THE CONFIDENCE MEN

How Two Prisoners of War Engineered the Most Remarkable Escape in History

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ

www.profilebooks.co.uk

First published in the United States of America by Random House,
an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York

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Book design by Simon M. Sullivan

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 271 5
eISBN 978 1 78283 560 8

Somehow, what we would not believe in reality, we will believe in a work of art.

—NORMAN N. HOLLAND,
"The 'Willing Suspension of Disbelief' Revisited," 1967

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Author's Note

In 1928, by an act of the Turkish Parliament, the Turkish language began to be written in a version of the Roman alphabet; the change was part of efforts to modernize the country. Before that date, Turkish had been written in a modified Arabic script. As a result, when pre-1928 Western writers rendered Turkish words in print, their attempts at Romanization produced a welter of competing forms. A single example will suffice: The name "Yozgad," which denotes both the prisoner-of-war camp at the heart of this story and the Anatolian town in which it lay, appears variously as "Yozgad," "Yozgat," "Yozghat," and "Yuzgat."

Although many pre-1928 Romanizations are anachronistic today, in the interest of reflecting the era in which our story is set, I have generally retained the spellings most commonly used by British writers of the period. I also refer to the region's towns and cities by the names they bore in the West at the time: "Angora" for Ankara, "Constantinople" for Istanbul, and the like.*

In addition, many English-language memoirists of the Ottoman theater, our heroes E. H. Jones and C. W. Hill included, used the generic term "Turks" to refer collectively to their Ottoman opponents, be they Turkish, Arab, Jewish, Kurdish, or otherwise, conflating a diverse range of ethnic identities under a single, imperial rubric. For linguistic economy, and in keeping with the diction of the early twentieth-century Britons on whom this book centers, I have occasionally employed "Turks" and "Turkish" in generic references

* Constantinople was for centuries the capital of the Ottoman Empire. In 1923, with the formation of the Republic of Turkey, the city's name was formally changed to Istanbul and the capital moved to Ankara.

throughout the text, although such terms would be considered ethnographically insufficient in modern scholarly discourse.

It is also vital to note that Western accounts of the campaigns in Ottoman lands can be fraught with a type of rhetoric—imperialist, exceptionalist, essentialist, Orientalist—that is unacceptable today. Such rhetoric, born of what one modern historian calls "romanticized misrepresentations of places like the Ottoman Empire as sites of mystery and despotism," and which "bolstered ideas of the backwardness of their societies and . . . the superiority of the Western European world," appears at times in this book in quoted matter.

The currency conversions in the footnotes, which translate early twentieth-century pound sterling values into contemporary pound sterling and contemporary U.S. dollars, reflect the historical inflation rate and contemporary exchange rate of late 2020, when this book went to press.

Introduction

This is the true story of the most singular prison break ever recorded—a clandestine wartime operation that involved no tunneling, no weapons, and no violence of any kind. Conceived during World War I, it relied on a scheme so outrageous it should never have worked: Two British officers escaped from an isolated Turkish prison camp by means of a Ouija board.

Yet that scheme—an ingeniously planned, daringly executed confidence game—was precisely the method by which the young captives, Elias Henry Jones and Cedric Waters Hill, sprang themselves from Yozgad, a prisoner-of-war camp deep in the mountains of Anatolia.

The plan seemed born of a fever dream. Using a handmade Ouija board, Jones and Hill would regale their captors with a tale, seemingly channeled from the Beyond, designed to make them delirious enough to lead the pair out of Yozgad. The ruse would also require our heroes to feign mental illness, stage a double suicide attempt that came perilously close to turning real, and endure six months in a Turkish insane asylum, an ordeal that drove them to the edge of actual madness.

And yet in the end they won their freedom.

I first encountered this story several years ago, through Jones's 1919 memoir, *The Road to En-dor*. Long after I finished it, two things haunted me. The first was that this astounding tale, rife with cunning, danger, and moments of high farce that rival anything in *Catch-22*, had slipped into a crevice in history, where it languished unknown to most of the twenty-first-century public. The second was that it had at its center an enduring mystery: How in the world was this preposterous plan actually able to succeed?

