

**A Riddle of Character:**  
**Erskine Childers and *The Riddle of the Sands***

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Let us set the scene for our story. It is the turn of the twentieth century. It is late summer in London, the time of year when everyone who is anyone has escaped metropolitan heat for rural frolics. A fashionable young man is imprisoned in the city, cut off from the summer parties in country houses populated by beautiful maidens with whom he is accustomed to flirt. He is stuck in London working at his Foreign Office post. He is irritated. He is grumpy.

Our fashionable youth, who turns out to be our narrator, Carruthers, receives a letter from a university acquaintance inviting him to do some yachting and duck shooting in the Baltic. The writer is an Oxford college chum named Davies. Carruthers considers the offer while dining alone at his club. The prospect of shivering in the Baltic was appalling. And Davies? He assays his character: "I had known him at Oxford—not as one of my immediate set; but we were a sociable college, and I had seen a good deal of him, liking him for his physical energy combined with a certain simplicity and modesty." Still, he concludes, Davies "seems to know none of my friends, he dressed indifferently, and I thought him dull." Despite these faults, Carruthers accepts the invitation as the only way to escape the tedium of a depopulated London. A few days later he arrives at a small Danish seaport with a large portmanteau and dressed to the nines in finest fashionable yachting attire. He finds Davies dressed in stained tweeds and sweater, with a bloody, bandaged hand. And instead of a large yacht manned by a well-dressed crew he finds a tiny sailboat, a retrofitted lifeboat with cramped, smelly quarters, called the *Dulcibella*.

Thus begins what many readers consider the first *important* spy novel. The book in question is *The Riddle of the Sands*, written by Robert Erskine Childers and published in 1903. It is the tale of two

Englishmen who together uncover a secret plot by Kaiser Wilhelm of imperial Germany to invade Great Britain. The book was a fictional plea to take seriously the real-world threat of Germany's growing naval power. Its author was a young government clerk who led a remarkable life until ended abruptly by a firing squad. And while intended to be a call to action, the book stands out in the crowded spy-novel genre as a literate and engrossing entertainment. Furthermore, *The Riddle of the Sands* is beloved by yachtsmen and weekend sailors who revel in its exciting maritime adventure. It is perhaps the premier novel about sailing small craft.

Robert Erskine Childers was born in London in 1870 to upper-middle-class parents. His father, Robert Caesar Childers, was an Oxford-educated civil servant in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, who became a scholar of Indian languages and a professor at University College, London. His mother was from a landed Anglo-Irish family. When Erskine was six his father died of tuberculosis. At the time of his father's death, young Erskine, his brother, and three sisters went to live with their maternal aunt at the family estate in County Wicklow, on the east coast of Ireland, while their mother went to an isolation hospital. She died six years later, also of TB, having separated herself from her children for their protection. She kept in contact with them only by letters. Erskine returned to England to attend Haileybury School, and won a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he earned a BA. He stayed on for a year to study law.

During his youth and college days, Childers occupied his free time in walking tours of Ireland and England. He also explored in small boats. His was a life of physical adventure, not limited by a permanent limp developed on one of his forays on foot. During his Cambridge sojourn he co-owned with his older brother a small boat, which he sailed whenever possible. It was the first in a series of small craft he owned in which he developed proficiency as a navigator and seaman. In 1895, Childers obtained a clerkship on the staff of the House of Commons. There he drafted legislation. In his ample spare time he sailed on the Thames and into the English Channel and North Sea. For five months in 1897, in his thirty-foot-long yacht *Vixen*, Childers and two friends explored the North Sea coasts of the Netherlands and

Germany, sailing around their coastal Friesian islands. It was the experience that prompted the idea for *The Riddle of the Sands*.

Two years later, at the start of the Boer War that pitted Great Britain against Dutch colonial settlers in southern Africa, Childers signed up for military service in the City Imperial Volunteer battery of the Honourable Artillery Company, a fashionable army militia unit. Childers was a committed imperialist. His father had served the empire. He had imbibed imperialism at Haileybury, an outpost for training youth for service in the colonies. At Cambridge he had spoken in debates in defense of empire. He served in the army for nearly a year, seeing action while tending the battery's horses.

