

**Commander Carlyon Wilfroy Bellairs (R.N.)**  
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***Bellairs, the Naval Commander***

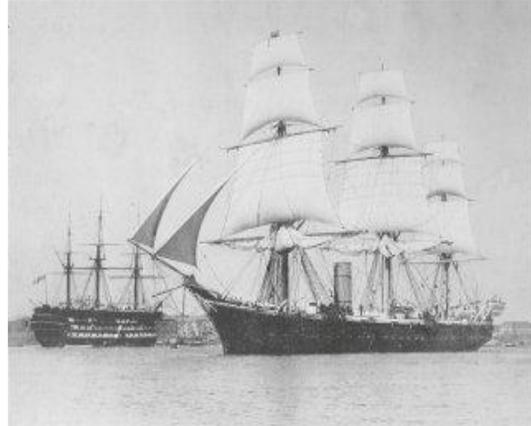
Carlyon Wilfroy Bellairs was born March 15<sup>th</sup> 1871, the third son of Lieutenant General Sir William Bellairs (d. 1913) and Blanche St-John Moschzisker. His father, Sir William Bellairs was a career soldier; much-decorated and knighted for distinguished military service overseas. Although we know little about Sir William, he was certainly a man proud of his son's work. Several letters from Sir William enthusiastically praised his son as "adding to the illustrious Bellairs name". The opinion of his father meant a lot to the young Bellairs, as he retained these letters in his personal files throughout his life.



Commander Bellairs Parents

Bellairs was educated as a naval cadet, first at school, then in the navy. On January 15th, 1884 (at age 13) he boarded the H.M.S. Britannia. Bellairs proved himself to be an able seaman. He rose quickly through the ranks to Lieutenant (1888) and Commander. He invented several improvements on

existing naval devices, which were subsequently adopted by the navy.



HMS Active (1897) [www.battleshipscruisers.co.uk](http://www.battleshipscruisers.co.uk)

While in command of the HMS Active (pictured above), Bellairs recorded his first visit to Barbados; arriving in port at 10:30 in the morning of March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1890. There are no records of Bellairs' personal opinion of the island at this time, but we can only assume he was impressed, as he would later chose to settle on the island with his wife.

***Bellairs, the Journalist and Politician***

Commander Bellairs retired from the Navy in 1902, to pursue a second career in journalism and politics. Many years later Bellairs continued to recount the exploits of his naval years fondly... "I may have forgotten some of my navigation and seamanship, still I have an old affection for the sea service, and I know what the comradeship of the sea service is like. They are the best comrades in the world." Bellairs continued to follow the events of the Navy during his journalistic years, and

it featured as a prominent topic in his political life.

Bellairs entered politics as Liberal MP for Kings' Lynn in 1906. He was in his element as a parliamentarian in pre-war Britain, penning many scathing articles on Britain's unpreparedness for an upcoming war with Germany or France and trying to push Britain to strengthen her neglected Navy. Perhaps the lack of action from his political party caused Bellairs to lose faith in the Liberals, because in 1909 he defected to the Conservative party.



Bellairs during his early years as a member of parliament. [Image: Lafayette].

He was voted best dressed by his peers, a newspaper article from the time said, "Commander Bellairs remains one of the most striking personalities. Tall, with iron grey hair, beautifully brushed, he wears a monocle with distinction, and what is more, apparently with comfort, and he talks in an attractive voice, with a suggestion of a languid drawl in it. But he can be incisive too."

In 1910, Bellairs took a break from political life to nurture a new relationship with Charlotte Pierson. Charlotte was an American from a

military background like C.W. Bellairs, daughter of the late Colonel H.L. Pierson of Laurence, Long Island. Perhaps this mutual understanding of military life helped the two live harmoniously.

During the time between their marriage (July 8<sup>th</sup>, 1911) and Bellairs' next stint in parliament, the couple spent several years as members of the Lansdowne club in Barbados. The Bellairs' continued visits to the Caribbean island showed the appreciation they shared for the island.



Commander Bellairs and his wife Charlotte.

In 1913, Bellairs returned to politics. He served as a member on the London County Council until 1915, when the next parliamentary elections were held. At this point, Bellairs was elected to represent the Maidstone Borough for the Conservative Unionist Party. During these years before and during WWI, Bellairs' past experience as a naval officer was once again a great asset to his political and journalistic career. At the end of WWI, Bellairs was elected MP for Kent (Unionist Party), and represented this constituency until his retirement in 1931, although in 1922 he switched

back to the Conservative Party when the Unionists disbanded.