Jones's book dwelled minutely on *how* his ruse worked, detailing a

web of plotting, rehearsal, and performance. But there remained the question of *why*—the precise ingredients of the psychological cocktail that transformed his captors into "clay in the potter's hands." Hill's posthumous memoir, *The Spook and the Commandant,* likewise favors exposition over explanation.

The passage of a century has made it possible to solve the mystery at the story's heart. Besides chronicling one of the most ingenious hoaxes ever perpetrated (and one of the only known examples of a con game being used for good instead of ill), *The Confidence Men* explores the strategy that underpins all confidence schemes: the subtle process of mind control called coercive persuasion, colloquially known as brainwashing. The answers to this book's central questions—*How does a master manipulator create and sustain faith? Why do his converts persist in believing things that are patently false?*—also illuminate the behavior of present-day figures such as advertisers, cult leaders, and political demagogues.

Above all, *The Confidence Men* is the story of the profound friendship of two men who almost certainly would not have met otherwise: Jones, the Oxford-educated son of a British lord, and Hill, a mechanic on an Australian sheep station. Vowing to see the scheme through if it cost them their lives, each was sustained throughout its myriad hardships by the steadfastness of the other.

"For a brief period," Jones would write, recalling their six-month confinement in the madhouse, "Hill was put in the bed next mine. It seems a little thing, that we should lie there three feet apart instead of ten, but it meant much. . . . We did not attempt to talk—we were too closely watched for that—but at night, under cover of darkness, sometimes he and sometimes I would stretch out an arm, and for a brief moment grip the other's hand. The firm strong pressure of my comrade's fingers used to put everything right."

THE CONFIDENCE MEN

JONATHAN CORUM

PROLOGUE

A Wraith at the Top of the Stairs

The men huddled in the passageway in the flickering candlelight. Some were wrapped in blankets against the Anatolian winter; others wore pajamas. Still others were dressed in British military uniforms, very nearly the only clothing they had. The passage in which they gathered each night, at the top of a dark staircase in a drafty old house, was their de facto sitting room. The house had once been a private home, but the family who lived there had been murdered more than a year before. Since the summer of 1916, when the men were remanded here, this house, with its woeful food, furniture, space, and sanitation, had been their only home. Merely to reach it they had withstood battle, capture, and, for many, a two-month forced march through desert and over mountains, on which scores of men would die.

Every evening, after their sentries locked them in, the men had watched keenly as two fellow officers faced each other across a table, built, like most of the furniture in the house, from disused packing crates. On the table lay a sheet of polished iron; atop the sheet was a raised wooden ring to which the letters of the alphabet had been randomly affixed. The board, too, was made from salvage: the planchette that slid across its surface was an inverted drinking glass, which had begun life as a jar of potted meat.

The sitters at the table closed their eyes and placed their fingers lightly on the glass. Like almost everyone there, they had little faith that they could raise the spirits: They hoped only that a night of "spooking" would help fill their long, empty hours in confinement. They had already tried chess, poker, and roulette, with a wheel made from a discarded door, but all had paled over time. "In spite of the outward cheerfulness, the brave attempts at industry, and the gallant

struggle against the deterioration that a prison environment brings, an atmosphere of hopelessness pervaded the whole camp," one of the sitters, Elias Henry Jones, would write at war's end.

For weeks, pairs of officers had taken turns manning the Ouija board, but each time the board refused to speak. At first the glass wouldn't move. When it did—seemingly of its own accord—that caused a ripple of excitement, but still the board was mute: The glass touched only meaningless strings of letters.

"Mere movement was no longer satisfying," Jones wrote. "We were tired of our own company, and knew one another as only fellow-prisoners can. We wanted a chat with somebody 'outside,' somebody with ideas culled beyond our prison walls. . . . It did not matter who it was—Julius Caesar or Socrates, Christopher Columbus or Aspasia . . . but any old Tom, or Dick, or Harry would have been welcome."

As days went by with no results, men dropped out. On this winter night in early 1917, only four remained. They agreed to give the spook-board one last try, and on this night, in Jones's hands, it began to speak.

