

# **‘Bright chaps for hush-hush jobs’: masculinity, class and civilians in uniform at Bletchley Park**

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**‘Bright chaps for hush-hush jobs’: masculinity, class and civilians in  
uniform at Bletchley Park**

Christopher Smith

Bletchley Park, the headquarters of Britain’s cryptanalysis bureau during the Second World War, has become an increasingly significant landmark in the British cultural memory of the war. Senior Bletchley figures have been the subject of biographies, newspaper coverage, popular histories, television documentaries and, in the case of the now famous Alan Turing, even major motion pictures. The result is that the image typically presented of the agency is highly particular; an institution characterised by eccentric geniuses, who muddled their way to victory: the 2014 film, *The Imitation Game*, being a prime example.<sup>1</sup> As Christopher Moran notes, the establishment’s ‘gifted practitioners have become a shorthand term for community, triumph over adversity, even the idea of Britishness itself.’<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this was a view shared by intelligence officials themselves.<sup>3</sup> The art of cipher cracking was regarded as an intellectual puzzle that required a lateral approach. In popular renditions of the Bletchley Park story, the best cryptanalysts and analysts were scholars, prominently specialists in languages and mathematics, crossword experts, chess players and others with trained minds, and principally male.

As both popular and academic historians have shown, this is a misleading narrative. First, Bletchley Park was merely the headquarters and largest of several stations and offices of the Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS). The focus on Bletchley Park alone has been a distorting factor which has side-lined the contributions of those agency workers employed in satellite stations and partner organisations – not least the Y Service, which was tasked with intercepting and triangulating the origins of wireless traffic. Second, GC&CS employed over 10,000 individuals by December 1944, approximately three quarters of whom were women and the experiences of female staff have increasingly attracted scholarly interest in recent years.<sup>4</sup> Third, historians, particularly of science and technology, have persuasively challenged the idea that the agency succeeded because of the efforts of a few key intellectual figures. Instead they have pointed towards the development of managerial and industrial processes in cryptanalysis and information management in building GC&CS’s success.<sup>5</sup>

Significant though all of these contributions have been in building a more complete understanding of this vitally important wartime intelligence enterprise, little attention has been given to the processes which led to the emergence of the popular, and indeed internal wartime, view that Bletchley Park succeeded because of the efforts of a corps of ingenious eccentrics. This was because those individuals engaged at the sharp end of wartime cryptanalysis and intelligence analysis were convinced that brains trumped a sophisticated grounding in the nuances of practical military matters. As the eminent historian and wartime intelligence officer (later Sir) F. Harry Hinsley noted, while summarising the skills required in the production of naval intelligence, ‘an academic exercise which, like the elucidation of a Latin text or the wrestling of deductions from the Domesday Book, called more for an immersion in detail than for experience at sea.’<sup>6</sup> In order to understand the basis for this view, qualified though it has been by historians such as Jon Agar,<sup>7</sup> it is necessary to turn to the wider cultural influences, particularly that of dominant wartime ideals of masculinity and those of Britain’s intelligence community, on the development of the agency’s internal wartime culture. This culture, as the chapter will argue, was heavily coloured by internal notions of masculinity and the ideal man for the job of intelligence work.

From its origins in the First World War, GC&CS developed its own peculiar hierarchy of masculinity which did indeed highlight many of the features which have so captured the popular imagination – which was both derived from wider British understandings of masculine behaviour yet apart from it. Masculinity in wartime Britain, as Sonya Rose has argued, emphasised heroic military manliness, though tempered in opposition to the brutal aspects of Nazi masculinity.<sup>8</sup> Specifically middle-class configurations of manliness were built around ideas of patriotism, service and gentlemanly chivalry, but not necessarily intellectualism. The ideal man at Bletchley, however, was rather different. He was, first and foremost, a gentleman scholar to whom traditional notions of formal rank were only peripherally important. Wartime military masculinity, with its reverence of uniform, drill and violent displays of masculinity were also subordinated, despite a wartime influx of regular military personnel into the agency.

Importantly, some of Bletchley’s men were, for administrative ease or as a result of recruitment strategies, nominally members of the armed forces. However, the distinction between civilian and service personnel is both complex and misleading. Most of those men in uniform were not career military men, but ‘civilians in uniform’, rarely expected to conform to military etiquette – something the organisation itself was reluctant to enforce. Notwithstanding their presence at Bletchley Park as uniformed personnel, the internal culture of GC&CS,

despite its military function, was hybrid; part military and part civilian. The tropes of masculinity, associated with servicemen in wider British wartime culture, rarely applied to these individuals in full – many of whom were distinctly intellectual and thoroughly middle class.

This chapter will primarily draw upon GC&CS's administrative records and veteran accounts to cast light on the variety of work, wartime experiences and the construction of masculinities within this highly unusual institution. First it will explore the development of the professional British intelligence community from the late Victorian and Edwardian periods and consider how the agency, founded in 1919, located itself in this world. Second, it will explore recruitment processes and the type of man (and occasionally woman) it sought for its most celebrated roles – cryptanalysts who broke ciphers, and linguists who translated and analysed intelligence. Third, it will explore challenges to these notions, as wartime pressures forced increased diversity in recruitment strategies and policies, which brought in a wider variety of men and women into this secret world to perform a range of different roles. That said, as a result of limited interest from historians and relatively sparse archival evidence related to those workers occupying lower grade positions, the central subjects of this chapter are those men recruited as cryptanalysts and intelligence officers. Ultimately, the chapter shows that Bletchley Park occupied a liminal space between overt forms of military service and civilian contributions to the war effort on the Home Front and that this facilitated the development of an internal hegemonic masculinity unique to the organisation.

### **‘These men knew the type required’: masculinity and espionage, 1909-1939**

GC&CS was formed on 1 November 1919, the third and final of Britain's major intelligence agencies. The other two, the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, better known as MI6) and the Security Service (also known as MI5), had been founded a decade earlier in 1909. It was in this ten-year period that British intelligence efforts were centralised, institutionalised and professionalised.