The City Imperial Volunteers returned to Britain in late 1900. Childers returned to his job clerking in the House of Commons. He wrote up his experiences in the army in South Africa in a book-length unit history titled *In the Ranks of the CIV*, published in 1901. In it, he defends the empire as the right of British, nay, English superiority. Still, in a letter written during the war to a sister Childers doubted that the empire could prevail over the resolute Boers.

In late 1901, Childers began to write *The Riddle of the Sands*. Again, he based much of the book on his sailing vacation in the German North Sea islands. He worked diligently on the manuscript throughout the next year while still clerking in the House.

The turn of the twentieth century was a period of great ferment in Britain. The death of Queen Victoria came amid challenges to Britain's imperial hegemony. France continued to exert global ambitions that prompted diplomatic upheavals. But the rise of Germany as a continental power was the new concern for Britons. Prussia's consolidation over Germany created a new world power. Under Kaiser Wilhelm II, Germany rushed to build an ocean-going fleet to rival Britain's Royal Navy and to create a worldwide empire.

Copies of *The Riddle of the Sands* hit bookstalls in May of 1903. The book received good reviews in the newspapers and became an instant hit. Allow me to outline the plot. The *Dulcibella* was not the kind of yacht Carruthers was expecting. Still, he sticks with the shooting excursion plan. Davies confesses that he had lured Carruthers to his boat on false pretenses. He really needs his facility as a linguist and his general savoir faire to solve a mystery. Davies recounts his recent experience sailing among the Friesian islands in the North Sea off Germany. He had encountered and befriended a German captain Dollmann and his daughter, Clara. But during a gale, Dollmann had tried to lure him onto a shoal where he would wreck. Davies' expert seamanship and luck prevented his death, but Davies is angry. He wants to know why the captain had tried to sink him. Also, though he does not say so, he is smitten by Clara. Furthermore, he astonishes Carruthers by declaring that the captain and his daughter were actually English! He can, he declares, tell an Englishman in disguise. Dollmann was a phony German and up to something, he declares. Davies must know what he is guarding.

The two men agree to sail west to the North Sea via the shipping canal then recently constructed in northern Germany. They then start nosing around the islands, which Davies had been exploring on his own. There they attract the attention of the commander of a German naval patrol craft, von Brüning, who appears affable but is overly curious about their movements and plans. Other events raise further the young Englishmen's suspicions. They encounter Dollmann and daughter again and Carruthers discerns that Clara is smitten by Davies as well, but when she visits the *Dulcibella* she is horrified by something and flees. It turns out that she found on Davies' bookshelf a copy of a book by a Royal Navy officer about sailing in The Wash, the North Sea bay off East Anglia. Davies and Carruthers realize that the author is Dollmann. Dollmann is an ex-British naval officer posing as a German! Astonishment! Why?

Davies and Carruthers learn that Dollmann, Commander von Brüning, and others are to meet on one of the islands. They decide to try to get there and find out what the meeting is about. In the book's best sequence, they row tidal waters in a dense fog and darkness, relying on Davies' superior navigation

skills. Reaching the island, Carruthers goes ashore and, using his fluent German, overhears the discussion. They're plotting something, including getting rid of the two English interlopers. Still, it's difficult for Carruthers to understand what they are trying to hide. Davies and Carruthers then split up, and Carruthers goes undercover on land posing as a sailor. He discovers that in the little creeks that feed into the North Sea hundreds of shallow-draft lighters or barges are under construction and in storage. By further skullduggery he discovers that the barges are intended to carry German troops across the North Sea to land on England's undefended North Sea shore.