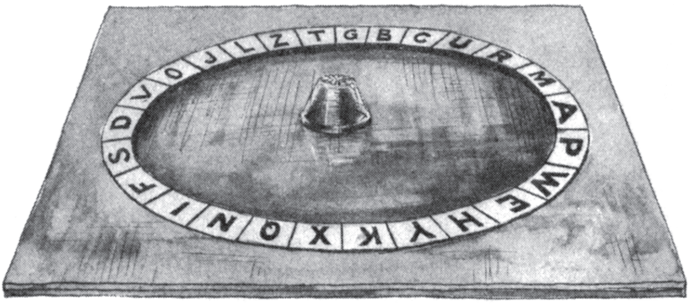
"For the last time," Jones's companion, William O'Farrell, intoned, addressing the board, "WHO—ARE—YOU?"

"S," the board replied. "A-L-L-Y."

A ghost—and a woman! And a most welcome spirit Sally proved to be, teasing, cajoling, and flirting as the glass spelled out her every word. From then on, Sally was joined nightly by a panoply of shades, including the gentle Dorothy, the cantankerous American Silas P. Warner, and a commanding presence known only as the Spook. At each séance, more and more men pressed eagerly round the table.

It was all just a lark, a prank pulled by Jones to pass the stagnant time. But in the coming months, as his humbuggery gained real converts, he began to dream that he could parlay their newfound faith into a far more serious enterprise. "If I could do to the Turks what I had succeeded in doing to my fellow-prisoners," he wrote, "if I could make them *believers,* there was no saying what influence I might not be able to exert over them. It might even open the door to freedom."

And so it would, by virtue of impeccable planning, immense per-



The handmade Ouija board used by Jones and Hill in their early séances. It would ultimately lead them to freedom. JONES, *THE ROAD TO EN-DOR* (1919)

sonal risk, and no small amount of luck. Had Jones not possessed a stellar visual memory; had Cedric Hill, who would become his confederate, not been a sleight-of-hand artist of uncommon prowess; had both men not had a keen aptitude for secret codes; and had they not managed to con their way out of a catastrophic turn of fate that threatened to capsize the entire scheme, they would never have gained their freedom and might well have forfeited their lives. Above all, had any of Jones's fellow prisoners taken the trouble to notice his left thumb, the plan would have been over before it began.

BOOK ONE

DEAD MEN WALKING

CHAPTER ONE

For King and Country

THERE WAS NO barbed wire around Yozgad, nor did there need to be. One of a constellation of World War I prison camps spread over Turkey, it was among the most remote. More than 4,000 feet above sea level, it had been earmarked for incorrigibles—those British officers deemed most likely to escape. The town of Yozgad, in which the camp was set, lay 150 miles south of the Black Sea and 300 miles north of the Mediterranean. The nearest railway station, Angora (present-day Ankara), was five days' journey by cart through forbidding terrain: jagged mountains round the camp and the Anatolian desert beyond. As a result, Yozgad was considered escape-proof, the Alcatraz of its day.

If an inmate did manage to get out, he would have to contend with the cutthroat brigands, believed to number in the hundreds of thousands, who roamed the surrounding countryside. "A solitary traveller, however well armed, would not have stood a dog's chance," Major Edward Sandes, interned at Yozgad, would write in 1924. Men who had fled other camps and been set upon by brigands had been known to beg the nearest Ottoman official they could find to take them back.

But for the British officers at Yozgad, something else precluded escape even more forcibly: On orders of the camp commandant, an attempt by any one of them would bring down severe reprisals—including lockdown, isolation, and even execution—on those who remained, a punitive rite known as strafing.* Men of honor, the prisoners swore to one another that they would not flee.

As Eric Williams, who in 1943 escaped from the Stalag-Luft III

* As the modern historian Yücel Yanıkdağ notes, some commanders of Russian POW camps in which Ottoman prisoners were interned discouraged escape by threatening similar reprisals.

