

Frank Sawyers (1902-1972)

Churchill's Wartime Valet

Introduction

Historian Christopher Catherwood described Winston Churchill as a 'flawed genius.' If the political genius is understood as a person who has made a dramatic and positive contribution to the history of their country – such as by successfully steering their nation through a brutal war and inspiring them in the process – then many people would agree with this interpretation. However, research into the nature of acknowledged 'geniuses,' such as by Edward Dutton and Bruce Charlton in *The Genius Famine*, has found that their abilities are often extremely lop-sided. People who have extraordinarily high intelligence may be surprisingly incompetent at tasks that are only weakly associated with general intelligence, such as driving a car or successfully getting on with others. Thus, it has been proposed that while the 'genius' can make outstanding contributions to the world, he has difficulty with mundane tasks and, so, in effect needs somebody to run his life for him.

These unsung heroes of history – the organisers behind the genius throne – are thus of great interest. With regard to Churchill, there have already been studies of his prep school headmaster (*Churchill's Headmaster*, by Edward Dutton), and his long-time cook (*Victory in the Kitchen* by Anne Gray) and his nanny Elizabeth Everest (qv). Another such person is Winston Churchill's valet, Carlisle-born Frank Sawyers (1902-1972), who organised Churchill's life for him between 1939 and the end of 1946. Though Churchill employed other valets before and after Sawyers, Sawyers played a particularly crucial walk-on role in British history due to the fact that he served Churchill throughout World War II.

The Road to Chartwell

Frank Sawyers was born in Carlisle on 27th August 1902. He was the youngest child of a family of nine surviving children. His father was William Sawyers (1861-1933), a chemical labourer originally from Smithfield, near Kirkclinton, in Cumberland, according to the 1911 census. His mother was Williamina Ainslie (1862-1932), from Longtown in the same county, who was the posthumous daughter of an agricultural labourer, though she went to school according to the 1871 census. Before Williamina married, she was a domestic servant. According to the censuses, Sawyers' siblings were Mary (subsequently Mrs Moses) (1881-1933), Rosanna (1883-1886), John (1885-1886), Richard (1887-1917) a brewers' drayman who was killed in action in World War I, James Ainslie (1888-?) who emigrated to America in 1923 and by the 1940 census lived in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and worked as an engine inspector; Jane (later Mrs Kellett) (1892-1979) who worked in a shirt-making factory in 1911, Thomas (1892-1928) a farm servant in 1911, William (1896-1958), a telegram messenger in 1911, Sarah (1898-1947), who never married, and Robert Cromwell (1899-1941) a marine gunner who was killed when his ship was sunk in May 1941. The family were Anglican, with Rosanna having been christened at the parish church in Arthuret on 24th June 1883.

Clearly, there was a certain amount of tragedy in Sawyers' family. He lost a brother in World War I and another brother in World War II, one of his brothers and two of his sisters both died relatively young, and two siblings passed away as infants in the same year. We can assume that, like his siblings, Sawyers left school at the age of 13, which was the age that most people completed their education at the time. Precisely what happened after Sawyers left school is unclear. He did not fight in the Great War, being slightly too young. It seems probable that he went into service as a junior servant in a local gentry household and worked his way up that system. It is possible that, at some point, this was the household of Hugh

Lowther, earl of Lonsdale (1857-1944; [ODNB](#)) or the household of one of Lowther's close relatives, for reasons we will look at shortly.

Sawyers' life is a blank until summer 1937, when he married Ellen Simpson in Carlisle. She appears to have been born in Carlisle in 1916, the daughter of George Simpson (1888-1963), a carpenter. However, Ellen cannot be found on the 1939 register and was certainly no longer living with Sawyers at that point. In 1939, Sawyers himself was a servant at Pewsham House, in Chippenham in Wiltshire, to Major William Lowther Lysley (1875-1944). Even so, he was still married to Ellen in January 1946 when he sailed to New York with Churchill and his wife Clementine (1885-1977). On his immigration form, filled in on 14th January, Sawyers specifically stated that he was married but there is no mention of Sawyers having had a wife in any accounts that discuss him. Indeed, novelist Michael Dobbs [b.1948], who consulted Sawyers' niece Mrs Doreen Jones (1935-2013) [nee Sawyers] before writing his novel *Churchill's Hour*, in which Sawyers was a character, tells us in the novel that: 'Sawyers was unmarried and always would be – a gentleman's gentleman.' This is clearly inaccurate. Considering the unacceptability of marital breakdown and divorce during this period, it may be that Sawyers did all that he could to conceal what had happened, including from his own family. Any record of Ellen's remarriage or death in the English records has proved elusive.