Carruthers returns to Davies. Together they decide to confront Dollmann at his house on an island and take him back to England on the *Dulcibella*. They also take Clara. The lovers are united. Dollmann, still an Englishman, does the honorable thing by stepping off the boat into the waves and disappearing. The book ends with an appended Epilogue seemingly written by an editor suggesting that real names had been changed, the events described actually happened, and that Germany posed a real threat of invasion.

As a cautionary tale, *The Riddle of the Sands* operates within two separate but overlapping literary genres. First, in 1903 it was the latest entry in the Invasion Scare category. Britain is an island, and for thousands of years people have invaded it: the Celts in the fifth century BCE, Julius Caesar leading Roman legions, then Angles and Saxons in the fifth century CE, and then the Vikings. The Normans invaded in 1066. The Spanish tried in 1588. The Dutch sailed a fleet up the Thames estuary in 1667. Napoleon Bonaparte planned to invade but the Royal Navy prevented it. The British are sensitive about invaders.

In 1871, shortly after Prussia humiliated France in a short war, an English army officer named George Tomkyns Chesney published anonymously a novel called *The Battle of Dorking*, depicting a successful German invasion of Britain. In the novel the British are crushed and its empire is broken up.

Chesney's aim was to shock the country and stimulate military and naval defense measures. In the following years hundreds of novels and stories appeared in Britain warning of foreign invasion. In most cases up to the 1890s, it was traditional-foe France that posed the threat. But the rapid development of the German imperial fleet, combined with Kaiser Wilhelm's growing colonial ambitions, including support for the Boers in southern Africa, tipped the scales toward Germany. Germany became the feared invader. Hack writers like William Le Queux and E. Phillips Oppenheim cranked out pot-boilers warning of invasion by France or Germany. Their novels often appeared serialized in newspapers owned by British press barons who had political axes to grind. So numerous and portentous was the genre that P.G. Wodehouse satirized it in his novel, *The Swoop! Or How Clarence Saved England* (1909).

Marching in step with the invasion-scare genre was the spy novel. James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy* from 1821 is often credited as the first spy novel. In the late-nineteenth century authors like Oppenheim and Le Queux mixed espionage with the threat of foreign invasion. They wrote their stories according to formulae. They threw in glamor, double-dealing traitors, and femmes fatales. The books are boring: they aren't well-written, characters are based on stereotypes and lack nuance, and so on. Oppenheim's *The Mysterious Mr. Sabin* from 1898 is often viewed as the first true spy thriller. Le Queux produced titles such as *The Poisoned Bullet* or *Spies of the Kaiser*.

Erskine Childers was aware of these pot-boiler conventions. He knew the spy novel and invasion-scare genres had political agenda. As a British imperialist he supported them. In *The Riddle of the Sands*, he bows to convention in making his protagonists club-land gentlemen, amateurs in the business of spying. They stumble onto something nefarious. They are accidental spies.

But Childers went beyond the formulae and bad writing. He developed real characters in Carruthers and Davies. Davies, Carruthers tells us, is affable but dull. We learn he failed the entrance examination to become a naval officer. After graduating from Oxford he failed the Indian civil-service

examination. He has no facility for languages, can't spell properly, is socially awkward, and gets tongue tied in the presence of Clara. He's not really a proper English gentleman. In the course of the story, however, he is revealed to be fearless and possesses great skill in handling a small sailing vessel. It helps to understand Davies's character as Childers first envisioned him when we know that he wrote the book originally without the character of Clara Dollmann. But the publisher insisted on including a love interest. Childers revised the text to include one. There's a slight wiff of sex when the two heroes appear at Dollmann's house to take the erstwhile English naval officer and his truly English daughter back to Blighty. Clara appears in her nightgown, bare necked and bare foot.

On the other hand, in the course of the novel Carruthers achieves real growth in his character. At the start of the narrative he is an effete clubland dandy, sadly vexed and put-upon by minor hindrances. He's charming and popular with women. He possesses language skills and the ability to talk his way out of difficulties. During his adventures he puts these skills to good use in outwitting German plotters. More importantly, Carruthers comes to admire Davies' real abilities and his steadiness of character. He comes to see Davies as a real Englishman.

