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William Le Queux, the Zeppelin Menace and the Invisible Hand

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Abstract

In contrast to William Le Queux's pre-1914 novels about German spies and invasion, his wartime writing is much less well known. Analysis of a number of his works, predominantly non-fictional, written between 1914 and 1918 shows that he modified his perception of the threat posed by Germany in two ways. Firstly, because of the lack of a German naval invasion, he began to emphasise the more plausible danger of aerial attack. Secondly, because of the incompetent handling of the British war effort, he began to believe that an 'Invisible Hand' was responsible, consisting primarily of naturalised Germans. Switching form from fiction to non-fiction made his writing more persuasive, but he was not able to sustain this and he ended the war with less influence than he began it.

Keywords: aerial bombardment, conspiracy theories, First World War, invasion literature, spy literature, William Le Queux

Most of the literature on William Le Queux concentrates on his career before the Great War, when he spent the better part of a decade warning of the twin dangers of German espionage and German invasion through his fiction and his journalism.¹ As is now well known, these dangers

1. For details on Le Queux's biography, bibliography, and critical approaches to his work, see Ailise Bulfin and Harry Wood, 'Introduction to William Le Queux, Master of Misinformation I & II', this issue, and Roger T. Stearn, 'The Mysterious Mr Le Queux: War Novelist, Defence Publicist and Counterspy', this issue.

were vastly exaggerated: Germany had no plans to invade Britain, and its espionage network there was almost non-existent. As is also well known, these exaggerations were nevertheless plausible and influential: Le Queux's books were extremely popular with the public, and he provided evidence that helped make the case for the creation in 1909 of Britain's Secret Service Bureau, the forerunner of the wartime counter-intelligence organisation, MO5 (later MI5).² But surprisingly little attention has been paid to Le Queux's wartime writing.³ How did he respond to the coming of the great struggle which he had long predicted? Did his projection of the German threat to Britain remain the same as before 1914, as the relative silence in the literature might suggest, or did he adapt it in order to meet the changing circumstances of an unexpectedly protracted, bloody and increasingly total war?

This article will show that Le Queux did change his portrayal of the nature of the German threat, in two key ways. It soon became clear that the war that was being fought was not the war that Le Queux, and many others, had predicted: in the short term, there was no German invasion; in the medium term, there was no British victory. To explain the former, he replaced the threat from the sea with the threat from the air, in the form of Germany's Zeppelin fleets. To explain the latter, he replaced the threat of German espionage of British defences with the threat of German subversion of British society through what he called the 'Invisible Hand', which he identified with German-born men naturalised as British citizens. Neither aerial bombardment nor naturalised Germans had featured largely in Le Queux's prewar writing, but by resorting to them now he was able to keep his essential beliefs intact. The Zeppelin menace allowed him to preserve the threat of an imminent attack on Britain, despite the increasing unlikelihood of an invasion; the Invisible Hand allowed him to preserve the concept of an enemy within Britain, despite the eventual internment of most male German citizens of military age. For Le Queux, the British themselves remained a superior people; it was only their complacency that risked ruin.

2. Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 13, 18; A. J. A. Morris, *The Scaremongers: The Advocacy of War and Rearmament, 1896–1914* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 156; Nicholas Hiley, 'Introduction', in William Le Queux, *Spies of the Kaiser: Plotting the Downfall of England* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), xviii.

3. Stearn, 'The Mysterious Mr Le Queux'; Chris Patrick and Stephen Baister, *William Le Queux: Master of Mystery* (Purley: self-published, 2007), 84–106; see also Andrew, *Defence of the Realm*, 54–55; Hiley, 'Introduction', xxiv, xxvii–xxviii; Panikos Panayi, *The Enemy in Our Midst: Germans in Britain during the First World War* (Providence: Berg, 1991), 158–162.

It will also be shown that Le Queux changed the form of his writing during the war, which changed the authority of his message. Prior to 1914 he had successfully employed a ‘factional’ style in promoting his warnings about the German menace, writing novels that were presented as fictionalised accounts of events that either had already occurred, or could occur in the future. This suited his penchant for claiming insider knowledge without having to back up his claims with evidence or, for that matter, logic.⁴ In the first two years of the war, however, he switched to more straightforwardly non-fictional genres of writing, including contemporary history and, more importantly, analytical polemic. Somewhat surprisingly, this is when he was at his most influential in wartime; later in the war he reverted to his more familiar ‘factional’ novel style, but was now ignored by the press.

This article is divided into five sections. The first section summarises Le Queux’s conception of the German threat before the First World War. The second section shows that while these fears were widely shared in the opening months of the war in 1914, his own response was surprisingly cautious. The third section examines the renewal of his own activism about the German threat in early 1915, now increasingly tied to the perceived danger of air raids on British cities. The fourth delves into Le Queux’s involvement with a hunt for German spies in Surrey, which led to his final loss of faith in the government’s competence to prosecute the war. The fifth section analyses his increasing belief by 1916 in the presence of an ‘Invisible Hand’ of naturalised Germans, in order to explain British failures at home and at the front. Finally, the conclusion suggests that Le Queux’s relative quiescence in the last years of the war was due to his eclipse by more extreme conspiracy theorists like Arnold White, Noel Pemberton Billing and Harold Spencer, as well as his reversion to fictional formats that proved to be less persuasive as the war entered its final and most total phase.

Le Queux’s prewar world

While Le Queux started out as a journalist, his prewar writing was dominated by fiction and his most successful works were novels predicting Britain’s invasion by European powers. In *The Great War in England in 1897* (1894) he described how a Franco-Russian landing was ultimately

4. The lack of consistency of Le Queux’s plots, internally and externally, is well known; see, for example, Hiley, ‘Introduction’, xi–xiii.

defeated by Britain in allegiance with Germany and its own imperial forces.⁵ From 1906, however, Germany was always the invader which, in *The Invasion of 1910*, was only stopped by the slimmest of margins; and as outlined in the Introduction, the sales of this work were phenomenal.⁶ But more characteristic of his output were his spy stories, which generally revolved around the detection and prevention of German espionage in Britain. These too presented Germany as Britain's implacable enemy, again almost single-mindedly focused on preparing for an invasion.

With Le Queux, the lines between fiction and non-fiction were hard to distinguish; indeed, as the Introduction suggests, blurring them seems to have been his especial talent. He claimed to be an amateur expert on espionage who – according to his *Who's Who* entry – was 'consulted by the British Government' for his 'intimate knowledge of the secret services of the Continental Powers', while *The Invasion of 1910* came with the well-advertised endorsement of Lord Roberts of Kandahar, a popular retired field marshal.⁷ As the latest product of the *Battle of Dorking* (1871) school of invasion literature, *The Invasion of 1910* used George T. Chesney's by now well-established form of 'future history' which emulated a non-fictional style.⁸ In Le Queux's scenario, after a surprise attack on the Royal Navy, four German corps invade Norfolk and advance on London, aided by another fifty thousand German soldiers who land in Essex. A brave but ineffective defence by ill-trained British troops leads to the capture and sack of the capital. Eventually the invaders are expelled, but not before much death and destruction is incurred, and not before the need to emulate German conscription is at last understood.⁹ While Le Queux's spy stories were more overtly fictional in style, they too were presented as being something more. An essential part of their appeal was that they were supposed to be thinly veiled versions of what had really happened, or was happening, or would happen if nothing was done to prevent it: they were 'based upon serious facts within my own personal knowledge', as Le

5. William Le Queux, *The Great War in England in 1897* (London: Tower Publishing, 1894).

6. William Le Queux, *The Invasion of 1910: With a Full Account of the Siege of London* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1906).

