

# Don't Drop it!

With two books out, *Dresden* and *The Mare's Nest*, I was becoming well known by 1966. In 1967, no fewer than three more would follow, *The Virus House*; *Accident*, *The Death of General Sikorski*; and *Breach of Security*. In 1968 came *The Destruction of Convoy PQ.17*, and with it fame, verging on notoriety.

Attending an English public school meant that I had been raised on a diet of famous people. Our school produced several famous names, including Royal dress designer Hardy Amies\* and foreign secretary Jack Straw – its scholars ranged from the divine to the lugubrious, one might say; as well as Robin Day, Noel Edmonds, and others of the entertainment world.†

Now, as an historian and biographer, I had arrogated to myself the right to ring on the doorbells of the famous; occasionally, I

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\* Sir Edwin Hardy Amies (Jul 17, 1909 – Mar 5 2003) was educated at Brentwood until 1927. In 1955 Queen Elizabeth II him awarded a Royal Warrant as her official dressmaker, and he continued in this role until 1990. She knighted him in 1989.

† After Brentwood accepted girls, TV personality and “topless” tabloid favourite Jodie Marsh (born 1978) also went there; she was bullied, she told *Sky Magazine* in April 2007, and contemplated suicide.

found myself giving talks, as a famous alumnus, at the old School, speaking to hushed sixth-formers in the Bean Library or the Memorial Hall. The wheel had turned nearly full circle. I dimly recalled, very early on Mother taking Nicky and me to the Memorial Hall to hear a talk by the eighty-year old composer Ralph Vaughan Williams, two or three years before he died.<sup>1</sup> The Lark Ascended as we sat there on the right-hand side of the auditorium, and my mother sketched the great composer – or was it I, or did we both? It was so long ago.

I used to think that the only other historic person that I had set eyes on was the illustrious Danish physicist Niels Bohr: the whole of Imperial College came to see him speak at our Royal College of Science lecture theater in about 1957, and I guarantee that not even the front row heard a single word that he whispered about quantum mechanics, so softly did he speak.<sup>2</sup>

Of course who needed a Bohr at Imperial College when we had our own Nobel prize winners? For God's sake, P. M. S. Blackett taught us young students physics. I mentioned him to Professor Werner Heisenberg (of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle) when I went to interview him for *The Virus House*; and I mentioned both Blackett and Heisenberg to Edward Teller, father of the hydrogen bomb, with whom I talked at length at Stanford for *Penthouse* magazine years later – one of those articles between the pictures for which real men are believed to buy the magazines.

So, yes, one way or another I suppose I did bump into quite a few famous people. Politicians? Yes, them too. I sat behind our Defence Minister Denis Healey once on a plane; and next to Richard Crossman at a Wilton Park retreat (I did not know then that he would plagiarize my Dresden book for a major article in *Esquire*, after Kimber had rejected their measly offer).<sup>3</sup> I chatted with Michael Foot at a literary cocktail party, surely one of the most readable journalists of World War II; smiling sheepishly he shied away, looking at his hand, when he realized whose hand it had just shaken.

I avoided seeing Winston Churchill in the flesh when I was at Impe-

rial College. Word went round the college one day that the Greatest Living Englishmen, as the press referred to him, would be showing himself from an upper window at No. 12 Hyde Park Gate, just down the road from Kensington Gore and us, at two p.m.

Most of the other students went, out of curiosity; I consciously stayed away, deciding already then – it was perhaps 1959 – that this old war criminal and gravedigger of the Empire had had quite enough adulation for one lifetime. A young girl working as an *au pair* in that Hyde Park Gate household later shared rooms with Jutta Padel, who worked for me for twenty years from 1960 onwards as a secretary, and told her that Winston took an old man's pleasure in exposing himself to her. But that is quite another story.

In the 1980s I glimpsed his successor, Harold Macmillan, doddering into the House of Lords as I was walking into their records office to work on Lord Beaverbrook's papers for my Churchill biography. Alan Samson, editor-in-chief at the Macmillan family publishing firm, quoted him as huffing at a recent board meeting that they would publish my Churchill biography – which Samson had strongly urged – only “over his dead body.” Looking at him enter the St Stephen's Entrance (••) to the House of Lords that day it did not look as though there would be long to wait.

Then there was Duncan Sandys, later Lord Sandys, whom I would get to know while writing *The Mare's Nest*. He arranged for me to have a private viewing of the sealed Cabinet War Rooms, and he later wrote the letter of recommendation that got my four daughters into the Lycée at South Kensington; and there was Sir Alec Douglas-Home, the prime minister, whom we met at a Sandys cocktail party – Pilar, a stickler for such things, remarked that he might at least have bothered to shave.

Poor old R. A. “Rab” Butler, the deputy prime minister in 1955, also crossed my path, though he certainly never realized it. He deserved to be prime minister, but was just too nice for the job. Macmillan was away, Butler was acting as prime minister, and he came to Brentwood in July 1955 for our speech day. Still in mischief mode, I am ashamed to say, I asked for a presentation copy of A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, for my Art Appreciation Prize. As I mounted

the steps, I signaled my reporter friends on *The Brentwood Gazette* and other Essex newspapers to stand by for the photo opportunity of a lifetime, the deputy prime minister handing me a copy of this well known, but seldom read, work of literature. "Charlie" Allison was wearing his broadest grin.