Late Victorian and Edwardian notions of masculine virtue, particularly as they pertained to the gentlemanly classes, formed the ideal for early recruitment of agents and intelligence officers. Such an individual, among other characteristics, was well bred, socially connected, patriotic, militaristic and a proficient sportsman. He was also an amateur and dilettante, distinct from the working and lower middle-class professional, capable of skilfully turning his hand towards a wide range of interests and pursuits.<sup>9</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century, the

British intelligence community was built around highly developed social networks which, as John Fisher notes, were bound together by social class, family ties, education and, on occasion, military service.<sup>10</sup> Espionage was not seen as a vocation conducted by professionals, but a form of dangerous service which the right sort of patriotic gentleman simply adopted. As the British agent George Alexander Hill noted in his memoirs, 'A spy carries his life in his hands. His existence is one of hazard, joyous or the contrary. Spies in the British service have commonly taken up their dangerous duty out of sheer love of adventure.'<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it was a privileged upbringing which provided the best preparation and Hill was dismissive of formal professional instruction. He noted that 'If I had gone to a special school for years, studied espionage as a profession, I could not have had a better training than life gave me in my early days.'<sup>12</sup> This was not entirely snobbery and his upbringing certainly came in handy – Hill had been educated by French and German governesses and, as a result, had a mastery of a variety of languages from an early age.<sup>13</sup>

Unsurprisingly then, from the outset, MI5 and MI6, formed together as the Secret Service Bureau in 1909, had a particular type of man in mind when it came to recruitment. An agent required a stiff upper lip; he needed to be calm in the face of danger and crisis; he needed to be socially well connected; though intelligence and academic achievement were certainly not frowned upon, ability on the playing field was important; military or police experience was prized; and he needed to be a gentleman. These were traits which showed remarkable continuity and endured for years. As John Cairncross, a veteran of two British intelligence services (and also a Soviet mole) in the 1940s noted, in a letter to the novelist Graham Greene in 1991, '[t]he MI5 outfit has always struck me as an upper class specifically English outfit.'<sup>14</sup>

When GC&CS was formed in 1919, it shared significant cultural DNA with the wider intelligence community and many of the same idealised masculine traits were equally prized by the new institution. By 1939 with around three quarters of scholarships awarded to public school products, Oxford and Cambridge were still unquestionably the most socially exclusive of Britain's universities, and they constituted the primary source of the agency's recruitment.<sup>15</sup> GC&CS's association with Cambridge dated from the First World War. Prior to the formation of the organisation, Britain's military cryptanalytic work had been performed by bureaus in the Admiralty (Room 40) and the War Office (MI1b). Significantly, Room 40 was founded by the scientist Sir James Alfred Ewing. Ewing had been appointed Professor of Mechanics and Applied Mathematics at Cambridge in 1890 where he remained until taking up his Admiralty post in 1903. When the First World War required the rapid construction of a first-rate

cryptanalytic service, Ewing utilised his contacts at Cambridge to find bright young men with an aptitude for languages.<sup>16</sup>

GC&CS's central mission, according to its first head, Commander Alastair Denniston writing in 1944, was twofold. First, it was overtly tasked with ensuring the security of the communications traffic of the British state. The second and covert responsibility was to intercept and analyse the traffic of foreign powers.<sup>17</sup> The rise of the Soviet Union ensured that the activities of the Kremlin were at the forefront of the cryptanalysts' attentions.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, the fall of Germany from great power status, the sense of complacency this security brought with it, and the economic turmoil of the inter-war period, ensured that GC&CS was initially awarded only limited funds and resources and suffered during wider government retrenchment in 1921.<sup>19</sup> The result was a small team, with relatively few new arrivals until the late 1930s. By that time it had become increasingly clear that under Adolf Hitler, Germany was resurgent, militarily aggressive and posed a clear threat to British interests. As such, Britain's cryptanalysis service was founded with only 53 employees, half of whom were women employed in clerical and secretarial roles, and even after a substantial recruitment drive in the run-up to the Second World War, the agency still only began the conflict with approximately 200 staff members.<sup>20</sup>

The core of the workforce, the upper echelons in particular, were individuals who had been involved in cryptanalysis and intelligence since the First World War. As such, their work in cryptanalysis predated GC&CS itself. These were individuals like Commander Alastair Denniston, the head of the organisation, who had latterly been the chief of the Admiralty's cryptanalytic section during the First World War. Senior members of his team included his deputy, a career Naval officer called Commander Edward Travis, his senior cryptanalyst and noted Cambridge classicist Dillwyn Knox, and chief administrator Nigel de Grey (who cracked the infamous 1917 Zimmerman telegram.<sup>21</sup>) These three men were veterans of Room 40 during the First World War and proven cryptanalysts. Similarly, senior figures, who had served in MI1b, such as John Tiltman, had come to occupy high-ranking positions within the new intelligence institution and remained in place until the Second World War.<sup>22</sup> Some of their colleagues from the Great War had, however, returned to their lives in academia where they were able to act as talent spotters in the event of another war. 'These men', according to Denniston, 'knew the type required.'<sup>23</sup>

This channel of recruitment became the standard during the inter-war period and select university officials were asked to draw up short, exclusive lists of the right 'type' of 'man',

who might be willing to serve his country. In 1932 Denniston contacted Mr C. E. D. Peters of Oxford University, asking him to look out for potential recruits, and added, 'In the last war you may remember that 40 O[ld]. B[uilding]. was the Admiralty Cryptographic Bureau and this Bureau was recruited almost entirely from the Universities.'<sup>24</sup> In 1935, as tensions between Italy and Britain were growing over the question of Abyssinia, Denniston wrote to Peters once again.