7. Quoted in Morris, *Scaremongers*, 107.

8. See, generally, I. F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars 1763–3749* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Ailise Bulfin, "'To Arms!': Invasion Narratives and Late-Victorian Literature", *Literature Compass* 12, no. 9 (2015), 482–496.

9. Le Queux, *Invasion of 1910*.

Queux wrote in 1909 in his introduction to the otherwise fictional *Spies of the Kaiser*.¹⁰ Here he described an elaborate, but almost entirely imaginary, system of German espionage:

That German spies are actively at work in Great Britain is well known to the authorities. The number of agents of the German Secret Police at this moment working in our midst on behalf of the Intelligence Department in Berlin are believed to be over five thousand. To each agent ... is allotted the task of discovering some secret, or of noting in a certain district every detail which may be of advantage to the invader when he lands.¹¹

Significantly, Britons were rarely, if ever, portrayed as traitors in Le Queux's stories. Foreigners were the danger, whether Germans or those they had suborned: 'often Belgians, Swiss, or Frenchmen employed in various trades and professions'.¹² In Le Queux's world, Britain was almost totally exposed to the predations of an ever-hostile Germany: government ministers refused to acknowledge the danger of espionage, and their reliance on poorly trained Territorial soldiers was 'a delusion': 'All the rifle-clubs in England could not stop one German battalion, because the German battalion is trained and disciplined in the art of war, while our rifle-clubs are neither disciplined nor trained'.¹³ Germans may have been treacherous, in Le Queux's world; the British were merely asleep.

Le Queux's fictions often used devices such as realistic-looking proclamations and maps to lend verisimilitude. For example, one of the stories in *Spies of the Kaiser* included a 'specimen' of notes for the use of German spies on 'the Day' of invasion.¹⁴ This recorded the presence in Sheringham and Cromer, on the Norfolk coast, of forty-six German 'hotel servants, waiters, and tradesmen', 'trained soldiers' all, who when the signal was given would secretly assemble at a 'store of arms' and then 'hold up the coastguard at all stations in their district, cut all telegraphs and telephones ... and take every precaution to prevent any fact whatsoever

10. William Le Queux, *Spies of the Kaiser: Plotting the Downfall of England* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), xxxiii.

11. *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

12. *Ibid.*, xxxiv.

13. *Ibid.*, xxxiv.

14. *Ibid.*, 55.

leaking out concerning the presence of [enemy] ships' off the coast.¹⁵ For Le Queux, it was axiomatic that Germany was already preparing in peacetime to attack Britain from within during wartime. In *The Invasion of 1910* he described how the Kaiser's army of spies would work to disrupt British mobilisation before the main body of German troops landed:

The Southampton line of the London and South-Western Railway was destroyed – with explosives placed by unknown hands – by the bridge over the Wey, near Weybridge, being blown up, and again that over the Mole, between Walton and Esher, while the Reading line was cut by the great bridge over the Thames at Staines being destroyed. The line, too, between Guildford and Waterloo was also rendered impassable by the wreck of the midnight train, which was blown up half-way between Wansborough and Guildford, while in several other places nearer London bridges were rendered unstable by dynamite, the favourite method apparently being to blow the crown out of an arch.¹⁶

Despite Le Queux's claims, it remains the case that Germany had not planned an invasion of Britain – even as a theoretical exercise – since 1899, and that before 1914 the German espionage system in Britain was minimal.¹⁷ Such intelligence gathering as was carried out focused on determining the capabilities of the Royal Navy rather than preparing for a sabotage campaign in support of an invasion that was never contemplated.¹⁸ Despite his protestations – 'I am not affected by that disease known as spy-mania. I write only of what I know', as he was to claim, improbably, in 1915 – Le Queux's world was largely fantasy, but it was a fantasy which, thanks in large part to his own prodigious writings, he shared with a considerable section of the British

15. *Ibid.*, 55.

16. Le Queux, *Invasion of 1910*, 28–29.

17. Thomas Boghardt, *Spies of the Kaiser: German Covert Operations in Great Britain during the First World War Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 69–73.

18. P. M. Kennedy, 'The Development of German Naval Operations Plans against England, 1896–1914', *English Historical Review* 89 (1974), 48–76.

public.¹⁹ The very phrase ‘spy-mania’ attests to the contemporary view that these beliefs were widely held, disputed though they were.²⁰

The non-invasion of 1914

Despite a relative thaw in Anglo-German relations before 1914, the image of the ubiquitous German spy which Le Queux had helped plant in the British consciousness remained, and returned to the fore upon the outbreak of war.²¹ This is shown by the rapidity with which spy scares erupted from August 1914 onwards, similar to the stories retailed by Le Queux but far surpassing them in scale. Arms caches were reportedly found in railway tunnels and hotel rooms; cordite bombs were said to have exploded in the East End; a sentry guarding a railway tunnel in Merstham in Surrey claimed to have been shot at by a motorcyclist.²² But the tiny German espionage apparatus in Britain that did exist was largely rounded up on the outbreak of hostilities, and – remarkably – not one example of enemy sabotage took place in Britain during the entire war.²³ These spy scares were therefore pure Le Queux – they were just what his readers had been led to expect would happen as the Germans prepared for the invasion which seemed inevitable, and perhaps imminent.²⁴

19. Le Queux, *German Spies in England*, 92. See David French, ‘Spy Fever in Britain, 1900–1915’, *Historical Journal* 21, no. 2 (1978), 355–370. It must be pointed out that Germanophobia was very far from uniform: for a recent study, see Richard Scully, *British Images of Germany: Admiration, Antagonism & Ambivalence, 1860–1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

20. See, for example, Charles Lowe, ‘About German Spies’, *Contemporary Review* 97 (February 1910), 42–56.

21. Sean M. Lynn-Jones, ‘Detente and Deterrence: Anglo-German Relations, 1911–1914’, *International Security* 11, no. 2 (1986), 121–150.

22. *Aberdeen Journal*, 11 August 1914, 6; London, The National Archives, Central Force intelligence report, 28 August 1914, AIR 1/565/16/15/88.

23. Panayi, *Enemy in Our Midst*, 183. This was not due to any German sense of fair play, however: Germany carried out extensive covert operations in the United States, for example, including sabotage. See Michael S. Neiberg, *The Path to War: How the First World War Created Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 77–82, 115–119.