William Lysley was the son of Frances Lowther who was herself the daughter of Sir Charles Lowther, Bart (1803-1894) of Wilton Castle, Cleveland, whose family was distantly related to the Earl of Lonsdale, at Lowther Castle, Penrith. So, it may have been via these connections that Sawyers migrated from Cumberland to Wiltshire. William Lysley, in turn, had a link with Churchill. His older brother, Captain Gerard Lowther Lysley (1872-1900), was killed in action at Bergendal in South Africa during the Boer War in 1900. According to his memoirs, Churchill was embedded with the same force as a reporter for *The Morning Post*

at the time, so it seems likely that this was the key association. Certainly, by the end of 1939, Sawyers had left the employ of William Lowther Lysley and he was working as Churchill's valet; his full-time personal servant, with a particular responsibility for his attire.

Sawyers' Time with Churchill

Information on the character and work of Sawyers with Churchill comes from a variety of sources. In his biography of Churchill, Martin Gilbert notes that Churchill himself wrote a letter of recommendation for Sawyers, in June 1946, to the merchant banker Sir Strati Ralli, Bart (1876-1964) when Sawyers desired to leave Churchill's service. 'Sawyers came everywhere with me in these six and half tempestuous years, and showed many excellent qualities,' Churchill wrote, adding that Sawyers was 'honest,' attended well to personal details, was 'attentive,' 'always rises to the occasion' and 'stood up to bombardment well.' 'He has a good memory and always knows where everything is. He is leaving me at his own wish and I am sorry to lose him.' Sawyers accompanied Churchill on all foreign trips, often sleeping in the room next door to his.

Sawyers' attention to detail was evidenced at his frustration at being forced to pack in great haste during the Yalta conference of February 1945, because Churchill suddenly decided that his entire party should leave and stay somewhere else. Lord Moran (1882-1977), Churchill's personal physician, wrote in his diary of Churchill shouting, 'Sawyers! Where is everyone?!' and of Sawyers being clearly upset and saying, 'They can't do this to me!' while surrounded by half-packed bags and 'literally beating his breast.' Churchill's daughter, Sarah Oliver (1914-1982), noted of the same incident: 'He put a sponge bag in and then put it out. He carefully laid out the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports suit, then changed it for the Royal Yacht Club suit' with Churchill all the time admonishing, 'Come on! Come on!' This desire

for perfection was also found during the War. Field Marshal Alan Brooke (1883-1963) recalled that Churchill snapped, ‘What’s wrong Sawyers?! Why are you getting in my way?!’ to which Sawyers replied, in his thick Cumbrian accent, ‘The brim of your hat is turned up, does not look well, turn it down, turn it down.’ Churchill did as instructed and Sawyers moved to a corner, muttering to himself: ‘That’s much better, much better, much better.’ Sawyers prepared Churchill’s baths, which he had daily, with similar precision, always ensuring that they were exactly ‘98 degrees Fahrenheit and two thirds.’

According to Lord Moran, Sawyers once infuriated Churchill with his perfectionism while cleaning. Sawyers was mopping when Churchill told him, ‘That will do Sawyers. You can do it later.’ But Sawyers continued mopping, causing Churchill to shout, ‘Oh, leave it, Sawyers! Come back later!’ He wanted Sawyers out of the room so that he could tell Moran about the Americans’ new invention, the atomic bomb. Sawyers was a stickler for punctuality, constantly concerned about lateness: ‘Sawyers just kept looking at his watch,’ records Lord Moran. However, Sawyers – perhaps due to perfectionism – would often be in a last minute rush himself. According to Churchill’s secretary from 1941 to 1945, Elizabeth Nel (1917-2007), Sawyers ‘never quite managed to be on time, though with a rush and a flurry at the last minute, he avoided any major calamity.’ She recalls how diligent he was, working ‘with almost never a day off,’ observing ‘poor Sawyers, who had no time for lunch, looking half dead.’ However, it seems that, away from ‘the gentry,’ there was a very different side to Sawyers. Beneath the fastidious, though occasionally irritable, servant persona was a brilliant sense of humour. Sawyers would do impressions and was a ‘perfect scream,’ the impact being enhanced by his lisp, and his dramatic mannerisms. He would recap amusing incidents, ‘which arose chiefly from errors on the part of those he served.’ ‘His gestures combined with his [speech impediment](#) made him very funny indeed. “Oh, [Mist](#),” [‘[Miss](#)’] he would say, “And you know what he did next?”’ Nel also described Sawyers’ appearance:

‘Though he was still quite young, he was hairless, short, and round, pale of face and somewhat toothless.’ According to novelist Michael Dobbs, who consulted Sawyers’ niece for a novel about Churchill as noted above, Sawyers also had ‘piercing blue eyes,’ had to bathe and dress Churchill as he was incapable of so-doing himself, and disliked Churchill’s cat due to the scratch marks it left.

