

WHY LIE?

1) Maskelyne urgently needed the money and the publicity.

After the war, he was anxious to re-establish his magic shows. His career had stalled. He wanted *Magic-Top Secret* to be a commercial success.

2) He was a showman hoping to convey an entertaining story. He was not interested in producing either a tedious memoir or an authoritative treatise on wartime deception. In any case, a serious book would have been banned from publication on security grounds.

An early version of *Magic-Top Secret* was serialised in *The People* in 1948 under the dramatic heading: *Jasper Maskelyne Tells His War Secrets. How I Tricked The Germans With My Stage Magic.*

Maskelyne's sensational and self-promotional war exploits were ideal fodder for this downmarket newspaper.

3) The ghost writer, not Maskelyne, may have been the prime fabricator.

Frank S. Stuart's previous biographies were semi-fictional concoctions. Stuart freely invented material and kept the chronology vague. Stuart was a creative rent-a-hack, not a historian. Maskelyne had to rely on a ghost writer. Most celebrities did and still do. The public is naive to think otherwise. Maskelyne participated in, but did not invent, this charade.

4) Maskelyne was careless or unscrupulous

He had already shown questionable judgement in allowing *Maskelyne's Book of Magic* to be released in 1936. This book, edited by children's author, Arthur Groom, plagiarised extensively from Will Goldston. In 1938 Maskelyne issued an apology, acknowledging this verbatim copying but claiming it was done without his knowledge.

5) Showbusiness is intrinsically dishonest.

Intense competition forces artists to lie about their achievements and to claim things that never really happened. Tickets must be sold. Truth must be placed in cold-storage. *Magic-Top Secret's* line "*the greatest magic show in history*" echoes P. T Barnum's catch phrase "*the greatest show on earth.*"

Even Maskelyne's dramatic claim that he was put on Hitler's black list has never been verified. It was almost certainly a smart publicity stunt. Achieving high billing on the Gestapo's death list enhanced Maskelyne's reputation. The evidence suggests he or his ghost writer made this 'fact' up. Surprisingly, this fable still fools people fifty years later. A magic collector recently stated: "*Maskelyne's exploits were so successful, Hitler had him targeted for assassination.*"

Robert-Houdin, Harry Houdini, and Jasper Maskelyne were masters of exaggeration and hyperbole.

6) A magic artist is only one step away from being a con-artist.

Magic tricks and confidence tricks have a shared heritage. Performing a deceptive act is not far removed from performing a deceitful act. The skills of a successful magician are similar to the skills of a convincing liar.

Maskelyne's own programme notes used the phrase: "*numerous swindles.*" Swindling for entertaining purposes was morally permissible. *Magic-Top Secret* was a collection of harmless swindles.

7) David Fisher amplified the myth beyond Maskelyne's original intentions. Fisher remoulded *Magic-Top Secret* and gave undue emphasis to the Alexandrian and Suez illusions, even though the original descriptions were short and imprecise. Milking the flimsiest of sources, Fisher conjured up the Big Lie that Maskelyne created the Alamein deception plan. Even Maskelyne did not have the audacity to claim credit for this operation.

8) Maskelyne might have been a serial hoaxer, playing practical jokes on his readers.

Magicians like to test people's credulity. Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast and his later documentary *F for Fake* are prime examples.

9) Maskelyne may have been the Munchausen of modern magic: a pathological liar, exhibiting symptoms of 'pseudologia fantastica'. Away from the limelight, Maskelyne began to make up fantastic, extraordinary stories. According to psychiatrist Charles Ford, "*The pseudologue spins tales that appear plausible on the surface but do not hang together over time. Fact and fiction are woven together in an interesting matrix until the two are virtually indistinguishable.*"

Maskelyne lied to John Booth in the 1950s. He lied to his Kenyan neighbours in the 1960s. He lied in depth to the American screenwriters. Maskelyne may have even deceived himself and, by the end, thought his war achievements were real.

10) The Liquor Problem. Alistair claims his father and the second wife had a serious drink problem. Alcohol abuse may have affected Jasper Maskelyne's long-term memory. In later life, he might not have been capable of giving a coherent account of his war career.

Jasper Maskelyne's Kenyan neighbour confirmed that Mary Scotcher, his second wife, drank heavily. The extent of Jasper Maskelyne's own drink problem in his final years is not so clear. However, the Kenyan neighbour does confirm that Maskelyne endured a hellish second marriage.