24. Howard Roy Moon, ‘The Invasion of the United Kingdom: Public Controversy and Official Planning 1888–1918’ (PhD diss., London University, 1968), 537–587; K. W. Mitchinson, *Defending Albion: Britain’s Home Army 1908–1919* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 76–97; Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 124–126.

But the invasion did not come. As Britons tried to make sense of what was happening in this war and what might yet happen, rumours of German subterfuge grew stronger and stranger, influenced by claims from the front lines in Belgium and France that the Germans were using covert means to support their advance: ‘Men in plain clothes signal by puffs of smoke in the daytime and by coloured lights at night; the hands of church clocks are revolved as signals; Germans are left, in the uniforms of British or French soldiers, in places evacuated by the enemy; women act as agents of the enemy, and everywhere the spy is active’.²⁵ Especially worrying were the reports of concrete floors of factories and similar industrial sites having been placed there before the war by German companies, in order to serve as emplacements for the heavy siege guns which the German army used to destroy the defences of fortress cities like Maubeuge. In October, as Antwerp fell and the German army arrived on the coast of the English Channel, rumours began to spread of similarly suspicious concrete floors in German-owned premises in London, Edinburgh and elsewhere. At the same time, reports of German air raids on Antwerp and Paris led to fears of an imminent German aerial offensive against British cities, resulting in the first, partial blackouts of London and nearby towns. Rumours grew of secret German aerodromes in the remote parts of Scotland, the Lake District and the Chilterns outside London. Police and military authorities expended much time and energy searching for these gun platforms and Zeppelin bases, to no avail.²⁶ The suspicion that an enemy within had literally laid the groundwork for an invasion remained.

Due in large part to the fear of espionage, in the first month of the war the Home Office began rounding up any Germans who were considered dangerous. In September the net widened to include German reservists more generally. But in October, when the German army reached the opposite side of the English Channel, a more indiscriminate internment of the German population was briefly begun, yet for lack of space this ceased after only a few days. By May 1915 about a third of the fifty-nine thousand enemy aliens (principally Germans) present in Britain on the outbreak of war were interned, all men, at which point the public and press outcry

25. *Evening Dispatch* (Birmingham), 29 September 1914, 1.

26. Brett Holman, ‘Constructing the Enemy Within: Rumours of Secret Gun Platforms and Zeppelin Bases in Britain, August–October 1914’, *British Journal for Military History* 3, no. 2 (2017), 22–42.

over the sinking of the *Lusitania* forced another, still more comprehensive roundup.²⁷ The Home Office's vacillation did little to reassure those who had believed and continued to believe in the presence of a massive army of German spies: by November 1914 the Metropolitan Police alone had investigated over 120,000 accusations made by the public.²⁸ Significantly, at no point were the estimated eight thousand naturalised Germans interned as a class.²⁹

For his part, Le Queux greeted the outbreak of war by suggesting that postmen provide the police with lists of Germans on their route, leading to the arrest of 'several non-registered Germans', or so he claimed – a claim that was reiterated as fact by other newspapers.³⁰ He also passed leads on to the authorities directly: for example, in November 1914, he provided MO5g (the investigative branch of MO5) with information about a German in Aldstone named Schmitt, who appeared to be 'extremely suspicious'.³¹ On this occasion, MO5g appeared to be grateful for his assistance.

Publicly, though, even amidst the growing spy scare Le Queux remained relatively quiet. His prewar scaremongering came back into vogue: *If England Were Invaded*, a prewar film version of *The Invasion of 1910* which had been delayed by the censors as too inflammatory, now made its appearance.³² His main original output in the closing months of 1914 consisted of the serialisation and publication of several novels, mostly written before the war, as well as an early pamphlet on German atrocities in Belgium and France, and the first twelve instalments of *The War of the Nations*, a weekly history of the war published by George Newnes and, after that, a similar series in *Lloyd's News*.³³ This move into non-fiction did provide some opportunities to comment on the spy danger. For example, in the second issue of *The War of the Nations*, published on 29 August, Le Queux claimed that in order to prevent public alarm, 'many startling

27. Panikos Panayi, *Prisoners of Britain: German Civilian and Combatant Internees during the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 47–51.

28. Panayi, *Enemy in Our Midst*, 158.

29. Panayi, *Prisoners of Britain*, 51.

30. *Daily Mirror* (London), 13 August 1914, 8; *Middlesex Chronicle* (Hounslow), 15 August 1914, 6.

31. London, The National Archives, William Le Queux to Director of Military Operations, MO5, 16 November 1914, KV 6/47/68.

32. See, e.g., *Burnley News*, 25 November 1914, 3.

33. Subsequent volumes of *The War of the Nations* were written by the even more prolific Edgar Wallace. For *Lloyd's News*, see, e.g., *Daily Mail* (Hull), 7 November 1914, 3.

facts remained unpublished, and many attacks upon those guarding our magazines, tunnels, and public buildings remained unrecorded'.³⁴ Three weeks later, in the preface to *German Atrocities*, he wrote: 'Evidence of German trickery and savagery we have, too, in our midst, for trains, sentries, and policemen have been shot at under cover of darkness by men who mean to emulate the methods of their compatriots'.³⁵ Here he still focused on the danger from Germans in Britain as a whole, as yet making no reference to those who had been naturalised as Britons.

During these first months of the war in late 1914, Le Queux's published opinions about the severity of the invasion danger were muted and somewhat inconsistent. From time to time he criticised the government for its seeming inaction; for example, sarcastically suggesting to the *Daily Telegraph* that as the Germans apparently never used covert methods, as government ministers seemed at pains to suggest, 'why need the constabulary, or the coastguard, trouble to search for concealed gun-platforms, secret wireless, or hidden stores of German ammunition and illegal petrol?'³⁶ But while he argued that the arrest of so many would-be spies and saboteurs showed 'beyond doubt how completely Germany had prepared for her secret raid', he also concluded that such a raid 'now happily could not be made'.³⁷ If the government seemed unable to grasp the scale of the spy danger, he himself had little to say about who should be regarded as enemy aliens and what should be done with them. His own spy fiction, so often before the war condemned for its excessive imagination, now began to look tame: 'when we look over the wonderful war machine set up by Germany and see the myriad wheels used, even Mr Le Queux's brilliant imagination comes near the commonplace', suggested the *Edinburgh Evening News*.³⁸ Le Queux's relatively restrained approach seemed to risk damaging his status as an expert on the spy danger.

The enemy within and the enemy above

34. William Le Queux, *The War of the Nations: A History of the Great European Conflict*, vol. 1 (London: George Newnes, 1914), 30.

35. William Le Queux, *German Atrocities: A Record of Shameless Deeds* (London: George Newnes, 1915), 6.

36. Quoted in *Western Times* (Exeter), 17 October 1914, 3.

37. Le Queux, *War of the Nations*, 30.

38. *Edinburgh Evening News*, 11 September 1914, 4.