In the past years you have been of very great assistance to us in producing candidates for our unusual work. Therefore I am writing to tell you that in the event of Anglo-Italian relations becoming somewhat strained I might have to apply to you to obtain trustworthy men with a thorough knowledge of Italian for translation and intelligence work.<sup>25</sup>

A few days later, Denniston followed up his letter with a further note, stating: 'During the war of 1914-18 a good many dons in residence who thought they could be spared did offer for this type of work'.<sup>26</sup>

By 1938 this system had further evolved and taster training courses were delivered at Oxbridge colleges. The graduates of those courses acted, once they had been accepted into the organisation, as further conduits for recruitment of academics and students.<sup>27</sup> One of the most successful of these recruits-turned-recruiter was Gordon Welchman. A mathematician at Sidney Sussex, Cambridge, Welchman began earmarking his own students, several of whom, including the famous cryptanalysts Joan Clarke and John Herivel, would eventually join him at Bletchley Park.<sup>28</sup> The result of all of this was that cryptanalysis, translation and interpretation duties was primarily conducted by bright young men (and a few women), drawn from Britain's elite universities.

Graduates from other universities do not appear to have been much considered at all during the inter-war years; certainly correspondence between Denniston and the universities was primarily limited to Oxford and Cambridge throughout the 1930s.<sup>29</sup> On occasion, Denniston did write to contacts at the University of London. However, as he confided to a Foreign Office colleague in 1938, he was reluctant to 'inform London University of the vacancies as it is always difficult to get in touch with them for these positions of a delicate nature, and at the last interview they supplied three or four candidates whose qualifications were quite unsatisfactory.'<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in the same letter, Denniston made it clear that female

candidates were, by and large, to be avoided. He had not contacted the women's Oxbridge colleges for one post because GC&CS already had a good internal female candidate – one female applicant was evidently more than sufficient.

So, besides being well-educated, what type of man were the recruiters looking for? First, he was required to be bright. The preferred candidates not only had to be Oxbridge graduates, but particular emphasis was placed on attracting those with First-class degrees – considered a guarantor of sufficient powers of intellect. Although GC&CS was increasingly turning towards mathematics, the precise academic expertise mattered less and it continued to place a great deal of stock in the tried and tested belief that the literary disciplines produced quality officers. As Denniston would note, 'an individual with a taste for modern languages would be a suitable man for us. It is true that a man with a mathematical mind is probably the most suitable, but we have several distinguished classicists who are among our most able members.'<sup>31</sup> Second, the man had to be both young and of strong character. Individuals prone to 'nerve weakness', men who lacked the quintessential British 'stiff upper lip' of popular imagination, were disqualified from consideration.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, older men were also out of the running; one applicant in 1937, aged 33, was deemed 'too old'.<sup>33</sup> Though experience showed that young men were deemed more likely to crack under the strain of the work, older individuals were thought more problematic. They were deemed to be too rigid and insufficiently capable of learning the new skills required for the role.<sup>34</sup> Third, as noted above, connections and a nod from an individual already inside the growing network of contacts, either as a trusted recruiter or practitioner, was important. In addition to ensuring that candidates were of sufficient aptitude, recruitment based on elite education was also a mechanism to acquiring 'trustworthy men'.<sup>35</sup> Possession of the 'right' school and university tie was an indicator that the recipient had been inculcated in gentlemanly values and, as a result, was worthy of trust.

### **'Not being at the front was somehow dishonourable': hegemonic masculinity and wartime Bletchley Park**

These practices developed over the course of GC&CS's history and continued into the Second World War. When describing the precise nature of the wartime recruitment process, Peter Calvocoressi, a senior Bletchley Park officer and later respected jurist, historian and publisher, revealed in 1980 that the institution was heavily informed by upper-middle-class cultural practices, environments, and attitudes towards social class. Recruiters 'made forays into



[public] schools and colleges, boardrooms and clubs. They put questions that were veiled and yet understood. They could not say precisely what they were looking for, but between friends and over a glass of sherry enough would be conveyed: bright chaps for hush-hush jobs.’ Of course, at least initially, the ‘old-girls’ network was less prized.<sup>36</sup> Calvocoressi, like the recruiters, reflected the belief that self-discipline, public service, and duty were all instilled into members of the upper-middle-classes through education and upbringing.<sup>37</sup> Members of that world could surely be trusted. Indeed, even in 1980, Calvocoressi still argued that it was this class factor which ensured the maintenance of the secrecy surrounding Bletchley Park until 1974.<sup>38</sup> A similar attitude was taken when it came to the appointment of some managers, when, on occasion, the academics occupying such positions proved unequal to the task. In such instances, GC&CS turned to the world of business. For instance, Sir Eric Jones, who would become the Director General of the Government Communications Headquarters (Britain’s post-war cryptanalysis organisation) from 1952 to 1960, had been an executive at a textile factory before the war. Following a period of service in the Air Ministry, he was appointed into a middle management role at Bletchley Park precisely because of his abilities as a manager.<sup>39</sup>

Though there were vastly increased demands for well-educated young men in wartime, (such men were sought after by a whole host of agencies, industries and military services, not least the other intelligence agencies), GC&CS’s recruit policies for cryptanalysts and translators remained largely unchanged. When trawling for three Temporary Senior Assistants, a senior civil service rank remunerated with a generous £600 per annum, to translate Italian decrypts, a set of specific qualifications were outlined. Applicants required ‘First-class Italian and first-class intelligence. Candidates are required for positions of responsibility and for work which requires leadership, accuracy and speed.’ No doubt given the seniority of the position and the required leadership element, the recruiters were instructed to look for ‘men (if possible)’, but only those aged between 25 and 40; the young remained favoured.<sup>40</sup>

Clearly then, certain assumptions surrounding the characteristics which made a good cryptanalyst and intelligence officer had become ingrained. Moreover, they had crystallised into a specific hegemonic masculinity, unique to Bletchley Park. The ideal young man was a patriotic gentleman, trustworthy, from a ‘good’ family, well educated, and, above all, very bright. Those individuals who did not fit this mould were viewed as a potential liability, not just to the success of the work, but to themselves. One veteran, Paul Fetterlein, in an interview with Lindsay Baker for the Imperial War Museum, recalled rumours of individuals, unable to cope with the strain of the work, taking their own lives.

