

# SELLING PARAMOUNT A DUMMY

*Mundus vult decipi. Ergo decipiatur.*

*(The world wants to be deceived. Therefore let it be deceived.)*

Paramount have sunk vast amounts of money into the bogus version of Jasper Maskelyne's life story, even though it is unlikely that the film will ever be made.

In early 2001, news broke that Tom Cruise and Paramount Pictures would be making a movie based on Fisher's *The War Magician*.

In April 2003, Paramount announced that Peter Buchman, screenwriter of Jurassic Park 3 had written the script and that Peter Weir would direct. Cruise would no longer play the role of Jasper Maskelyne but would help produce the film.

Behind the scenes, Paramount Pictures were claiming "*exclusive rights to Jasper Maskelyne's name, likeness, writings, books and life story.*"

Their legal department issued a warning fax to a reputable American scholar in London who had started researching Jasper Maskelyne's life: "*Since Jasper Maskelyne was not a public figure and since information about him must have been sourced from Mr. Fisher's book or Mr. Maskelyne's own writings it is imperative that you obtain written permission from Paramount Pictures Corporation and from David Fisher prior to publication of any book you are writing. Paramount Pictures and the producers of the upcoming film will take whatever legal steps necessary to protect and preserve the considerable investment already made in the project.*"

Jasper Maskelyne was no longer public domain. He had suddenly become a privatised commodity. Paramount were determined to build a firewall around their investment. The London scholar reluctantly abandoned the biography. His publishers could not afford an expensive legal entanglement with the film studio.

Was Paramount subverting the American ideals of free speech?

Were my own writings on Jasper Maskelyne now susceptible to corporate censorship?

Would I wake up one morning in blood-drenched sheets and find a severed horse's head between my legs?

## DECEPTION & SUBTERFUGE

*"It is clear that I have exclusive rights to all materials written by Jasper Maskelyne, all interviews, all recordings and any other documents of any kind that under copyright laws would be claimed by the owner. I also have the exclusive rights to exploit his name, likeness, and other images of any kind."*

David Fisher's imperious broadside (2003)

David Fisher surfaced in the wake of the film deal.

In an e-mail to Alistair (June 2003), Fisher privately conceded that parts of *The*

*War Magician* were fictional: “while I had no doubts that some of his stories were hyperbole, I also have no doubts that he (Jasper Maskelyne) contributed greatly to the final deception at Alamein that caused Rommel to withhold his troops. I have read quotes from two of Montgomery’s officers confirming that. But because I could not confirm everything, I intentionally published my book as a ‘novel based on fact.’ I tried to make it the literary version of stage magic, in which most of what you see is true, but somewhere in the mix is deception and subterfuge.”

This admission is still disingenuous. The book was published in 1983 as non-fiction and was re-issued in 2004 as non-fiction. Cassell Military History released a new paperback edition of *The War Magician*, sub-titled the *True Story of Jasper Maskelyne*.

Fisher claimed he did spend time in the “*British War Museum at Key Bridge*.”

Here Fisher is confusing the Imperial War Museum in Lambeth with the Public Record Office (now known as the National Archives) at Kew.

Fisher claims to have interviewed Peter Proud (Tobruk camouflage expert), Robert Harbin (magician), and James Gardner (Farnham colleague) and “*the girl in the box*.” I have no reason to doubt this, as Proud and Gardner were still alive when Fisher began his research.

In September 2004 Peter Weir, the film director, flew up to Brisbane and taped an audio interview with Alistair Maskelyne. Alistair spoke candidly about his father and gave Weir an earlier copy of my research. Weir then withdrew on a working holiday to Hawaii and examined the competing material provided by Paramount.

In October 2004 Weir contacted Alistair to say he was withdrawing from *The War Magician* film. Weir wrote: “*The decision not to proceed, while influenced by our meeting and the Stokes material, was finally my own. I’ve avoided biographical material so far, and if I was to break my own rule I had to proceed from a solid factual base. That was not possible for reasons well known to you.*”

In my judgement, Weir displayed remarkable integrity by declining Paramount’s lucrative offer.

The film may have stalled, but at least something positive emerged from Weir’s brief involvement: “*I had hoped to arrange the return of your father’s Mid-East journal but apparently Mr Fisher wants to hold onto it until the film is made. So, the least I can do is give you the photo-facsimile in the meantime.*”

So thirty years after first reading his father’s wartime photo album, Alistair Maskelyne finally received a scanned version of his father’s fabled document.

Alistair e-mailed me about this development: “*Since Paramount still retain the book itself, they made photographic copies for Peter Weir, and this is what I now have, courtesy of Weir. It consists of 160 very large glossy plasticised photo sheets, each one covering one page of the book. Each sheet measures about two feet by two feet. And the substance? Just many rather repetitious pictures of dummy tanks and dummy guns, together with some of the pictures of my father with which we are already familiar. Also a lot of pictures of theatrical posters of Cairo shows he did for the troops. Hardly any written content, so a disappointment in that respect.*”

It should also be noted that the ‘wartime’ album was not actually compiled during the war. The photographs, the correspondence and the press cuttings are genuine and date from the war period. The written comments also match Jasper

Maskelyne's handwriting. However, it is not clear in which year the scrapbook was compiled.

I met with Alistair again in Brisbane in January, 2006. I had already studied significant samples of the scrapbook but I realised I would not be satisfied until I had carefully examined every page, every line, every photograph and every news clipping for myself. Having immersed myself in the Maskelyne field for so long, I knew that important clues relevant to my research might easily be overlooked by the casual reader.

For example, I found surprising confirmation of my theory that Maskelyne was aware of CDL's. In his scrapbook is a clipping from the Statesman, New Delhi, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945 which reads: *"Another British war secret is revealed. The Canal Defence Light, CDL for short, is a several million candle-power searchlight fitted into the turrets of tanks..."*

I immediately recognised the photograph within the article. A night-time shot of a tank projecting a horizontal beam of light several miles into the darkness, illuminating a distant farm-house.

However, Jasper Maskelyne is being untruthful when he writes above the clipping: IDEA OF MINE CALLED "DAZZLE BEACONS".

The wartime album has many interesting unreleased shots, such as Maskelyne in military uniform sitting astride a motorbike; relaxing in front of the Pyramids (and a row of beer bottles) with two lady friends; and performing a small-scale magic show in the desert from the back of a truck.

However, the most rewarding discovery for me was a lengthy wartime article *MAGICIANS AT WAR* written by Frank Stuart which Jasper Maskelyne had pasted into his scrapbook.

*"When Major Maskelyne publishes the full story of these activities in book form after the war, a lot of German Intelligence officers are going to be very embarrassed indeed."*

*"I have known Major Maskelyne and other famous magicians for many years..."*

At last, solid proof from the motherlode that Jasper Maskelyne and Frank Stuart were working a literary double-act!

Fisher has withheld this material for more than twenty-five years.

The significance of Frank Stuart's article probably eludes him, but even Fisher must be aware that releasing the contents of the Maskelyne scrapbook to outside scrutiny would not be to his advantage and would seriously undermine the contents of *The War Magician*.

My favourite line (of denial) by David Fisher is: *"I have no desire to impede the accurate recording of history."*

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Postscript: the severed horse head cushion is made by kropserkel.com