

**‘It’s a narsty biziness’:
Conservatism and Subversion in 1930s Detective Fiction and Thrillers
Glyn White**

This chapter focuses on popular fiction and particularly the crime genre, encompassing both the detective story and the thriller. Critical surveys looking back across the decades finds these subgenres difficult to distinguish over time but writers of the 1930s are very much aware of which subgenre they are writing in and its relative status. In 1942 Nicholas Blake asserted that ‘It is an established fact that the detective novel proper is read almost exclusively by the upper and professional classes. The so-called “lower middle” and “working classes” tend to read “bloods”, thrillers.’ And, he points out, ‘the modern thriller is generally much below the detective story in sophistication and style’ (xxii) Given the perceived hierarchy of readership and regard, defining the difference between these subgenres became important to some authors.

In 1936, Dorothy L. Sayers identified ‘the most important principle of the modern detective story’ which she calls the ‘Fair-Play Rule’ (vii) as what marks detective fiction out. Sayers sees this defining characteristic as implicit in the foundational tales of the genre by Edgar Allan Poe, and Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone*, but lost in the welter of Victorian sensation fiction, until Conan Doyle’s Holmes, and almost lost again in the overdone reaction to sensation fiction when detective short stories reduced the form to ‘over-intellectualized’ puzzles in which ‘human interest was lost in the mechanical ingenuities of the plot.’ (xii) What Sayers is doing here, not at all objectively, is charting the most respectable line through the vicissitudes of sordid popularity. She very much wants detective fiction to keep the respectable mainstream literary novel in sight and is wary about it being equated with other forms of ‘popular’ literature.

Popular fiction in the 1930s was generally regarded by literary critics on both right and left as either irredeemably bad or as a damaging addictive vice. Q.D. Leavis argues in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) that – alongside radio, cinema and newspapers – popular literature ‘does not merely fail to help him [the reader], it prevents him from normal development.’ (224-5) To [practitioner](#) Christopher Caudwell in 1937 popular fiction was the new ‘opium of the people’ (1973: 123). Writing in 1980, as academic criticism finally began to change its tune with regard to

popular fiction, Stephen Knight states the bald fact that ‘Literary criticism has shied away from commercial success as a ground for treating a book seriously.’ (2) Forty years previously, even detective fiction’s champions run it down because they share their critics assumption that literary fiction is necessarily superior to genre fiction.

In the first book-length survey of detective fiction, Howard Haycraft points out ‘that one out of every four new works of fiction published in the English language belongs to this category’ but adds that it is ‘a frankly non-serious, entertainment form of literature.’ (1942: vi, ix-x) Haycraft’s study appears at a peculiar moment as an American author celebrates a genre dominated by British writers, which is banned from import into Germany (xix), in the midst of what he refers to as ‘the Hitler War’ (191). The serious input comes from practitioner Nicholas Blake, quoted above, who is mostly at pains to understand why detective fiction is so valued by its upper-middle-class readership that Q.D. Leavis can describe it as a ‘highbrow cult’ (quoted in Watson 1971: 95). Many later critics (Watson, Knight 1980, Porter 1981, Mandel 1984) suggest that the answer is that both the detective novel and the thriller are generally expressive of conservative views, or as Julian Symonds summarizes: ‘The values put forward by the detective story from the time of Holmes to the beginning of World War II and by the thriller and spy story up to the advent of Eric Ambler, are those of a class in society that felt that it had everything to lose by social change.’ (1972: 17) Colin Watson suggests the genre offers its addicts an escape ‘inward – into a sort of museum of nostalgia,’ (1971: 171) or perhaps into what John Scaggs identifies as a ‘positively Edwardian world’ which excludes ‘all the devastation of the Great War and the social and economic upheaval of 1920s and 1930s depression.’ (2005: 48)

Contemporary apologists for the detective genre frame its appeal quite differently. W.H. Auden and Blake respectively point to ‘the illusion of being dissociated from the murderer’ (1980: 24) and the appeal of the ‘fantasy-representation of guilt’ (1942: xxiv). Edmund Wilson, less positively, suggests that, in a world ‘ridden by an all-pervasive feeling of guilt and by a fear of impending disaster’, the detective story provides a specious exercise in pointing the finger away from it readers through ‘an infallible power, the supercilious and omniscient detective, who knows exactly where to fix the guilt.’ (1951: 236-7) The elaborate play of locating guilt crucially involves the reader because: ‘Once the criminal is discovered, everyone else is freed from the burden of possible guilt’ (Aydelotte 1976:

73) – but perhaps not satisfyingly so. Auden admits that ‘I forget the story as soon as I have finished it and have no need to read it again.’ (1980: 15) In other words, the guilt has not gone away and the craving returns. Accordingly, Erik Routley titled his book on the genre *The Puritan Pleasures of the Detective Story* (1972).

Gill Plain argues that a key form of guilt that this genre negotiates relates to the Great War: ‘Contrary to appearances, then, detective fiction is an arena that displays the body made safe’ (33) and ‘the wartime absence of explanation is superseded by detective fiction’s excess of possible solutions. Thus the fragmented, inexplicable and even unattributable corpses of the war are replaced by the whole, over-explained, completely known bodies of detection.’ (34) The conflict’s massive loss of life is defused, a corpse at a time. Read from this context the apparent inexhaustibility of the genre makes more sense, but the compulsive reading it gets from addicts and particularly readers who did not experience the war still requires explanation.

Dennis Porter summarizes the contradiction of a genre that is ‘more end-oriented than almost any other type of narrative. [Yet] the great majority of detective novels are instantly forgettable and discarded as soon as they are finished.’ (1981: 235) He concludes that the form’s ‘framework of certainties [...] leaves us bored in the end’ (258) because ‘the pleasure is not in the end but in the process, not in the final reassertion of order but in the halting and suspenseful approach to it.’ (236) It is here, in the process of reading (which imitates the process of detection) that the ideas of fair play between author and reader are live. It does not make the detective story writerly in the Barthesian sense; nor is it an actual collaboration because ‘despite their participation, the reader does not create or produce meaning, but merely affirms the “meaning” or solution set down by the author.’ (Scaggs 2005: 38) But once we shift the focus away from their endings the stories ‘reveal the hidden tensions beneath the surface of genteel English society, exhibiting its insularity, its greed, the instability of identity, its obsession with the hierarchies of class and gender.’ (Horsley 2005: 19) More recent studies, (such as Light 1991, Diemert 1996 and Horsley 2005) thus question sweeping judgements about the conservatism of the genre and suggest that when the work of individual authors in these genres is studied closely cracks in the façade of crime fiction can be seen.

What we find in practice in the 1930s is not an homogenous group of authors writing similar books but a heterogenous group of writers trying for success within

the most popular genre of the decade and vying to determine its next steps, its new directions and its boundaries. The genre of detective fiction that Sayers is critically commentating on from within is clearly live, potentially open to innovation and change, rather than set in the aspic of nostalgia for its own period. The reason for this ferment is precisely the success and popularity of the genre. It appears to be what readers want and therefore *is* what publishers want. Unless a writer commits themselves to literary fiction, and the poor or unlikely financial rewards associated with that, detective fiction will be a logical starting point for achieving commercial success – even if they are temperamentally unsuited to it and do not share its perceived values.

[In this chapter. I will argue that overviews of the genre made with the benefits of hindsight do not give a proper sense of the decade as lived by writers and their readers and](#) that highbrow snobbery about popular literature, left-wing hostility to its conservative ethos and post-war nostalgia for a ‘Golden Age’ of detective fiction have combined to obscure some of the most read texts of the 1930s. [Through glancing at a range of examples in their generic contexts we can begin to unravel their complex interrelationships and better understand how this decade’s genre fiction evolved. The selections focus on a selection of famous and forgotten figures working in these genres shaped by the parameters of the decade rather than those of a broader ‘Golden Age’.](#)

Agatha Christie: Marple, Poirot and ‘playing the game’

The detective novel was already in full flower by the start of the 1930s. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was writing new tales of his iconic Victorian detective Sherlock Holmes until 1927 (though Holmes ended his active career during the Great War). Though Holmes first appeared in novels, *A Study in Scarlet* [in](#) 1887 and *The Sign of Four* in 1889, it was his short story adventures in *The Strand* magazine (1891-2) that made him famous. The short story was still a viable form for detective fiction into the 1930s but had increasingly lost ground to the longer novel form that started to take hold with E.C. Bentley’s *Trent’s Last Case* in 1913. Bentley’s tale, conceived as a parody of the infallible detective seen in Doyle’s imitators, is really about a journalist who gives up on his assignment and allows various persons implicated in the death of American financier to remain above the law for personal reasons. While Holmes was certainly not above imposing his own morality rather than the letter of the law (two

early examples are ‘The Boscombe Valley Mystery’ and ‘The Blue Carbuncle’) the freedom of the amateur investigator not bound by duty becomes a key factor in the detective novel. It is also important – not least for dialogue purposes – that the detective character can interact with suspects on their social level, and the standard social level of the settings for the detective fiction genre as it develops is generally upper middle class.