Whether it was part of an intentional effort to reverse a decline in his status as an expert on the spy danger or not, early in 1915 Le Queux began a highly visible campaign of scaremongering that was linked firmly to the new danger of aerial bombardment as well as the older fear of spying. While he did have some knowledge of the advance of aviation before 1914 – for example, he was on the organising committee of Britain’s first air meet, at Doncaster in 1909 – it did not then feature particularly strongly in his writing.³⁹ But he now adapted to the idea of this new factor in war, especially the ability of airpower to strike at long distances to attack civilian populations behind the front lines, most prominently in the form of Germany’s giant Zeppelin airships.⁴⁰ In October 1914, for the first time London’s lights were dimmed to make it more difficult for enemy airmen to find; then, on 19 January 1915, the first Zeppelin raid on Britain took place, scattering bombs over the Norfolk countryside.⁴¹ An aerial attack on the capital seemed imminent, and it was now that Le Queux began to incorporate the aerial danger into his paranoia about German spies, by using it as a substitute for the receding possibility of a seaborne invasion.

While Le Queux still used fiction to promote his ideas, during the war his clearest expositions came in the form of non-fiction.⁴² In mid February he published *German Spies in England: An Exposure*. He began by claiming that he was ‘no alarmist’ while simultaneously claiming authority from his shift in genre: ‘This is no work of fiction, but of solid and serious fact’.⁴³ For the previous six years, he claimed, he had confined himself to fictional warnings of

39. Patrick and Baister, *William Le Queux*, 106–109. A Russian airship attempts to bombard Edinburgh with chemical weapons in *The Great War in England in 1897*, and in *Spies of the Kaiser* the plans of a new British aeroplane become the subject of German espionage: Le Queux, *Great War in England*, 248–254; Le Queux, *Spies of the Kaiser*, 75–90.

40. Susan R. Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 20–63.

41. Nigel J. Parker, *Gott Strafe England: The German Air Assault against Great Britain 1914–1918*, vol. 1: 1914–1916 (Solihull: Helion & Company, 2015), 62–65.

42. Several of Le Queux’s ostensibly non-fictional productions, such as the series of supposed confessions by German army officers published in the latter half of the war, were also clear fabrications.

43. Le Queux, *German Spies in England*, 8. See also Harry Wood, ‘Radical Reactionary: The Politics of William Le Queux’, forthcoming issue.

the spy danger because of the ridicule he had faced from the government and the press.⁴⁴ He was helped by the satisfaction of knowing that a ‘Confidential Department’ (as he publicly termed MO5g) was busy ferreting out German espionage networks in Britain.⁴⁵ Le Queux proclaimed every confidence in these men. But he was incensed by the continuing insistence of Reginald McKenna, the Home Secretary, that ‘he has succeeded in smashing the German spy organisation in this country’.⁴⁶ Le Queux believed that he was in a privileged position to dispute such claims: ‘Few men’, he ventured, ‘know more of the astounding inner machinery of German espionage in this country, and in France, than myself’.⁴⁷ In fact, as a consequence of his expertise, he believed that he was the target of German agents, and repeatedly (if unsuccessfully) demanded protection from the police near his home at Shepperton in Surrey as well as from the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police.⁴⁸

Le Queux did have some friends in MO5, but his claims of insider knowledge must not be taken at face value. In *German Spies in England*, for example, Le Queux quoted from ‘a confidential report which, in the course of my investigations, travelling hither and thither on the Continent, I was able to secure, and to hand over to the British Government for their consideration’.⁴⁹ This was the transcript of a speech supposedly given by Kaiser Wilhelm II at a ‘secret Council’ at Potsdam in June 1908, shortly ‘after the Zeppelin airship had been tested and proved successful’, in which he railed against the constellation of enemies besetting his empire from within and without.⁵⁰ But now, in the form of the Zeppelin, ‘God has placed the means at my disposal to lead Germany triumphantly out of her present difficulties and to make, once and for all, good the words of our poet, “*Deutschland, Deutschland Über [sic] alles!*”’⁵¹ Wilhelm then vowed that

44. Le Queux, *German Spies in England*, 42–43.

45. *Ibid.*, 19.

46. *Ibid.*, 99.

47. *Ibid.*, 7.

48. See the correspondence beginning with London, The National Archives, William Le Queux to Commissioner, Metropolitan Police, 17 August 1914, MEPO 3/243.

49. Le Queux, *German Spies in England*, 22.

50. *Ibid.*, 22.

51. *Ibid.*, 27.

we shall strike as soon as I have a sufficiently large fleet of Zeppelins at my disposal. I have given orders for the hurried construction of more airships of the improved Zeppelin type, and when these are ready we shall destroy England's North Sea, Channel, and Atlantic fleets, after which nothing on earth can prevent the landing of our army on British soil, and its triumphant march to London.⁵²

Or so Le Queux claimed. There is no mention of this secret council in the vast literature on the origins of the First World War or in the voluminous biographies of Wilhelm II.⁵³ This is because it never took place: there was no intent for war on the part of Germany before 1912, at the earliest.⁵⁴ Moreover, Zeppelins were still primitive in 1908 and did not figure prominently in German strategy until shortly before the war.⁵⁵ The entire Potsdam speech in *German Spies in England* was a fabrication from beginning to end and serves as a reminder, should one be necessary, of Le Queux's deep unreliability. But it also points to the increasing significance of aerial bombardment in his writing in early 1915, although as yet only as the preliminary for an invasion from the sea, not a replacement.

German Spies in England sold very well – forty thousand copies in its first week alone, according to Le Queux.⁵⁶ But it was just the start of his revival. On 28 February, *The People* published his sensational article 'HOTBEDS OF ALIEN ENEMIES AND SPIES IN THE HEART OF THE METROPOLIS'.⁵⁷ This was not a work of fiction, but rather a supposedly factual exposé of 'the alien enemy in our very midst [which] will be read with amazement and

52. *Ibid.*, 30.

53. See, e.g., John C. G. Röhl, *Wilhelm II: Into the Abyss of War and Exile, 1900–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 605–643.

54. The 'Fischer thesis' of German culpability for the war places great emphasis on an actual meeting held in Berlin in December 1912, at which preparations were begun for a probable war in the near future. But the significance of even this so-called 'war council' for the origins of the First World War remains debateable. See Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus* (Harlow: Longman, 2002), 149–152; Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 329–330.

55. Guillaume de Syon, *Zeppelin! Germany and the Airship, 1900–1939* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 80–81.

56. *The People* (London), 28 February 1915, clipping, MEPO 3/243.

