MURDER IN PARADISE

Sir Harry Oakes, the Bahamian Yankee

One Mainer’s path to fortune, knighthood, and murder.

By Ron Soodalter

In early July 1943, the world’s attention was diverted from World War II by a shocking murder. Sir Harry Oakes—Maine native, adventurer, gold prospector, philanthropist, British baronet, and one of the wealthiest men of his time—had been found brutally slain in his bedroom at Westbourne, the mansion on his rambling Bahamas estate. In the investigation that followed, justice would be stymied by police ineptitude and corruption, the indictment and trial of the wrong man, the shadow of the American Mafia, accusations of ritual killing, and the incessant meddling of officials all the way up to the former King of England. Despite the number of possible suspects who stood to benefit from Sir Harry’s death, the quest for his killer was inexplicably terminated. The murder remains one of the modern age’s most fascinating un-
Harry Oakes's life would not seem out of place as the subject of a Jack London novel, although his early years gave no indication of the triumph and tragedy that were to come. He was born to a financially comfortable family in Sangerville, Maine, on December 23, 1874, the third of five children. A decade later, the family moved to Foxcroft to allow Harry and his two brothers to attend the prestigious Foxcroft Academy. After graduating, Harry entered Bowdoin College, where he earned his bachelor's degree. He went on to study medicine at Syracuse for two years before he was bitten by the gold bug. At 22, hearing tales of the fabulous strikes being made in the Klondike, he left medical school for Alaska to pursue a career as a prospector.

He had no doubt of his potential for success. According to Maine folklore, Harry confided to a Bowdoin classmate that he expected to gain a fortune and die a violent death “with his boots on.” Oakes’s youthful prediction, melodramatic though it might have been, would eventually prove accurate on both counts.

In the Yukon, Harry fought to survive not only the extremes of weather—it was not uncommon for temperatures to plunge to 60 degrees below zero—but the violent way of life there. The Klondike during the Gold Rush was the last bastion of the Wild West. Crime was common, and gangsters such as “Soapy” Smith, the notorious “King of the Klondike,” ruled.

Young Harry adapted well to his rough-and-tumble environs, but he made no strikes. Restless, he spent over a decade roaming the world on his obsessive search for riches, prospecting in California, Central America, Australia, New Zealand, and Africa, before returning to North America after hearing gold was being mined in Northern Ontario.

His quest finally paid off in 1912, when he discovered a massive seam of gold beneath Kirkland Lake. This strike would

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prove to be the richest in Canada and the second-richest in the Western Hemisphere, making Harry one of the wealthiest men in the world. His Lake Shore Mines would ultimately net him the staggering sum of $60,000 per day (the equivalent of $720,000 per day in today’s currency).

Harry set about enjoying the good life that so many years of hard work and deprivation had earned him. On a world cruise in 1923, the 48-year-old Oakes met Eunice MacIntyre, a tall, attractive Australian some 25 years his junior, and they soon married. Over the next ten years, the union would produce five children.

Five years later, he moved his growing family to Niagara Falls, Ontario, where he became a Canadian citizen. He built a 35-room mansion, created a private golf course, and purchased one of the most extraordinary cars of his time. With its 12-cylinder engine and red leather seats, the hand-built 1928 Hispano-Suiza H6B “Sedanca de Ville” was large, elegant, and powered with the same engines used by World War I French fighter planes. In 2008, Harry’s very car (see photo, left page) sold at a Bonhams auction for nearly a quarter of a million dollars.

Harry was magnanimous with his wealth, rewarding those who’d helped him and launching a number of local civic-improvement projects into which he poured millions of dollars. Over time, however, he came to resent what he considered the exorbitant taxes—$17,500 a day—that the Canadian government levied upon him. In 1935, he left Canada, taking his wife and children to live in the Caribbean city of Nassau, on the island of New Providence in the Bahamas.

In those days, Nassau was the quiet backwater capital of the British colony and a bastion for well-heeled whites in a place where abject poverty existed alongside fabulous wealth. As he had when he first arrived in Niagara Falls, Harry set about improving conditions on the island for both its native poor and its privileged whites. He built an air base, polo field, country club, and golf course. He also purchased and improved the local hotel. He added a wing to the hospital, provided public transportation, employed a large number of the locals, and initiated programs to address the poverty in which many of the islanders were living. For his largesse, the Crown awarded him a baronetcy, whereupon he became Sir Harry Oakes.
"A PIT BULL OF A MAN"

Sir Harry Oakes was a self-made conundrum, his personality formed partly by his early years in New England, partly by the hard times he’d experienced as a hard-pan miner, and partly by his miraculous transformation from poor prospector to a figure of unimaginable wealth and standing. The stocky 5’6” Oakes—once described as a “pit bull of a man”—was gruff and often unpleasant. He didn’t suffer fools or flatterers, nor did he believe in mincing words. And while he made many friends through his charitable works, he was just as much of a genius at making enemies.

