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Seen by as PM  
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1800

MR. WHITMORE

Sir John Colville telephoned me at 1440 today. He said that he wanted to give me some background to the story on page one of the Sunday Times.

He said that the Sunday Times had got hold of a garbled version of something which had actually happened in 1939 but had placed it in 1948 when he had been Private Secretary to Princess Elizabeth. He had therefore felt it necessary to set the record straight, and had accordingly spoken to the Sunday Times.

What had happened was as follows. In 1952 Lord Talbot (who at that time had some responsibility or other for security matters) had shown him a manuscript document which gave character descriptions of about twenty people including himself, Sir David Pitblado and various others. Talbot had asked him if he could help to identify the writer of these descriptions.

On seeing the document, he had decided that the description of himself was written by a man called Mr. John Cairncross.

This man had joined the FCO just before the war where they had been colleagues. He (Sir John) had then checked his diary and found that he had indeed had lunch with Cairncross in 1939, and it was following this lunch that the character description had been written.

Cairncross had left the FCO shortly afterwards and moved to the Treasury. He then at a later stage had moved to the Atomic Energy Authority, and he was there when he was discovered as the writer of the character descriptions in 1952. It was quickly established that he had been a Communist before the war, though he had become somewhat disenchanted with them after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Following the revelation, he was forced to resign from the AEA.

/ Sir John explained

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Sir John explained that the event which the Sunday Times reporter had got wrong was the lunch which he had had with Cairncroff. They had initially placed it in 1948, which if true, would have been immensely damaging in view of his (Sir John's) position. He had therefore decided to set the record straight, that he had not mentioned the man's name to anyone as yet - except to the Home Secretary, with whom he had spoken the previous day.

*Passage deleted and closed under FOI Exemption.  
Wayland, 11 March 2014*

I said that I would pass this information to the Prime Minister. Perhaps I could leave this for you to do before the meeting this evening.

Sir John finished by saying that if we wanted any further information he would be very ready to speak to us tomorrow.

T.P. Lankester

18 November 1979

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