The publication of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), Agatha Christie’s first novel and the debut of her Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, occurred at an auspicious point in the aftermath of the Great War. Christie’s *Styles* gives us the (now-clichéd) denouement in which the detective assembles the suspects and explains to them who the guilty party is. In this way, ‘Christie perfected a structure, best called the clue-puzzle, which invited and empowered the careful reader to solve the problem along with the detective.’ (Knight 1980: 107)

In 1926 Christie further stamped her authority on the genre with *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?* which pushes some of the genre’s conventions to their limit when the in-text narrator (not Hastings, Poirot’s usual companion) is ultimately shown to be the murderer. I use ‘conventions’ advisedly because the famous rules of the form – The Detection Club Oath (1928), S.S. Van Dine’s ‘Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories’ (1928) and Father Ronald Knox’s ‘Detective Story Decalogue’ (1929) – all come later (see Scaggs 36-7) and it is probable that Christie’s groundbreaking work prompted their creation. Prohibitions against twins, doubles and Chinamen are all basically ways of restating the single real tenet: that the author should play fair with the reader.

Christie published twenty or so novels in the 1930s, but was keen not to repeat herself. Between the five Poirot novels of the 1920s, she had tried out a number of alternative lead characters. 1930 brought *Murder at the Vicarage* and the introduction of Miss Marple (also the focus of a short story collection *The Thirteen Problems* [1932] using stories originally published in newspapers). A female detective and an elderly, unmarried one – a ‘superfluous woman’ to use a phrase current in the period (see Ingman 1998: 9) – is a significant innovation, with a key challenge for the author in maintaining the requisite level of realism while keeping the detective character central to the plot. The novel is narrated by the Reverend Leonard Clement (in whose house the murder takes place) and he observes and describes his neighbour, Miss Marple, supplementing and surpassing the

investigations of a brusque Inspector and bluff Chief Constable through her greater knowledge of St Mary Mead. The murder victim is the local magistrate and churchwarden who has enemies aplenty so that even the vicar comments on the first page that ‘anyone who murdered Colonel Protheroe would be doing the world at large a service.’ (1) Shortly afterwards Lawrence Redding, the artist who is having an affair with Mrs Protheroe, expresses a similar wish with the words ‘if this were only a book [.]’ (32). The self-reflexivity here is a notable feature of the genre though it can usually be subsumed under realism. Later the vicar will spot Redding as a reader of G.K. Chesterton and as playing ‘that favourite character of fiction, the amateur detective’ (153, 152). Miss Marple herself admits to reading ‘a lot of American detective stories [.]hoping to find them helpful’ (257) and observes from their rules ‘I think one coincidence is allowable’ (261). This statement also plays out self-reflexively. The vicar, uncharacteristically impassioned in his sermon, appears to have driven his embezzling curate to try to take his own life, but finding the man stricken and trying to call the doctor, telephones Miss Marple instead. She can therefore turn up, express her guilt for not coming forward sooner and reveal the name of the murderer. The game of balancing realism against genre continues as the fictional detective tells the narrator: ‘I know that in books it is always the most unlikely person. But I never find that rule applies in real life.’ (279) This concludes a plot that begins by incriminating the most likely culprit (Redding), then disqualifying them, and finally reinstating them as the culprit as their various tricks of false confessions, false notes, and changes to clocks to obscure their guilt are one by one discounted so that Marple is proved right and the likeliest suspect is found guilty. The key clue observed by Marple is so domestic and feminine that even Poirot would be hard put to convincingly note that Mrs Protheroe appearing without a handbag was ‘Really a *most* unusual thing for a woman to do.’ (284) Christie would come back to Marple in 1942 and eventually come to prefer her as a protagonist but, rather like the public reaction to Conan Doyle’s attempts to dispose of Sherlock Holmes, Christie found her readership did not want to see Poirot set aside and, in the decade after his reappearance in 1932, and he appeared in 14 novels.

Lord Edgware Dies (1933) is one of these Poirot mysteries, set in London with Hastings ‘writing up’ a once famous crime of the 1920s. Its urban setting among aristocracy, actresses and film stars contains three murders and paints a portrait of decadence with a high frequency of conservative judgements. The eyes of the victim,

Lord Edgeware, have ‘a queer secretive look about them’ (36) according to Hastings and in his handsome young butler Hastings finds ‘something vaguely effeminate that I disliked’ (35). While Hastings is described as ‘easily the stupidest of modern Watsons’ by Haycraft (1942: 132) in this text Poirot supports and extends Hastings’s prejudices saying of Edgeware: ‘he is very near the border line of madness, Hastings. I should imagine he practices many curious vices, and that beneath his frigid exterior he hides deep-rooted instincts of cruelty.’(41) While admiring American cabaret performer Miss Carlotta Adams’s stage talent Poirot notes that she is ‘a Jewess’ and that there is an ‘avenue of danger’ in her character: ‘love of money’ (8). This 1930s stereotyping is confirmed when we find she has been paid by the murderer but then killed in a way that makes it look like she is a suicidal addict. Poirot goes to great lengths to retrieve Miss Adams’s last letter to her devoted sister which has been doctored by the killer, eventually realizing how the most likely suspect (as in *Murder at the Vicarage*) has committed the crime. Actress Jane Wilkinson, Lady Edgeware, wants a divorce in order to marry a duke. We are told early on that she has ‘no morals whatsoever’ and ‘she’d kill someone quite cheerfully’ (17) and she succeeds in murdering Edgeware through the assistance of Carlotta Adams who pretends to be Jane at the party that gives her an unbreakable alibi at the time of the murder. Ultimately, Carlotta is held up as a flawed but good woman against the ruthlessly egotistical Jane Wilkinson who is allowed the last word in a letter to Poirot that proves her toxically self-centred worldview.

The ABC Murders (1936) pushes the envelope of the Poirot novels by dealing with a serial killer and changing, slightly, their narrative method. Haycraft laments that Christie employs ‘one of the tritest of the Conanical devices almost ad nauseam, in the person of Captain Hastings’ (132) and this convention was beginning to have the effect of making Poirot seem old-fashioned. After all, if Christie could twist it so radically in 1926, why is she still using it a decade later? Hastings announces in a foreword that he will depart from his ‘usual practice of relating only those incidents and scenes at which I myself was present. Certain chapters, therefore, were written in the third person.’ The sections that do not come from Hastings’s journal deal with Mr Alexander Bonaparte Cust, stocking salesman, seemingly the killer but actually the killer’s baffled dupe gradually bringing himself under suspicion. While the murders accumulate and things seem to be spiralling out of control, what we actually get is three murder investigation vignettes with interested parties who attempt to help

Poirot. The leader of these self-appointed assistants turns out to be the murderer. The victims are a female tobacconist in Andover, a promiscuous waitress in Bexhill and a titled collector in Churston. Here [Hastings's](#) simplicity is significant in keeping Poirot on track, so that he notes [where there was most to gain](#), the lack of psychological consistency in the choice of victims and the creation of a 'stupid, vacillating and suggestible' fall guy or 'pseudo murderer' (254). Having bluffed and outwitted the murderer Poirot berates him: 'You are full of insular superiority, but I myself consider your crime not an English crime at all – not above-board – *not sporting* –' (263). This forms an interesting contrast to a passage in *Lord Edgware Dies* in which Poirot has concealed a letter (against the rules of the genre). Hastings protests 'It's not – not playing the game' and Poirot's response ridicules the whole premise of the critique: 'It is not said any more. I have discovered that. It is dead. Young people laugh when they hear it.' (173) There is a clear ambivalence here about the fairness of the game in a genre of fiction that ostensibly prides itself on having rules. For Christie, the author is in charge and always decides what is or is [not](#) fair. We will discuss the one-off non-Poirot bestseller with which Christie closed the decade, her most radical experiment in rule-breaking, in our concluding section on detective fiction after turning to others working in the genre.

The Jobbing Writer

F. Jefferson Farjeon's career in crime fiction sprang out of the stage success of thriller *No. 17* (1925) which he [novelized](#) in 1926. Seven sequel novels featuring the central character ex-merchant seaman Ben the Tramp followed and [Hitchcock made the film](#) *Number Seventeen* in 1932. These works are essentially crime comedies with the hapless Ben played for laughs. He is marked by his phonetically-rendered [Cockney](#) (as in the title to this essay) as irredeemably working class, but is the only character who *is* who he says he is. Farjeon, as a jobbing writer, needed to move with the times and diversify and by the 1930s had moved closer to clue-puzzle detective fiction. His works in this field share an uneasy mix of gothic atmosphere and comic dialogue, and a preference for upper-class amateur heroes and damsels in distress over the mechanics of detection.

