syria and Yemen. On the other hand, there is little doubt that oil was a decisive factor in the Iraq War of 2003, and it has been a driving force elsewhere. There is important, fresh information and insight in Dennett’s reading of recent Middle East events. But the granular details of pipeline schemes can become a distraction, diverting focus from the central storyline.

> “Everywhere it has been hunted as a wild animal, and the law of the jungle has entered into the heart and sinew of the industry. The sordid and bloody story has been told in local and world wars, in revolutions and corruption, in continuing world turmoil.” – Harvey O’Connor, The Empire of Oil

As someone who has known Charlotte Dennett for more than 30 years, I’m familiar with her political views, and have read both her 2010 book, The People V. Bush: One Lawyer’s Campaign to Bring the President to Justice and the National Grassroots Movement She Encounters along the Way, and her previous work with husband Gerard Colby. As she explains in the new book, for years “we followed the trail of US evangelical missionaries and spies from Latin America to Southeast Asia and Africa and inevitably found oil and fundamentalism as common denominators of conquest.” The result was a massive book with an equally big title, Thy Will Be Done: The Conquest of the Amazon: Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil.

What intrigued me more and kept me reading this time were the twists and turns of her personal journey, as well as her family’s deep and complex connections with the Middle East. They go back much farther than 1975, when Charlotte dodged gunfire in Beirut as a young reporter; or 1947, when she was born there and her father’s plane went down; or even 1931, when 21-year-old Daniel Dennett arrived in Beirut to teach. Her grandmother,

Elizabeth Redfern, spent three years in Turkey as a missionary educator from 1900 to 1903, teaching biology at the American College for Girls.

And it was no accident. Redfern's father, a Massachusetts lumber merchant, thought that was an excellent idea. In fact, he needed her "to be his eyes and ears in Turkey as the United States entered the Great Game." The race was on to build railroads, and white pine from Maine made good railroad ties. "My grandmother was there to see it all, whether or not she understood its ramifications," Dennett writes.

Apparently, Elizabeth Redfern wasn't the only amateur spy at the school. With daily horseback rides other missionary teachers "did their part in informally gathering and passing on intelligence to the school's wealthy trustees." It was all there: missionaries, spies, commercial scheming over transportation and oil in the Middle East.

Despite its connection to her husband's death, Charlotte's mother loved Beirut, and managed to return as a librarian in 1963. Charlotte finished high school there, two years that changed her life, introducing her to "an interpretation of the Middle East that was entirely different from anything I'd seen in the United States." In the 1970s, she came back as a reporter, writing sunnily about developments in rapidly changing societies. In Abu Dhabi, for example, she reported that petroleum "has launched a small, poverty-stricken country into space age modernity and affluence."

But some stories couldn't be published, material that ended up in a file called "What Charlotte couldn't write." Things like tyrannical rule in Iran under the US-backed Shah, men in dark suits and sunglasses surveilling street corners for any disturbances, universities plied with drugs to keep the students pacified, and the Shah's sister trafficking opium. Once she teamed up with Colby, however, to investigate the connections between Rockefeller, missionaries, CIA operatives and genocide in the Amazon, self-censorship was no longer an issue.

That makes the last chapter of the book a bit surprising, although a fitting climax for her quest. It begins with two CIA men visiting their home for a chat in April 2019, and culminates in May with handshakes, promises and speeches at CIA headquarters as Dennett wonders whether Big Oil can be restrained or the agency can change its ways. "Are we on the cusp of something new? Or the same old story…"

In 2007, after repeated rejection of requests for documents on her father's death, Dennett sued the CIA. This attracted some press, including coverage by the Village Voice and New York Times. The court backed the agency's typical national security argument and her case was dismissed on appeal. But the spooks took notice and apparently had another move.

When Mark Schwendler, a CIA historian, and David Marlowe, assistant director of the Near East Mission, showed up in Burlington last year it was all smiles and jokes. Colby and Dennett were skeptical: "We figured that they surely must have researched us ahead of time and discovered that I was writing a book about my father." Apparently, Schwendler was conducting related research, following up on a 2008 think tank recommendation that Dennett be added to the CIA's memorial wall. It still sounded suspicious.

Schwendler then provided crash documents that pointed to weight, weather and pilot problems. But Dennett had seen reports that contradicted those theories. By the end, it was obvious that the writers knew more than the CIA men. The visit concluded with a promised

tour of the agency's spy museum and some creepy final words: "Welcome to the family. We are all family."

On May 21, 2019 Dennett and Colby got their tour and more. In a Langely, Virginia conference room, renamed for the two fallen heroes, they saw tributes and heard warm remarks by Marlowe. They visited Dennett's star, newly engraved on the CIA wall, and took part in an emotional ceremony. There was even a private meeting with CIA Director Gina Haspel, who called her father a role model and agreed to consider releasing more documents. The agency delivered on that in January 2020, removing some redactions and releasing more Information about the elder Dennett's last months.

The real surprise was Charlotte's take away from the charm offensive: "Apparently my wanting to do justice to my father won them over to our patriotism and the sincerity of our work, despite some understandable misgivings about our previous books." Really? Despite knowing well that spies routinely dissemble, she considered the respect and sensitivity shown at the CIA that day to be genuine. Well, possibly. But it might also be strategic, keeping potential threats as close as possible.

"These Americans (being part of an oath-taking secretive organization) do not get the same public accolades as our armed forces on Memorial Day," Dennett also notes. "Intelligence agencies are needed… members of the CIA may not always feel comfortable in what they are ordered to do, but they strongly believe in the overall mission: that ultimately, they are protecting democracy itself."

That argument seems out of place, a soft defense of an intelligence community that has often backed repressive regimes, created massive chaos, and helped private interests protect oil and pipeline routes "at all costs." Then again, most spies probably do believe that protecting democracy and American interests are closely linked, if not the same thing. And her father clearly had some misgivings, at least about the "imperial drift" of oil companies like Aramco. On the final page, Dennett does balance her qualified support with mention of a recent questionable CIA operation, running local militias in Afghanistan that commit serious human rights abuses.

Her last thoughts also suggest that we live in unsusual times, when members of the intelligence community can be whistleblowing fighters against a corrupt federal regime, and patriots can be liberals who love their country while criticizing its shortcomings and mistakes. This is intriguing. Yet she provides no details and offers no advice on how to avoid the next showdowns over oil, beyond responsible individual acton and insistence on the right to be fully informed.

Instead, Dennett asks more questions: Have we turned a page? Will the truth about Americans trying to grab Ukrainian natural gas be exposed? Can a powerhouse like Saudi Aramco, the personification of big oil in league with big banks, "be restrained by the heartfelt pleas of millions of young climate activists?" We need frank, intelligent investigations and discussions about such issues. But she doesn't pretend to offer all the answers. Rather, Dennett's combination of oil pipeline politics, relentless journalism, and revealing family biography makes for an absorbing political detective story, one likely to leave you with new questions of your own.

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