His son-in-law, Count Alfred “Freddie” de Marigny, referred to Sir Harry as “eccentric and complicated…crude and ill-tempered,” adding, “Oakes would never look like anyone’s idea of a multimillionaire. He looked like a union boss or a butcher…He bought a title from the British Crown, but he did not find nobility.”

Kaitlin McKay, manager of Kirkland Lake’s Museum of Northern History, which is located in Sir Harry’s chateau in Ontario, makes allowances for his abrupt manner. “Yes, Harry was gruff, stern, and cranky, but he gave jobs to more than 1,000 people. He was also very generous, but he preferred to donate things, rather than money, in keeping with people’s needs.”

John Marquis, a chronicler of what has been called the “crime of the century,” writes that “Sir Harry was a complex man with a number of personal demons.”

On the night of July 7, 1943, those demons got very personal indeed.

THE NIGHT IN QUESTION

A violent tropical storm struck the Bahamas, drenching Nassau in thick sheets of rain. It was while this tempest was raging that a person or persons brutally slew Sir Harry Oakes.

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whereupon he made a chilling discovery.

Sir Harry lay dead upon his bed in a grisly state. His body had been doused in gasoline and set alight, but the wind and rain gusting through the open window had put out the flames before he was entirely consumed. As it was, his face and body were badly burned and blistered, and he was haphazardly covered with feathers from a pillow, as though to make it appear a ritual slaying. His face was bloody, and near his left ear were four puncture wounds which reportedly fractured his skull. But curiously, the blood had run up his face rather than down onto the sheets, indicating that he had not been killed in his bed.

This lurid scene is at the heart of the film *Passion and Paradise*, in which Rod Steiger plays Sir Harry Oakes.

**THE AFTERMATH**

Immediately after he discovered Sir Harry’s body, Christie reported the death to the governor of the Bahamas, who was none other than the Duke of Windsor, formerly Edward VIII, King of the United Kingdom and the Dominions of the British Empire, and Emperor of India. The Duke of Windsor had stunned his nation by abdicating his throne in order to marry the American divorcee Wallis Simpson, and his well-publicized Nazi sympathies had proven a further embarrassment to his country. He was reportedly given the governorship of the Bahamas in 1940 as a gentle way of exiling him from Great Britain.

Inexplicably, the Duke of Windsor seemed more interested in keeping the murder under wraps than in solving it. Word got out, however, and—pressured to take action—he called upon Miami police captain Edward Melchen, whom he knew from a previous trip to Florida. Bahamians could not understand why he hadn’t turned to the local police force or even to Scotland Yard. But if his intention was to compromise the evidence and muddy the investigation, he couldn’t have chosen a likelier officer than Melchen, who arrived in Nassau

(Continued on page 256)
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INTRIGUE

Murder in Paradise (continued from page 175)

with fellow captain James Otto Barker.

The murder scene was rife with evidence. The walls showed bloody handprints, as did a lacquered Chinese screen. Muddy boot tracks led up the stairs into the bedroom and back down again. The detectives, however, made no immediate attempt to examine the evidence or to protect the crime scene from disturbance as people came and went freely, touching objects within the room. Nor did the officers initially try to collect fingerprints, claiming the weather was too humid.

Nonetheless, within days, they honed in on a suspect: Sir Harry’s son-in-law, Count Alfred de Marigny. [If you’re casting this thriller in your head, it might help to know de Marigny was played by Armand Assante in Passion and Paradise.]

POINTED FINGERS & FAMILY FEUDS

Count Alfred de Marigny was not a popular figure in Nassau. Arrogant and self-important, he’d managed to alienate both the locals and the privileged whites, who considered him—not without justification—a gigolo and a social climber. His detractors included the Duke of Windsor himself. But perhaps the man who most disliked de Marigny was Sir Harry Oakes. At 32, the penniless, twice-divorced count had eloped with Sir Harry’s 18-year-old daughter, Nancy. Although Sir Harry tried initially to accept the situation, he rapidly came to abhor his son-in-law after Nancy had an abortion.