In *The Z Murders* (1932) the upper-class protagonist Richard Temperley is in a Euston hotel lounge where a man is silently killed and a red enamel 'Z' is found. Temperley also finds the handbag of once-glimpsed Sylvia Wynne and instantly

wants to protect her from police investigation. Though she refuses to explain her odd reaction to the murder and insists she has an urgent appointment in the west country, Temperley dodges the police and follows. While dogged in pursuing Sylvia, Temperley is no detective and wishes ‘for the brain of a Poirot or a Sherlock Holmes!’ (98) Near Bristol there is another murder and another ‘Z’ found. Next Sylvia leads Temperley to Boston, Lincolnshire, in the cab of comic but reliable Ted Diggs. Meanwhile a crooked Bristolian cab driver, Albert Bowes, is hired by the chief villain, ‘Z’ an uncanny and menacing figure with two flapping sleeves that conceal a hook and a silenced pistol and the reader spends some chapters accompanying their parallel journey to Boston where Bowes is killed and Z’s helper, the countryman, kidnaps Sylvia for the last leg of their journey to Whitchurch, Shropshire. The geographically marked Z has been pre-announced to Sylvia and the real target, her grandfather. Panicked, the old crook flees, dies of exposure and thus gives up the jewels Z coveted from the falling out ‘twenty years ago’ when Z was maimed, including having a ‘z’ carved in his forehead. The bizarrely sinister and implausible villain is thus distinctly *not* a victim of the Great War but an embittered crook. This and the obligingness of the police who save Temperley, despite his constant refusal to tell them what he knows, place the story at odds with generic standards of plausibility. The disposability of the victims is also telling. They are a struggling shopkeeper who snores, a [Gypsy](#) woman who can only tentatively be named by an embroidered handkerchief since ‘gipsies aren’t always too particular about property’ (208), a dishonest cab-driver and the three criminals. Implicitly, these are characters readers should not overly worry about, apparently, their deaths tidying up society and Sylvia’s family tree. Christie’s *The ABC Murders* clearly took elements from *The Z Murders* but the difference is that Christie makes the serial killer’s victims people with others who care about them, and makes the monstrous killer a fake. In essence she tames Farjeon’s excesses and bring her version within the clue-puzzle model.

Farjeon is closer to Christie’s territory with his country house mystery *Thirteen Guests* (1936). At Bragley Court Inspector Kendall has to contend with the separate deaths of Mr Chater, Mrs Chater and a body found in a quarry. Kendall has numerous uncooperative guests to wrangle but works out in his notes – rather boringly – that Chater was a blackmailer who poisoned himself when exposed, that Mrs Chater fled and died in a bicycle accident and that the man in the quarry is

Chater's brother-in-law, bigamously married to an actress guest, who was killed by Chater. Yet Kendall does not learn everything. The daughter of the house seeking to relieve the suffering of her dying grandmother acquired the Chinese cook's suicide draft and placed it in her water only to think better of it and overturn the tray. In the meantime, Chater had re-filled his flask from the jug. Her guests contrive to redistribute the evidence to conceal this from the police, exculpating the upper classes and allow them to carry on undisturbed. This sort of clue-puzzle is a zero-sum game.

Farjeon's *Mystery in White* (1937) features a mixed bag of Christmas travellers who leave a snowbound train led by Mr Maltby, a parapsychologist, and arrive at a strangely deserted manor. They are joined by a man called Smith who insists he was not on the train. Smith's working-class background is kept visible by his phonetic speech and everything readers need to know about him is encapsulated in: 'Smith was not a pleasant-looking object.' (68) While the upper-middle-class characters keep scrupulous tabs on what they use in the house, Smith does not and, after nearly strangling the group's bore, he flees into the snow. The setting resembles Christie's exceptionally long-running play *The Mousetrap*, first performed in 1952, but here, as in Farjeon's other works, the characters the narrative invests in are curiously insulated from harm as the crimes usually occur 'off-screen' and do not directly involve any of the guests. Smith, having killed a man on the train, meets a woman on the road and stabs her in the face before being thrown off a cliff by the police and blamed for all the recent murders. This includes Smith taking responsibility for the murder of Harvey Strange who was actually killed by Nurse Martha Wick, the woman Smith stabs. Twenty years previously, Harvey and Martha conspired to rob Harvey's shell-shocked brother, William, of his inheritance by murdering their father/employer John Strange and using an old will. When William turns up in the present with his daughter, Nora, the serious consequences of war are invoked by his disabling shell shock. When Nora is asked what fixed ideas her father labours under she replies 'one is that there is going to be another war.' Maltby replies 'That fixed idea is not born only of shell shock.' (200) The case is solved (and an inheritance found) by Maltby psychically channelling John Strange, who requires no further action but that Martha's brother, a servant who knew of the murder, is given a serious browbeating by his betters. Offbeat *and* incredibly classbound, *Mystery in White* gleefully breaks detective fiction rules feeling licensed by its subtitle, *A Christmas Crime Story*, to be (only) seasonal fun. This was the first of Farjeon's

novels to be republished in the 21st century and its larky tone and sinister setting recapture the combination he successfully made in *No.17*. But the combination falls flat in other examples of his work.

Farjeon's *Seven Dead* (1939) sets up a bizarre mystery when seven corpses are found in Haven House in an apparent mass suicide but, rather than stick with Inspector Kendall's investigation, the narrative chooses to follow yachtsman-journalist Hazeldean's unofficial excursion to Boulogne to find the child in the picture at [the](#) crime scene (pp.52-133). Hazeldean uncovers sinister goings on at Madame Paula's pension (and eventually a dead undercover gendarme) but rescues grown-up Dora Fenner. However, her false uncle, having covered his tracks in Britain, kills Madame Paula's pilot partner in a faked air crash and escapes Boulogne by stealing Hazeldean's boat. A few weeks later, Kendall has thrown in his lot with Hazeldean and Dora and they sail to the island at the map reference clue left by the leader of the seven 'suicides'. This is where they were abandoned by the villain Cauldwell who stole Fenner's identity. The trio are there to witness Cauldwell's arrival, mental breakdown and suicide with the revolver they have (riskily) laid under the carved motto left by the revenge-bound stranded seven which says in Latin: 'Let Justice be done though the heavens should fall' (215). Once again the crime solves itself though in this case it really doesn't quite add up. It might appear that Cauldwell's social cross section of victims are only gassed in tidiness as they have lost their humanity already in their years trapped on the island. They undoubtedly perish because they prize revenge over anything else, but what has sustained them (and what allowed Cauldwell to steal the boat they built together) is cricket, a game representative of Englishness and fair play. Their cricket ball sails through Fenner's window to announce their arrival and sits in the top of a vase at their death scene. Whether this visitation of revenants represent the casualties of the Depression or the unacknowledged victims of the Great War, betrayed by its coming sequel, is not resolved. Farjeon's narratives have a superficial slickness to them but occasionally their more gothic elements reveal much more about the guilt underlying the genre's conservatism than they can contain. What is certain is that the supposed comic ending when Kendall asks Hazeldean and Dora when they will announce their engagement and they tell him they have already married rings false.

The Firebrand

Trying to break into the ranks of established detective novelists was not easy for writers starting their careers in the 1930s. Christopher St John Sprigg wrote six detective fictions early in the decade coming from a career in journalism and going on to cultural commentary and an early death in Spain under the name of Christopher Caudwell. As we have seen earlier, his later verdict on popular fiction in general was negative but his early efforts at detective fiction are lively and playful and undeserving of the ‘simplistic’ tag attached by James Gindin (1992: 157).

Fatality on Fleet Street (1933) projects its narrative five years into the future as the fascistic newspaper magnate Lord Carpenter (resembling contemporary figures Lords Northcliffe and Beaverbrook) is murdered after he attempts to manipulate public opinion to force the Prime Minister to declare war against Russia. The character of the detecting journalist as seen in *Trent’s Last Case* is personified by Charles Venables who, being determined to prevent the hot-headed brother of the fashion journalist he loves being convicted, obstructs the police investigation more than he aids it, coming into conflict with Detective Inspector Manciple who is reflected in the newspaper’s editorial conference table ‘with the meretricious glitter peculiar to Empire hardwoods’ (33). Cynicism varnishes the tale so that the half-Russian agent Venables discovers by going undercover cannot tell the difference between Kipling and Sapper, and Venables’s s Chinese colleague – a violation of rule five of Knox’s decalogue – can put off his editor with nonsense predicated on orientalism: ‘Such is the value of the fictitious reputation for inscrutability, built up for the Chinese by six generations of imaginative sinologues.’ (141) After Manciple states: ‘The really intelligent murderer [...] belongs only to detective novels which I rarely read’ (170) the culprit turns out to be the least likely suspect, Hubbard the archivist, afflicted with epilepsy (still poorly understood in the 1930s) and megalomania. War is thus averted by the actions of a lone madman (arguably answering Carpenter’s insanity) rather than the system.