People took it very, very seriously and I know in the newspapers today they say all about the great successes people had and so on and how important that was. But they don't mention those who were failures at it, and there were some people who took it very badly. In fact there were two or three suicides; people who tried to do a code and, you know, and you sort of work week, after week, after week and nothing happened, it can be very depressing. And as I said, there were some people who couldn't take it and committed suicide. [...] They felt that they had failed England in its hour of need.<sup>41</sup>

Interestingly, Fetterlein was explicit in noting that he had never actually known any such individual personally and nor were such matters discussed at Bletchley Park itself. Instead, the rumours circulated in various fashionable London intellectual circles frequented by Bletchley Park's staff during their time off.

While dominant middle-class masculinity of Bletchley Park revolved around scholarly gentlemanliness, wider British hegemonic masculinity placed greater importance and emphasis on other masculine traits. Masculinity was increasingly associated with military service and the soldier hero. Those men out of uniform were, according to Sonya Rose, forced to identify and stress the 'heroic features of their masculinity' in other ways and 'drew upon both a language of military battle and a language of working-class manhood'.<sup>42</sup> From GC&CS's point of view, this created some problems when it came to recruitment. If the performative aspects of wartime British masculinity privileged military heroism, then a government desk job, with little explicit relevance to the war effort clearly could lack appeal. To get around the problem of unwilling, but well qualified, potential recruits, recruitment officials in the Ministry of Labour and National Service were instructed to compel candidates of high quality to attend interviews 'under Defence Regulation 80b if necessary'. Moreover, recruiters were further instructed that 'no submission should be withheld because a candidate does not wish to be considered, provided the qualifications are suitable.'<sup>43</sup>

Another unfortunate side effect was that a number of men found that their masculinity and manliness were open to public question and they, in turn, were subjected to humiliation. These kinds of public shaming of men who did not conform to the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity on display in wartime Britain were, in some respects, reminiscent of the campaigns

launched against civilian men during the First World War, though difficult to quantify in terms of scale.<sup>44</sup> More recent research based on oral history testimony has, however, suggested that rather than enduring external pressure from within their communities to join the armed services, British men on the Home Front during the Second World War were more likely to subject themselves to internalised pressures. This manifested itself in the form of feelings of inadequacy that such men placed on themselves because they felt that they should be doing ‘more’ to fight for King and Country.<sup>45</sup> One solution for such men, who were prevented from entering military service, was to at least create the appearance of military service and to join the Home Guard. Complete with a near identical uniform to that of regular Army personnel (the identifying signifier of Home Guard status being easily removed and reattached as required<sup>46</sup>), civilian men were able to demonstrate what Connell and Messerschmidt describe as ‘complicit masculinity’.<sup>47</sup> That is, they enjoyed the ‘benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance’, which in wartime Britain emphasised active military service. For the middle-class, academically-minded cryptanalysts and codebreakers of Bletchley Park, this was difficult if not impossible to achieve. Many of them, despite being of military age, were not in uniform and though they were engaged in work of clear national importance to the war effort, it was secret in nature. Even though alternative options, such as the Home Guard were available,<sup>48</sup> for some they were not enough. The language and mediums for expressing military masculinity, in describing their work to friends and family outside of work circles, was unavailable.

At Bletchley Park, some men faced overt external pressure to leave the relative safety of the Home Front while others subjected themselves to internal pressure. In terms of the former, Gordon Welchman, the head of a major Bletchley Park section, recounted in his memoir, a case in which a young man under his command ‘received a scathing letter from his old headmaster accusing him of being a disgrace to his school.’ Yet as Welchman explained, internal and external pressures went hand in hand: there was an ‘inevitable feeling that not being at the front was somehow dishonourable’. Despite their ‘exhausting’ and vital job, young men at Bletchley Park ‘longed to play an active part in the fighting.’<sup>49</sup> Such individuals, not only had to face their own sense of unease, but also had to contend with the local community where their presence had not gone unnoticed. One local resident, in a published collection of oral history interview excerpts, remembered pondering whether the new arrivals to the town were ‘skiving’.<sup>50</sup> Bletchley staff were also clearly and acutely aware of local suspicion, as was

recorded in a poem entitled Bumph Palace, 'For six long years we have been there / subject to local scorn and stare.'<sup>51</sup>

In a notable example, Donald Michie, a veteran and later a pioneering figure in the field of artificial intelligence, recalled his own excruciating humiliation in a briefing filled with young women of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) in which he sat 'like an ugly duckling'. The WAAFs, he recalled, 'felt only contempt for an apparently young male in civilian attire. Some of them had lost boyfriends in the RAF, and many had boyfriends still alive but in daily peril.'<sup>52</sup> The painful experience, which he described as a 'white feather' incident, but also appears to be in equal part the internal pressure of imagining what the WAAFs were thinking about him, clearly played on his mind and, some time later, those feelings of inadequacy were externally reinforced by his father. Naturally, Michie had been unable to inform his family what he was doing and all they knew was that he was involved in nondescript war work. So, when, at the St George's Golf Club, his father had been asked how his son was contributing to the war effort 'his mind was unavoidably blank' and, in turn, asked Michie whether he had 'considered active service'. Having been humiliated twice, first by a group of young women and then by his father, Michie asked for a transfer to the North African desert, for which his superior (Colonel Pritchard) gave him a dressing down.

'I have to instruct you to return to duty. You see, Mr Michie, we have a war on our hands. Inconvenient, but unfortunately true. Unless you have further questions, you are free to return at once to your section.' Pause. 'And by the way, I do not expect you to raise such matters again.' Pause. 'Either with me or with anyone else.' Longer pause. 'As for your father, I do not anticipate that he will raise them either.'

On that matter, it transpired that Pritchard was right, as Michie learned years later: his hitherto disappointed father was 'paid a visit' by a military official.<sup>53</sup> The issue of security was, understandably, key. Not only were the men of Bletchley Park, as Pritchard noted, in many cases making their best possible contribution to the war effort, but even if it were desirable for them to change role to one of active military service, that was impossible.<sup>54</sup> In many cases, they simply knew too much and their risk of capture by the enemy was too great. They were stuck at Bletchley whether they liked it or not.