Holding the book prominently toward the cameras, I lingered a few seconds shaking Butler's hand – it was limp from a childhood riding accident in India – and I held on until all the cameras had flashed. As I stepped down I checked what I had been given: it was Duden's Russian-German technical dictionary. I suppose that everybody's reputation clicked up one notch that day, but it was not the picture that I had intended.

The only truly great man I met, in retrospect, had that other mark of greatness, humility. I visited Professor Otto Hahn one day at Göttingen University for *The Virus House*. His discovery of atomic fission had changed the world.<sup>4</sup> It won him the 1944 Nobel Prize for chemistry, though circumstances prevented its award until 1945. I had just visited the Deutsches Museum in Munich where his cheap wooden workbench was on display with the block of paraffin wax and the clockwork-driven Geiger counter which he had actually used.

I curiously asked him when he had made the actual discovery.

"Oh, that would have been January 1939, *nicht wahr?*"

I politely corrected him. He and the chemist Fritz Strassmann had published their scientific paper on January 9, 1939, which would surely indicate some date in the preceding months for the laboratory experiment. What counts is the first scientist to get his discovery into print.

"I remember," he agreed. "When we finished the paper I phoned Rosbaud." Dr. Paul Rosbaud, the editor of the German scientific journal *Naturwissenschaften*, was a close friend.

He came hurrying round that same evening. The two chemists had completed their paper, claiming proof that the uranium nucleus had "burst asunder," only minutes earlier. "I told him to chuck out somebody else's paper to make room."<sup>5</sup>

He grinned at the memory. Several others were working along the same lines as he, Enrico Fermi for one. The next edition of the journal was already in proof, but Rosbaud ordered the Hahn–Strassmann paper set up in type at once bearing that day's date as its date of receipt — December 22, 1938.

"It was the solstice," I concluded my chapter in *The Virus House*. "The world's winter had begun."

Pressing the matter of the actual date of the experiments, I inquired if perhaps he had kept a diary?

"Fräulein Müller," he buzzed through to his outer office. "Did I keep a diary in 1939?"

"1938," I gently murmured.

She came bustling in, and opened the bottom drawer of his desk. They had obviously worked together for a good many years. She looked after the old professor. The drawer was stuffed with notebooks. After scrabbling for a few seconds she surfaced, rather like a scuba diver, triumphantly clutching one labelled 1938.

Together we leafed backwards from the end of the year. Suddenly Hahn stopped, and I saw a tear form in one eye. He was back in Berlin, it was the last year of peace, and all the horrors there had yet to happen. He had already lost his best assistant, the physicist Lisa Meitner, who had fled to England in July 1938.

I followed his shaky finger. December 17, 1938: "You're absolute right," he said. "*Aufregende Radium-Barium Versuche*," [*•• get precise German text*] followed by four exclamation marks.

Thus we fixed the date. "Exciting fractionation of radium/barium/mesothorium." He had used the radium as a neutron source, bombarding a uranium sample, and – being a fine chemist – had found a trace of barium that wasn't there before. The uranium atom had split.

Fräulein Müller handed him a tissue. She had also dug out the letter which he had written two nights later to Lisa Meitner in London, a letter written even as he was replicating the experiment: Lisa was not going to believe this – classical physicists did not accept that an atom could split.

Through all this, Strassmann and I are tirelessly working – as well as we are able – on the uranium substances. . . It is now just eleven o'clock at night. At a quarter to twelve Strassmann will be coming back so that I can see about going home.

The fact is, there is something so odd about the “radium isotopes” that for the time being we are telling only you about it: the half-lives of the three isotopes have been measured with absolute accuracy; they can be separated from all elements with the exception of barium; all the processes are working properly with the exception of one – unless there has been some exceedingly strange coincidence.

The fractional crystallization is not working. Our “radium” isotope is behaving just like barium.

It was an agonizing moment: “There may still be some extraordinary coincidence behind it all,” he repeated. “But we keep coming back to the horrifying conclusion – our ‘radium’ isotopes aren’t behaving like radium, they’re behaving like barium.” Strassmann had agreed that they should trust only her, Lisa, with their findings as yet; perhaps she as a physicist could put forward “some fanciful explanation” for it all. “. . . All highly tricky experiments! But we must get at the truth.”

This really was the stuff of history. “I’ve got to get back to the counters now,” the letter concluded – the Geiger-Müller counters.<sup>6</sup> Oh, what a night that was.

I asked him what uranium looked like. “A heavy white metal,” he answered mechanically, still flicking backwards through the pages of his life as a young man. Fräulein Müller had slipped out.

“There’s a powder form too, isn’t there?” I inquired, to revive the interview.

“Yes.” He asked where the secretary was, and I asked if I should fetch her. “No, no, dear boy. You see that top bookshelf,” he indicated. “Hand me down the big dictionary, would you.”

