

## Commander Carlyon Wilfroy Bellairs (R.N.) Christie Lovat & Danielle J. Donnelly

### *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 Emily Craven Gibbons. 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 Williams 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.

Bellairs was educated as a naval cadet, first at school, then in 1884 (at age of 13) aboard the H.M.S. Britannia. Bellairs proved himself to be an able seaman. He rose quickly through the ranks to Commander and invented several improvements on existing naval devices, which were subsequently adopted by the naval service.



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

While in command of the HMS Active, 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's personal opinion of the island at this time, but we can only assume he was impressed, as he would later chose to retire to the island with his wife.

### *Bellairs, the Journalist and Politician*

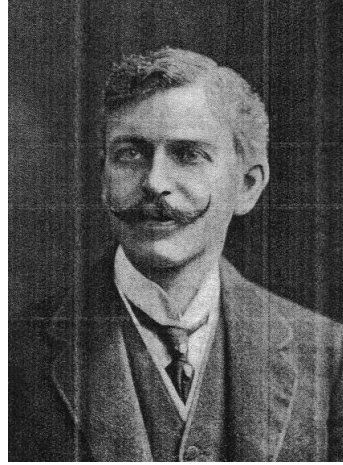
Commander Bellairs retired from the Navy in 1902, to pursue a second career in journalism and politics. Many years later Bellairs continued to recount the exploits of his naval years fondly... "I may have forgotten some of my navigation and seamanship, still I have an old affection for the sea service, 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's 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.

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, as they wed in 1911 and were married happily until Charlotte's death in 1939. During the time between their marriage and Bellairs's 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 had for the island.

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

### ***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 or 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 also 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".

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.



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

### ***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 couple moved into Seabourne House, Charlotte passed away. 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's 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. However, 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 enamoured 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. He died in 1955.

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, for the cause of women's education in Canada. Bellairs was, in every sense, an exemplary model of "Mastery for Service."