The desolate landscape around Yozgad. JONES, *THE ROAD TO EN-DOR* (1919)

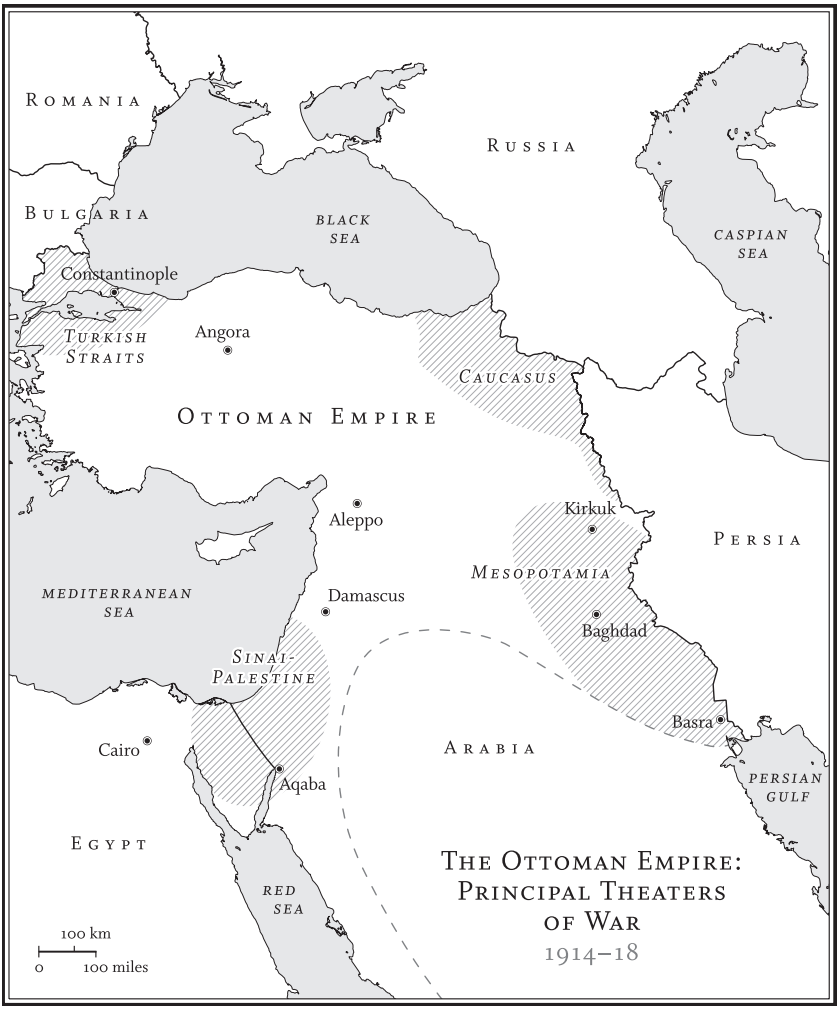
prison camp in Silesia, would write, "The exhausting . . . march to Yozgad . . . so told on the survivors that once they had settled down the opinion grew among them that it was wrong to escape, that the loss of privileges by those who stayed behind far outweighed the slim chance of the few who might get away."

Yet some, including Jones and Hill, dreamed of liberty. The question was how to attain it without compromising their countrymen.

THE WAR WITH the Ottoman Empire has been called the forgotten theater of World War I, yet it was as brutal as anything on the Western Front. It spanned four principal arenas: Mesopotamia, including modern-day Iraq, where Jones was captured; the Sinai Peninsula and Palestine, including present-day Syria, Israel, and Egypt, where Hill was taken prisoner; the Caucasian Front, where the Ottomans fought Russia; and the Turkish Straits, where Allied forces suffered a devastating defeat at Gallipoli in 1915–16.

The Ottoman Empire had entered the war in the autumn of 1914 after allying itself with the Central Powers: Germany and Austria-Hungary.* The Allies—including Britain, France, and Russia—formally

* Bulgaria would join the Central Powers in 1915.



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declared war on Turkey, as the empire was known in Allied shorthand, soon afterward. For Britain, a crucial imperative was to ensure continued access to its oilfields in Persia (present-day Iran), which bordered Mesopotamia.* In 1913, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, had urged the Royal Navy to convert its fleet from coal-burning vessels to oil-fired ones: Oil burned hotter and gener-

* The Anglo-Persian Oil Company was established in 1909 after the discovery of an immense oilfield in Masjed Soleiman, in what is now Iran, the year before. Urged on by Churchill, the British government became the majority shareholder in the concern in the summer of 1914. The company later became British Petroleum, now BP.

ated steam faster, affording greater speed. Once the Ottoman Empire joined the conflict, Britain moved swiftly to protect its Persian assets.