57. *Ibid.*

disgust'.⁵⁸ The disturbing revelations were the result of Le Queux's own forays into the 'nests of Germans who, unchecked by the authorities, vilify Britain and openly pray for her downfall', right in the middle of London. As it exemplifies the kind of paranoia Le Queux was preaching, it is worth quoting at length:

Everywhere I went, both around Tottenham Court-rd. and in Soho, I heard the same vile abuse of England, the same wild enthusiasm over German victories, the same blind, unshaken confidence in the German power to eventually crush us, and the same declaration that the bombardment of London from the air is only a matter of days, and that it will be the signal for terrible havoc and destruction to be worked in all our great cities by the army of secret agents who are 'lying low' awaiting the signal to strike, and thus produce a panic.⁵⁹

As one of Le Queux's German contacts supposedly told him:

'We shall win ... The British Army will never re-enter Belgium. We have some surprises there for them, just as we have here in England when our Zeppelins come. All is prepared, and, at a given signal, these English fools will wake up with a start. We already have our hand upon these vermin here, and it will not be long before the Eagle will show its claws. Happily, the fools are asleep. We are not! We know every night what is happening. Tonight, at eight o'clock, there were five German aeroplanes between Dunkirk and Dover. But they are not coming to England.'

'How do you know that?' I asked, instantly interested.

The round-faced man, a typical Prussian, only smiled mysteriously behind his glasses, and refused to satisfy my curiosity.⁶⁰

According to Le Queux, he was able to verify that there were indeed five German aeroplanes over the Channel near Dunkirk that night, and hence that information from Germany was

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

reaching the German spies in London on a nightly basis. Even more sensationally, he claimed to be ‘in possession of the amazing manner in which this news is conveyed, and also the actual identity of those who convey it!’⁶¹

Le Queux’s intention was to rouse the Home Office from its slumber, to force it to place ‘the whole matter of enemy aliens and espionage ... under the control of a central board with absolute power to crush it out, and so protect the State from a deadly peril which has permeated into every walk of our national life’.⁶² But the link here between the secret army of saboteurs and the imminent Zeppelin offensive was new. Previously, Le Queux had consistently thought in terms of an invasion from the sea. Now, with the German army tied down on the Western Front and the Royal Navy supreme in the North Sea, this looked increasingly unlikely, and so Le Queux believed that the Germans were more likely to attack from the air.⁶³ In *Britain’s Deadly Peril*, published before the end of March 1915, he prevaricated, suggesting on the one hand that ‘the invasion of England would be, at the very best, an undertaking of the most hazardous nature which would be foredoomed to failure and in which the penalty would be annihilation’, but on the other that an increasingly desperate Germany ‘may yet, in spite of all that has happened, attempt a desperate raid on these shores’.⁶⁴ If the instabilities in Le Queux’s ideas about what the future held suggest a lack of consistency, they nevertheless reflected wider public uncertainties, and certainly seemed to be no barrier to the interest of publishers in their potential sales value.

Interlude: spy-hunting in Surrey

If Le Queux’s Soho expedition sounds very much like an episode from one of his own novels, so much more so does an even more involved counter-espionage operation in which he claimed to be involved at around the same time. This appears to have been a semi-official hunt – involving a Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) armoured car, possibly on behalf of MO5g – for evidence of

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Le Queux was still suggesting that the German population of London was ready to rise up in a coordinated attack with Zeppelins as late as early 1916: William Le Queux, *The Way to Win* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Kent & Co., 1916), 124–125.

64. William Le Queux, *Britain’s Deadly Peril: Are We Told the Truth?* (London: Stanley Paul & Co., 1915), 141, 147.

German signalling in Surrey, where he lived. For Le Queux, the signalling system which he believed he had discovered on this spy hunt explained how the Germans in London were apparently able to know of the movement of enemy aircraft over the Channel. But his unsuccessful attempts to persuade the Metropolitan Police and the War Office of the importance of this intelligence led to his final loss of faith in the government's ability to deal with the supposed spy menace.

There are several accounts of this episode, though none from wholly reliable sources. Less than a week before his *People* article, Le Queux had already informed Special Branch that:

Now, yesterday [23 February 1915] I took, with the aid of the Royal Naval Air Service, one of these reports [from the public of espionage], and I have spent the last twenty hours in an armoured motor-car, together with an expert Signaller and apparatus on the Surrey Hills. We, with witnesses, have seen the messages nightly flashed from the Kent coast to London: we have, in return acknowledged them, and asked them to repeat them, and they have repeated them to us!⁶⁵

Judging from another, public contemporary account by Le Queux, this was merely the first in a series of adventures spanning 'fourteen exciting days and nights' of spy-hunting across Surrey, Sussex and Kent, beginning with the episode described above.⁶⁶ This was related in *Britain's Deadly Peril*, where he provided more details, including the Morse signals received on the first night, 23 February: 'S.M.' was seen flashing from one country house 'situated upon so strategic a point that it could be seen very many miles in the direction of London', from which direction, hours later, a more complex signal was detected: 'S. H. I. S. (pause) H. 5. (pause) S. H. I. S. F. (pause with the light full on for two minutes). I. S. I. E. (pause) E. S. T. (light out)'.⁶⁷ He attached particular importance to one part of this coded message, claiming to have confirmed that 'only one hour prior to the reception of that message on the first evening of our vigil – "H. 5" – five German aeroplanes had actually set out from the Belgian coast towards England!'⁶⁸

65. William Le Queux to Arthur Lambton, 24 February 1915, MEPO 3/243.

66. Le Queux, *Britain's Deadly Peril*, 103.

67. *Ibid.*, 100, 101.

68. *Ibid.*, 103.

Here, then, was Le Queux's explanation for the cryptic comment made by the Soho Prussian, and hence his supposed proof that the German spies in London were in daily communication with their masters on the Continent.

Was any of this true? Given Le Queux's propensity for fabrication, it is tempting to concur with Panikos Panayi that it is another of Le Queux's fabrications.⁶⁹ But that it was not invented is supported by Nesta Webster, who within a few years became a conspiracy theorist to surpass Le Queux himself, as well as an early British fascist.⁷⁰ While she did not take part in the spy hunt herself, her husband did, and her later account confirms Le Queux's general outline, including the involvement of 'an immense wireless apparatus mounted on a lorry which made a terrific noise coming through the village, and a number of naval operators', which sounds very much like the RNAS armoured car mentioned by Le Queux.⁷¹ These vehicles were ad hoc responses to the last phases of mobility on the Western Front, before the front lines stabilised, and in early 1915 were mostly based around London serving in anti-aircraft and anti-invasion roles.⁷² The spy hunt may well have been an unofficial venture by bored RNAS personnel, eager for some kind of action while stationed at home. There is, however, an outside chance that it was sanctioned by MO5g, as suggested by Nicholas Hiley.⁷³ Interestingly, at just this time and near the same location as Le Queux's spy hunt, MO5g had been given the responsibility of investigating a suspicious radio signal that had been picked up at Aldershot, the British Army's chief garrison, just across the Hampshire border from Surrey.⁷⁴ Furthermore, on the same day that Le Queux's spy hunt began, HMS *Hearty*, a survey vessel in the Thames estuary, reported 'seven German aeroplanes passing over the Maplin Lightship at 4 p.m. flying very high', an unusually numerous formation for this stage of the war, which could conceivably correspond

69. Panayi, *Enemy in Our Midst*, 161.

70. Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), 38–40.

71. N. H. Webster, *Spacious Days: An Autobiography* (London, 1950); quoted in Hiley, 'Introduction', xxviii–xxix.

72. David Fletcher, *War Cars: British Armoured Cars in the First World War* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1987), 22.