11) Maskelyne may have had a cavalier, contemptuous attitude to truth. If people fell for these tall tales, then it showed up their own shortcomings and stupidity. The Maskelyne myth relies on the gullibility of others. It takes a village. A village of articulate enthusiastic 'idiots' to keep the myth alive. Without their help, the myth would soon die.

12) Maskelyne's exaggerated war career may partly be the result of a clever misinformation scheme by Dudley Clarke. Maskelyne's role was deliberately overstated. In 1980, veteran David Mure conceded that Maskelyne's involvement

in A-Force was largely notional (in name only): *“Clarke deliberately gave him a shadowy eminence ... based on his being the inventor of the dummy tanks, the bogus submarines, the camouflage aeroplanes and the fleets of fraudulent landing craft which were such an essential part of the visual side of deception. As the ‘A’ force officer in charge of the Beirut station in 1943, I used to pass through double agent links with the Germans’ reports of concentrations of aircraft, landing craft etc. strategically poised for the invasion of Greece and the Balkans. I honestly thought that the dummies had been devised expressly by the great magician and this gave me the greatest confidence in them. I have no doubt that, when such displays were mooted in command circles in support of a cover plan the commanders and senior staff officers got an equal feeling of confidence. No doubt Jasper’s advice was sought and fully acted on when it could be of real use in devising deceptive equipment and, by his own account, the boss who understood his talents and their application to current problems by far the best was Brigadier Dudley Clarke. But the work was actually carried out by the GHQ camouflage department.*

Maskelyne’s co-operation was, therefore, largely notional.”

The notional theory is plausible. Independent sources show that Dudley Clarke was fascinated by conjuring. His uncle, Sidney Clarke, a London barrister, was a prominent member of The Magic Circle. Dudley Clarke was attracted to Maskelyne’s charm, style and prominent public image. Clarke took advantage of the Maskelyne name and achieved a public relations coup. A-Force’s association with Maskelyne helped convince the higher-ups that the camouflage and decoy plans would be professionally executed.

This may explain how Maskelyne’s mysterious and phantom role became inflated over time.

13) Exponents of deception who in wartime invent schemes that fool the enemy may be tempted in peacetime to invent stories that fool their own side. Deception turns into deceit.

An embarrassing example is the adventurous career of British intelligence officer, Richard Meinertzhagen (1878-1967), who gained fame in World War One for his ‘lost haversack’ ruse. He bravely rode out near the enemy lines, drew fire and then accidentally-on-purpose dropped a bloodstained haversack which contained fake documents. This deception operation misled the Turks over the direction of the British attack. Historians frequently recycle this story on trust. Yet it is now clear that Meinertzhagen often indulged in autobiographical fabrication.

In 1995, scholar J.N. Lockman detailed how Meinertzhagen forged important chapters of his Middle East diary and invented a meeting with Lawrence of Arabia in Rafa, Palestine in 1917.

Meinertzhagen was also a world authority on birds and donated his collection to the Natural History museum. In 1993, ornithologists exposed Meinertzhagen’s fraudulent and dishonest acquisition methods.

Meinertzhagen was a liar, a thief and a cheat. Yet he still receives favourable treatment as a deception warrior. The lost haversack ruse, which is mentioned second hand in Lawrence of Arabia’s memoirs, might well be semi-fictional.

I read several extracts from Meinertzhagen's published diaries in the British Library and discovered two suspicious entries immediately prior to the haversack ruse entry of October 10th, 1917.

Only days before, Meinertzhagen wrote that he was a passenger on a reconnaissance flight. A German plane shot at his aircraft, wounding and rendering unconscious his pilot. Meinertzhagen was able to land safely despite the fact he could not fly. And previous to this, he describes a mysterious desert rendezvous worthy of a Dan Brown novel. He is betrayed, but manages to kill one of his assailants who is a woman dressed as a man.

Most questionable of all is his diary claim that on June 28th, 1939, Hitler and Ribbentrop summoned him to the Chancellory in Berlin. Meinertzhagen secretly carried a loaded weapon into the meeting. "*I had ample opportunity to kill both Hitler and Ribbentrop.*" Though tempted, he decided not to go through with this impromptu assassination.

In my judgement, Meinertzhagen was a fraudulent fantasist. Whether he fooled the enemy is questionable, but he certainly made fools of his own side.

The same silver bullet question needs to be asked of Jasper Maskelyne: was he a master of deception or a master of deceit?

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Postscript Brian Garfield has recently published a highly critical biography of Meinertzhagen, gently titled, *The Meinertzhagen Mystery: The Life and Legend of a Colossal Fraud* (2007).