

Churchill's secret war

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Citation:

CLARKE, David (2018). Churchill's secret war. *Fortean Times*, 372. [Article]

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WINSTON CHURCHILL: The Secret War

Millions of words have been written about Sir Winston Churchill (1874-1965), British prime minister and one of the most influential statesmen of the 20th century. DAVID CLARKE examines Churchill's curiosity about unexplained phenomena that occurs throughout his long career as army officer, politician and writer.

Books and TV documentaries have picked apart his Churchill's role as the inspirational wartime leader who led Britain, when it stood alone, against the Nazi war machine and later helped seal the Allied victory in the Second World War. Learned papers have debated his qualities as a politician, his wisdom and eloquence as an orator and his passion for science and technology. Even his love life and his lifelong struggle with his 'black dog' have been placed under the literary and psychological microscope.

But far less attention has been devoted to Sir Winston Churchill's more esoteric interests that lay outside the strict boundaries of politics and international affairs. Anecdotes that provide insights into his passion for science fiction, his dalliance with spiritualism and his on-off fascination with fashionable ideas have, on occasions, received sensational media coverage. But no one has suggested that an interest in matters that we might define as Fortean linked these interests together. I have found no evidence that Churchill read or was aware of Fort's writings. But his personal library certainly contained a copy of the 1953 book *Flying Saucers Have Landed*, inscribed by his cousin, Desmond Leslie, the aristocratic former RAF Spitfire pilot turned UFOlogist (FT 225:40-7). (1) Leslie borrowed heavily from Fort's material to compile the historical essay that was paired by his publisher with contactee George Adamski's story of his meeting with a being from Venus.

Churchill's alleged interest in spiritualism [see panel] has been examined by Malcolm Gaskill who concludes that, in office, he showed 'all the constructive pragmatism one would expect from a man who counted bricklaying among his recreations' (2). His early adventures serving in the British Army in Sudan and later as a journalist with the *Morning Post* during the South African war led him to speak of assistance or refer to 'that High Power which interferes in the eternal sequences of causes and effects'. In his book *My Early Life* he provides a breezy account of his escape from a Boer prison camp in 1899. after which he He evaded his pursuers by using a device popular with spiritualists, the planchette pencil, that directed him to a safe house. to help him divine his position and evade pursuers. As a result he came to believe he was a man of destiny. Many sources highlight his gift for prophetic accuracy that weaves itself through his writings, speeches and recorded conversations. As a schoolboy he predicted 'there will be a great crisis which I can't foresee the details of [but] I shall save England and the empire' (3). President Richard Nixon described him as the only political leader in history 'who has his own crystal ball', according to historian James C. Humes in his book *Churchill: The Prophetic Statesman* (4).

Churchill returned to England in 1900 and became an MP at the age of 25. During WW1 he promoted the use of tanks to break through the German trenches in WW1, but his powers of foresight failed him when, as First Lord of the Admiralty in the War Cabinet, his plan to break the stalemate on the Western Front by landing Allied troops on the Gallipoli peninsula ended in disaster. His resignation was followed by a long period in the political wilderness that saw him return to writing for a living. His journalism helped to pay for the upkeep of Chartwell, his country home in Kent. Interested in everything, as a young man serving with the British Army in India, he devoured

Charles Darwin's *On The Origin of Species* and novels by HG Wells. Drawing upon the ideas he had toyed with in youth he used his contacts in the military and the scientific community as the source for a string of 'popular science' articles in magazines and newspapers.

Wells had envisaged the potential destructive effect of an atomic bomb in his book *The World Set Free* published just months before the outbreak of the First World War. Ten years later, writing in 1924, for instance, he anticipated the arrival of nuclear weapons in articles for the *Pall Mall Magazine*, Churchill asked presciently 'might not a bomb no bigger than an orange be found to possess secret power to destroy a whole block of buildings nay, to blast a township at a stroke?'. In the same publication he quotes a German informant who warns the next war would be fought with death rays 'which could paralyse the engines of motor cars...claw down aeroplanes from the sky and conceivably be made destructive of human life and vision'.(5)