### **‘Galling to regulars’: competing masculinities**

One area in which the general labour shortage provoked by the Second World War did force change in GC&CS’s recruitment practices, which had in other respects been remarkably resilient, was its approach to university recruitment. While a primacy continued to be placed on Oxbridge, Nigel de Grey noted sadly that ‘As national recruiting became more methodical this system tended to clash with the proper authorities. There were also diminishing returns as men and women joined the Services.’ The net had to be widened once national recruitment policies became more ‘methodical’.<sup>55</sup> Though de Grey was not specific on the precise timing of this change, it is a reasonable assumption that he was alluding to the further extension of conscription under the National Service Act (No 2) in December 1941. As a result, recruiters began trawling other universities, the armed forces and the civil service for suitable talent.<sup>56</sup> This, however, came with its own problems as new arrivals brought challenge to the dominant image of masculinity within the agency – particularly regular service personnel.

Though GC&CS had been formed around men who had served in the First World War, many of them as military officers, during the inter-war period and the organisation’s mobilisation during the late 1930s, it had become decidedly civilian in character. As de Grey noted in 1949, ‘Direct contact with Universities, secondary schools, etc. In general this method produced not only the original 60 high-grade people but also considerable numbers afterwards.’<sup>57</sup> Yet, by June 1942, some 37% of GC&CS’s personnel were in military uniform, a figure which would continue to rise over the course of the war.<sup>58</sup> The gender composition also radically changed as women were increasingly employed to conduct auxiliary functions, typically in machine operation and clerical work.<sup>59</sup> However, very few of these (eventually thousands of) women were employed in cryptanalysis and translation – those were, of course, the ‘men’s jobs’. Instead, they were typically placed into these forms of auxiliary ‘women’s work’. In this respect, Bletchley Park clearly conformed to Peggy Inman’s observation (and that of many others since) that comparatively few women were allowed to undertake ‘male’ jobs, despite popular notions to the contrary.<sup>60</sup> In GC&CS, the far greater challenge to gender and the dominant internal configuration of masculinity came from the arrival of other men.

The influx of military personnel first created tensions, particularly surrounding the question of pay. The nub of the problem was that civil servants were largely less well remunerated than their counterparts in the military services. The result was that men conducting identical work could receive radically different pay. In addition, it was also frustrating for regular officers, who had earned their rank and pay, that temporary officers,

individuals parachuted into uniform and into a relatively high rank, were equally well remunerated.<sup>61</sup> The issue of equal pay for equal work continued to plague senior managers throughout the war and was never satisfactorily resolved.<sup>62</sup>

Besides creating administrative problems, the increasingly military character of the agency brought with it cultural conflicts which revolved around the introduction of new, competing masculine ideals, to Bletchley Park. One of the central features of the organisation was that, despite being quasi-military since its conception, it did not for the most part observe military traditions. This issue, which included limited adherence to uniform etiquette, came to a head when an Admiral visited Bletchley and, unable to spot any members of the Women's Royal Naval Service, returned to London thoroughly disgruntled by the lack of discipline on display.<sup>63</sup> This issue of uniform, in the literal sense, also arose in other areas of business, not least mess arrangements. At the outset of the war, it had been usual for GC&CS's military officers to wear their uniforms as and when they pleased and for enlisted men in the ranks to wear them perpetually.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, the donning of uniform by military officers had been actively discouraged because, as noted above, they did the same work as civilians and it was assumed that the construction of artificial differences might result in friction. When a new cafeteria open to all ranks was proposed, the issue of officers being able to eschew uniform, as agency tradition had determined, came to a head. While those in the ranks would be expected to wear their uniforms, officers would not, which provoked 'grounds for resentment'. Ultimately it was proposed that 'it would be good policy' to ensure that military personnel wear their uniform 'the whole time'. The basis for that recommendation was:

It has been stated on many occasions that discipline is not very ridged here, particularly among the Service personnel. I think that is a perfectly correct statement, but we have some odd officers here to say the least of it, many of whom do not behave as officers and therefore cannot fairly expect to be treated as such.<sup>65</sup>

Of course, given that GC&CS emerged from the Admiralty and War Office and had strong connections to each of the Whitehall military service ministries, men in uniform had always been present. However, wartime mobilisation and conscription also ensured that, at times, it was preferable for bureaucratic purposes to formally place an individual into uniform only to immediately then second them to GC&CS.<sup>66</sup> One problem was that enlisted men were also

recruited into cryptanalysis and translation work, making the differences in formal seniority and pay particularly acute. The solution was extraordinarily rapid promotion. Asa Briggs,<sup>67</sup> for example, who joined the army directly from Cambridge University in 1941 as a private soldier and seconded to GC&CS in 1942, was swiftly promoted to the rank of Regimental Sergeant Major – a member of the highest group of non-commissioned officers. In 1945, after he had left Bletchley Park, he described himself being treated as a ‘real RSM’, highlighting the significant distinction between what the rank meant at Bletchley and its very considerable importance in the regular armed forces.<sup>68</sup>

As the example of the visiting Admiral demonstrates, the acquisition of regular military men, who held very different ideas regarding how officers and enlisted men and women should behave to that of the civilians and soldiers in uniform, created tensions. As de Grey explained in 1949, the ‘very low standard of “military” behaviour in a civil institution [was] galling to regulars.’<sup>69</sup> The most pronounced examples of this occurred not within the walls of Bletchley Park itself, but rather just outside them. The rapid expansion of the agency, which numbered around 8,000 at Bletchley Park alone by December 1944, ensured that local billets had swiftly been exhausted. The response to this problem had been the construction of two purpose-build military accommodation camps on the immediate outskirts of the facility. These were operated by the Army and RAF respectively, staffed by regular military personnel uninitiated into the secret work conducted within the walls of the Park, and run under closely observed military rules and rituals.

