

Who is Victor Alexander Louis Mallet?!!!

Written by Matthew A. Hill

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MATTHEW A. HILL, NOV 10 2011

In establishing a database full of thousands of government documents there are nearly as many individuals mentioned in them. I enjoy opening the files and folders, not really knowing what I am going to read, the stale odours of the 60 year old pages gently waft up to my nose, and smell like the really old books in university libraries that no one ever really opens let alone read but yet are readily admired for their ability to survive the 21st Century cull on physical materials. At times I am reading through the documents that have been handwritten straining to read them and wondering if their peers had as much difficulty reading their inked scribbles as I do. Could you imagine if a Foreign Office official had requested in a letter for Viscount Halifax, the British Ambassador to the US, to seek an audience with President Roosevelt to show sympathy with American people over the 1941 Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbour but had read instead 'show no sympathy'! Obviously, this level of miscommunication is unrealistic and belies the agency of diplomats as more than messengers but the exercise points to a very real problem in diplomacy. Miscommunication is the nightmare to diplomats whose nuanced words are so carefully pulled apart by their contemporaries. Perhaps they are the über cultural critics – deconstructing words and their meaning to arrive at some objective 'truth'.

I also enjoy reading these documents because the foreign office staffers write so clearly and crisply. At times, it's as if the words jump out of the page. And some of these documents show little cracks in the formalities of government and you glimpse in the margins their inked cynicisms and joys. But who are these people? The aim of this blog is to create a series of bite-size profiles that bring the archive to life by giving it a little colour. I am sure you are all thinking, but let's be honest, probably not, who on earth is Victor Alexander Louis Mallet?! Well. If you Wikipedia him you'll find a series of notations about his life that are more a series of non-intriguing bullet points. You'll find he was a British soldier during WWI, a British diplomat in a number of places including Stockholm, Tehran and more importantly, for this archive, Washington, D.C. And he was Queen Victoria's Godson. Other details scrounged from Google include his appointment as a CHG in 1934, KCMG in 1944 and GCMG in 1952. Moreover, in Google images he looks like a tall handsome chap that plays croquet in a suit. None of these descriptions give me an idea of who he really was. Now, don't get me wrong. I am not expecting a personal ad that describes he was a man with a GSOH and WLTM a female WASP.

Neither am I expecting this archive to provide us with this level of personal details but there are at times when I get a glimpse of his character. [Ed. Please excuse the following excessive use of acronyms]. Take his despatch on August 8, 1939 to the Foreign Secretary on the politico-economic situation in the US. On page 8 he talks about the failure of Congress to make any amendments to the Wages and Hours Act 1938, more formally known as the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). Very briefly, the FLSA limited the maximum number of hours a week an employee could work and determined a legal minimum hourly rate. In the following excerpt we see Mallet's descriptions of an interesting encounter the President of the United Mine Workers Union (UMW) and head of the umbrella organisation the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), John L. Lewis had at the House of Representative's Labor Committee. According to Mallet, the Committee, in a rather teasing analysis, had gotten itself 'into a regular tangle over' the matter. Moreover, Lewis' 'language appears to the casual reader to have been the result of a sudden fit of temper, but I am told that what he said was quite deliberate'. He continues the story, '[Lewis] went out of his way to deliver a virulent personal attack upon the Vice President. He complained that the genesis of the campaign against labour in the House of Representatives was to be found within the Democratic Party; that it ran across to the Senate and emanated there from a "labor-baiting, poker-playing, whiskey-drinking, evil old man whose name is Garner".' In

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packing my sentence with a stereotype, I can just imagine the furore a straight talking Welsh mining descendant would have in the corridors of power. What tickles me the most is that Mallet seems to be almost relishing this recantation. And interlaced with the key domestic political issue of the day, namely, who was to run for the Democrats in the 1940 presidential election, his smiling summary of Lewis' rant continues: 'He went on to say that Mr. Garner's knife was searching for the quivering, pulsating heart of labour, and that he, Mr. Lewis was against him now and would be against him in 1940 when he sought the Presidency of the United States'. Don't forget these are Mallet's words paraphrasing Lewis', so there is some measure of authorship.

Moreover, in a format that would have been welcome in the amphitheatres of Ancient Greece this tragic story ends with the follow words. Words that one should read between as they give a hint of the opinion of His Majesty's Chargé d'affaires: 'This outburst has on the whole reacted against Mr. Lewis, as the press in sanctimonious horror has held up its hands at such dreadful accusations. Perhaps the real truth is that everybody knows what Mr. Garner's habits are and everybody prefers not to think of them as associated with the Vice President of the United States.'

About the author:

Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but othertimes it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.