Sprigg’s *Death of an Airman* (1934) draws on his extensive knowledge of flying and non-fiction publications on the subject. Bishop Edwin Marriott, learning to fly in order to serve his vast Australian Diocese more effectively, witnesses a flight instructor die in a suspicious crash and assists Inspector Bray. Embarrassingly for these investigators the victim may have been murdered by an international drugs cartel importing from Paris using a transport business owned by the Home Secretary’s nephew. The solution requires the Bishop to identify supposed trainee

flyer Tommy Vane and aviatrix Lady Laura Vanguard as the secretly married criminals. In the climax the Bishop is knocked unconscious by Vane and stowed in the plane that Lady Laura uses to escape. He hears her confession and she hands him the controls before jumping to her death, while earthbound Vane deliberately runs into a spinning [propeller](#). The novel ends with the Bishop and Sally Sackbut, aerodrome manager, committing to marry followed by: ‘Which explains why the Flying Bishop of Cootamundra (as he is known), and his wife, have a horror of detective novels’: “‘It reads alright in a book,” the Bishop will explain, “but it’s dreadful if you encounter it in real life.”’ (287) These brief examples show Sprigg more than capable of writing in the genre but unable to take it entirely seriously, needing new outlets for his talents.

The Rival Queen

Like Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers was not afraid to innovate in the genre and collaborated with Robert Eustace on *The Documents in the Case* (1930) an epistolary science-based novel of detection. She also collaborated with other members of The Detection Club on four occasions in the decade. In her introduction to a collection of short detective stories she edited in 1936 Sayers traces the genre’s high and lows and argues for its development into ‘a novel of characters and manners’ (xiii). This is where she thought to take the detective novel using the detective character who had served her well through the 1920s, Lord Peter Wimsey. Wimsey is reminiscent of P.G. Wodehouse’s Bertie Wooster with his own unflappable [valet](#), Bunter, but in *The Nine Tailors* (1934) Wimsey’s education, knowledge of French and experience in detection are plausible assets that make him welcome in the police investigation (‘decent sort of bloke, his lordship’ [126]). The way the locals all appear to know the correct way to address him, however, and his expertise in campanology both seem highly implausible. The murder mystery itself is rather a red herring. The mysterious corpse found in the grave of the [lady](#) of the [manor](#) when her husband’s burial is being prepared turns out to be a crooked ex-butler to the family coming back to retrieve hidden loot. He was imprisoned in the church tower while Wimsey joined Rector Theodore Venables and his bellringers for a record attempt at change ringing. The killer is therefore the bells, *The Nine Tailors* of the title, or the ten upstanding ringers. Apart from this gothic tinge *The Nine Tailors* feels like a conventional novel in the depth of its background and setting (the Cambridgeshire Fens) climaxing in a natural

disaster that allows the Rector to be shown at his best and to resolve all outstanding issues, including the man guilty of imprisoning the victim in the tower dying in the flood. Sayers tends to split readers, with her works found too detailed and too deferent, or ‘pompous and boring’ (Symons 1972: 109). John Cawelti admits ‘the mystery in *The Nine Tailors* is an incredible tissue of improbability, coincidence and turgid sensationalism’ (1976: 121) and Wilson judges it ‘one of the dullest books I have ever encountered in any field’ (1951: 258). As Nancy Hoffman notes ‘Male critics are fond of knocking her work’ (1976: 100). There is some feminist impulse in *Gaudy Night* (1935), which famously set aside the murder generally regarded as necessary to the full-length form, but Wimsey’s developing relationship with Harriet Vane across the 1930s novels does not dislodge convention (marriage) and privilege. Cawelti ultimately responds more positively though doing down another (female) writer in the process: in ‘the evocation of a set of characters and a social atmosphere she is in my opinion a far richer and more complex artist than Christie.’ (120) Nevertheless, by the end of the 1930s Sayers was essentially done with the genre, unable to drag it her way, and became busy with the translation work she would regard as her legacy.

The Eccentric

Anthony Berkeley Cox, writing as Anthony Berkeley, also had his own detective hero established during the [1920s](#), Roger Sheringham, but had largely exhausted his possibilities by *The Poisoned Chocolates Case* in 1929. A new approach called for a new pseudonym and an inversion of the clue-puzzle formula. As Frances Iles he wrote *Malice Aforethought* in which Dr Edmund Bickleigh plots the demise of his socially superior wife, Julia. The narrator begins with a tennis party during which she utterly humiliates him, while he fails to seduce another woman he has deluded himself is interested in him and meets Madeleine Cranmere the new lady of the manor. Later, Ivy Ridgeway a former conquest he has lost interest in, tries to get him to express his love for her by pretending to be pregnant. Both Ivy and Julia know, well before Bickleigh will admit it to himself, that he is falling for Madeleine. Julia – to his surprise – can catalogue his earlier ‘sordid intrigues’ (104) but puts her foot down about Madeleine with the verdict that: ‘I should call her utterly untrustworthy, egotistical to the point of mania, and the most dangerous kind of liar there is – the liar who can deceive not only other people, but herself as well.’ (117) Unfortunately.

Julia can't see that she has married Madeleine's male counterpart who is already engaging in a sexual relationship with her. When Julia refuses to divorce Bickleigh he is able to rationalize her murder to the point he barely thinks of it in such terms. Once he has caused her death, however, he finds Madeleine is committed to a younger lover. The village gossips of Wyvern's Cross (far more acidly portrayed than those of Christie's St Mary Mead) get on to the successful crime and Chatford, the solicitor who has married Ivy, decides to pursue the matter with the police. Informed by Ivy, Bickleigh decides to murder both Chatford and Madeleine, even as he is quizzed about Julia's death. Overconfidence almost undoes him but the case against him for the attempted murder of Chatford fails. Freed, he is immediately charged with administering typhus to his rival for Madeleine's affections and is found guilty despite being innocent of this crime. The defective drains of the manor house that Bickleigh complained about have, in effect, done for him. The irony and the queasy identification with the murderer (Berkeley/Bickleigh) make this inversion of the detective genre stand apart from contemporary works.

Identifying the perverse pathos in Julia sticking to her husband, despite what she knows about him (see 132), Iles's next book, *Before the Fact* (1932), focuses on a wife/victim and her gradually dawning sense of what a monster her charming husband is. The basis for the Hitchcock film *Suspicion* (1941), in which the ending is defused, the darker outcome of Lina Aysgarth's narrative is prescribed from the start. Yet her complicity, her maddening refusal of a possible escape and her clinging to her aristocratic psychopath husband rather than suffering the humiliation of admitting how much she has been deceived, is made plausible.

These novels are remarkably cynical. They bring the hypocrisy of upper-class 1930s values home to the reader in, for example, the way Julia despises the fact that Bickleigh needs to work even though it is this that allows him to keep her or the way Johnnie Aysgarth's aristocratic disinclination and inability to work honestly to support his preferred profligate lifestyle lead him into theft, fraud and murder. Both novels portray relationships built on illusions, or perhaps delusions, about respectability, marriage, friendship, justice and romance; illusions must be maintained in spite of the facts. This iconoclasm sits beside a distinctly anti-modernist certainty that is of a piece with the author's published polemics and apparent efforts to save the reign of Edward VIII (see Turnbull 1996).

A third Iles novel, *As for the Woman* (1939) about a toxic love triangle inspired by high profile criminal cases of the period, did not find critical favour and the author, having no financial need, chose to write no more novels. Iles's blackly comic takes on character, motive, and victimhood are spins on the genre that it took time to process but they undoubtedly had their influence on his contemporaries.

The Pseudonymous Poet

Nicholas Blake, whom we have met before, was a genre fiction pseudonym for poet C. Day Lewis seeking to support himself through writing. He created the detective character Nigel Strangeways for *A Question of Proof* in 1935 and novels featuring Strangeways appeared annually through the remainder of the 1930s. They do not, however, settle into a formula, becoming a means of processing the personal and the political (see Gindin 1992) through the range of formats offered by popular detective fiction.

