

Esterhazy, the Mythomaniac of Milton Road

By Professor Eric Cahm, Lecturer in Contemporary History at the University of Tours

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The self-styled Count de Voilemont, who ended his days peacefully in Harpenden on 21 May 1923, must surely have been the most extraordinary of the colourful characters involved in the web of falsehood, military intrigue and political scandal surrounding the case of Alfred Dreyfus, which rocked France and kept the world in suspense in 1898 and 1899. Born Charles-Marie-Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy in 1847, the orphan son of a French general, he was a lifelong myth-maker: none of those whose lies and forgeries for so long helped to prevent Dreyfus's name from being cleared had a more fertile imagination than he did; he firmly believed in the products of that imagination. In his earliest years he had given himself the title of count, and after offering, and selling, French military secrets to the Germans, he produced story after story as a smokescreen to ensure that captain Dreyfus, falsely accused – because of a chance similarity in the handwriting of the bordereau, a covering note listing various pieces of military information which he himself, Esterhazy, was sending to the German military attaché Schwarzkoppen – should continue to be thought of as a traitor.

After being condemned as the author of the bordereau on the flimsiest of evidence, Dreyfus was dispatched to Devil's Island early in 1895 and forgotten.

When he turned traitor to France, Esterhazy was a debt-ridden infantry officer who had found a convenient posting near Paris, been pursuing women, speculating on the stock exchange and falling into debt. He first came under suspicion in 1896, when Picquart, head of French counter-intelligence, got hold of a *petit bleu*, or message sent by pneumatic tube, which Esterhazy had addressed to Schwarzkoppen. Picquart's surveillance of this new probable traitor produced no result until he was able to compare some samples of Esterhazy's writing with that of the bordereau. Esterhazy, while selling secrets to Germany, had actually been audacious enough to apply for a posting to the War Ministry! This was because he had succeeded in winning the constant high regard of his superiors and of influential people. For the traitor was also a charmer: "The blazing passion of his language, his furious mimicry, his intensity of life, the communicative frenzy of this astonishing play-actor had an endless fascination", wrote the great historian of the Affair, Joseph Reinach. Faced now with Esterhazy's handwriting and that of the bordereau, Picquart saw at once that they were identical: Dreyfus could therefore not have written the bordereau. But this honest officer (Picquart's) attempts to clear up the case were frustrated by his superiors in the French General Staff who were determined to avoid any re-opening of it as the ex-war minister Mercier had been responsible for an illegality in the 1894 trial.

Esterhazy continued unmolested until the defenders of Dreyfus identified him in 1897 as the author of the bordereau, thanks to his banker Castro, who recognised his client's writing on the facsimiles of the bordereau being hawked around the Paris streets. Dreyfus's brother Mathieu denounced him to the War Minister. By this time the General Staff, realising their vulnerability if he should be unmasked as the real villain of the piece, had placed him under their protection; they remained in collusion with him for months. Esterhazy's phantasmagoria ran riot in his counter-attack. Insolently addressing three letters to the President of the French Republic, he threatened: "My family is illustrious enough in the annals of French history and of great European causes for my government to take care that my name should not be dragged through the mud". He demanded justice, otherwise he would appeal to the head of his house, the German Emperor. Actually he was almost entirely French, though he could claim descent – only via a legitimised son born out of wedlock it is true – from the great Austro-Hungarian Esterhazy family. He also now invented a "veiled lady", who began to loom large in the press: she had been communicating documents to him which could incriminate important personages. These he threatened to publish.

Safe in the protective hands of the General Staff, and of the government, which was insistent that Dreyfus's trial had been perfectly fair and legal, he survived the publication by *Le Figaro* of some old letters fuming with hatred of France, the government enquiry which inevitably developed into legal proceedings, and his two-day trial in January 1898, which ended in his acquittal. The nationalists were jubilant. It was then that Emile Zola entered the fray with his famous "J'Accuse!". This bombshell which exploded in the French press on 13 January 1898 and produced fallout throughout the world, stung Dreyfus's supporters into action and started the process that would lead to his retrial in Rennes in 1899 and his eventual rehabilitation in 1906.

At Zola's February 1898 trial for libelling the French army chiefs, Esterhazy stonewalled, and the tide did not begin to turn against him until his cousin Christian, whom he had swindled, revealed to a magistrate, Bertulus – investigating charges against him of sending Picquart forged telegrams to discredit him – that he had been in collusion with the General Staff. Esterhazy was arrested on forgery charges. By this time the new War Minister Cavaignac, though he still believed Dreyfus guilty, had seen that Esterhazy was an embarrassment because of his behaviour. He was discharged for misconduct on 31 August 1898. He was planning to flee to England, when, just at the same moment, the news of Colonel Henry's suicide broke. Henry, who had forged a letter incriminating Dreyfus, had been forced to confess, and with this and his suicide, clear indications that Dreyfus's conviction had been buttressed by a forgery, public opinion began to swing in favour of a retrial. Esterhazy left for London, never to return to France.