Critics have suggested that Childers possessed characteristics of both Carruthers and Davies. He was, like Carruthers, comfortable in club land and the halls of power. He was a capable writer and speaker. Like Davies, he was adept in small sailing vessels. He was single-minded in his pursuits.

After the successful appearance of his book, Childers crossed the Atlantic with comrades of the Honourable Artillery Company to visit a similar militia counterpart in Boston. While there he met Mary Alden Osgood, the daughter of a wealthy Boston physician. She and her mother posed for a dual portrait by the fashionable painter John Singer Sargent. Born with a hip condition, she had surgery at age 13 that allowed her to walk but only in pain. Molly Childers was an intelligent, well-educated young woman. It was love at first encounter. After a rapid courtship Erskine and Molly married in January of 1904. As a

wedding present, her father commissioned a Norwegian shipbuilder to build a sailing yacht for the couple, called the *Asgard*. When completed in 1905, the couple frequently sailed the 49-foot, 28-ton vessel in the seas around England and the Baltic. Childers returned to his work as a parliamentary clerk and the couple made their home in London. They moved in fashionable literary circles, counting Fabian Society founders Beatrice and Sidney Webb, historian George Trevelyan, and novelists Arthur Conan Doyle and Henry James as friends. They had two children, sons born in 1905 and 1910.

Erskine Childers wrote and published works on the military history of the Boer War. He was involved in British politics and was a member of the Liberal Party, which alternated with the Conservatives for control of the House of Commons. Some of you may be unfamiliar with British politics at the turn of the twentieth century. Oscar Wilde comes to our aid in his play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Lady Bracknell is interrogating Jack Worthing as to his suitability to marry her daughter. She asks: "What are your politics?"

Jack: I am afraid I really have none. I am a Liberal Unionist.

Lady Bracknell: Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evenings, at any rate.

If you are familiar with *The Importance of Being Earnest* through the excellent film version from 1952, directed by Anthony Asquith, it is notable that Asquith was the son of former Liberal Party prime minister, Herbert Asquith.

Writer George Dangerfield attempted to describe the Liberals in his brilliant account of British politics of the era, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*:

To reduce the Liberal Party to a definition would be like attempting to reduce the glandular contours of a circus Fat Lady by simply talking her thin. It was an irrational mixture of whig aristocrats, industrialists, dissenters, reformers, trade unionists, quacks and Mr. Lloyd George; it



preserved itself from the destructive contradictions of daily reality by an almost mystical communion with the doctrine of *laissez-faire* and a profound belief in the English virtue of compromise. [p. 72]

Childers grew increasingly focused on Irish affairs and in 1910 resigned his clerkship to focus on Irish home rule. The issue had dominated parliamentary debates for decades. As biographer Burke Wilkinson notes, Childers believed strongly that small nations should have the right of self-governance. He later resigned from the Liberal Party in protest of concessions made to unionists and delays in instituting Irish home rule. In 1911 he published *The Framework of Home Rule*, a book-length historical and economic argument for granting Ireland dominion status, like what Canada has today. It is part of the empire but self-governing. He, a protestant Englishman, believed a compromise could be reached. He appealed to the goodwill of fellow Britons, though he knew that resistance to home rule was growing in Britain and Ulster, the protestant north of Ireland.

Three years later, in the summer of 1914, in reaction to the arming of Ulster unionists, Erskine and Molly Childers worked with fellow supporters of Irish home rule to smuggle guns into the island. He did a deal with shady German arms dealers selling obsolete German army rifles. He and Molly, with some friends acting as crew, sailed the *Asgard* from Wales to the Belgian coast, loaded it to the gunnels with boxes full of rifles and ammunition tied securely down, and sailed around the southern coast of England to offload the rifles in an Irish port in broad daylight. It took four days to sail the return leg, passing through the Royal Navy fleet en route. Molly was often at the helm. It should be noted that the arms were later used in the 1916 Easter Rising, a failed attempt to free Ireland.