A Question of Proof is set in a public school where a pupil and later the headmaster are murdered. Teacher Michael Evans, who is conducting an affair with the headmaster's wife, becomes a suspect and calls in his friend Nigel Strangeways, who appears with a third of the book already gone. In *Thou Shell of Death* (1936) Strangeways is asked by his uncle, Assistant Commissioner of Police, to guard Fergus O'Brien, Great War flying ace and 'Public Idol No.1' (17). He fails in this task but solves this death and a subsequent poisoning, and pursues the culprit by car and plane until he falls to his death. Strangeways can then begin a relationship with explorer Georgia Cavendish, former lover of O'Brien and sister of the man responsible for his death. *There's Trouble Brewing* (1937) begins with the killing of a dog in a brewing vat, a subsequent murder by the same method and two others followed by an attempt to blow up the brewery that is thwarted by the villain's son. *The Beast Must Die* (1938) starts with the sort of arresting phrase typical of Frances Iles: 'I am going to kill a man.' (3). Frank Cairns, a successful detective novel writer under the name of Felix Lane, takes the reader into his confidence about his intention to find and kill the hit-and-run driver responsible for the death of his son in the absence of any progress from official police investigations. This time Strangeways does not show up until roughly halfway through the novel, investigating the death of George Rattery, the hit-and-run driver identified in the preceding sections 'The Diary of Felix Lane' and 'Set Piece on a River'. What Strangeways and the reader need to

do is to identify that Cairns's protestations of innocence are [calculated lies authored by his other persona as](#) fiction writer Lane. The plot thus references Christie's *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd* as well as Iles. In the epilogue, presented to us through clippings and notes in Strangeways's files we learn that Cairns, allowed to escape by the detective, has drowned himself at sea and Strangeways faces suspicion from his usual official collaborator, Inspector Blount, in this 'most unhappy case' (294). With *The Smiler with the Knife* (1939) the series veers off into thriller territory with Strangeways's wife Georgia, now 'the most famous woman traveller of her day' (11), going undercover within a fascist organization, The English Banner, and having to go on the run across Manchester and into Gloucestershire. After this excitement, *Malice in Wonderland* (1940) reflects the so-called 'Phony War' of 1939-40 as Mass-Observer Paul Perry visits the holiday camp of the title and finds himself suspected of being the prankster who calls themselves 'the mad hatter' whom Strangeways is called in to identify rather than catching a murderer. In this supposedly classless environment Perry is able to prove himself to pert Sally Thistlethwaite while Strangeways draws on the amateur criminological observations of her Oxford outfitter father.

Blake's novels are not so conservative in their relationship to politics and class as much detective fiction of the period. Their settings, the school, the brewery town, the holiday camp, are often microcosms of Britain and the villains and murderers reflect what is wrong with the country. In *Proof*, Evans is disgusted by the visiting parents at the private school where he works: 'The spectacle of all this painted, feathered, complacent, chattering flock made him feel sick inside. It was to maintain this portentous scum that millions sweated or starved beneath the surface.' (21) The murderer is a religious maniac whom Strangeways allows to kill himself rather than escape justice as insane. In *Shell* the killer is the worst type of colonial exploiter and the corollary victim is a Great War brass hat who knowingly sent men to their deaths. The villain of *Brewing* is a sadistic capitalist and the socialist doctor observes: 'It is an interesting comment on our social system that a fellow like Bennet, whose life was a series of more or less legalized crimes has to kill three people before we put him where he can do no more mischief.' (287-8) The hit-and-run killer of *Beast* is a snobbish and adulterous businessman whose murder is understood if not justified. In *Smiler* the villain is a millionaire aristocratic psychopath served by a variety of grotesques who believe in 'the principle of aristocracy, the rule and

government of the superior person [...] the hereditary line of true aristocrats [...] and] the privilege and responsibility of a superior caste.’ (112) Finally, the saboteurs of *Wonderland* turn out to be the couple responsible for running the camp, taking bribes from a rival concern since they cannot control their high-living habits gained in the 1920s.

Strangeways, a tea addict and upper-class British through and through, is a cerebral hero self-consciously inhabiting his role: ‘Nicholas had a weakness for consummating a case in the most spectacular way possible. It was a kind of extravagant repayment to himself for all the wearisome business that preceded’ (*Proof* 243) For Blake the wearisome business of writing diligently researched detective novels rewards him with an arena for engaging with contemporary cultural ills rather than wallowing in nostalgia for a lost past.

And Then There Was One

This subsection will make some concluding remarks about detective fiction and Christie’s role in it after discussing the bestselling work of her career, published in 1939, where the pattern of innovation and boundary testing of her 1930s work – often inspired by the works of her contemporaries – culminates.

And Then There Were None, to give it its final title and that of all American editions, was originally titled *Ten Little Niggers* in Britain and – revealingly – it remained so for UK editions into the 1980s, though 1964 and 1986 editions went with *Ten Little Indians*. The novel narrates in third person the journey of ten individuals to an island off the Devon coast where a wealthy American built and abandoned a well-appointed house. All the travellers have their own reasons to stay with the current residents, the Owens, without knowing them well. Such vague plans are perfectly acceptable to the upper middle classes who have no jobs and live on their unearned income. Those of lower classes are hired as servants, detectives or bodyguards. A recording by the absent host/employer Mr U.N. Owen accuses them all of being murderers. The unreality is self-reflexively recognized. Hit-and-run driver Marston says ‘Whole thing’s like a detective story. Positively thrilling’ (84) before he takes the poisoned drink that will make him the first victim.

Eventually realizing there is no hidden killer on the island, the survivors know the culprit is among them. Narratorially, we are given the thoughts of those undergoing this stressful situation which differentiates their varied psychologies. For

example, Miss Emily Brent, a Christian spinster lacking in charity, recalls one of Miss Marple's fellow ladies of the parish of St Mary Mead. But while widow Mrs Price Ridley complains 'ever since the war there has been a loosening of moral fibre' (*Vicarage* 120), Miss Brent states 'the present generation are shamelessly lax' (18) and is unrepentant about casting out a pregnant servant who then committed suicide. Passages of close focalization through characters' thoughts constrict the reader's vision. The sketching of psychological depth for almost all these characters humanizes them and makes the text even more powerful as their consciousnesses are eliminated.

With a third of the novel and only five characters left on the island the narrator gives us five separate unattributed internal monologues (227-9). The evidence in the monologues allows the reader to identify three: one belonging to Vera Claythorne, a former nanny whose charge drowned in unfortunate circumstances and perhaps the most sympathetic of the characters, one belonging to the callous colonial mercenary Lombard and one clearly belonging to the murderer. This narrows the field for the reader since the killer must be either Dr Armstrong, Blore the detective or Mr Justice Wargrave. This at least is scrupulously fair but, shortly afterwards, when the narrator tells us that 'Dr. Armstrong lifted the lifeless hand and felt for the pulse' the 'lifeless' is misleading description (237). The judge is alive and Armstrong is helping him conceal it. Much earlier, as each character comes into narratorial focus in order to reveal why they have come to the island, most of the judge's section (47-9) is a shrewd display from him that makes links with Armstrong that he will exploit later, but there is a sharply angled trick in the short paragraph which tells us he 'reflected on the subject of Constance Culmington. Undependable like all women.' (48) The narrator allows the reader to think she is unreliable for issuing the false invitation rather than an unreliable person whom the judge has used to create his inclusion in the party. There are other clues and insights that point in the right direction but these are often countered by alternative views with no detective to sift them. For example, Lombard guesses the killer but allows himself to be dissuaded by Vera, and neither of them guesses two of the other three have an arrangement (181-3). The coming together of Lombard and Vera which the reader might expect never happens but in the judge's terms Vera is dependable. Her hysteria will rise to the point at which she shoots Lombard and hangs herself, both acts observed by the judge.

As all ten characters die the body_count exceeds Farjeon's *Seven Dead* of the same year. A chapter covering a few small details and the bafflement of the police follows, before a final chapter gives us the content of a message in a bottle sent by the culprit before they killed themselves in line with their ostensible death and left the mystery for the police to solve. Priestman draws out the parallel between the invisible host (U.N.Owen) and the novel's creator (1990: 157). Alarming, the confessing culprit admits 'I enjoy reading every kind of detective story and thriller' (302) echoing Miss Marple's reading policy expressed in *Murder at the Vicarage* (see above). The confession further claims:

It was my ambition to invent a murder mystery that no one could solve.

But no artist, I now realize, can be satisfied with art alone. There is a natural craving for recognition which cannot be gainsaid.