This clash between the ill-disciplined behaviour of the civilians in uniform who worked for GC&CS and what Paul Fussell memorably described as military ‘chickenshit’ (‘behavior that makes military life worse than it need be: petty harassment of the weak by the strong; open scrimmage for power and authority and prestige; sadism thinly disguised as necessary discipline; a constant “paying off of old scores”; and insistence on the letter rather than the spirit of the ordinances’) was pronounced. To make matters worse, among the key victims of ‘chickenshit’ were ‘the artist, the “so-called intellectual,” the sneerer at athletics, the “smart ass”, the “stuck up,” the foreigner – anyone conceived to be “not our crowd.”’<sup>70</sup> Certainly, the arrival of regular military discipline soon saw Bletchley staff confronted with ‘chickenshit’. In his memoir, James Thirsk, another non-commissioned officer at Bletchley Park, presented the army camp commander, Colonel Fillingham, as a ‘formidable’ and ‘awe-inspiring’ figure. Fillingham is reported to have delighted in berating his ill-disciplined troops for various minor infractions and introduced the dreaded ‘PT’ [Physical Training].<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Asa Briggs fell

foul of a camp Lieutenant because of a failure to correctly fold the blankets on his bedding. The Lieutenant might have later come to regret his military pedantry when he later applied to Briggs' Oxford College.<sup>72</sup>

There were, of course, many hundreds of other men working for GC&CS whose work and contribution to the success of the vast cryptanalytic exercise have, by and large, left little archival trace. Such individuals represent yet another strand of masculinity within the agency, typically drawn from the lower strata of Britain's social class system. These were the mechanics, security staff, gardeners, clerks, technicians and so on. For instance, the fabled machines constructed to aid the deciphering of Axis messages, to collate collected intelligence and communications equipment designed to transport this product to government ministries and across the world to distant military commands, were primarily maintained by men – typically non-commissioned officers from the armed forces.

In all, there were just under 250 such mechanics employed by the agency by September 1944.<sup>73</sup> Yet the archives provide little detail regarding the selection process for these men or the kinds of recruit they acquired. The most obvious conclusion to draw from this is that they were simply seconded. Certainly, this was the case when it came to the approximately 4,000 women from the armed forces stationed at Bletchley and its satellite (usually termed 'out stations') facilities. Many of these women were assigned to work at Bletchley Park because, following their basic training, they declared themselves willing to work on 'special duties'. The process for men, particularly those performing technical work, was rather different.

The clearest account of the selection procedure, by the former RAF electrical engineer Ken McConnell, asserts that the process was far from simple. McConnell had been trained before the war as an electrical engineer, which was classified a reserved occupation, precluding him from conscription. However, following the Dunkirk evacuation, he was permitted to volunteer for the RAF and, having been accepted, he spent two years plying his trade on aircraft. He was then selected to perform secret work and sat an arduous exam.<sup>74</sup> In a short account submitted to the BBC People's War archive, Denis Whelan recalled that most of the crews which maintained specialised cryptanalytic machines were made up of men from the Royal Engineers. As a civil service telephone engineer seconded to the Foreign Office, Whelan's job was to build devices to test those cryptanalytic machines. However, because the machines were temperamental, he and a colleague were assigned as on-call engineers regularly visiting Bletchley Park and its various out stations testing machine faults. Whelan made little reference to his passage into secret work, but did recall that it involved an interview.<sup>75</sup> Finally,



Mr H. L. Swatton, another General Post Office engineer, before being transferred to Bletchley Park, was not only interviewed but subjected to a hands-on test of his technical skill with a variety of equipment.<sup>76</sup>

Even from these few examples, it is clear that the men in the ‘lower’ orders of the organisation were typically highly skilled in their technical fields, but that their route to Bletchley Park involved a fairly rigorous interviewing process which, in some cases even involved a practical element. The fairly easy passage into secret work, which, in the case of at least some cryptanalysts, involved a sounding out over drinks, did not apply to lower graded male staff. Of course, they did not mix in the same circles, they did not possess the appropriate school tie and had not attended the ‘right’ university – they were not ‘gentlemen’.

## **Conclusion**

Over the course of its existence GC&CS developed a unique, internal configuration of masculinity which drew from a variety of sources. These included wider British middle and aristocratic gentlemanly society, the common-room culture imported from Britain’s universities and the archetype of the gentleman spy from the wider intelligence community. In particular, the war saw the development of a distinct type of employee; the soldier in uniform, as individuals from a civilian and often scholarly background were placed into military attire for the duration of the conflict. Over time, however, the men stationed at Bletchley Park, in high status, intellectually-demanding roles such as cryptanalysis and translation, were supplemented by men sourced from the regular armed forces. The majority of these men, particularly those out of military uniform, were clearly distinct from, and were expected to conform to, a different template of masculinity to those outlined by historians such as Sonya Rose in wider British society. Of course, these men were not appointed for their martial ability or trained for such a role. They were, however, required to have a distinctly middle class background complete with an elite education, most typically with university training. This not only ensured that candidates were of a high intellectual calibre – a necessity for many of the agency’s jobs – but also created the illusion that because they were ‘gentlemen’ their discretion and honour were beyond question. This exclusivity was, of course, not always possible particularly in the case of lower tier male staff: skilled ‘professionals’ like technicians were, instead, heavily vetted and subjected to intense interviews and tests prior to appointment.

GC&CS was not always, however, a melting pot of masculinity. Instead, competing ideas took root at different times and the influx of new groups of men disturbed any sense of equilibrium. For instance, the arrival of regular military personnel into a largely civilian organisation led to consternation from both the regulars disturbed by the lack of discipline and the decidedly unmilitary denizens of Bletchley Park suddenly faced with the prospect of uniforms, drill and PT. The fact that many of these individuals were out of uniform, or perceived to be engaged in outwardly unheroic work also presented problems as men, on occasion, felt and were perceived to be failing their masculine military duty at a time of war. Meanwhile, further down the hierarchical rungs, typically obscured in the archives and overshadowed in popular discourse regarding the establishment, were hundreds of men from different socio-economic backgrounds – the ‘professional’ class – and who travelled a markedly different route to arrive at Bletchley Park.

