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## ‘The Confidence Men’ Review: Spooking the Commandant

How two resourceful Allies used spiritualism, deception and distinctively British nonsense to escape a Turkish prison camp in World War I.



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By Edward Kosner  
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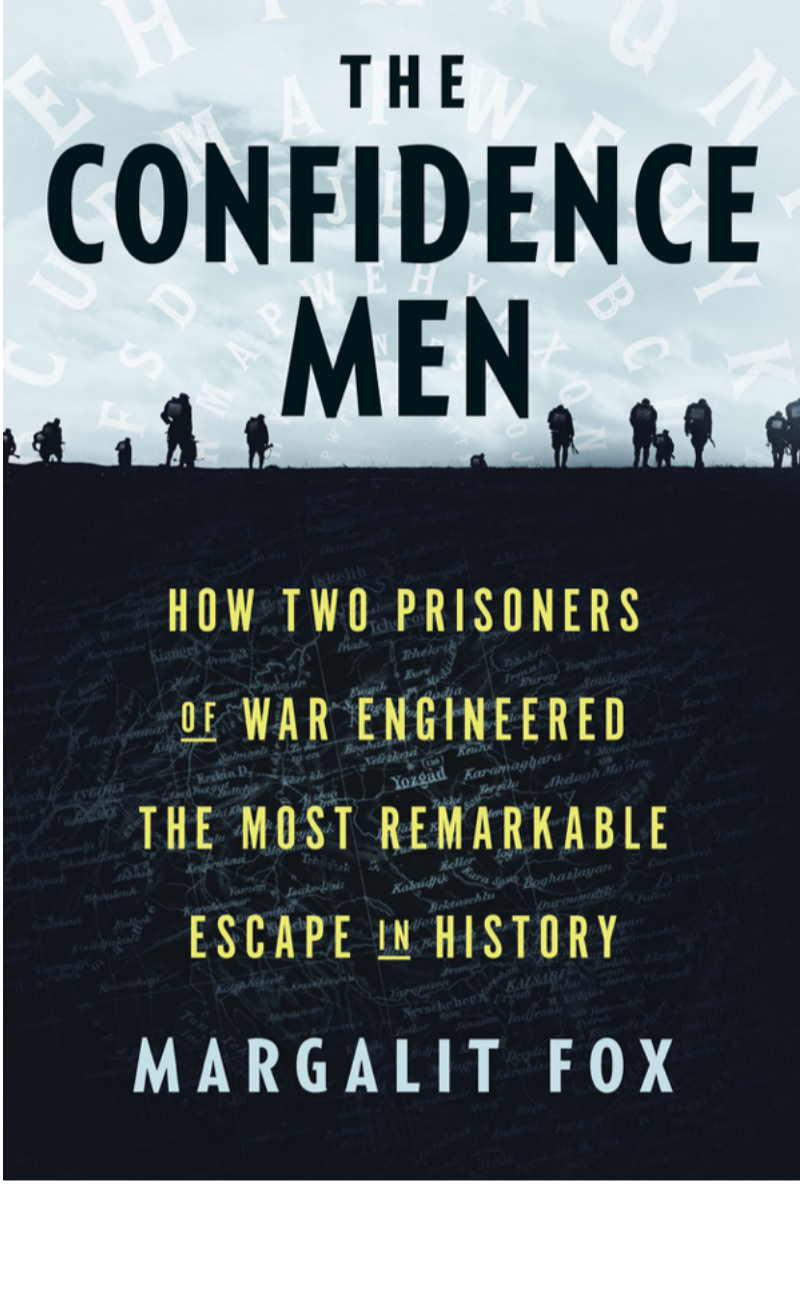
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Tales of spunky prisoners of war suffering horrifying privation or outfoxing their sadistic or imbecilic captors are a staple of military history and the movies. John McCain devotes much of his Vietnam memoir “Faith of My Fathers” to his ordeal in the Hanoi Hilton, and “Stalag 17,” “The Bridge on the River Kwai,” “The Great Escape” and “Unbroken” are great films. Fact or fiction, few of them can match the latest entry in the genre for screwball comedy.

Margalit Fox’s “The Confidence Men” tells the tale of two Allied officers captured by the Turks during World War I who escaped their remote prison camp by pulling an ingenious and elaborate spiritualist con on the camp’s greedy commandant. A onetime writer of obituaries for the New York Times and the author of three other books, Ms. Fox brings a deadpan touch to her story.

