

Desmond Leslie

By Philip Hoare

Saturday, 10 March 2001

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The extraordinary life of Desmond Leslie rivals any fiction by Nancy Mitford or Anthony Powell, with overtones of a Fifties sci-fi movie, and a little Weimar decadence thrown in. A cousin of Sir Winston Churchill, son of a colourful father, husband to a Berlin-born cabaret singer, Leslie was a Spitfire pilot, proponent of extraterrestrial life, composer of revue lyrics, and a collector of electronic noise.

A scion of the Irish ascendancy, he was the son of Sir Shane Leslie, third Baronet, and lived at Castle Leslie, in Co Monaghan. Sir Shane scandalised his family by converting to Roman Catholicism whilst an undergraduate; a supporter of the nationalist cause, he habitually sported a saffron-coloured kilt, even in London. He wrote or translated 58 books, on subjects ranging from Irish politics to the paranormal. Of Sir Shane's three children, John, Desmond and Anita, the last would herself become an author, known notably for her *Jennie: the life of Lady Randolph Churchill* (1969).

Born in 1921 (the Duke of Connaught was a godparent) and educated in England, Desmond Leslie was early on introduced to strange phenomena: one November night in 1934 after "lights out", he claimed his dormitory was "suddenly lit by a brilliant green glare", an *X Files* moment which had his fellow schoolboys rushing to the window to see "an immense green fireball move slowly across the sky and disappear behind the Sussex Downs".

The sky continued to fascinate Leslie. Educated at Ampleforth and Trinity College Dublin, during the Second World War he became a fighter pilot. A family historian remarked, "He destroyed a number of aircraft, most of which he was piloting at the time." During the war he met Agnes Bernauer, the daughter of a German Jewish impresario who had given Marlene Dietrich her first job. They married in August 1945, on the first day of peace in Europe, and, having managed to crash a selection of Spitfires and Hurricanes, Leslie ended the war on a high note, drinking claret with Agnes and his cousin, the Prime Minister, at 10 Downing Street on VE Day. During the Fifties, the couple lived in London, where they counted among their friends Claus von Bulow and the exiled King Farouk.

In July 1954, Agnes - now Agnes Bernelle, and appearing as Salome at St Martin's Theatre (a part in which she became the first "nonstationary" nude on the English stage) - reported to the *Daily Mail*,

"If all goes well there will be flying saucer landings in England next year . . ." Those are the words of my husband, Desmond Leslie, written from the Californian desert, where he and an American investigator, George Adamski, are watching the sky in search of flying saucers.

Leslie's book with Adamski, *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (1953), had been published in the wake of the post-war ufo flap. An entertaining mix of sci-fi theory and historical accounts (including a description of an 1883 photograph of a ufo), many gleaned, as Leslie acknowledged, from the researches of Charles Fort, the book was written with witty rhetoric and disdain for the sceptics. "Why should they risk a public landing?" Leslie mused:

Their ship would be impounded for evasion of custom duties. Their clothes would be torn off and sold as souvenirs. They would be denounced as saboteurs, anti-Christ, disturbers of the peace, emissaries of Satan, and the rest.

An Eric von Daniken before his time, Leslie drew on levitating saints, Atlantean myths and ancient airships to evolve a specific theory of interplanetary propulsion which he sought to relate, Gaia-like, to the Earth itself. "As I write this, I am riding on a great green luminous spaceship . . . rushing through the Ocean of Space." The book culminated in a 50-page account of Adamski's encounter of the third kind with tall, long-haired Venusians in outfits "like ski trousers".

Leslie and Adamski's work became a 1950s best-seller, a classic of ufology which even now is the subject of website chatrooms.

While her husband pursued ufos, Agnes continued with her career. In 1963 - the year in which the couple moved to Castle Leslie - she created a Weill/Brecht cabaret, *Savagery and Delight*, which she débüté at Peter Cook's Establishment Club in 1963. Her husband created television history when, during the live filming of *That Was The Week That Was* with Bernard Levin, who had given *Savagery and Delight* a bad review, Leslie emerged out of the audience and took a swing at him.

Despite their mutual eschatological beliefs, the Leslies' marriage ended in the late Sixties when she met the architectural historian Maurice Craig. An incarnation of an Otto Dix painting with a gravelly voice to rival Lotte Lenya, Bernelle went on to record with Elvis Costello (the 1985 album *Father's Lying Dead on the Ironing Board*) and perform with Marc Almond and Gavin Friday, as well as appearing in the film *Hear My Song*.

Desmond Leslie too had theatrical aspirations, despite his friend John Betjeman's dismissing his first play as "bad". His attempts to write topical revue songs and lyrics were staged at the Gate Theatre by Michael MacLiammoir and Hilton Edwards. In 1954 he provided the screenplay for the film *Stranger From Venus*, inspired as much by the movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still* as by Leslie's own experiences. He also created his own studio "where he collected tapes containing thousands of sounds: bees humming, cars hooting, babies crying", as Kim Bielenberg records. A prescient nod towards modern "sampling", some of his "sound pictures" were used by Stanley Kubrick in his film *Dr Strangelove*.

When, in 1963, Leslie returned to Castle Leslie, it was, he said, "in the set determination to restore its ruined finances". He set up a night-club in one of the estate houses and invited such house guests as Marianne Faithfull and Mick Jagger. In the 1990s he moved to the South of France with his second wife, Helen

Strong, although returning regularly to Castle Leslie.

Desmond Leslie believed in reincarnation, and the holistic theories of Gaia, and joined a faith-healing sect, the White Eagle Lodge, run by a medium. He also continued to pursue his near-Messianic belief in ufos, lecturing at ufo conferences in Laughlin, Nevada, in 1998, and, as late as June 2000, at a similar conference in San Marino - a now legendary witness to the birth of ufology.

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