I have, let me confess it in all humility, a pitiful human wish that someone should know how clever I have been... (315)

The effect of this is peculiar. The murderer congratulating themselves is very like the author praising their own sleight of hand and the tantalizing – if not quite playing fair – clues to the murderer's identity. This is perhaps why Haycraft suggests that Christie pays 'closer attention to the probabilities and the canons of fair play' while placing her only near the top of her field (1942: 133). Where aficionados are uneasy, Ernest Mandel points out that 'to practice deception while "playing fair" is the very quintessence of the ideology of the British upper class.' (16) yet Christie is not demonstrating upper-class ideology for her readers, she is playing an intimate psychological game with them. Knight noted that Christie's golden age novels 'both raised and dissipated the fears of their audience' (1980: 133) Plain suggests there is greater emphasis on raising than dissipating: 'reading *before* the ending [...] we might detect the extent to which she pleasurably and mischievously permits free play to the repressed desires and anxieties of her society.' (54) In this context it is easy to agree with Horsley that 'Christie's work cannot unreservedly be judged as conservative' (49) In the case of *And Then There Were None* Christie depicts sadism and cruelty by inventing the situation and then extends the experience by deception and rule-bending, and removes the safety device of the detective. This extremity is the difference between Christie and the competitors she outsold. While the majority of her output might lack the emotional range, gothic shudders and mercurial invention of her competitors' work her novels consistently deliver mysteries that are

hard to solve, do not stray from their genre, and do not use third-person narration to labour their points in ways that mark them as dated. The traditional format of her Poirot mysteries and the flat but authoritative figure of the detective, despite the fact that most laugh at him on first sight, are key elements.

The differences in durability between her and other writers' reputations lies in the differing articles of faith, their victims, culprits and perspectives on class. Priestman points out Christie's lack of visible style and minimally stated snobbery (1990: 160). Porter says her style 'combines a taste for understatement with a leisurely formality.' (1981: 135) Watson suggests that Christie 'evolved a style of narration that hinted, just delicately enough not to offend British sensitivity to "sarcasm", at self-parody' (1971: 174) For Knight this is:

quasi-humility, characteristic of English bourgeois self-protection. The false mockery [...] is seen as part of the honesty of the self-denigrator and passes for an ability to see oneself in real terms. A wry comic version of self-criticism can be a strong force to obscure the reality of one's position, to defend by stasis a hard-won position of advantage. (1980: 118)

Nicholas and Margaret Birns make a case for Christie as a modernist, praising her 'formal subtleties, her fractured yet resonant selves, and her often-brilliant modernism' (134) (as does Light 1991: 65-75). Like the suspects who appear suspicious at one moment in her novels and innocent the next Christie's true nature is strategically obscured.

Although detective fiction continues to be a powerful and popular genre in publishing after the 1930s, the cutting edge would shift focus from the amateur sleuth dominant in this decade to the iconic American Private Eye of the 1940s. The classical form itself could not maintain its dominance but Christie, by continuing to write without appearing to notice generic shifts, became an institution as iconic in relation to the clue-puzzle detective novel as Conan Doyle is to the detective short story. Writing in 1990 Anna-Marie Taylor highlighted Christie's status as 'the world's best-selling, English-language novelist' (134) but noted the author increasingly clinging on to her 'Old Toryism' in her later work (149). As we have seen, the Christie of the 1930s was somewhat different, and freer to be so, hidden among a slew of other suspects drawing attention to themselves in the dominant popular genre of decade.

Meanwhile the thriller, for so long detective fiction's poor relation, would stake a claim to its inheritance in the late 1930s.

The Thriller

In his memoir, *Here Lies*, Eric Ambler records how he claimed to write 'detective stories, mostly' when reporting to join the army in 1940 because: 'I had found that with persons who did not read much detective stories were more respectable than thrillers.' (218) Why? We have seen how popularity was counted against all genre fiction but, while detective fiction offered its readers an intellectual puzzle, the thriller was closely associated with the even more popular (and therefore suspect) medium of cinema. Hitchcock's film adaptation of John Buchan's 1915 novel in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1935) made several improvements to its source, but its choice suggests that the literary thriller had not significantly moved on in twenty years. In fact, it had diversified.

There are whole strands of the thriller genre closely associated with film genres that there is not room to deal with here such as the gangster thriller, stemming from the American publication *Little Caesar* (1929) by W.R. Burnett but rapidly adapted into the first of the archetypal early-sound Hollywood gangster films *Little Caesar* in 1930. Supported by news reports, this strand runs through British popular literature of the decade from one-man book factory Edgar Wallace's Chicago-set *On the Spot* (1931) to James Hadley Chase's infamous bestseller *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (1939) and into the 1940s. Similarly, the Biggles stories by W.E. Johns which began in 1932 offer another example of a popular thriller subgenre picking up on Hollywood interest, in this case Great War flying exploits exemplified by *Wings* (1927) and *The Dawn Patrol* (1930). Appearing in collections of short stories and episodic novels Biggles books sold so well that eighteen were published in the decade. *Biggles Learns to Fly* (1935), one of four titles that year, has the hero signing up young and developing his 'uncanny instinct [...] for detecting the presence of Huns.' (178) Upbeat and stoical, Biggles 'had regarded war as "fun". But he now perceived that he had been mistaken.' (39) Nevertheless, when he loses colleagues the response is usually to hunt and shoot down the culprit, and not dwell on trauma or loss, reproducing the idea that war was a character-forming arena for heroism current in the genre of the thriller since the late 1910s.

This response to the Great War was embodied in H.C. McNeile's character Bull-dog Drummond, created roughly contemporaneously with Poirot in 1919. Drummond, a demobilized officer with a private income, advertised himself as 'finding peace incredibly tedious, would welcome diversion. [...] Excitement essential.' (1967: 16) When Sapper (McNeile) died in 1937 Drummond's career was continued by Gerard Fairlie. By 1939 Drummond had sold 300,000 copies and been the subject of 17 films (compared to three 1930s Poirot films).

Sapper's hero helped the thriller gain its reputation for lowbrow, right-leaning views. If the 1930s is often remembered as 'the golden age of detective fiction' rather than the golden age of thrillers, despite some key and ground-breaking works in this subgenre, the difference in their critical statuses might simply be explained by the relative crudity with which their conservative views were conveyed to their readers. Drummond's successes imply that a few armed British military men are equal to any emergency and the incipient fascism of the series shows where 'Emphasis is laid on the fact that none of Drummond's companions ever questions the rightness of his decisions or fails to carry out his orders.' (Watson 70). Michael Denning suggests that 'Drummond is a bundle of chauvinisms, hating Jews, Germans, and most other foreigners; he is a bully, a vigilante, and a thug, but the narrator covers his activities by telling us again and again that he is "a sportsman and a gentleman"' (55). This sporting ethic can be traced – in fiction – back to Buchan: 'It was an ethic that took the school cricket pitch, the celebrated paying fields of Eton, as a figure of social life, thus combining an institutional loyalty, and reverence for the hierarchical structure with a sense that social and political conflict was a game, to be played in a spirit of fairness, amateurism, and manliness.' (Denning 33)

Earlier we have seen Christie's ambivalence about the notion of fair-play and Farjeon's identification of cricket as a simple-minded obsession marking a death-bound group. Blake's Nigel Strangeways upholds cricket as a measure of British values and, in *A Question of Proof*, dismisses a suspect simply because 'No man who could bat like that could commit a mean and cowardly murder.' (130) In his *The Smiler with the Knife* the focus of several chapters shifts to Peter Braithwaite, star cricketer and another undercover agent within the English Banner, who infiltrates a secret bomb factory where he is caught and tortured before blowing the factory up in a last heroic act (172-89). Blake approves of the sporting ethic but not what he perceives it is associated with in Sapper, describing Drummond as an 'unspeakable

public-school bully' (1942: xxiii). Genre fiction becomes a forum in which to debate the meaning of British 'fair-play' and sportsmanship while avoiding divisive political labels.

Denning argues, from the first Drummond novel, that: 'These thrillers are an attempt to privilege a national consciousness over any class consciousness, and the threat comes from those who place class over nation.' (49) He further suggests that since Drummond's nemesis assembles American and German millionaires and Bolshevik trades unionists to bring Britain to its knees 'Sapper is as anti-capitalist as he is anti-worker' (Denning 48). However, there is real paranoia in the immediate wake of the Russian revolution and in the conclusion Drummond targets the intellectuals and 'extremist members of Parliament' (254) leading the 'working-man' 'to hell' and states 'Evolution is our only chance –_not revolution' (258-9). In fact, during the 1920s, while Drummond evolved to be a little more in tune with the authorities, there was little 'evolution' in British society. The governmental response to the General Strike of 1926 and the Depression following 1929 showed it. By the mid-1930s another conflict was clearly looming in which the ordinary citizen would once again suffer for the failures of government.