73. Hiley, 'Introduction', xxviii.

74. London, The National Archives, Home Defence Intelligence Summary, 17–24 February 1915, AIR 1/550/16/15/27.

with the five aeroplanes supposedly signified by ‘H.5’.⁷⁵ On the other hand, Le Queux’s private and public versions of this episode are inconsistent: in his private correspondence with the Metropolitan Police, he claimed the hunt was inspired by a letter from one of his readers, whereas according to his published accounts it was the initiative of an unnamed RNAS officer.⁷⁶ In any case, if there was any official involvement in the search, why did Le Queux try to inform both the War Office and Special Branch of its results himself, rather than let MO5g handle it?

Whatever the ratio of reality to fantasy in his claims, Le Queux certainly acted as though he believed he was in possession of important information. But if he thought that taking part in this spy hunt would bring him into the government’s confidences, he was sorely mistaken.⁷⁷ After informing the War Office of the results of the investigation, he was most displeased to receive nothing more than a form letter from the Director of Military Operations thanking him, which he pointedly reproduced in his book.⁷⁸ The Metropolitan Police were equally unimpressed with Le Queux. Partly this was because, despite his repeated demands for protection since the start of the war, he was unable to produce any of the many threatening letters he claimed to have received. His ham-fisted proposal to form a new, centralised counter-espionage organisation also won him few friends.⁷⁹ In any event, police observers found nothing untoward in the places he had claimed were hotbeds of alien subversion.⁸⁰ In the damning opinion of the chief of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Edward Henry, Le Queux was ‘not a person to be taken seriously’.⁸¹

This incident did win Le Queux some sympathy in the conservative press, however, and one reader demanded that ‘in the interests of the nation some member of the House [of Commons] should ask for the production of Mr Le Queux’s account, and what action, if any, has

75. London, The National Archives, Intelligence Section, GHQ Home Forces, ‘Aeroplane and seaplane raids, 1914–1916’, June 1917, AIR 1/2319/223/30.

76. Le Queux, *Britain’s Deadly Peril*, 99; William Le Queux to Arthur Lambton, 24 February 1915, MEPO 3/243.

77. See also Michael Matin, ‘Gauging the Propagandist’s Talents: William Le Queux’s Dubious Place in Literary History’, this issue.

78. Le Queux, *Britain’s Deadly Peril*, 104.

79. William Le Queux to Patrick Quinn, 21 February 1915, MEPO 3/243; Patrick Quinn to William Le Queux, 22 February 1915, MEPO 3/243; William Le Queux to Patrick Quinn, 22 February 1915, MEPO 3/243; ERH [Edward Richard Henry], note, 2 March 1915, MEPO 3/243.

80. ERH [Edward Richard Henry], note, 2 March 1915, MEPO 3/243.

81. *Ibid.*

been taken under these circumstances'.⁸² For his part, Le Queux now felt himself free to criticise the government's handling of the spy question:

One of the persons who made the signals in question was, three weeks ago, reported to the police and hence to the Special Department, and no notice was taken of it. Now we have indisputable evidence of the utter inefficiency of the authorities in dealing with the matter ... I cannot allow myself to be misguided further from my duty as an Englishman, – or my loyalty to my King ... with this grave danger so palpably before one's eyes, I deem it my bounden duty to speak, and to try and expose it to the public who are no longer to be gulled into a sense of false security.⁸³

Indeed, this rebuff or neglect when trying to offer what he clearly felt to be important information was a turning point in Le Queux's attitude towards the government. While he still maintained a respectful tone when referring to MO5g or to the War Minister, Lord Kitchener, he henceforth had little but contempt to offer most other ministers and departments.

Naturalised Germans: the Invisible Hand

As the war progressed, Le Queux's thoughts on how to explain the government's lethargy in dealing with the spy problem darkened. In his view, the stonewalling he faced from the War Office and the Home Office could no longer be explained by mere incompetence, particularly since he still professed to hold the highest opinions of MO5g. Rather, the effective work of counter-espionage as well as the war effort more generally was being actively undermined behind the scenes, by sinister forces which he termed Germany's 'Invisible Hand'. He was not alone in promoting such a theory, though he was among the first, and this fits with the understanding of Le Queux as a populariser of security anxieties set out in the Introduction. Later and more widely known as the Hidden Hand or Unseen Hand, from 1916 this conspiracy theory began to play an increasingly prominent part in the discourse of the far right of politics in

82. *Globe and Traveller* (London), 12 April 1915, 3; Granville C. Cuningham, letter, *Globe and Traveller*, 26 April 1915, 3.

83. William Le Queux, letter, 24 February 1915, MEPO 3/243.

wartime Britain.⁸⁴ Its cognitive value was that it could explain everything from bureaucratic obstacles to the war's seemingly endless stalemate. Its political value was that it allowed the most trenchant criticisms of government conduct at a time of national crisis while avoiding any appearance of unpatriotic partisanship. Its ultimate result, if left unchecked, would be to justify the purging from national life of anyone accused of German influence.⁸⁵

At the beginning of the war, Le Queux had had no need of an Invisible Hand. While he was not above insinuating that 'certain Ministers were Germany's friends', as one of the Germans he supposedly spoke to in Soho claimed, he generally attributed the failures of the authorities to self-interest rather than subterfuge.⁸⁶ For example: 'there is too much of a tendency on the part of the Government to try to "save its face" by declaring that the spy peril is enormously exaggerated ... On no other supposition can we explain the unparalleled liberty accorded to thousands of Germans, whether naturalised or not, who are still permitted to live and move so freely among us'.⁸⁷ Here, Le Queux had already identified naturalised – and hence not interned – Germans as 'the real danger ... those who, for years, have made their homes among us, who have married Englishwomen, and have become so familiar to their neighbourhoods that they are in little or no danger of being under the slightest suspicion'.⁸⁸ His proposed solution was their wholesale internment, which would 'clear out, once and for ever, the canker-worm of espionage which has, alas! been allowed to eat so very nearly into Britain's heart'.⁸⁹ In *Britain's Deadly Peril*, Le Queux noted with approval that, 'In Russia every German, whether naturalised or not, has been interned, every German woman and child has been sent out of the country, and all property belonging to German companies, or individuals, has been confiscated for ever by the Government', and asked why Britain allowed 'the peril to daily increase when the Government

84. G. R. Searle, *Corruption in British Politics, 1895–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 241–270; Panayi, *Enemy in Our Midst*, 162–181. See also Wood, 'Radical Reactionary', on Le Queux as an exponent of the 'Radical Right'.

85. On conspiracy theories in general, see A. J. Gulyas, *Conspiracy Theories: The Roots, Themes and Propagation of Paranoid Political and Cultural Narratives* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2016), 5–20.

86. *The People* (London), 28 February 1915, clipping, MEPO 3/243.

87. Le Queux, *German Spies in England*, 133–134.

88. *Ibid.*, 172–173.

