

The Confidence Men

by Margalit Fox

ONE OF the strangest tales of the First World War must be that of Lieutenant Elias ‘Harry’ Henry Jones of the Indian Army. He and his pal Cedric Waters Hill, a pilot of the Royal Flying Corps, used a Ouija Board and parapsychology to escape from a Turkish Prisoner of War camp.

Jones, a Welshman by birth, and Hill, from Queensland, Australia, were held captive in a remote place called Yozgad after the Turkish Ottoman Army seized the British garrison in Kut, south of Baghdad, in the spring of 1916.

Forced to walk thousands of miles, first to Aleppo in Syria and then on to the bleakness of Yozgad, Turkey, the resilient Jones began to cleverly plan his escape as soon as he arrived at the camp. How was escape possible without risking the lives of so many others? Out of the blue the artful Jones received a postcard from an aunt in England who suggested he use a ouija board to talk to spirits and help pass the long, bleak, boredom-filled hours at Yozgad.

What if, pondered Jones, he could channel spirits, and those spirits, under the leadership of ‘the Spook’ (ie Jones), could convince Commandant Bey and his right hand man Moisie Eskanazi (nicknamed ‘the Pimple’) there was information from the ‘other side’ about buried treasure?

Bey was as susceptible to greed as any man stuck out in a remote wilderness far from home. By the time the ‘buried treasure’ was planted in Bey’s mind, Jones had met Hill and forged an alliance in their mutual desperation to escape.

The pair ran seances and soon gathered large audiences of fellow prisoners to their clairvoyance events. They even convinced fellow POWs they could read minds – the author has included all the codes and words used in phrases and questions that enabled the blindfolded ‘mind reader’ (Jones) to correctly call out an object hidden in a man’s pocket.

Hill was soon nominated technical adviser to the hoax.

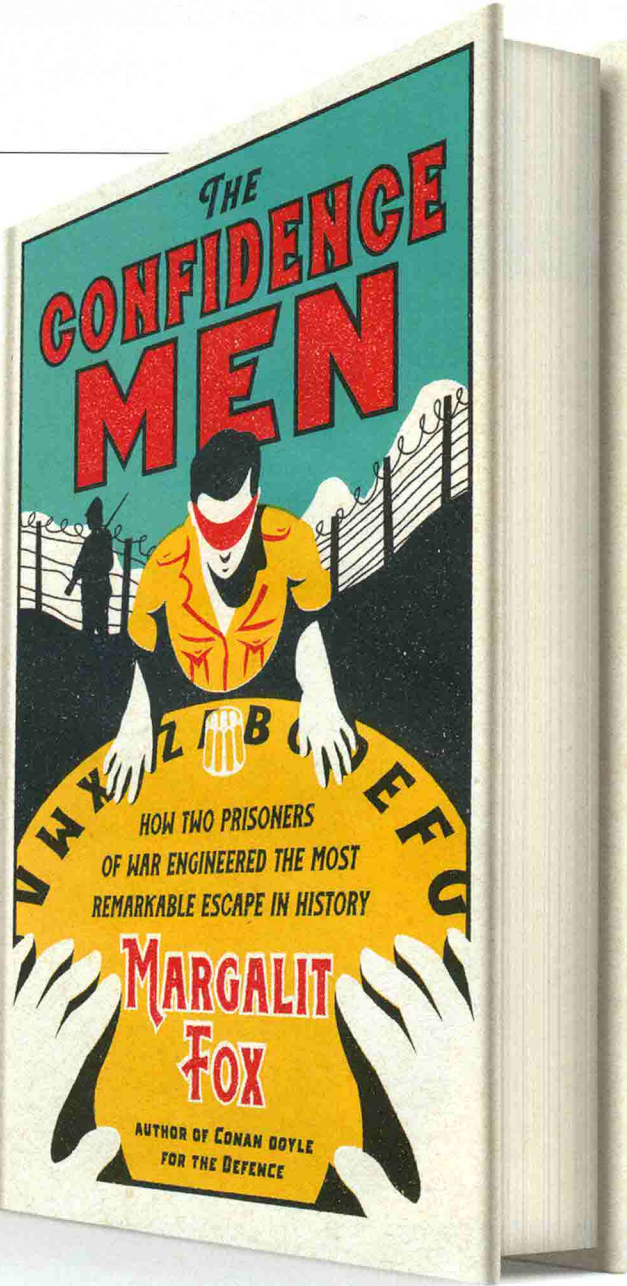
He was an ideal choice as before the war he had proved himself a competent magician with an astute sleight of hand able to convince any sceptic there really was a coin behind their ear. His bewitching talent thus ensured his partnership with Jones whose vocal dexterity via ‘the Spook’ would eventually lead to an ‘official escape’, firstly to the Turkish capital Constantinople (now Istanbul) and then home to Blighty.

In this insightful book there is a whole raft of qualified research supporting and re-examining the mental agility of two men who found themselves in a desperate situation. The risks they took to expedite their escape, including a mock hanging and suicide attempt, left them vulnerable to exposure but their good friendship and secret communications kept the spiritualism hoax very much alive and exceeded all doubts in the minds of their captors.

Both men stopped eating, with Hill losing 70lbs during his fast to prove their descent into insanity. Jones continued to rave on and on about being obsessed by the Spook. It really was the oldest trick in the book to plead insanity.

Their self-imposed physical suffering was an extreme homage to their plan of escape and showed them as men of great fortitude and courage over adversity. They believed,

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so they made it happen. The author also reveals how some of the world’s greatest illusionists carry out their tricks.

The author successfully offers a picture of humanity’s sense of freedom. She also cleverly explores the art of the con artist, using her knowledge as a biographer of Sherlock Holmes creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (*Conan Doyle for the Defence*) to validate her findings in regard to many of the other worldly activities carried out by Jones and Hill.

Both men got home to England later in 1918 having convinced Turkey’s leading psychiatrist they were completely mad. The final chapter reveals what happened to them after the war. Jones hoped his memoir would serve as a cautionary tale about how easy it is to become a spiritualist charlatan. It’s an awesome book made even more valuable by such outstanding research and insight.

Reviewed by Melody Foreman

Illustrations: Yes **References/Notes:** Yes
Appendices: No **Index:** Yes