Possibly the best example of his prescience is the type-written essay 'Are We Alone in Space?' that was, remarkably, penned in 1939 when the world stood on the brink of war. A shortened version of the 11-page type-written essay appeared was published by three years later in the London *Sunday Dispatch* under the title 'Are there Men on the Moon?' in 1942. The editor ran the article appeared after an eclipse of the moon, the editor noting that millions of people who watched it must have wondered: 'Is there life on the moon?', 'Can it be that this world is the only place in the whole vast universe with people?' and 'are there Men in the Moon and Men from Mars?' The Prime Minister had tried to answer some of these questions, he said, in an article written just before the war. Despite the national exposure it received, the extraordinary nature of the content remained largely forgotten until a longer, revised version, was unearthed in 2016 by an Italian scholar, Mario Livio, in 2016 during a visit at the US National Churchill Museum.(6) Writing in *Nature* about its re-discovery, Livio said: 'What's so amazing...is that here is a man, arguably the greatest statesperson of the 20th century, and in 1939 he not only has the interest, but finds the time, to write an essay on a purely scientific question. His logic, his train of thought, mirrors exactly what we think today'.

The essay, revised during the 1950s, displays a broad grasp of contemporary developments in astrophysics and what we now call astrobiology. Churchill begins by stating that 'all living things of the type we know require water'. He did not rule out the possibility that life could arise in other circumstances but accepted that 'nothing in our present knowledge entitles us to make such a conclusion'. He moves on to explore the factors required to produce what astronomers now call a 'Goldilocks zone' around stars, where a planet's temperature will not be too hot nor too cold to sustain the conditions likely to host life as we know it. In our own solar system only the Earth, Mars and Venus fell into that zone. But when Churchill projected outside of our solar system and grappled with the different planetary formation theories of his day, he concluded that, logically, extra-solar planets *must* exist. Decades before SETI, the Drake Equation or discovery of the first exo-planet Churchill reached a carefully argued and persuasive conclusion: we are *probably* not alone in the universe.

'I am not sufficiently conceited to think that my sun is the only one with a family of planets and, therefore, that our little earth is unique,' he wrote. 'Once we admit that the other stars probably also have planets, at any rate a goodly proportion of them, it is more than likely that a large fraction of these will be the right size to keep on their surface water and, possibly, an atmosphere of some sort'.(7)

Where and how did Churchill become aware of these ideas? His literary output reflects not only his fascination with hard science but also the influence of his earlier fascination with science fiction and, in particular, the writings of HG Wells. Research by the Cambridge historian Dr Richard Toye uncovered a long chain of correspondence between Churchill and Wells that he traced back to the turn of the century. The two men first met in 1902 and kept in touch until Wells's death in 1946. Toye argues that Churchill's book title *The Gathering Storm* was borrowed consciously from Wells's *The War of the Worlds*. Churchill used it to describe the rise of Hitler's fascist regime in Germany, whereas Wells employed it as a metaphor for the arrival of Martian invaders.(8)

But Wells's influence was waning by the time Churchill produced his essay on extraterrestrial life. The soon-to-be Prime Minister was the first modern leader to appoint a scientific advisor to serve in government. Long before his rise to power, Churchill took advice and counsel from his close friend Frederick Lindemann (1886-1957), professor of physics at Oxford University. The aristocratic scientist, nick-named 'The Prof' by his admirers, was undoubtedly a brilliant man but his priggish manner created a certain amount of friction with academic rivals. The pre-war essay on ET life betrays Lindemann's growing influence and, with it, Churchill's growing confidence and ability to explain complex scientific concepts in plain English a popular manner. Churchill's reputation as a clear-sighted politician grew partly as a result of briefings provided by his loyal friend not only on science but on many other subjects.

Churchill saw the Second World War as 'a war of science...which could be won with new weapons' and one of Lindemann's protégés, the physicist Professor R.V. Jones (1991-1997), played a key role in what became known as 'the secret war'. (9) Jones and his team were encouraged by Churchill to both anticipate and design counter-measures against German technological advances in radar, rocket technology and nuclear weapons. Occasionally Fortean anomalies fell within the remit of scientific intelligence and piqued the curiosity of Jones, whose His interest in UFOs and psychic phenomena is chronicled in his papers at the Churchill Archives.(10) Dr Jones was appointed in 1941 and promoted to Director of Intelligence at the Air Ministry in 1946 as the flap of 'ghost rocket' sightings spread across Scandinavia and western Europe (see FT 164:43). Jones's experience dealing with the first UFO flaps in 1946-47 and 1952, led him to adopt a nuanced but sceptical attitude towards the phenomenon.