I said I knew how to spell *Uran*. No, he replied, put your hand into the gap where the dictionary had been. I could feel glass, a preserving jar, slightly warm, in fact disconcertingly so.

“Hand it d—,” he began, then cried out in alarm: “DON’T DROP IT! It will explode. It catches fire instantly on contact with air.”

The jar was incredibly heavy; heavier than Gold, or lead, or mercury, and it was warm. I asked with a trace of apprehension, "Isn't it radioactive too?"

"Of course it is," said the old professor with a mischievous chuckle. "Terribly so. That's why Fräulein Müller mustn't know."

He clipped the end of a cigar, ready to light it. "If we'd had the safety regulations back then that we have now, I would never have been able to make that discovery. I used to go around with a gram of radium in my pants pocket."

He lit the cigar, and his head vanished briefly in a bluish haze. Held prisoner in Farm Hall, a Cambridgeshire safe house of the British secret service, in August 1945, he contemplated suicide when the BBC broadcast the news of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

A year or so after my visit to Göttingen I found myself traveling in Germany's newest express train, the "Otto Hahn."

I believe that it was on this occasion, after visiting Hahn in October 1965 (••), that I drove over to Gütersloh to visit my German publishers, Sigbert Mohn Verlag. The Mohn brothers owned the billion-dollar Bertelsmann concern.

Dieter Struss, my editor, showed me over the operation.

I left Gütersloh deeply depressed by two of the things he showed me: one was their *Büchersilo*, a cathedral-sized warehouse in which computer-controlled gantry cranes, reminding me of those in the Thyssen steelmill, were clanking around, automatically shifting pallets of books around, stacking them from spotless floor to lofty roof, as anonymous as bricks in a brickyard.

This was no sight for a sensitive young author to see, convinced of his own singularity and the specialness of his own cosseted darling, the book just published by this firm.

The other unexpectedly gruesome spectacle was the office housing the Bertelsmann Book Club. On an upper floor lines of secretaries were opening that day's mail – the club had two million members – and hitting just a few keys on a keyboard in reply.

"Standardized replies," explained Struss. "Most of the queries are the same."

On the next floor down were arrays of clattering IBM Selectric golf ball typewriters, but no typist in sight, just whirring reels of tape, spinning back and forth, debouching pretyped standard texts. I had never seen a robot typewriter before.

“But the letters still have to be signed,” I pointed out, a bit helplessly.

Struss smiled the smile of the knowing. He pointed to a girl walking around the typewriters, picking up sheaves of letters. She stacked them in front of a square box-like apparatus. Out of the front protruded a single rod, clutching a Mont Blanc fountain pen, scratching noiselessly away at the letters fed into it.

He showed me one of the metal signature plates. “*Bankecht*,” he said: it would pass even a bank’s scrutiny. I have rarely trusted a letter from Germany since then.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Ralph Vaughan Williams, born Oct 12, 1872, died Aug 26, 1958.
- 2 Niels Henrik David Bohr, born Oct 7, 1885, died Nov 18, 1962.
- 3 R. H. S. Crossman, “Apocalypse at Dresden,” *Esquire*, 60, No. 5 (November 1963) – See <http://www.fpp.co.uk/reviews/Dresden/Esquire1163.html>.  
- Crossman was a member of the British Psychological Warfare directorate during the war, and a leading Socialist Cabinet minister afterwards. He was independently wealthy – and more so after the *Esquire* article, based entirely on my research, appeared. It was not plagiarism, he was too clever for that: but it was a blatant theft of intellectual property.
- 4 Otto Hahn, born Mar 8, 1879, died Jul 28, 1968. On Feb 10, 1939, Hahn and Fritz Strassmann announced the proof of krypton as the second fission fragment and named the process *Uranspaltung*, uranium fission. Hahn had confidentially revealed his discovery to Lisa Meitner by letter during December, 1938 and she used this inside knowledge to stake her own claim, published in *Nature* on Feb 11, 1939 jointly with her nephew, the physicist Otto Robert Frisch, who suggested the term “nuclear fission”. (“Disintegration of Uranium by Neutrons: a New Type of Nuclear Reaction, *Nature*, vol.



143, 239-240.) Not surprisingly, Hahn felt betrayed by Meitner; she for her part never forgave Hahn for remaining in Germany.

- 5 Interview. The paper by Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassmann was titled: "Über den Nachweis und das Verhalten der bei der Bestrahlung des Urans mittels Neutronen entstehenden Erdalkalimetalle". *Naturwissenschaften*, vol. 27 (1), pages 11-15.
- 6 Lisa Meitner, born Nov 17, 1878, died Cambridge, England 1968. Her Wikipedia entry currently records, "Th[e] surviving correspondence indicates that Hahn believed nuclear fission was impossible." The opposite is true. She replied sceptically to his letter quoted: "Your radium results are really very disconcerting: a process using slow neutrons that yields barium?! . . . At present it seems to me very difficult to accept that there is such a drastic breaking-up [of the uranium nucleus] but we have experienced so many surprises in nuclear physics that one cannot dismiss this by saying simply: 'It's not possible!'"