Close your eyes and you can picture the young Sean Connery and Michael Caine of “The Man Who Would Be King” playing the two leads in a film based on the book. The impresario of the bizarre escape plan was Elias Henry Jones, 33, an Oxford-educated barrister and onetime magistrate in Burma during the British Raj. The son of a Welsh lord, Jones, a second lieutenant in the Indian Army Reserve, was captured after the disastrous siege of Küt-al-Amāra, in what is now Iraq, in April 1916. His accomplice was Cedric Waters Hill, just 25, an Australian mechanic who became a pilot and just happened to be a skillful amateur sleight-of-hand artist.

After a hideous 62-day trek with other POWs covering nearly 2,000 miles, Jones was deposited in the Yozgat camp, a cluster of repurposed buildings in a small village in remote Anatolia, “the Alcatraz of its day.” Hill showed up not long after. The camp was commanded by Kiazim Bey, an aging autocrat who lived in fear of his prisoners escaping. His young aide-de-camp and translator was Moise Eskenazi, a diminutive, officious Ottoman Jewish soldier, known to the prisoners as “the Pimple.” The British officers endured quarters crawling with vermin and choked down rotten food, but they were an enterprising lot. They formed an orchestra, gave lectures, held classes and staged entertainments. Jones fashioned a Ouija board from scrap, and using an inverted glass as a planchette, began giving mock readings for his fellow captives—the inspiration for his escape plot.



THE CONFIDENCE MEN  
By Margalit Fox  
(Random House, 329 pages, \$28)

“The Confidence Men” is essentially a shaggy-dog thriller, so a tick-tock of their intricate scam with its twists and turns and near-disasters would cheat the reader. But it won’t spoil anything to report that their scheme involved a half-dozen spirits “summoned” by Jones surreptitiously manipulating the board, the chief of whom was “the Spook.” There was also a fiendishly complicated mind-reading act based on a memorized system of word clues relayed by the stooge to the sham mentalist. And a code using Welsh words to fool the Turkish censors while communicating with family back in Britain. Plus “trance-talking”—when the Ouija board was unavailable—not to mention the “Telechronistic Ray,” the “Four Cardinal Point Receiver,” a staged double hanging, and six months of feigned madness in a Turkish hospital.

All of this was in service of Jones and Hill’s long con—persuading Kiazim and the Pimple that the Spook could lead them to a treasure worth millions buried near Yozgat by a rich Armenian before he was slaughtered in the genocide. Speaking through the supposedly blind Jones, the imperious Spook manipulated the commandant and his flunky so that they eagerly facilitated the wily prisoners’ lurch for freedom.

In counterpoint to the lunacy, Ms. Fox details the carnage suffered by the British and Empire forces in what was essentially a sideshow theater of battle against the Turks across the Ottoman Empire during World War I. In the siege of Küt-al-Amāra alone, the British counted about 23,000 casualties in repeated vain attempts to relieve the encircled, starving garrison. During his post-Yozgat stint as a hospitalized “mental case,” Hill was reduced to a bearded wraith weighing less than 100 pounds—so weak that he could hardly hold the Bible he read incessantly as part of his act as a holy madman.

The problem with “The Confidence Men” is that the core narrative, complicated as it is, could comfortably be told in half of Ms. Fox’s 238 pages. She deals with this by quoting big blocks of text from Jones’s memoir “The Road to En-dor” (1919), Hill’s posthumous “The Spook and the Commandant” (1975) and accounts published by other prisoners. And she thumbs in potted histories of the Ouija board, performance magic, religious awakenings and cultism, among other topics. There’s a taxonomy of confidence games, too. Impatient readers may find themselves riffling through these pages to get back to the main event.

Miraculously, as it were, Jones and Hill pulled off their caper, returned home, wrote their ghost stories and lived relatively happily ever after. “What aided the mediums most,” the author writes, “were the times. . . . The period saw the resurgence of the Victorian ardor for spiritualism, a movement, itself founded in fakery, that has been called ‘conjuring in disguise.’ It was a time when cutting-edge technologies—the telephone, the phonograph, the radio—“were making disembodied voices audible to an enchanted but largely uncomprehending public. . . . And it was a time of sustained, widespread social upheaval, when many stood ready to grasp at whatever straw might offer succor.”

Toward the end of her book, Ms. Fox devotes a chapter to recapitulating the elements of successful cons and hoaxes. Reading it, I was momentarily reminded by the notion that “The Confidence Men” itself was an audacious meta-hoax—a scam book about a fictitious scam. So I googled Jones and Hill, found their entries—and satisfied myself that it was a just a good yarn. No fooling.

Mr. Kosner was the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.  
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