

F. E. at War

One of the most controversial periods in the career of F.E. Smith (later first Earl of Birkenhead and always known as 'F.E.') was his record in uniform during the First World War. If the man had been other than F.E., much of the controversy surrounding him might have been avoided. The uncomfortable truth is that, whilst F.E. was admired by many, he was disliked by many more, some capable of causing trouble if roused.

Lord Beaverbrook knew F.E. well and was quick to identify the difficulty: '[F.E.'s] chief enemy has always been his own biting and witty tongue, which spares no man.' Even F.E.'s son, young Freddy, described his father as being so insensitive to the effect his wit had on others that he was bewildered when people took offence at being 'under his lash'. Freddy added: 'Unable to repress the phrases which came all too readily to mind, [F.E.] left his path strewn with unnecessary enemies, and it was perhaps some coarse strand in his nature which seldom allowed him to attribute the rancour that followed to its true cause, himself.' It was also hinted that, whilst F.E. was happy to 'dish it out', he disliked being the object of the barbs of others.

That being his nature, it was perhaps to be expected that in the heightened atmosphere of war F.E.'s actions were often met with a mixture of harsh criticism, damaging innuendo and farce, illustrated here by two incidents.

F.E. and the Indian Corps

Following the outbreak of hostilities, and after a short period as Director of the Press Bureau charged with war-time press censorship, F.E. (already a Lieutenant in the Oxfordshire Yeomanry) secured a 'cushy appointment' not with the Oxfordshires but rather curiously as an Intelligence and Recording Officer attached to the Indian Corps, then disembarking in late September 1914 at Marseille. John Campbell, one of F.E.'s biographers, described the appointment as a 'very odd job for someone of his ability'. In effect, he was the Regimental Historian, stationed behind the lines, with the added duty of sending reports to India describing the war efforts of the Indian troops for publication,

when appropriate, in the press on the sub-continent.

This left F.E. open to accusations of shirking his responsibilities and evading military service, a point taken up with gusto by the press and eventually anonymously in the correspondence columns of the *Morning Post*. The canard could not be ignored and F.E. was obliged to obtain a letter from his commanding officer in the Oxfordshires, Colonel Dugdale, who wrote that F.E. had properly sought his advice and permission at every stage: 'Everything was done with my full knowledge and approval, and I really cannot see why outsiders should interfere between the Commanding Officer of a regiment and his officers', commented Dugdale. What is more, he saw the brouhaha as possibly political.

This did little to silence malicious tongues and the charge remained that F.E. was evading the role of combatant that 'he had so strenuously pressed on others' – a reference to F.E.'s vocal support for Kitchener's call for volunteers.

Nor did F.E. act subsequently to dispel suspicion when, in March 1915, he returned home on leave. His wife was anxious that he should remain in England, and it was not long before F.E. had secured an appointment to a Military Court, then, in May 1915, a position on the Committee of Inquiry looking into the sinking of the 'Lusitania'. Later that month F.E. became Solicitor General in the Coalition Government. The Attorneyship soon followed and a Cabinet place. Thus the Oxfordshires were robbed of F.E.'s service on the battlefields of France for the rest of the war.

Arrest at Plug Street

An event that caused much amusement at F.E.'s expense and smacked of farce worthy of some passages in Ford Maddox Ford's classic War novel *Parade's End*, set partially in Gray's Inn, occurred in 1916. In late January that year, Lloyd George, Bonar Law and F.E. (by now Attorney-General and dressed in the uniform of a Colonel in the Oxfordshires) crossed to France to visit GHQ at St Omer to confer with the military brass. At Boulogne, there were no passes prepared for them but at Lloyd George's insistence the three men none the less proceeded by car to St Omer.

Once there, F.E. decided to visit his old parliamentary comrade Winston Churchill – no longer in government, but back serving with his regiment – at his HQ at Ploegsteert ('Plug Street' in military jargon and

squaddy parlance). He acquired a car and later enjoyed a boozy meal with Churchill in the forward zone, both men drinking a considerable amount of brandy in the process. In the early hours of the next morning, and still in uniform, F.E. was arrested and taken to St Omer on the grounds that he had entered the military zone without a pass. He was billeted at the Hotel du Commerce at St Omer and kept in custody for the rest of the night. F.E. had given little or no resistance on his arrest, probably due to having drunk too much.

The fact that F.E. had no pass would have been overlooked if he had been any other politician of equal standing. It was because he was F.E. and someone who obviously took it for granted that the rules did not apply to him that this mischief was set on foot by someone who held a grudge. To add to this tangled web, there is some evidence suggesting that a telegram was sent down the line permitting F.E. to proceed unimpeded but the telegram was altered so as to authorise his arrest. This was done presumably by someone who saw an opportunity to embarrass the Attorney-General. It has to be conceded, however, that, although F.E. had recently been promoted Colonel (non-active), it was rather pretentious of him to be wearing his uniform on the visit, given that he was in France, not as a soldier, but as a politician. It was typical of F.E. to throw any caution to the wind.

When F.E. awoke he was livid, as was Churchill who was now fully aware of what had happened. At the hotel F.E. discovered that two military policemen were stationed outside his room with orders to shoot him if he attempted to leave. When Adjutant-General Sir Nevil Macready interviewed the prisoner, possibly at his HQ, F.E. protested he was a member of the War Cabinet and HM's Attorney-General. Macready was unimpressed. F.E.'s son takes up the story: '[Macready] had evidently been pondering for some time the "heads I win, tails you lose" question which he now put to the Attorney-General: "If you are a civilian, why are



Portrait of Lord Birkenhead by Sir John Lavery RA.

you here in uniform? If you are a soldier, why don't you obey the Regulations?" Heated discussions followed. Eventually matters were resolved and apologies offered and accepted. As an additional sop, Sir Douglas Haig invited F.E. to lunch with him, only to be shocked at the amount of his best brandy F.E. consumed. F.E.'s fellow Benchers at Gray's Inn would have been less surprised!

This tale continued to be retold, often in garbled versions, in messes and at dining tables for some time afterwards – mostly to delighted guffaws, causing considerable harm to F.E.'s reputation. But what was more surprising than the story of the arrest itself was that anyone in the military had the time to waste on such a practical joke in a horrific war that saw so much blood spilt and treasure lost. The stark lesson may be that in the context of human affairs and petty one-upmanship there is always time for a vendetta to be played out.

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