89. *Ibid.*, 93.

could, by a stroke of the pen, end it for ever'.⁹⁰ This idea of a secret army of German immigrants remained his *idée fixe*.

By the spring of 1916, when his last full-length attempt at non-fiction, *The Way to Win*, was published, Le Queux had adopted a more fully-fledged conspiracy theory, in the form of the Invisible Hand which was holding Britain back from victory:

We have seen it at work in a hundred devious ways – the protection of the enemy alien, the amazing leniency shown towards spies, the splendid efforts of one department strangled by the red tape of another, the protection of German-owned property and funds, the provision of delights at [prisoner of war camp] Donington Hall and other Hun hostels; indeed, the whole of the 'Don't-hurt-the-poor-German' policy which has been the amazement of ourselves and neutrals alike.⁹¹

He added further examples: the loss of merchant vessels to enemy submarines, the escape of the German warships *Breslau* and *Goeben* in August 1914, the loss of merchant vessels to enemy submarines, the burning of the Canadian parliament in February 1916.⁹² The sheer breadth of these examples implied a conspiracy of incredible power and ubiquity.

But Le Queux's conception of the Invisible Hand always rested, implausibly, on the treachery of a handful of naturalised Germans rather than on the treachery of native Britons which such a powerful conspiracy would surely require. For him, the 'canker-worm' inside Britain was always German, not British. In *The Way to Win*, for example, he argued that, 'Without hesitation I say that it would be practically impossible for a German spy to do any effective work here if he were not aided and abetted by Germans resident in England'.⁹³ Similarly, while those Germans who had escaped from internment must have had help from people outside the camps, 'That those people were British I refuse to believe. The inference is that they were Germans'.⁹⁴ Once the majority of German citizens were interned, Le Queux

90. Le Queux, *Britain's Deadly Peril*, 175.

91. Le Queux, *Way to Win*, 123.

92. *Ibid.*, 123.

93. *Ibid.*, 118.

94. *Ibid.*, 119.

focused on the danger from naturalised Germans. ‘The leopard cannot change his spots’, he explained, ‘and the born German remains a German to the end of his days’.⁹⁵ In fact, ‘Every German who becomes naturalised as an Englishman is a traitor to his country, and we have no room for traitors in this country to-day’.⁹⁶ But at the outbreak of war, there were no more than eight thousand naturalised Germans in Britain, most of whom were without access to sensitive information or positions and were of relatively humble means and circumstances.⁹⁷ This was no secret army, let alone an Invisible Hand. But they were enough for Le Queux to maintain the illusions of the German enemy within and of the purity of the British people. This was both the strength of the Invisible Hand theory, and its weakness.

Conclusion

In the last two years of the war Le Queux gave up warning about the Invisible Hand via non-fiction, while occasionally returning to the theme in his fiction. For example, it featured heavily in his novel *The Zeppelin Destroyer*, published in June 1916, in which it was again linked to an aerial threat. Here, the Invisible Hand is credited with uncovering every advance in British aviation during the war while simultaneously causing confusion in the higher direction of the war:

The Invisible Hand was established in our midst in about 1906, when the Kaiser sat down and craftily prepared for war. He saw himself faced by the problem of the great British power and patriotism, and knew that the Briton would fight every inch for his liberty. Therefore the All-Highest Hun – the man who will be held up to universal damnation for all time – proceeded to adopt towards us the principle of dry-rot in wood. He started a system of sending slowly, but very surely, his insect-sycophants to burrow into the beam of good British oak which had hitherto supported our nation. That beam, to-day, is riddled

95. Ibid., 128.

96. Ibid., 128.

97. Panayi, *Prisoners of Britain*, 51.

by these Teutonic worms – insects which, like the book-worm, are never seen, yet, directed by the Invisible Hand, are only known by their works.⁹⁸

The Zeppelin Destroyer also seems to have marked the end of his serious concerns about aerial bombardment, perhaps because its publication was swiftly followed by the end of the Zeppelin menace as Britain's air defences finally began to have effect, downing six of the previously near-invulnerable airships in the last four months of 1916.⁹⁹

One of the Invisible Hand's last appearances was in *The Bomb-Makers*, published in December 1917, although he now bowed to common usage and termed it the Hidden Hand, 'upon which the newspapers were ever commenting – that secret and subtle influence of Germany in our midst in war-time'.¹⁰⁰ While he still believed that naturalised Germans were behind the Invisible or Hidden Hand, he now argued that it operated primarily through the blackmail of neutral subjects living in Britain, based on the possession of 'documentary evidence of such a damning character that, if handed to the proper quarter, would either have caused their arrest and punishment, or, in the case of the fair sex, cause their social ostracism'.¹⁰¹ Even now, Le Queux believed the British themselves to be immune to German blandishments, yet here his evolving conspiracy theory appears to be drawing nearer to those of his competitors. He had previously acknowledged only one other writer as being aware of the danger of the Invisible Hand, 'Vanic' of the *Sunday Referee*, namely the navalist, eugenicist and journalist Arnold White.¹⁰² White's popular *The Hidden Hand*, published in the autumn of 1917, was relatively

98. William Le Queux, *The Zeppelin Destroyer: Being Some Chapters of Secret History* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1916), 46–47.

99. Christopher Cole and E. F. Cheesman, *The Air Defence of Britain 1914–1918* (London: Putnam, 1984), 151–153.

100. William Le Queux, *The Bomb-Makers: Being Some Curious Records Concerning the Craft and Cunning of Theodore Drost, an Enemy Alien in London, together with Certain Revelations Regarding his Daughter Ella* (London: Jarrolds, n.d. [1917]), 64. The Hidden Hand also appeared in another novel which Le Queux may have written in 1918, but appears not to have been published until after his death: William Le Queux, *Sant of the Secret Service: Some Revelations of Spies and Spying* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d. [1929?]).

101. Le Queux, *Bomb-Makers*, 70.

102. Le Queux, *Way to Win*, 123.

tame, but he had already gone much further.¹⁰³ In May 1916, White argued that the ‘failure to intern all Germans is due to the invisible hand that protects urnings [homosexuals] of enemy race’, who, along with their ‘agents’, were engaged in ‘the systematic seduction of young British soldiers’.¹⁰⁴ He warned that ‘if the conception of home life is replaced by the Kultur of urnings, the spirit of the Anglo-Saxon world wilts and perishes’.¹⁰⁵ In early 1918, the aviator and independent MP Noel Pemberton Billing republished these claims in his far-right journal, *Vigilante*, along with the even more lurid fantasies of Harold Spencer, which resulted in the infamous ‘Cult of the Clitoris’ libel trial in May and June.¹⁰⁶ The hints in *The Bomb-Makers* of the use of blackmail by naturalised Germans must owe something to this atmosphere of sexual paranoia, but unlike White, even now Le Queux could not conceive of the fundamental perversion of the British race. For him, the enemy within always remained a foreigner; it was winning the war that was at stake, not procreation in peace.