In short, the masculine characteristics desired by GC&CS included those of the professor-turned-codebreaker and hard-headed intelligence professional. The ideal cryptanalyst and translator was an intellectual, but he was also cool-headed and in possession of a stiff-upper-lip; he was a gentleman amateur but also willing to tolerate management in an increasingly professional environment. Popular emphasis on Turing-like caricatures understates the complex matrix of masculine characteristics prized by the agency and the variety of roles it required filling, but it does reflect how the institution viewed its staff and the qualities it valued. As one visiting intelligence officer, Ewen Montagu, recalled being told by a colleague at Bletchley Park, ‘an acrostic brain is better at this game.’<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Imitation Game* (2014), Dir. Morten Tyldum. The Weinstein Company, Film.

<sup>2</sup> C. Moran (2013), *Classified: Secrecy and the State in Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 256.

<sup>3</sup> This image was primarily fostered by memoirists in the 1970s and 1980s. For examples, see: F. W. Winterbotham (1974), *The Ultra Secret: The Inside Story of Operation Ultra, Bletchley Park and Enigma* (London: Orion); P. Calvocoressi (1980), *Top Secret Ultra* (London: Cassell).

<sup>4</sup> A. Burman (2013), *Gendering decryption – decrypting gender: The gender discourse of labour at Bletchley Park 1939–1945* (unpublished MA dissertation, Uppsala University); J. Abbate (2012), *Recoding Gender: Women’s Changing Participation in Computing* (Cambridge,

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MA.: MIT Press), pp. 11-39; C. Smith (2015), *The Hidden History of Bletchley Park: A Social and Organisational History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan); T. Dunlop (2015), *The Bletchley Girls: War, Secrecy, Love and Loss: the Women of Bletchley Park tell their story* (London: Hodder & Stoughton); M. Smith (2015), *The Debs of Bletchley Park and Other Stories* (London: Aurum Press).

<sup>5</sup> J. Agar (2013), *The Government Machine: A Revolutionary History of the Computer* (Cambridge, M.A.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press), pp. 203-209.

<sup>6</sup> F. H. Hinsley (2001), 'BP, Admiralty, and naval Enigma', in F. H. Hinsley and A. Stripp (eds.), *Codebreakers: The Inside Story of Bletchley Park* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> J Agar (2013), *The Government Machine*.

<sup>8</sup> S. Rose (2004), 'Temperate Heroes: Concepts of Masculinity in Second World War Britain', in S. Dudink, K. Hagemann, J. Tosh (eds.), *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 177-195.

<sup>9</sup> For a wider discussion of gentlemanly characteristics see: P. Mason (1993), *The English Gentleman: The Rise and Fall of an Ideal* (London: Pimlico).

<sup>10</sup> J. Fisher (2002), *Gentleman Spies: Intelligence Agents in the British Empire and Beyond* (Stroud: Sutton), p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> G. A. Hill (1932), *Go Spy the Land: Being the Adventures of IK8 of the British Secret Service* (London: Cassell), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Hill, *Go Spy the Land*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> M. Kitchen (2004), 'Hill, George Alexander (1892-1968), intelligence officer', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [accessed: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/67/101067487/>].

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<sup>14</sup> John J. Burns Library, Boston College, Massachusetts, MS1995-03, Box 13, Folder 35, John Cairncross, 'Additiona [sic] note for Graham', undated [likely 5 March 1991].

<sup>15</sup> For Oxbridge's social exclusivity see: R. McKibbin (2000), *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 248-249. For GC&CS's recruitment policies, see Smith, *The Hidden History of Bletchley Park*, pp. 41-50.

<sup>16</sup> C. Andrew (1986), *Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community* (Sevenoaks: Scepter), p. 150.

<sup>17</sup> A. G. Denniston (1986), 'The Government Code & Cypher School Between the Wars' [1944], in C. Andrew (ed.), *Codebreakers and Signals Intelligence* (London: Frank Cass), p. 49. This document first appeared in print in: *Intelligence and National Security*, 1:1 (1986), pp. 48-70.

<sup>18</sup> For details regarding GC&CS's inter-war period activities, see: M. Smith (2001), 'GC&CS and the First Cold War', in M. Smith and R. Erskine (eds), *Action This Day* (London: Bantam), pp. 15-40.

<sup>19</sup> Denniston, 'The Government Code & Cypher School Between the Wars', p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, *The Hidden History of Bletchley Park*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>21</sup> A telegram sent by Arthur Zimmermann, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of the German Empire, in which he attempted to encourage Mexico to invade the United States of America. This was intercepted and read by British cryptanalysts and shared with Washington.

<sup>22</sup> Tiltman replaced Knox as the agency's chief cryptanalyst after the latter's death in 1944.

Smith, *The Hidden History of Bletchley Park*, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Denniston, 'The Government Code & Cypher School Between the Wars', p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> The National Archives (TNA), Kew, HW 72/9, A. G. Denniston to C. E. D. Peters, 26 April 1935.