However, much as Churchill, Nel and Lord Moran seemed to like Sawyers, the civil servant Sir John Colville (1915-1987) disliked him, referring to him in his diaries as ‘the inevitable, egregious Sawyers’ who would always be present whenever he wanted to speak to Churchill. Sawyers had been with Churchill at a dinner in Tehran where Stalin had toasted Sawyers’ health, leaving Sawyers ‘slightly swollen headed.’ However, these entries may have reflected momentary irritation, as Colville later referred to Sawyers as ‘a considerate character’ who took the ‘utmost care’ of Churchill and ‘would have made his fortune on the stage’. In 1945, Sawyers was awarded the Defence Medal, for his services, in Churchill’s resignation honours list.

Sawyers’ Time After Churchill

For whatever reason, Sawyers had decided to leave Churchill’s service by summer 1946. According to his niece, Doreen Jones by 1947 he was the valet to the ‘assistant governor General’ of ‘Rhodesia.’ The problem in confirming this is that ‘Rhodesia’ did not exist at the time; there was ‘Northern Rhodesia’ (now Zambia) and ‘Southern Rhodesia’ (now Zimbabwe). ‘Rhodesia’ was subsequently the legal name of Southern Rhodesia, so it may be that this is what Mrs Jones meant. However, there appears to be no evidence that there was ever an ‘Assistant Governor’ of Rhodesia. Had Sawyers been valet to the governor of Southern Rhodesia between 1947 and 1953, Sir John Noble Kennedy (1893-1970), this

would make sense, as Kennedy and Churchill knew each other well, due to Kennedy having been assistant chief of the Imperial Staff during the War. Mrs Jones claimed that Sawyers' next move was back to England, to be the valet for Lord Astor (1907-1966) at Hever Castle in Kent. This move also seems plausible because, according to historian Christopher Sykes, Astor's mother, American socialite Nancy Astor (1879-1964) (the first female member of the House of Commons to take up her seat) was a close friend of Lady Kennedy.

According to Mrs Jones, Sawyers served the Astors in the 1950s. By 1965, when Churchill died, Sawyers was the valet to businessman and motoring magazine editor Leon Mandel (1928-2002) in Chicago. It was reported in January 1965 in the *Arizona Republic* newspaper that Sawyers was located by the American government on Mandel's yacht and flown, at the US government's expense, back to Britain for Churchill's funeral along with wartime Supreme Commander of Allied Expeditionary Force, Europe and former president Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969) and then current Secretary of State Dean Rusk (1909-1994). However, it seems that Sawyers worked for somebody else in America before working for Mandel. On 18th November 1960, Churchill sent Sawyers a telegram in which he wrote, 'Thank you so much for your thought.' It is unclear to what this was the response but it gave Sawyers' address as Pastorage, a mansion in Old Westbury on Long Island in New York. This was built in 1932 for the banker Robert Winthrop (1904-1999) and his family. So a member of this family may have been Sawyers' employer at the time. According to historians Paul Fryer and Olga Usova, the Astors and the Winthrops were certainly connected, with the former giving the name 'Winthrop' to a number of children. Sawyers also sent Churchill a telegram of condolence in 1963 when Churchill's daughter, Diana Churchill (1909-1963), committed suicide, for which Churchill thanked him by way of reply. Whatever the connection, it may also be that Sawyers wished to emigrate to America, in part, because his elder brother James Ainslie Sawyers already lived there, in Pennsylvania.

Sawyers' Retirement

By 1970 at the latest, Sawyers had moved back to his childhood home of Carlisle. We know this from his will, dated 21st August 1970. He was living at 144 Milbourne Street in Carlisle, near both the river Caldew and the railway station, in a small, brick, terraced house. His will reveals that at some point he had converted to Roman Catholicism, leaving legacies to 'The Convent of the Little Sisters of the Poor' in Botcherby, and to the parish priest of the church of Our Lady and St Joseph in Carlisle. Ever the organiser, he gave detailed instructions regarding his funeral and even **the** wake, instructing that he should be buried in an oak coffin with a Catholic emblem on it 'but no shroud' in his family's grave in Upperby Cemetery, with his name added to the headstone. He left his four different dinner and tea services to various nieces and nephews. A love of animals was displayed in his bequeathing £50 to 'the National Equine and Smaller Animals Defence League' and in his leaving his dog, Chappie, and his parrot, Polly, to his nephew. His wife was not mentioned in this will, consistent with their estrangement. Sawyers died on 7th July 1972, aged 69.

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