103. Arnold White, *The Hidden Hand* (London: Grant Richards, 1917).

104. Arnold White, ‘Efficiency and Vice’, *English Review*, no. 90 (May 1916), 451.

105. *Ibid.*, 451.

106. Searle, *Corruption in British Politics*, 260–265; Jodie Medd, ‘“The Cult of the Clitoris”: Anatomy of a National Scandal’, *Modernism/Modernity* 9, no. 1 (2002), 21–49.

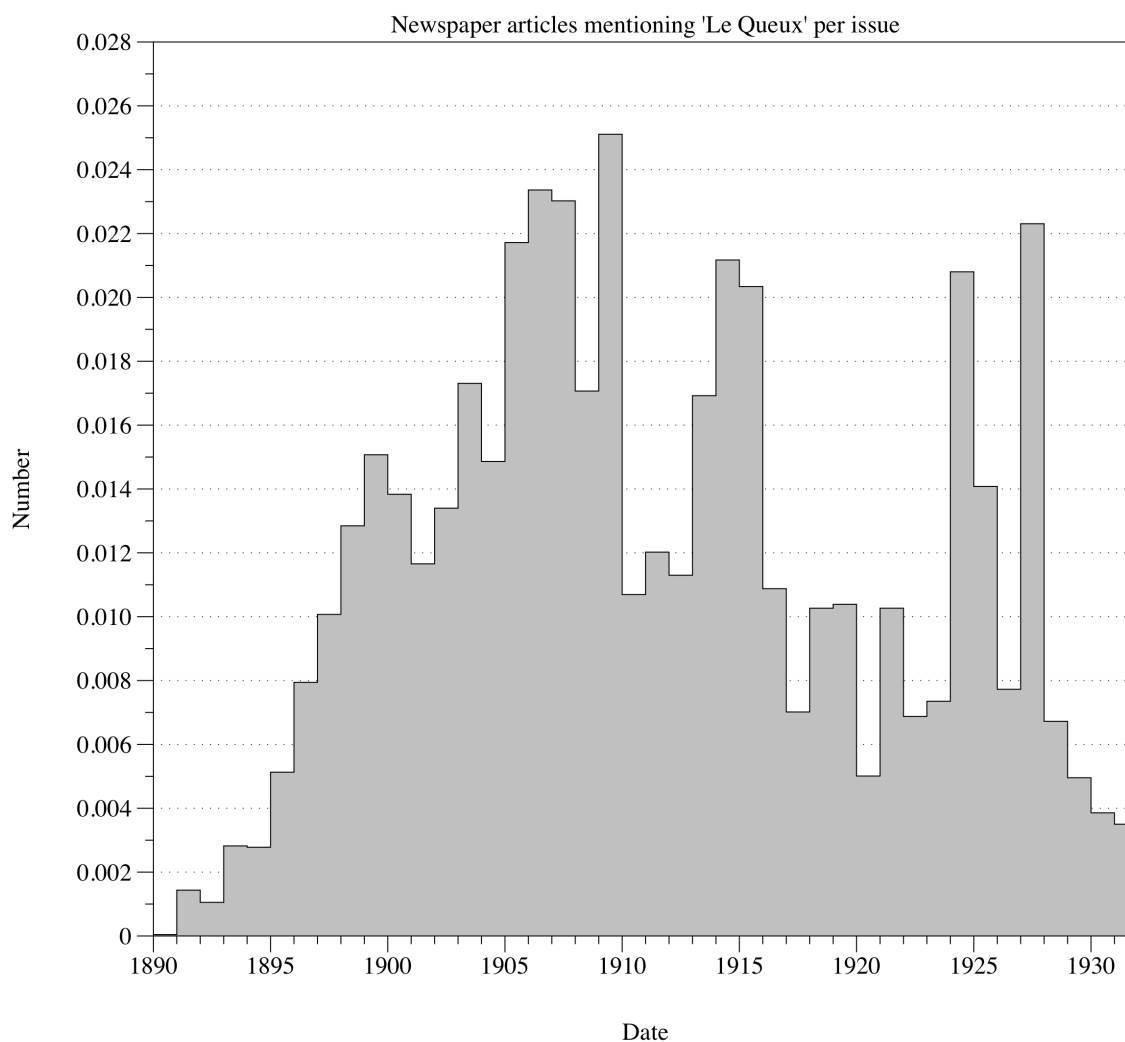


Figure 1. Number of articles in the British Newspaper Archive containing the phrase ‘Le Queux’ per issue, 1890–1932.

In any case, press interest in Le Queux’s writing had long since waned by 1918 (see Figure 1).¹⁰⁷ His claims about an Invisible Hand holding Britain back from victory no longer

107. Figure 1 shows the rate at which the phrase ‘Le Queux’ appears in the British Newspaper Archive (BNA; <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>) each year between 1891, the year before the publication of his first book, and 1932, the year after the last of his considerable backlog of new works remaining at the time of his death was published. The numbers were compiled on 30 September 2016 and are normalised against the number of newspaper issues in BNA for that year, as a crude way of accounting for the completeness of its sample of all British newspapers. Given the rarity of the surname Le Queux in English, virtually all of these references must be to Le

attracted the attention they had in 1915. In part this may have been because even in their ultimate, most paranoid form, they could not compete with the still more lurid versions peddled by White and Spencer. But it also seems to be because of his retreat from the non-fiction genre back into the more comfortable borderlands of novels drawing on supposedly factual elements, like *The Zeppelin Destroyer* and *The Bomb-Makers*. This was the mode he was used to writing in before the war, when *Spies of the Kaiser* and other works had helped create the image of the German spy and the reality of the British counterspy. But it was the more straightforwardly ‘factual’ works like *German Spies in England*, *Britain’s Deadly Peril* and *The Way to Win* that were the most persuasive and had the most impact of Le Queux’s wartime writing.¹⁰⁸ Despite the dubious and sometimes simply fabricated nature of these books, key to their success was the relatively sober documentary style in which their sensational claims about the twin menaces of Zeppelins and spies was presented. By contrast, Le Queux’s late-war novels lacked verisimilitude and received little or no attention in the press. Perhaps the crushing reality of an increasingly apocalyptic conflict meant that his fantasies were no longer necessary. At the end of a total war, alongside a stream of dispatches, maps, photographs, films and people bringing news from the front, fiction – even in its factional form – was not able to persuade like a lie presented as fact.

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Queux himself, and this graph therefore provides a reasonably reliable index of the British press’s interest in him over the course of his writing career.

108. The reverse seems to have been true in peacetime. After the cataclysm of the war, writers of otherwise non-fictional warnings about the new danger of aerial bombardment often resorted to fictional modes in order to impress readers with the full scale of the disaster that threatened them if nothing were done to avert it. See, for example, L. E. O. Charlton, *War over England* (London: Longman, Greens & Co., 1936), the last third of which was written as a novel (and indeed was published separately as *The Next War* [London: Longman, Greens & Co., 1937]). See, generally, Brett Holman, *The Next War in the Air: Britain’s Fear of the Bomber, 1908–1941* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

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Notes

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