How to change course? If the thriller was a genre that reached working-class and lower-middle-class readerships then, some left-wing writers concluded, it was a genre through which anti-fascist, anti-capitalist and anti-war agendas could be pursued just as well as right wing agendas. A key intervention is Graham Greene's *A Gun for Sale* (1936) which sprang out of Greene's conviction that it was 'no longer a Buchan world' (1981: 54). According to Brian Diemert: 'Greene saw the thriller form as tendering more than an outlet for melodramatic creative impulses or a shortcut to financial success. What it offered was a means of putting ideas, specifically political ideas, across to readers who would not be reached by more conventional political discourse.' (1996: 13)

In *A Gun for Sale* Raven kills a Czech minister (and his secretary) for money on orders conveyed by Davis but is paid in marked notes from a wages robbery. As the police pursue him he seeks his revenge, getting entangled with Anne, a showgirl, whose fiancé, Mather, is the detective in charge of the robbery case. Raven, puny, hare-lipped, and orphanage-educated after his father's execution and his mother's suicide, learns from Anne what the consequences of his actions are. She helps him target Davis in the town of Nottwich because she does not want the coming war,

knowing that Mather will enlist. We cannot share Anne's enthusiasm for the stolid detective, 'so one dimensional' (Diemert 130) he is unable to see beyond the case in hand. It is Raven who interests the reader because, unlike Buchan's Richard Hannay who is sought because he has been framed for a murder he did not commit, Raven is guilty and nearly without scruples. Those he has are clearly a weakness. *A Gun for Sale's* tormented anti-hero was in many ways ahead of his time. It was adapted in Hollywood as *This Gun for Hire* (1942), a film as important in establishing film noir iconography as the more famous adaptations of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett.

Greene uses the thriller format to show Britain gearing for war, its journalists focusing exclusively on the international situation and ignoring responsibility close to home. The novel draws on contemporary non-fiction exposés of the arms trade such as *The Bloody Traffic* (1933), *Merchants of Death* (1934) and *Who's Who in Arms* (1935) in its portrait of Sir Marcus, Davis's employer and head of Midland Steel, who has sources close to government that let him know he will be able to export nickel for arms manufacture even when arms exports are banned (115-16). As Raven reaches Nottwich Sir Marcus asks the chief constable Major Calkin to insist his men adopt a shoottokill policy, and threatens Calkin's dream of gaining promotion to Colonel and returning to punishing the 'conchies' at a military tribunal, reducing him to 'a small plump, bullying henpecked profiteer' (114). Perhaps most telling of the peripheral portraits is that of Buddy Fergusson, a medical student, a lion among men in the gas-attack training rag, bullying those he despises because he knows they will do much better than him after university. With his sexual and intellectual failings gnawing at his consciousness Buddy is totally undone when confronted by the physically meagre but genuinely dangerous Raven: 'it was a dreadful thought that he had been keeping fit for this: to stand shivering and silent in a pair of holed pants, while the mean undernourished city rat, whose arm he could have snapped with a single twist, put on his clothes, his white coat and last of all his gas-mask.' (148) It reads like a repudiation of the Bulldog Drummond mentality in the genre he made his home.

A Gun for Sale was the first of Greene's novels to be subtitled 'an entertainment', though the term was retrospectively added to the title of his 1931 thriller *Stamboul Train*. *The Confidential Agent* (1939), about the representative of an unnamed rebel government trying to acquire British coal contracts, was also an

entertainment, as was the first American edition of *Brighton Rock* (1938), though not in its British or subsequent publications (see Diemert 5-14). Roger Sharrock claims 'Greene's great technical achievement has been the elevation of the form of the thriller into a medium for serious fiction.' (1984: 12) Greene's straddling the fields of serious and genre literature is certainly behind his rise to greater success in the 1940s. Yet, apart from the threat of war and engaging anti-hero, *A Gun for Sale* is not so different from the London-set investigation of *It's a Battlefield* (1932) or the conflict between unthinking good and principled evil in *Brighton Rock* focusing on a racetrack gang once run by one of Raven's victims. In all Greene's novels guilt cannot be discovered, because it pervades everything and cannot be dispelled by pinning the blame on an individual as in the classical detective story. This is the truth the 1940s private detective thriller later discovered and reiterated: 'guilt cannot be localized in a corrupt society' (Diemert 97)

Ambler's late 1930s novels are generally regarded as a turning point for the thriller and, unlike Greene, Ambler subverts the genre from fully within it. Casting around for a way into a career in writing Ambler realized that: 'The detective story had been worked over and over, but no one had looked at the thriller. It was still a dirty word.' (Denning 1987: 65) He wanted to make the thriller more relevant, and this involved a conscious rejection of elements familiar from the bestselling thrillers of the period. In particular, Ambler rejected to villains leading 'world conspiracies no more substantial than toy balloons' and heroes whose key characteristic was 'abysmal stupidity combined with superhuman resourcefulness and unbreakable knuckle bones.' (Ambler 1985: 165) He also reversed the politics of the genre when he 'decided to [...] make heroes of the left wing and popular front figures.' (Denning 1987: 65) Ambler's protagonists are professional working men; engineers, journalists, language teachers, authors. They are ordinary men, not supermen with hordes of unquestioning followers to call upon. Ambler's greater realism is informed by Somerset Maugham's *Ashenden*, published about a decade after the author's experiences while employed by the British Secret Service in Switzerland and Russia. Through a series of loosely connected bathetic anecdotes, *Ashenden* provided 'the first exposure of what espionage really meant – not romantic melodrama, but long periods of boredom, fear, human weakness, callousness and deceit.' (McCormick 167)

Ambler's first novel, *The Dark Frontier* (1936) is an oddity in which the writer attempts to have his cake and eat it; to both mock the thriller and reinvent it at the same time. Professor Barstow, a mild-mannered atomic physicist, learns from a representative of Cator & Bliss 'one of the largest armaments manufacturing organisations in the world' (14) that the Balkan nation of Ixania, previously best known for its pig-bristle production, is to get an atomic bomb unless he assists the company's agent in sabotaging the development. Rendered unconscious in a crash having read a spy novel, Barstow 'becomes' the superspy Carruthers (the hero's name in Erskine Childers's 1913 *The Riddle of the Sands*): 'Free from the fears, and the vanities, the blunderings and shortcomings of ordinary men, he was of that illustrious company which numbers, Sherlock Holmes, Raffles, Arsène Lupin, Bulldog Drummond and Sexton Blake among its members' (30) Halfway through the novel, however, an American journalist usurps the narration of the climactic encounters and the country's successful socialist revolution. When the country's ousted leader bemoans her country's fate Carruthers's responds: 'Ixania is unproductive because you make it so. Your businessmen suck the country's life blood so that there is none to feed the body. Your soil is for the most part uncultivated because the wealth that should fertilise it maintains an army that is as un-necessary as it would be inadequate as a means of defence.' (225) Ambler would go on to frame his analysis of the diseases of Europe in more realistic settings and actual countries where his ordinary heroes, remaining themselves, become embroiled in situations beyond their control.

Ambler's first 'straight' thriller, *Background to Danger* (1937), begins with a prologue in the City of London showing Joseph Balterghen, Chairman of Pan-Eurasian Petroleum, at a board meeting where it is decided to influence the Bulgarian government by whatever means he thinks necessary to revive some concessions for the firm. Kenton, a journalist short of money, is bribed by a nervous man on a train to take some papers through Austrian customs and deliver them to him at a hotel address. By the time Kenton arrives the man is dead, and he is stuck with the incriminating papers. He stows them at a café with typical Amblerian economy: 'The third [envelope] he marked with his own name and handed it over, accompanied by five marks and a circumstantial story, to the man behind the counter for safekeeping.' (63) Captured and threatened by Balterghen's agent, and threatened by his Drummond-like British thug, Captain Mailler, Kenton reacts strongly: 'For the first

time in his adult life someone was trying to coerce him with threats into making a decision, and his mind was reacting with cold, angry, obstinate refusal.’ (84) Kenton’s pig-headed resistance, beyond any physical capacity to do so, is rewarded when he is rescued by Zaleshoff, a Soviet agent who has been following him from the hotel. Thereafter Kenton is largely caught up in Zaleshoff’s plans to recapture the documents, but the most extraordinary sequence comes when Kenton is alone trying to flee Linz wearing a bloodstained coat. He is helped by an observant British traveller in worsted, Mr Hodgkin, who provides clues to the destination of the villains and then, as they separate on a scenic overlook, lectures Kenton on what a bad fugitive he is, only deigning to help him because he is British and he wants to thwart the Europeans whose brutal political reality he has seen first hand. Making his way down to the border Kenton sees ‘better than the view from Mr Hodgkin’s promontory’ (171) suggesting the reader is not being invited to share this insularity. Yet it is also true to say as Denning does: ‘That we are no longer in England, no longer subject to fair play, non-violence, and rational justice, is something that all of Ambler’s characters must learn.’ (73)