It was now that he resolved to milk, for cash from the foreign press, a confession which he carefully prepared in such a way as to make him look like a much-maligned patriot not a traitor. Yes, he had written the bordereau, he told Rowland Strong of *The Observer*, but it had been on superior orders from Colonel Sandherr, the head of French counter-intelligence in 1894 when it had been part of a French campaign to mislead the German military attaché, and to provide the necessary concrete evidence against Dreyfus who had already been unmasked as a traitor. Rowland Strong had been on the trail of Esterhazy for some time, and Oscar Wilde had dined more than once with Esterhazy in Paris. He, like so many others, had been fascinated by the glamorous villain, and though he believed Dreyfus to be innocent, he still found Esterhazy "much more interesting" – another Wildean paradox. A French writer, Julien Benda, had met Esterhazy in 1892 and wrote that he was "tall, thin, a little bent, the face sallow, bony and lined ... a careworn air. He might have been an elegant and treacherous gypsy, or better a great wild beast, alert and sure of itself. Charmed by his distinction I could not take my eyes off him."

In London however, Esterhazy found himself at a disadvantage, knowing almost no English, being without friends and without money. He even extracted payment from *The Observer* only after a court case. He was to live precariously in furnished rooms for several years on the proceeds of a variety of contradictory articles, interviews and statements. He still persisted, in his testimony to the French Appeal Court, the Cour de Cassation, and during Dreyfus's second court-martial at Rennes in 1899, that he had written the bordereau on superior orders.

He continued to write, having always had a ready pen and a genuine talent for journalism: he even frequented the Reading Room at the British Museum. His articles appeared in the anti-Semitic Paris daily, *Libre Parole*, under a pseudonym. It was now, in 1907, that he found relative calm, and the companionship of the cultured woman who was to share his life, in London and soon in Harpenden, until his death.

Long before, in 1886, he had married Anne de Nettancourt, the daughter of a French aristocratic family, but though she bore him two daughters, Everilda and Valentine, to whom he remained attached, her

wealth had not kept him from ruin - one reason he offered his services to Germany – and by the time of his involvement in the Dreyfus Affair, he had left the wife he despised for a prostitute, Marguerite Pays, who was implicated in his forgeries directed against Picquart.

We know little of the background of Alsace Louise, Esterhazy's companion during the last years of his life, except that her family name was Mathey and that she had musical connections and a considerable musical culture. She was fluent in English as well as French. She was much younger than Esterhazy, and it may be surmised perhaps from her first name Alsace that she was born about the time of the French loss of Alsace in 1871. As is known, she and Esterhazy, presenting themselves first and Mr and Mrs Fitzgerald, moved to Harpenden in 1909, first to Tennyson Road, then at the end of 1910 to "The Elms" (now 40) in Station Road, and finally in 1913 to "Holmleigh" (now 21) in Milton Road, where they were to live as Count de Voilemont and his wife – sometimes introduced to French visitors as his niece. The "Count", now aged 66, had bought this last house, no doubt with his wife's money: they then settled to the life which has been chronicled in the Hertfordshire press, he at first riding the horse he kept at the property and making enough noise typing articles to attract the neighbours' attention, she frequently the local music shop (Billinghams at 22 Station Road). During the First World War he wrote for the French press a number of articles highly hostile to the Allies!

On his death he left all his possessions to his "wife". His effects were valued none too handsomely at £190.10.9d, according to his will, which I recently turned up in the Probate Registry. "Alsace Louise Mary Jane de Voilemont" then sold the house and is last heard of in Chelsea at 6 Bramerton Street, but there is no further trace of her in Chelsea, and the mysteries about her remain. Were her parents of mixed nationality, as her first names suggest? And if so, was her father French or English? Mathey could just be English or French. These clues might lead to more revelations. Some time after Esterhazy's death in 1923, there was erected – by her? – the tombstone in the parish churchyard which sums up the great myth-maker: title, the name de Voilemont, even the date of birth (1849) being all equally fictitious.

Perhaps Esterhazy's best epitaph was provided earlier by William James the philosopher who called him "a fantastic scoundrel ... a regular Shakespearean type of villain, with an insane exuberance of rhetoric and fancy about his vanities and hatreds that literature has never yet equalled". During the Dreyfus Affair the facts indeed eclipsed fiction for the public, and novels were abandoned for the daily thrilling revelations in the press, about Esterhazy and much else.

Further reading

The eminent French historian Marcel Thomas wrote the only life of Esterhazy, which includes a chapter on England and Harpenden: *Esterhazy ou l'envers de l'affaire Dreyfus*, Paris, Vernal/Philippe Lebaud, 1989.

More details on him can be found in English in Jean-Denis Bredin, *The Affair*, New York, Brasiller, 1986 – the fullest account of the Dreyfus Affair.

My book, *The Dreyfus Affair in French Society and Politics*, Longman, 1996 – offers a concise, up-to-date treatment of the subject.