But Sir Henry Tizard (1885-1959), a member of the small group who fought what became known as Churchill's 'Wizard War', took a different view. A chemist by training and WW1 test pilot, Tizard is best known for his role in the early development of radar when he and Lindemann were close friends. In 1940 he led a top secret mission to the USA to exchange Britain's most advanced technology in return for American support against the Germans. But in 1942 the two men clashed over Lindemann's plans for the strategic bombing of Germany and Tizard resigned. After his return to Whitehall in 1948 as Chief Scientific Advisor it was Tizard who insisted that MoD should create a 'Flying Saucer Working Party' to investigate UFOs reports (11) Tizard believed UFO reports from credible sources should not be dismissed and deserved 'a full investigation'. Playing Drawing upon his their intelligence contacts in America, the MoD quickly replaced 'flying saucers' with the US Air Force acronym UFO: unidentified flying objects. But the working party's final report, delivered to the MoD and CIA in the summer of 1951, reached an entirely negative conclusion. All reports of UFOs investigated by MoD, its authors claimed, could be explained as known astronomical or meteorological phenomena; mistaken identifications of aircraft, balloons and birds; optical illusions

and psychological delusions and deliberate hoaxes. It recommended no further work should be carried out on the subject until some new hard evidence came to light. Their brief six-page report was ‘lost’ for 50 years before my probing, using Freedom of Information legislation, unearthed a single surviving copy in the MoD archives. (12) Attached to it was a cryptic covering note from the head of Scientific Intelligence, Bertie Blount, addressed to Tizard, that read: ‘This is the report on “Flying Saucers” for which you asked. I hope that it will serve its purpose’.

However you interpret that cryptic remark, the government remained on the defensive as Press interest in UFOs continued to grow. As the Working Party collected its data in the winter of 1950-51, newspapers adopted the fashionable topic. It was ‘the story that is bigger even than atom bomb wars’ according to one Sunday newspaper. In October Charles Eade, editor of the *Sunday Dispatch*, published a page one splash that promoted the reality of flying saucers. The story was entirely based upon information supplied by his wartime friend Lord Mountbatten of Burma, Admiral of the Fleet, who privately expressed his belief that flying saucers were ‘the Shackletons and Scotts of Mars and Venus’, the same planets identified by Churchill’s essay – and Wells’s novel – as potential sources for extraterrestrial life in our own solar system. Eade revealed his source was ‘one of the most famous men alive today’ whom he could not name but who ‘commands universal respect and admiration’. (13)

Lord Mountbatten became the Chief of Defence Staff in 1957 by which time he had learned to keep his views on UFOs private. Other high profile military believers, such as Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, had been the subject of ridicule for their public expressions of belief in the existence of UFOs and the spirit world (or, in his case, a combination of both). Along with Tizard and others – including a member of Churchill’s family - they formed a secret phalanx of ‘believers’ in the corridors of Whitehall. But they were outnumbered by scientific skeptics including as Jones and Lindemann who, crucially, held the patronage of his friend the Prime Minister. The establishment position that Lindemann represented was that research into esoteric phenomena, as UFOs were classified, was a drain on scarce resources – an attitude that has continued to underpin all British government policy to the present day. Indeed it led directly to the conclusions of MoD’s Condign report that preceded the closure of the UFO desk in 2009 (see FT 368:26-29).

Ultimately, it was Lindemann’s faction who won this *secret war* ~~covert battle of wills~~. The scientist, elevated to Lord Cherwell in 1941, used the conclusions reached by Working Party to dismiss flying saucers as ‘a product of mass psychology’. His opinion dominated the Cabinet discussion that followed reports of a UFO flap over Washington DC summer of 1952 that alarmed both the CIA and President Harry Truman. (14) The Washington DC flap filled newspaper columns and it was a story in *The Times* that triggered Churchill’s personal interest. On 28 July he fired off his famous memo addressed to the Air Ministry. He wanted to know: ‘What does all this stuff about flying saucers amount to? What can it mean? What is the truth?’.

The unequivocal response arrived on his desk two weeks later and was copied to Lord Cherwell. It assured the Prime Minister there was nothing to worry about and ‘a full intelligence study’ completed in 1951 had concluded all reported sightings could be explained. ‘The Americans, who carried out a similar investigation in 1948/9 [Project Grudge] reached a similar conclusion. Nothing has happened since 1951 to make the Air Staff change their opinion, and, to judge from recent Press

statements, the same is true in America'. Lord Cherwell had the last word on 14 August when he said he 'agreed entirely with [the Air Ministry] conclusions'.(15)

Divining what Churchill really believed is impossible from the sparse surviving official papers. The most reliable evidence I uncovered was that provided by Anthony Montague-Browne (1923-2013) who joined the Prime Minister's personal staff as joint private secretary in the autumn of 1952. When I raised the UFO issue with him in 2000 he clearly recalled the internal battles between believers and skeptics in Whitehall that, he said, were a 'light-hearted distraction from the more serious business of the Cold War'. But he played down the depth of Churchill's interest in UFOs as 'ephemeral', adding, 'he wanted to know the facts in case he was questioned in Parliament. That's all'.