During his remaining time in parliament, Bellairs often lectured to senior officers at the Royal Navy College and was president of the Poetry Society. He received several honours. These included the Silver Medal, from the Society of the Arts, and the offer of a baronetcy in 1927 (which he respectfully declined).

### ***Bellairs, Promoter of Human Rights***

During his later years in parliament as a Conservative, Bellairs spoke out strongly on many human rights issues, which ironically would have branded him a progressive liberal by modern standards. During 1918, Bellairs expressed his adamant support for the Woman's Suffrage Bill (he referred to this as the Woman's Emancipation Bill), citing how bravely women had stepped up during the First World War to support the country. In one article, he wrote admiringly, "Women are doing much themselves to shake men out of apathy into cooperative effort, so as to build a better world and a better Commonwealth." After the Suffrage Bill was passed, Bellairs continued to actively support women's rights in Britain and abroad, and would eventually bequeath his considerable estate to a women's educational institution.

He detested slavery and denounced the purchase of timber by the British Empire from the Soviet Union, where prisoners of war and peasants (driven into slavery through excessive taxes) were used to cut and process the lumber. He wrote "...the timber from Soviet Russia is red with the blood and

soaked with the tears of an unhappy, oppressed people in the shackles of slavery".

Bellairs also anticipated the strife caused by Jewish settlements in the Middle East. For example, he commented venomously on what he viewed as an imminent war promoted in Britain's old Palestine mandate by the failure of the British and Americans to ensure equal rights to both Palestinians and Jews. He wrote, "There is no democracy or liberty about it but just frank blackmail."

Bellairs spoke strongly against organized religion, an uncommon thing for a political figure at the time. For example, he repeatedly criticized the superfluous wealth amassed by the Pope and clergymen at the expense of their flock. Of this, he wrote, "The religion of materialism is the only one really suited to man".



Commander Carlyon Bellairs (1922) during his prosperous political years. [Image: Bassano, National Portrait Gallery, London].

Bellairs also felt that the education system at that time was not up to par, and wrote, "Education in its present stages, both at home and abroad, has disappointed us all."

He was also in favour of divorce, when the situation warranted it. He felt that divorce shouldn't be such a taboo in society, and that it could be better for the parents as well as the children. He wrote, ...“Separation indeed is a duty to themselves as well as the general wellbeing. To be with quarrelling parents is a most unfavorable environment for children.”

Although Bellairs retired prior to World War II, he continued to follow the military news closely. He was particularly disturbed by the concept of nuclear weapons, and their use in a civilian setting. In his words, “It was a ghastly mistake to use atom bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even if we allow that the war was not already won by the operation, there should have been a prior attempt to make the Japanese understand the situation...” Ever the optimist, he later predicted that the existence of nuclear technology would both put an end to superfluous wars between nations, and provide cheap electricity to the poor.

### ***Bellairs, in Retirement***

Bellairs and his wife bought a 5-acre property on the oceanfront in Barbados in 1936. They promptly built a house on the property and moved there permanently in 1938. This residence, known as Seabourne House, remains on the Bellairs Research Institute property today. However, there was a considerable difference between the property donated by Bellairs, and the Bellairs Research Institute as it exists today. In 1951, when Bellairs first contacted the University, his estate consisted of Seabourne House, three smaller houses, and several small out-

buildings. There were also crops of sugar cane, cassava, bananas, guavas, limes, coconuts, and a few head of poultry and dairy cows. Today, the Bellairs Research Institute lands are considerably smaller, following sale of some land to a neighbouring resort (The Coral Reef Club). Although Seabourne House still stands, other structures on the property were replaced by dormitories and research facilities. There is now little evidence of the crops and livestock once present on this property although coconuts are still collected from the coconut trees.



Seabourne House seen from the beach (1962) [Image: The McGill Archives].

Unfortunately, only a year after the happily married couple moved into Seabourne House, Charlotte passed away (1939). Bellairs chose to stay in the home they built together for the remainder of his life. Although he often wrote to England, and continued an interest in military events, both in England and overseas, there are no records of him returning to his homeland.

### ***The Bequest of the Bellairs' Estate***

In 1951, Bellairs began his quest to bequeath his property to a women's college as a memorial to his wife.

Initially, it was his desire to donate the property to Wellesley College of Boston, a women's liberal arts college. It was his idea to have the property used as a health and rest resort for staff, to help build relations between the college and the West Indies.