"The British attitude and policy towards the Ottomans was a variable mixture of Orientalism and racism, on the one hand, and *realpolitik* on the other," the contemporary Turkish historian Yücel Yanıkdağ has written. "From the Ottoman perspective, the Great Powers, including Great Britain, were only interested in carving away the empire." What was more, he wrote, "the British [viewed] the Ottoman Empire as weak and degenerate [and] underestimated what it would take to defeat it." T. E. Lawrence, a British Army officer dispatched for a time to Mesopotamia—he would later become renowned as Lawrence of Arabia for his work in the Palestine campaign—called the British operation in Mesopotamia a "blunderland."

Of all Britain's campaigns in the region, very likely the most disastrous was the five-month siege and ultimate capitulation at Kut-al-Amara, on the banks of the river Tigris some 200 miles upriver from the Persian Gulf. In April 1916, after a siege of 147 days entailing three unsuccessful relief attempts and 33,000 British casualties, the British surrendered. It was, in the words of one twenty-first-century historian, "arguably . . . Britain's worst military defeat since the surrender of Cornwallis's army in 1781 during the American Revolutionary War." More than 12,000 men were taken prisoner at Kut.* Among them was Jones, who with his fellows had endured five months of shot and shell, aerial bombardment, flood, disease, and starvation.

"Harry is home," Jones's father would write at war's end, after his son had come through the siege, the march, two years in Yozgad, and confinement in the madhouse. "He has suffered terribly. I did not think it was possible to suffer so much and live."†

* "Kut," as Kut-al-Amara is informally known, rhymes with "foot."

† Of the 8 million to 9 million prisoners of war in World War I as a whole, nearly 300,000—from both sides—were taken in the Ottoman theater. Roughly 35,000 of these were Allied prisoners, held in Ottoman camps throughout Asia Minor. The Allies took more than 200,000 Ottoman prisoners, interning them in camps in Egypt, India, Burma, Cyprus, Iraq, and Russia. Conditions in Allied camps were no better than those on the Ottoman side: Of the estimated 65,000 to 95,000 Ottoman prisoners held in Russia, for instance, some 43 percent died during transport or captivity.

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Jones's journey to Yozgad began in Burma. Elias Henry Jones, familiarly known as Harry or Hal, was born in Aberystwyth, Wales, on September 21, 1883, the eldest of six children of a Welsh father, Sir Henry Jones, and a Scottish mother, the former Annie Walker. Sir Henry (1852–1922), a cobbler's son who had left school at twelve to work as his father's apprentice, won a scholarship to Glasgow University in the 1870s and went on to become one of the world's foremost moral philosophers. He was knighted in 1912.

Elias Henry Jones, circa 1915.
JONES, *THE ROAD TO EN-DOR* (1919)

Harry—"his father's double in inventive daring," one of Sir Henry's biographers would write—spent his boyhood in Wales. In 1891 he moved with his family to Scotland, where his father took a post at the University of St. Andrews. Three years later they settled in Glasgow, where Henry Jones had been awarded a professorship in moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow, a chair once held by the eighteenth-century economic philosopher Adam Smith. But to the end of his life Harry remained deeply invested in his Welsh heritage and was fluent in Welsh, a skill that would help turn the machinery of his confidence game.

Harry graduated from the University of Glasgow, where he studied psychology, along with Greek, Latin, mathematics, and history; after earning a master's degree from Balliol College, Oxford, he was admitted to practice as a barrister. In 1906, he joined the Colonial Service and was posted to Burma, then an administrative department of British India. Based in Kawkareik, near the Thai border, he worked as a magistrate, overseeing the judicial affairs of a large province.

During these years, Harry's family would know great loss. His sixteen-year-old brother, Will, described by their father as the most gifted of the Jones children, died in 1906 from appendicitis; in 1910,