Yet despite his deteriorating health and the heavy burdens of international diplomacy at this dangerous stage in the Cold War, it seems his desire to know 'the truth' about flying saucers was more than just a passing fad. Although only fragments of the Cabinet discussions survive, in 1987 a retired RAF official revealed that he had received a request from Air Ministry to submit a report on flying saucers 'following a request from Churchill' in 1952. Wing Commander Tim Woodman, who died in 1996, was superintendent of Test Flying at RAF Boscombe Down at the time. Puzzled but following orders, he collected information from test pilots and passed his dossier to the Air Ministry. What became of this material he had no idea.(16)

Meanwhile, on a visit to Chequers – the Prime Minister's official residence in Buckinghamshire - Churchill's son-in-law ~~and future defence minister~~ Duncan Sandys MP told Montague-Browne that 'he believed, or said he believed some of the evidence'. Taking a direct swipe at 'The Prof' (Lord Cherwell), Sandys insisted the evidence for flying saucers was no different to the first reports of German V2 guided rockets that 'all our leading scientists declared to be technically impossible' but had been proved wrong. In 1943 Cherwell had assured Churchill it was 'lunacy' to believe the Germans were capable of producing such weapons. Unlike the skeptics Sandys had personally spoken to a RAF fighter pilot who filed a report of his own sighting whilst ~~Sandys, the then Minister of Supply, was visiting touring~~ British air bases in West Germany (see FT 289: 28-29). In a minute to Cherwell, seen by Churchill, Sandys said he had no doubt the pilot 'saw a phenomenon similar to that described by numerous observers in the United States'. The paper trail ~~that shows tracks~~ Sandys interest in UFOs ~~continued as he was promoted in during~~ Churchill's last administration. In 1955 Montague-Browne sent Sandys a copy of the then-classified Air Ministry 'Secret Intelligence Summary' on flying saucers.(17) ~~He returned to office in 1957 as Minister of Defence in Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's cabinet, but made no further inquiries about UFOs.~~

We will never know for certain how sympathetic Churchill was to the more far out beliefs that engaged fashionable society in the aftermath of WW2. Nor do we have any detailed surviving accounts of the private exchanges he must have had with Cherwell, Sandys and R.V. Jones on UFOs. The few surviving written records do not assist us much. But an anecdote from 1954, when artist Bernard Hailstone was making a portrait of a pragmatic Churchill in the grounds of his Westerham home may provide a clue. During the proceedings the conversation between artist and Prime Minister turned to the subject of flying saucers and space travel. Did he believe in them, Hailstone asked? Churchill's response was: 'I think that we should treat other planets with the contempt they deserve' (18)

Notes and References:

- 1) *The Belfast Newsletter* of 30 November 1954 reveals that a second copy of Leslie and Adamski's book was presented to Churchill on his 80th birthday by Miss E. Hamilton Gruner of Kensington, along with a note wishing him many happy returns.
- 2) Malcolm Gaskill, *Hellish Nell: Last of Britain's Witches* (4th Estate 2001), p299.
- 3) *The Guardian*, 6 February 2004
- 4) James C. Humas, *Churchill: The Prophetic Statesman* (Regnery History, 2012).
- 5) Winston Churchill, 'Shall We All Commit Suicide?', *Pall Mall magazine*, September 1924.
- 6) Mario Livio, 'Winston Churchill's essay on alien life found', *Nature* 542, 16 February 2017.
- 7) 'Are we alone in space?' Churchill Archives (Chartwell papers) CHAR 8/644
- 8) *The Independent*, 27 November 2006.
- 9) RV Jones, *Most Secret War* (Hamish Hamilton, 1978).
- 10) RV Jones papers, Churchill Archives, University of Cambridge NCUACS 95.8.00
- 11) TNA DEFE 41/74
- 12) TNA DEFE 44/119
- 13) *Sunday Dispatch*, 1 October 1950
- 14) Duncan Sandys papers, Churchill Archive, DSND 15/4
- 15) TNA PREM 11/855
- 16) Letters from Tim Woodman to Andy Roberts, August-September 1987
- 17) TNA PREM 11/855 and AIR 22/93
- 18) *Daily Telegraph* 26 January 1965