When questioned by the two detectives, de Marigny offered a sound alibi for the night Sir Harry was killed, accounting for all but half an hour of his time. On scant evidence, and in apparent haste, de Marigny was booked, indicted, and imprisoned, spending the next four months in Nassau’s dour stone jail while the world speculated about his guilt. When de Marigny requested the best attorney in the Bahamas, he learned to his dismay that he’d been preempted in his selection by the prosecution, so he employed two young barristers to represent him during the 25-day trial that held the Western world spellbound.

Looking poised, elegant, and mature beyond her years, Nancy appeared in court every day to testify and to support her husband. Firmly convinced of his in-
Sir Harry Oakes and the Willows Mansion

The Willows was built in 1913 for Miss Charlotte Baker, a patron of the arts who was closely associated with the Spence School for Girls in New York City. The name was chosen because of the stately willow trees that lined the curving entry drive. The Willows Mansion was later purchased by Sir Harry Oakes in 1938, a Maine native famous both for discovering gold in the Yukon and getting mysteriously murdered.

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INTRIGUE

For two weeks, the prosecution presented its case, citing family disputes and lust for his father-in-law’s riches as de Marigny’s motives for the killing. Sir Harry’s widow testified against her son-in-law, and for physical evidence, the Crown offered a single fingerprint that Capt. Barker claimed to have obtained from the Chinese screen. So certain was the prosecution of a conviction that the government ordered the rope for de Marigny’s execution.

But when the defense cross-examined Capt. Barker, the tide in the packed courtroom began to turn. The detective admitted that he’d lifted the crucial fingerprint without having first photographed it on the screen. So questionable were Barker’s methods that defense attorney Godfrey Higgs had little trouble casting doubt on his testimony. He directly accused Barker of lifting the print from a drinking glass that he’d given de Marigny during questioning, and of later planting the print in Sir Harry’s bedroom.

Nor could Barker come up with an explanation as to why neither he nor Melchen had fingerprinted the dozens of people entering and leaving the bedroom—after initially lying by stating that they had. And when Nancy testified that Barker had told Lady Oakes of finding de Marigny’s print several days before it had been identified as de Marigny’s, the jury’s doubt deepened.

Further undermining Barker’s evidence was the testimony of Capt. Maurice O’Neil, a forensic expert for the defense, who swore that de Marigny’s print had not been taken from the screen at all, but rather from an entirely different surface. According to O’Neil, a print lifted from a drinking glass would display no background texture, but a print taken from the Chinese screen could not be lifted without carrying the background texture of the screen along with it. If it doesn’t print, you must acquit.

In the absence of any evidence other than Barker’s perjured testimony, the jury took less than two hours to free de Marigny. The courtroom, full of a crowd who until recently had wished him hanged, erupted in cheers. There was a rider to the verdict, however: de Marigny was banished
from the Bahamas, effective immediately. This was the jury’s concession to a single morally minded member who refused to vote for acquittal unless the fast-living de Marigny was removed from the colony.

Following the trial, the Duke of Windsor ordered the official search for Sir Harry Oakes’s killer or killers to be abruptly stopped—nor would it resume in the nearly three-quarters of a century that followed.

WHO KILLED SIR HARRY?
There’s no lack of armchair theories about this juicy case, some more far-fetched than others. The list of possible suspects is long and gossipy, clanking with scoundrels and criminals. According to various researchers, the American Mafia kingpins Charlie “Lucky” Luciano and Meyer Lansky were interested in building gambling casinos and hotels in Nassau, and some chroniclers have suggested that both the Duke of Windsor and Harold Christie were in league with them, almost tasting the shady money. Author Marshall Houts points out that Lansky and Christie had known each other since “the rum-running days of [P]rohibition” and claims, “[I]t was well known that [Capt. James Barker] had been on Meyer Lansky’s payroll for a number of years.”

But the irresistible force of Mafia money ran into an immovable object in Sir Harry Oakes, who was unwilling to see his island idyll turned into a gambling den—or so the theory goes. However, this explanation doesn’t stand up under scrutiny. In order for casinos to be built in Nassau, the Bahamas’ no-gambling laws would have to have been formally amended. And as time proved, the removal of Sir Harry Oakes did not suffice to further Lansky’s plan. Only after Fidel Castro’s regime expelled the mob from Cuba was casino gambling introduced into Nassau two decades later. Also, as Marquis points out, the messy murder wasn’t up to Mafia standards; the mob might simply have “disappeared” Sir Harry.

