

## SEND IN THE CLOWNS

"I could perhaps like others have astonished you with strange improbable Tales; but I rather chose to relate plain Matter of Fact in the simplest Manner and Style, because my principal Design was to Inform, and not to amuse thee. I could heartily wish a Law was enacted, that every Traveller before he were permitted to publish his Voyages, should be obliged to make Oath before the Lord High Chancellor that all he intended to print was absolutely true to the best of his Knowledge; for then the World would no longer be deceived as it usually is, while some Writers, to make their Works pass the better upon the Publick, impose the grossest Falsities on the unwary Reader. ...it hath given me a great Disgust ...and some Indignation to see the Credulity of Mankind so impudently abused. Therefore ... I imposed on myself as a Maxim, never to be swerved from, that I would strictly adhere to Truth..."

Final chapter from Gulliver's Travels

In 2004, the BBC transmitted the wackiest demonstration so far of one of Maskelyne's wartime schemes. *Crafty Tricks of War* claimed that Maskelyne's protection of the Suez Canal was one of the greatest tricks ever. Presenter Dick Strawbridge and magic guest Paul Zenon spoke about black art, car headlights and disco balls. Strawbridge then built a miniature model of Maskelyne's whirling spray. The reflective cone was powered by a rubber band. A shimmering narrow length of plastic sheet was meant to represent the Suez Canal. A dozen miniature lights were scattered far and wide alongside this artificial strip.

With the main light turned off, the camera tracked through the semi-darkness. The tiny dazzle lights went into action. This display was supposed to replicate the concealment of the Canal. Strawbridge's eccentric and unconvincing demonstration of the Suez Canal illusion might have fooled a moth, but would not have fooled a Messerschmitt.

The Sunday Times recently gave Fisher's *The War Magician* a favourable review and recycled the usual claims that Maskelyne made Alexandria disappear, hid the Suez Canal, found the transmitter in Farouk's Palace, and then pulled off "the grandest of grand illusions," the Alamein deception plan. The reviewer was moved by "the horrific death of Maskelyne's closest collaborator". His emotions were being wasted on a fictitious character, Frank Knox.

In early 2005, the London Times ran publicity for the centennial celebrations of The Magic Circle under the heading: "The Magician Who Hid A City. He performed some of his greatest illusions in Egypt, re-creating in June 1941 the lighthouses and lighting of Alexandria harbour to fool enemy bombers, and concealing the Suez Canal using spinning strobe lights."

Michael Bailey in the Magic Circle Souvenir Book, *Circle Without End* (2005,) came out with the usual plaudits for Maskelyne's achievements in deception and camouflage. He inadvertently came unstuck with his final sentence: "Major Jasper Maskelyne did much during the hostilities but was never fully recognized for his extraordinary illusory contribution to the war effort."

In May 2005, military expert Max Hastings gave historian James Holland a rave review for *Together We Stand*, his new book on the Mediterranean campaign: "A remarkable collation of personal experience and sensible historical judgements."

Unfortunately, Holland carelessly recycled two fabricated episodes from Maskelyne's career and naively cited Fisher's book in the bibliography.

And throughout 2005, to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, a touring exhibition, *Their Past, Your Future*, partly sponsored and conceived by the Imperial War Museum, travelled around England breathing new life into the Maskelyne legend:

***“How could magic help the British Armed Forces to win the war? Jasper Maskelyne, a famous magician before the war, created deceptions and camouflage on a grand scale for British Military Intelligence. Maskelyne used mirrors and searchlights to ‘hide’ the Suez Canal. His ‘blinding curtain of light’ kept the canal safe from German bombers and protected the Allies’ vital supply route to the Middle East. Maskelyne also ‘hid’ Alexandria in Egypt, disguised lorries as tanks and made escape kits for POWs. Many of Maskelyne’s techniques are still being used in warfare today.”***

An obituary of British magician John Salisse in the London Times (November 2006) maintained the illusion: *“He was inspired by magic as a schoolboy after seeing Jasper Maskelyne at the Boscomb Hippodrome. Maskelyne’s astonishing sleight-of-hand techniques — which included “hiding” the Suez Canal and conjuring up illusions of battleships — found wartime application in the campaign against Rommel in North Africa. Salisse was to have a lifelong interest in Maskelyne and amassed a renowned collection of memorabilia.”*

The Official MI5 website also praises Maskelyne's involvement in an ingenious deception ruse at the de Havilland Mosquito factory north of London:

*“The “attack” itself was one of the most remarkable deception operations of the Second World War. A former stage magician, Jasper Maskelyne, was brought in to fake the attack on the night of 29/30 January 1943. His “Magic Team” created an elaborate system of camouflage to make it appear to German reconnaissance aircraft that a very large bomb had exploded inside the factory’s power plant.”*

Marvellous stuff. Apart from the awkward fact that Maskelyne was definitely still in Egypt, not England! And his name does not appear in the recently declassified documents that detail this ‘faked bomb damage’ operation.

The Maskelyne myth appears indestructible. Jasper Maskelyne is frequently praised from many quarters as a genuine master of deception, but the evidence suggests he was a master of make-believe.

**Maskelyne’s illusions, for the most part, were illusory. His desert miracles were mirages.**

Alistair Maskelyne wrote: *“The passage of time and the death of many of the personages involved in the events described can give rise to misrepresentation and over emphasis of the relative importance of the parts played by some of the players. I know my father had always liked to “big note” his activities, both on the stage and in the army. He greatly enjoyed his connections, even if peripheral, with more famous persons. As time passes, people forget, or do not know the facts and it is possible for an unscrupulous story teller to enlarge his ego or purse at the expense of the truth ... Being my father’s son, I recognise in myself some of his characteristics, and find I do enjoy the odd newspaper article about my own life, so it is a family failing.”*