Cause for Alarm (1938) has Nicky Marlow, an engaged engineer, taking a job in Italy after two months of unemployment, and finding himself inveigled into industrial and then political espionage by General Vagas, a Yugoslavian who turns out to work for the Germans. Zaleshoff appears again, recruits Marlow as a double agent and, when things go wrong, gets him out of the country to Belgrade to deliver the final piece of disinformation to Vagas and help damage the Berlin-Rome Axis. Gavin Lambert points out that ‘the second half of the novel is Buchanesque’ (110) but a Buchan protagonist would not utterly depend on a Soviet agent as Kenton does: ‘without Zaleshoff’s capacity for endurance and improvisation, he would never survive. He has nothing to fall back on except his middle class belief in muddling through, ludicrously inadequate in a crisis.’ (111) Kenton’s refrain ‘you could not help liking Zaleshoff’ (216, 223, 278) suggests resemblances, in Zaleshoff’s theatricality and adaptability, to a Carruthers-like skill-set. Yet Marlow conspicuously fails to learn from him and on returning to England takes a job with Cator & Bliss (280). The dropping of Zaleshoff from this point in Ambler’s output is often tied by commentators concerned by Ambler’s popular front sympathies (Cawelti and Rosenborg 1987, Wolfe 1993) to the 1938 Nazi-Soviet pact but it is also

part of Ambler's development of the genre that his protagonist will not be Carruthers, or – after this point – assisted by anyone with a claim to that 'illustrious company'.

Epitaph for a Spy (1938) takes place largely at a French coastal resort hotel where first-person narrator Joseph Vadassy, a stateless Hungarian, is arrested for taking pictures of the naval defences at Toulon. Flabbergasted, Vadassy eventually realizes, under the prompting of detective Beghin, that he has accidentally picked up a camera identical to his own in the hotel. Beghin suggests he clear himself of the charge of espionage by discovering the owner of the other camera. As in a typical detective novel, Vadassy has plenty of red herrings and unreliable witnesses to deal with, but he finds that 'Reality is always so obstructive' (65). Describing himself as 'pathetically ineffectual' (152) Vadassy inadvertently discovers a left-wing exile being sought by Nazi agents among the guests but not the Italian agent responsible for his plight. He is still in the dark when he is dragged by Beghin into the chase denouement in the warehouse district of Toulon and any elaborate explanation of motive is cut off by Beghin's epitaph for the spy: 'He needed the money.' (218)

Ambler's masterwork *The Mask of Dimitrios* (aka *A Coffin for Dimitrios in the US*, 1939) focuses on Latimer, an ex-academic turned detective novelist, prompted during an encounter with Colonel Haki of the Turkish secret police to seek the true background to the eponymous Dimitrios, the crook, pimp, murderer and fixer whose body he is taken to see. Excursions to Smyrna, Sofia and Geneva follow and Latimer finds he himself is being tracked by Mr Peters, a former ally of Dimitrios in a heroin-smuggling racket. Peters draws him to Paris and Latimer becomes a key part of his plan to blackmail the still-living Dimitrios, now a Director of the Eurasian Credit Trust. In trying to understand evil Latimer loses faith in the concept: 'Dimitrios was not evil. He was logical and consistent.' (252) Latimer's hesitancy and morals make a difference to the outcome, but he very much wants to go back to fiction by the end, acknowledging it as an escape from messy and immoral reality: 'He would be writing a detective fiction story with a beginning, a middle and an end; a corpse, a piece of detection and a scaffold. He would be demonstrating that murder would out, that justice triumphed in the end.' (283) As the novel closes Latimer is warned by his journalist correspondent in Sofia that there will be war in the spring but all he can think of is getting started on his next book.

Ambler's last novel before war service led him into filmmaking, *Journey into Fear* (1940), caps the series with a spare narrative about an engineer, Graham – 'a

quiet, likable sort of chap' (5), with key knowledge of (neutral) Turkey's naval capacity sent home by boat via Italy by Colonel Haki following an assassination attempt. Graham is distracted by dancer Josette and her cynical partner Jose's reported moral opinions: 'He says that it was people who were safe and well-fed who invented good and evil so they would not have to worry about the people who were hungry and unsafe.' (109) Out of his depth, Graham can spot neither his enemies nor his allies and ends up stoically facing death: 'Forty years was not a bad lifetime to have lived. There were many young men in Europe who would regard the attainment of such an age as an enviable achievement.' (259) His salvation lies in his seemingly irrelevant relationship with the French traveller Mr Mathis, a socialist who deliberately embarrasses his snobbish wife with radical statements and uses the idea of revolution comically. Mathis is enough of an ally to change the odds, but the heroism has to come from within Graham. This is the nub of the thriller form and as Mr Thistelthwaite argues in Blake's *Malice in Wonderland*: 'We are all heroes at heart [...] But to few of us is given, in this modern world, the opportunity of translating our dream into reality.' (1940: 166) Other late 1930s manifestations of the thriller come at this imagined opportunity from a different angle.

Geoffrey Household's *Rogue Male* (1939), while it eschews the middle-class protagonist of Ambler's 1930s fiction, is equally about coming to awareness of the contemporary situation. The anonymous narrator is one of the landed gentry, more interested in agriculture than business, who has unintentionally achieved a certain amount of fame as a big game hunter. In jeopardy, he agonizes over his class position, claiming England is 'the least class conscious of nations in the Marxian sense' (34) but noting 'when I speak English to an Englishman I am at once spotted as a member of [Class] X.' (35) He explains: 'I say Class X because there is no definition of it. To talk of an upper or ruling class is nonsense. The upper class, if the term has any meaning at all, means landed gentry [including himself] who probably do belong to Class X but form only a small proportion of it. The ruling class are, I presume, politicians and servants of the state – terms which are self-contradictory.' (34) The narrator does not rise above snobbery (60, 64) but his explicit awareness of and anxiety about class show he does not share the certainties of Hannay or Drummond.

In fact, the narrator's lack of self-knowledge is a theme of the book: 'With this pencil and this exercise book I hope to find some clarity.' (8) Writing in three

bursts the protagonist initially tries to convince himself that he was lining up his rifle sights on the dictator of a country adjacent to Poland simply to prove that he could do so. Captured and tortured, his enemies decide it is better to stage his death by dropping him off a cliff rather than executing him, but he lands on soft ground and manages to conceal himself in woods. Back in England, finding himself still pursued and forced to kill a man in self-defence, he puts his affairs in order and disappears because 'I could not risk embarrassing the officials of my country.' (57) The protagonist goes to ground in Dorset quite literally, digging out and occupying a rabbit warren in an ancient trackway. As narrator he acknowledges 'my reasons were insistent but frequently obscure' (61). Located by his enemies after an excursion to acquire books to occupy his mind, he almost outlasts them but is pinned down to be starved out unless he signs a document incriminating himself and his government. The suspiciously un-English Major Quive-Smith who traps him calls him 'an anarchial [sic] aristocrat' (136) and expects him to sign eventually but he reckons without other effects of his methods. They force the protagonist to face the fact that he loved the dead woman, that the site he chose to hide in is one he showed her before she went back to her country and was killed by the forces under the dictator he took aim at, and that he made a genuine assassination attempt when 'mad with grief and hatred.' (142) Thus the protagonist passes to 'a spiritual offensive' (144) and strikes back.

Ralph Harper suggests *Rogue Male* is an almost excessively Oedipal tale (17) and goes on to argue that 'The thriller is not by any means oriented outward toward the shape of the world, but inward to the heart of the subject.' (80-1) Yet while it seems that *Rogue Male* is an exploration of the narrator's psyche it is also – like other examples of the genre – freighted with consideration of the character of his country in a time of crisis. At multiple levels *Rogue Male* is about facing up to moral obligations and doing something about what is wrong and at least partially about casting aside class considerations to do so. As such, and in a very different way, it shares a message with Ambler's novels of the period that, although it may not be easy, we must move beyond our disgust with politics and politicians and finally, despite ourselves, commit to a war against fascism. Ultimately 1930s thrillers show us that 'the ethic of sportsmanship and the game is at best an anachronism and at worst a mystification.' (Denning 62) The thriller is a much better vehicle for overturning this view than detective fiction could ever be because of its focus on removing the

certainties of the protagonist's life. By comparison, detective fiction was formally encumbered by outdated domestic and conservative values that would be significantly diminished in the next decade as a common sense of purpose took hold and its vitality, cruelty and innovations would be obscured by nostalgic – or hostile – retrospection.

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