The beginning of the Great War, or World War One, in August 1914 found Erskine Childers volunteering to serve in Britain's defense. He was 44 years old. Neither his gun-running, which was known to authorities, nor his advocacy for Irish home rule, negated the fact that he was an Englishman

rallying to defend his country. Germany was the aggressor and had invaded Belgium and France. He gave the Admiralty his charts and soundings of the German Friesian coast to help plan an invasion. He then flew as navigator on naval aircraft to bomb German military bases on the Friesian coast. He was transferred to the Mediterranean and served in the Gallipoli campaign. He earned the Distinguished Service Cross. He later trained for action in a coastal motor-boat squadron to operate in the channel. The War Office then transferred him to the Royal Air Force to serve as an intelligence officer in briefing aircrews on bombing raids. The war ended, and he left the service in early 1919. During the war Molly volunteered in aid of Belgian refugees and kept up the work for Irish home rule.

The war had interrupted the development of Irish home rule. Just before the war, Parliament passed a home-rule law with the proviso that Ulster would remain in the union for six more years. But with the coming of war Parliament suspended implementation of the act for the war's duration. At war's end, in 1918, Sinn Fein, an Irish political party that supported independence, won a big victory in parliamentary elections. But its members refused to take their seats in Westminster, and instead declared an Irish parliament, or Dáil Eireann, and an Irish Republic. The British government outlawed both the Dáil and Sinn Fein, which went underground. Guerrilla war ravaged Ireland. In 1920 Westminster passed a new home rule law creating separate parliaments for Ulster and southern, or Catholic, Ireland. But the Dáil rejected it.

Biographers are of mixed minds about the process, but Childers moved gradually from supporting union under the British empire, to Irish nationalism, to belief in complete Irish independence. During the guerrilla fighting Childers became the public spokesman for the Republican cause. In press releases and newspaper articles he used his formidable rhetorical skills to debate British prime minister David Lloyd George and portray the repressive tactics of the British government. In 1921, British troops captured Childers. But he was released during a truce requested by British prime minister David Lloyd George to negotiate a treaty.

Childers was among those sent by Irish leader Eamon De Valera to London to negotiate. Talks with the British government went on for months. The Irish delegation grew more divided. Childers sided with the Republican camp, opposing Dominion status. In December, Lloyd George declared that the Irish delegates must accept dominion status or face a military onslaught. They buckled under the threat and signed the treaty.

Childers did not. In the ratification debates in the Dáil he, a deputy, and others argued against acceptance. But a narrow majority voted in favor of Dominion status. Childers joined the Irish Republican Army and fought in the guerrilla war against the forces of the newly created Irish Free State. He wrote the IRA's propaganda. By this time, after years of physical and mental strain, he was a worn out wreck, thin, gray, sickly. In November, 1922, Free State forces captured him. He was tried by a military court for possession of an illegal weapon—a small revolver—found guilty, and sentenced to death.

Childers smuggled out of prison a statement explaining his logical course toward a wholly independent Ireland. He wrote goodbye to Molly. His older son, Erskine Hamilton Childers, then a teenager, came to him in his cell. He asked his son to promise to shake hands with all the members of the Irish firing squad. He himself shook hands with each Free State soldier. As they lined up in firing position, the soldiers broke down at the prospect of executing an Irish national hero. To assist them, he called out: "Come closer boys. It will be easier for you."

Biographer Burke Wilkinson titles his book on Childers, *The Zeal of the Convert*. Other biographers employ the word "riddle" in their titles, a nod to Childers's great novel and to the mystery of his conversion. Erskine Childers was a complicated man. His transformation from English imperialist to Irish republican was remarkable. I have only skimmed the surface in telling the story of his life. I want foremost to acquaint you with the novel, which is a well-written, ripping yarn. It captures the thrills of

sailing small craft. Besides, what other spy novel includes nautical charts? I recommend *The Riddle of the Sands* to all my friends.

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