Bellairs in his later years

In 1951, Bellairs came across the "Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences" (otherwise known as the report of the Massey Commission), and became enamored with the idea of promoting Canadian culture. He almost immediately contacted the Right Honourable Charles Vincent Massey (the Governor General of Canada at the time), and requested that Mr. Massey direct him towards a suitable women's college in Canada to receive his property. Mr. Massey recommended that Bellairs consider the Royal Victoria College for Women in Montreal. At the time, this was the women's College of McGill University. Bellairs was enthusiastic about the idea, and immediately contacted the then Principal of McGill University, James F. Cyril. Through a series of letters, it was eventually decided that Bellairs would donate his property to the Royal Victoria College for women, to serve all

of the functions and conditions he had originally intended for Wellesley College. He also bequeathed his considerable collection of personal manuscripts, books, and political writings to the Royal Victoria College, along with a stipend of 400£ for a young female student to build her future career on the information he had collected over his lifetime. In 1954, James F. Cyril traveled down to Barbados and officially opened the Bellairs Research Institute. Happily, Bellairs lived long enough to see the creation of the educational memorial he made to the memory of his wife Charlotte. He died in 1955.



The elderly Bellairs, at Seaborne house (seated back right)

### ***Bellairs' Legacy***

Bellairs' accomplishments were many, throughout a long and eventful life. In the British Navy, he contributed naval inventions and books of military strategy. As politician and journalist, he was a strong human rights advocate. A dedicated husband, and educational philanthropist, he donated his property as a tribute to his wife Charlotte, for the cause of education in Canada. Several generations of researchers and students have now benefited from this bequest. Bellairs was, in every sense, an exemplary model of "Mastery for Service."

## *Authors' Comments*



Professor Danielle J. Donnelly is the McGill Director of the Barbados Interdisciplinary Tropical Studies (BITS) program. This is a joint activity between McGill University and The University of the West Indies (UWI). The program was initiated in 2009. “As students and staff arrived at Bellairs Research Institute, they had no idea who Bellairs was, and there were few in Barbados who could contribute much information about the original owner of this property”.

In 2009, Prof. Donnelly sent undergraduate student Ms. Christie Lovat on a mission to the McGill Library’s Rare Books and Special Collections (RBSC) to see what could be found of Bellair’s papers. There were dozens of cardboard boxes of jumbled writings. By luck, and with great excitement, Christie found Bellairs’ will! Prof. Donnelly was fascinated to learn that Bellairs had left £400 sterling to have his papers organized after his death (by a female library student!) While his papers had been transferred to Montreal, they had never been sorted. Much of this material was mildewed, and some had been discarded over the years. The tropics had not been good for this paper collection! Nevertheless, Christie kept exploring and a picture of Bellair’s life began to emerge. Profs Donnelly and Virr (Head and Curator of Manuscripts, RBSC) requested that the McGill Principal of the time (Heather Monroe Blum) support a female summer student to put the collection in order, with Prof. Virr to supervise. This allowance was quickly granted. Once this treasure trove was catalogued, exploration of these papers was greatly facilitated. Ms. Vijayeta Patel, BITS

assistant, has helped to discover more information and pictures from the Bellairs’ archive.

## *Bellairs Research Institute*

The Bellairs Research Institute has seen considerable research and teaching since this property was donated to the Royal Victoria College of Women in the 1950s. Every year, groups of students occupy the residences built in the 1960s to replace the various outbuildings on the property. Visiting researchers and professors live at Seaborne House; one apartment upstairs and the main house, with accommodation for about six, downstairs. More are accommodated upstairs of the Brace Building, rebuilt in 2008, with a library, offices, and two large classrooms.

For over 20 years, groups of 5 – 25 students in the Barbados Fall Study Semester (BFSS) have enjoyed the campus on the beach every fall. For the past 7 years, another cohort of up to 20 students in the BITS program have joined UWI students for a summer of project work and experiential studies. Every winter for many years, McGill and international mathematicians have congregated at the Bellairs Research Institute for week-long workshops. Geography, Biology, and other departments at McGill run annual workshops of varying duration.

Bellairs sincerely felt that students educated in the temperate world could vastly benefit from exposure to the tropics. He would have enjoyed the knowledge that so many students have benefited, and continue to benefit, from his wonderful gift. This campus is a fitting tribute indeed to his much loved wife, Charlotte Bellairs!