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- <sup>25</sup> TNA, HW 72/9, A. G. Denniston to C. E. D. Peters, 4 October 1935.
- <sup>26</sup> TNA, HW 72/9, A. G. Denniston to C. E. D. Peters, 7 October 1935.
- <sup>27</sup> Denniston, 'The Government Code & Cypher School Between the Wars', p. 52.
- <sup>28</sup> A. Briggs (2011), *Secret Days: Code-Breaking in Bletchley Park* (London: Front Line), p. 43.
- <sup>29</sup> TNA, HW 72/9, *passim*.
- <sup>30</sup> TNA, HW 72/9, A. G. Denniston to T. J. Wilson, 16 May 1938.
- <sup>31</sup> TNA, HW 72/9, A. G. Denniston to E. A. Cresswell, 25 February 1938.
- <sup>32</sup> TNA, HW 72/9, A. G. Denniston to O. V. Guy, 27 June 1932.
- <sup>33</sup> TNA, HW 72/9, A. G. Denniston to E. A. Cresswell, 1 January 1937.
- <sup>34</sup> TNA, HW 50/50, Memorandum by Nigel de Grey, 17 August, 1949, p. 7.
- <sup>35</sup> TNA, HW 72/9, A. G. Denniston to C. E. D. Peters, 4 October 1935.
- <sup>36</sup> P. Calvocoressi (2011), *Top Secret Ultra* (Cleobury Mortimer: M & M Baldwin), p. 20.
- <sup>37</sup> S. Gunn and R. Bell (2003), *Middle Classes: Their Rise and Sprawl* (London: Phoenix), p. 100.
- <sup>38</sup> Calvocoressi, *Top Secret Ultra*, pp. 23-24.
- <sup>39</sup> Smith, *The Hidden History of Bletchley Park*, pp. 31-32.
- <sup>40</sup> TNA, HW 64/63, 3 Senior Assistants job specification, 19 August 1942.
- <sup>41</sup> Imperial War Museum, Sound Archive, Paul Fetterlein interviewed by Lindsay Baker, 23436, reel 5.
- <sup>42</sup> S. Rose (2004), *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 195.
- <sup>43</sup> TNA, HW 64/73, A. W. Kearn [Ministry of Labour and National Service], Vacancies in the Foreign Office, 29 April 1943.
- <sup>44</sup> Rose, *Which People's War?*, p. 179.

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- <sup>45</sup> J. Pattinson, A. McIvor, and L. Robb (2017), *Men in Reserve: British Civilian Masculinities in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, chapter 3 *passim*.
- <sup>46</sup> P. Summerfield and C. Peniston-Bird (2007), *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and the Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 225.
- <sup>47</sup> R. W. Connell and J. Messerschmidt (2005), 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society*, 19: 6 , p. 832.
- <sup>48</sup> Smith, *The Hidden History of Bletchley Park*, p. 145.
- <sup>49</sup> G. Welchman (2014), *The Hut Six Story: Breaking the Enigma Codes* (Cleobury Mortimer: M & M Baldwin), p. 86.
- <sup>50</sup> G. Blane (1998), 'Outside the Gates', in R. Cook (ed.), *Bletchley Voices: Recollections of Local People* (Stroud: Chalford Oral History), p. 95.
- <sup>51</sup> [Baroness] Bobby Hooper quoted in M. Smith (1998), *Station X: The Code Breakers of Bletchley Park* (London: Channel Four Books), p. i.
- <sup>52</sup> D. Michie (2006), 'Codebreaking and Colossus', in B. J. Copeland (ed.), *Colossus: The Secrets of Bletchley Park's Code-breaking Computers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 224.
- <sup>53</sup> Michie, 'Codebreaking and Colossus', p. 233.
- <sup>54</sup> Welchman, *The Hut Six Story*, p. 86.
- <sup>55</sup> TNA, HW 50/50, Memorandum by Nigel de Grey, 17 August, 1949, p. 4.
- <sup>56</sup> TNA, HW 64/73, [unknown author], M.115, 6 April 1943; TNA, HW 50/50, Memorandum by Nigel de Grey, 17 August, 1949, pp. 4-6.
- <sup>57</sup> TNA, HW 50/50, Memorandum by Nigel de Grey, 17 August, 1949, p. 4.
- <sup>58</sup> TNA, HW 64/70, [Untitled document listing Military / Civilian staff figures and related issues] 23 June 1942.

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<sup>59</sup> For a statistical breakdown of GC&CS's staff see: K. Johnson and J. Gallehawk (2007), *Figuring it out at Bletchley Park: 1939-1945* (Redditch: BookTowerPublishing), pp. 61-65.

<sup>60</sup> P. Inman (1957), *Labour in the Munitions Industries* (London: H.M. Stationery Office), p.

53. See also: P. Summerfield (1984), *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), chapter 7; H. L. Smith (1986), 'The Effect of the War on the Status of Women', in H. L. Smith (ed.), *War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 208-29.

<sup>61</sup> TNA, HW 64/67, Pay for Cryptographers, 13 August 1941.

<sup>62</sup> Smith, *The Hidden History of Bletchley Park*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, *The Debs of Bletchley Park*, p. 90.

<sup>64</sup> Asa Briggs, a non-commissioned officer, however recalled in his memoir that uniform was never a requirement within the walls of Bletchley Park. Briggs, *Secret Days*, p. 107.

<sup>65</sup> TNA, HW 64/70, [Untitled document listing Military / Civilian staff figures and related issues] 23 June 1942.

<sup>66</sup> Welchman, *Hut Six Story*, pp. 190-192

<sup>67</sup> After the war Briggs went on to be a highly distinguished historian and in 1976 was made a life peer.

<sup>68</sup> Briggs, *Secret Days*, p. 140.

<sup>69</sup> TNA, HW 50/50, Memorandum by Nigel de Grey, 17 August, 1949, p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> P. Fussell (1990), *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 80.

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<sup>71</sup> J. Thirsk (2008), *Bletchley Park: An Inmate's Story* (Bromley: Galago), pp. 79-81; Briggs, *Secret Days*, p. 102. Note, however, Briggs became a favourite of the Colonel and was spared much discomfort.

<sup>72</sup> Briggs, *Secret Days*, p. 106.

<sup>73</sup> Johnson and Gallehawk, *Figuring it Out*, p. 93.

<sup>74</sup> K. McConnell, 'My Secret War', *BBC WW2 People's Archives*, a6844106

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/06/a6844106.shtml> (accessed: 22 October 2016).

<sup>75</sup> D. Whelan, 'Denis Whelan – His Association with Bletchley Park', *BBC WW2 People's Archives*, A3019592, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/92/a3019592.shtml> (accessed: 22 October 2016).

<sup>76</sup> Bletchley Park Trust Archive, Other People's Stories, vol. 3, Mr H. L. Swatton, Personal notes and interview transcript, 16 April 2001.

<sup>77</sup> E. Montagu (1979), *Beyond Top Secret U* (London: Corgi), p. 45.