None of this is to say that the Duke of Windsor didn’t have an ulterior motive for burying the case; from the very beginning, his handling of it was nothing short of abysmal. When he called in the American detectives, his specific instruction to them was to find evidence of Sir Harry’s suicide, when the most perfunctory glance
revealed the deed to be a brutal murder. After de Marigny’s arrest, he ordered the local police to thoroughly clean the murder room, thereby destroying all forensic evidence and any future hope of identifying the killer. Finally, as the trial demonstrated, the two captains had illegally attempted to railroad a man to the gallows; they wouldn’t have done so without the tacit approval of—and instructions from—their employer, the Duke of Windsor, who despised de Marigny and saw him as the perfect scapegoat.

Another possibility is that Harold Christie—soon to become Sir Harold Christie for his contributions to the island’s economy—committed the crime, or had it done. It was Christie who originally persuaded Sir Harry to move to the Bahamas and, according to author William Boyd, owed Sir Harry a considerable sum. When Sir Harry—who was considering a move to Mexico—called in his marker, Christie canceled both the debt and Sir Harry in a single blow.

Marquis also points to Christie, who he posits was in league with a crooked, status-seeking Florida lawyer named Walter Foskett. Foskett, Marquis argues, considered the Oakes fortune his “personal piggy bank,” charming his way into the family’s good graces and pocketbooks, until he cheated Sir Harry on the purchase of a Rembrandt painting. Oakes swore to “straighten him out,” whereupon Foskett—seeing his swindling schemes coming to an abrupt end—colluded with the ambitious Christie to do away with Oakes. The Duke of Windsor helped cover up the murder, since he and Christie were friends and probable business partners, and Foskett was his legal advisor.

The debate over other possibilities still rages on. Pointing to the feathers on Oakes’s body, some have claimed it was a ritual slaying carried out by the native population, but this is highly unlikely. Sir Harry had worked diligently to improve the lives of the island’s inhabitants and was widely respected by them, nor is there any reported history of a pattern of such slayings on the island.

According to another theory, the shadowy Swedish industrialist and Nazi spy Axel Wenner-Grenn (the inventor of Electrolux vacuum cleaners), who was purportedly involved in a money-laundering scheme with the Duke of Windsor, slew Sir Harry to prevent him from revealing the Duke’s involvement.

Then there are those who return to Count Alfred de Marigny as the likeliest suspect despite his acquittal, hypothesizing that Sir Harry was about to expose his son-in-law’s shady business dealings, so de Marigny killed him to keep him quiet.

Nonetheless, over time, the most persistent allegations have continued to swirl around Sir Harold Christie. Defense attorney Higgs declared in open court that Christie’s account of his actions on the night and morning of the murder was “implausible.” During the trial, Christie testified that he’d spent the entire night inside the mansion, but a Nassau policeman who knew him by sight stated that he’d seen Christie driving downtown that evening. Despite the fact that it brought Christie’s credibility into question, this discrepancy was never pursued. Christie also claimed to have been ignorant of any disturbance in the night, even though his guest room was next door to Sir Harry’s bedroom and there almost certainly would have been significant noise. His account was indeed implausible.

There have been numerous attempts to unearth further evidence over the years, many of which have been met with violence. In April 1950, a Washington attorney named Betty Renner arrived in Nassau for the express purpose of solving the murder. Two days later, she was bludgeoned and drowned in a well. Marquis calculates that in the 16 years following Sir Harry’s death, investigators researching the Oakes case that Nassau’s power elite failed to solve were murdered at the rate of one a year.

Many years after her father’s death, Nancy Oakes de Marigny—long since divorced from “Freddie”—issued a heartfelt entreaty that read, in part: “For justice and for decency, [the government] should insist on a vigorous effort… to clear this up, regardless [of] who might be affected by the truth.” Her plea was met with silence.

Sir Harry Oakes’s funeral was held at the family’s Bar Harbor estate. He rests in his family’s marble mausoleum at Dover-Foxcroft cemetery, the central figure in a crime that was sloppily committed, off-handedly and corruptly investigated, and ultimately left unsolved. Were it not for the fact that F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote _The Great Gatsby_ some 18 years before Sir Harry’s grisly murder, one might surmise that the author had based his hero on the eccentric prospector: a driven man of humble beginnings who accumulates fabulous wealth, then dies a tragic, violent death.
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