

The Golden Age of English Detection

BY

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TO the common reader, contemporary British fiction appears to be, like Caesar's Gaul, divided into three parts. I am sure that qualified literary critics would regard this classification as crude in the extreme, but it may be of some interest to state how the thing looks to one who is by profession a humble political propagandist, and so comes to the field of imaginative letters as the merest member of the general public.

Three sorts of novels are being written in England today. First, there are the best sellers; second, there are the highbrow intellectual novels; and third, there are the detective stories. Naturally, there are dozens of nondescript novels being written (and, unfortunately, being published too) which fit into none of these categories. But perhaps we can leave them to their nondescription.

It would be well worth while, I should think, for some competent critic to devote his attention to the first category. The contemporary English best seller, by which I mean such books as Dr. Cronin's or Miss Du Maurier's, are by no means negligible. I am quite incompetent to write of them myself. I have read only a few of them, but those which I read all seemed to me to have something to them. The last one I read was Dr. Cronin's book about the medical profession, "The Citadel," which I see has just been filmed, and, very well filmed too. Nobody could miss the defects of the book, but it would be a mistake to dismiss it on that account. Cronin's book, and I fancy, all the other books in this best seller class, have something which I believe is technically called "narrative power." And this power can exist in them in spite of crudities, banalities, and occasional psychological obtuseness. Such books as these "get by" simply by brute force; there is quite a lot to be said for them. However, I have not the least intention of trying to say it. For I daresay that all unknown to me, some literary critic has already made a painstaking and exhaustive study of them.

Of the second category of considerable English novels, there seems to me to be less to say. A really formidable number of highly competent, highly cultivated, highbrow novels flow from the English presses today. Many of them have considerable psychological insight. They are, to a certain point at any rate, true pictures of the kind of people whom they describe—and there seems to be not the slightest reason why they should have been written. These books seem to me far less defensible, for all their greatly superior sophistication, than the less pretentious best-sellers of the first category.

I know of only one English author in this field whose work seems to me justified. (In this field a work, to be justified, must have something approaching genius.) Miss Elizabeth Bowen is in many respects a typical English highbrow novelist; but her work, at its best, rises right out of this category and becomes something of profound and tragic importance. I do not know whether American readers can ever quite understand how such books as Miss Bowen's "Friends and Relations," or her most recent novel "The Death of the Heart," strike us in England today. These are the classical descriptions of the banality and despair of the English middle class. Her last book in particular, which I happened to read coming over here on the boat, consists largely of a detailed description of life in an upper middle class household in London, and in a lower middle class household by the seaside. Both descriptions are simple, unpretentious, photographic, yet they convey the despair of a lost world more poignantly than any rhetoric. Miss Bowen is the representative chronicler of the English middle class of the 1930's; she makes a Dostoevsky novel seem like a success story, and a Chekhov play like a pep talk. However, she is a lonely figure, exhibiting by her very stature the poverty of the field of highbrow fiction in which she works.



C. Day Lewis: "I am not at all sure that he does not write even better when he is, presumably, pot-boiling as 'Nicholas Blake' . . ."

There is but one other considerable group of English novelists. (For there exists, hitherto, at any rate, only the beginning of a school of writers who possess literary distinction and yet write straight narratives, as against psychological analysis. It may well be that it is in this beginning that hope for the future of the English novel lies. There are some young novelists—Mr. Arthur Calder-Marshall, Mr. Rex Warner, Mr. Day Lewis, Mr. Norman Collins, for instance—most, but not all, of whom have a pronounced sociological slant—whom the critics are all watching with the liveliest expectations. Somehow, however, for mere members of the general public like myself, this tendency towards a new school of writers of straight narrative fiction of literary distinction remains a matter of promise rather than of performance.)

The remaining branch of English fiction, which it is worth saying a word or two about, is the third category, that of the detective novel. And here, as a steady student, I feel a little more qualified to speak. In this queer little bypath of letters, and here almost alone, there are in England the characteristic signs of vigor and achievement. This is, perhaps, the Golden Age of the English detective story writers. Here suddenly we come to a field of literature—if you can call it that—which is genuinely flourishing.

Here are a dozen or so authors at work, turning out books which you find that your friends have read and are eager to discuss. Here are books which the au-

thors evidently enjoyed writing and the readers unaffectedly enjoy reading. I have myself little doubt that some of these detective novels are far better jobs, on any account, than are nine tenths of the more pretentious and ambitious highbrow novels.

It is characteristic of the situation that a whole list of names comes into one's mind the minute one begins to think of detective writers. There are, for example, what we may call the "old masters." There are Sayers, Christie, and Freeman Wills Crofts; and brooding now almost silently above them, there hovers the father of the contemporary detective novel, Mr. A. C. Bentley of that still unsurpassed classic, "Trent's Last Case."

It would be interesting for the specialist to study each of these writers. There is Freeman Wills Crofts, the engineer turned author, with his bleak attention to the mechanics of the detective story; his ostentatious refusal to have anything to do with literary frivols. There is Agatha Christie, the most prolific and efficient professional of them all, turning out innumerable highly competent, if sometimes irritating books, with an occasional classic, such as "The Murder of Roger Ackroyd," with its stunning twist at the end, which even now, so many years after its publication, it would be an indiscretion to give away.

At the other extreme from the austerity of Mr. Crofts lies Miss Sayers, who has now almost ceased to be a first rate detective story writer and has become an exceedingly snobbish popular novelist. She was, at her best, a real master of the detective story. Miss Sayers was able to make her Lord Peter stories, such as "Murder Must Advertise" or "The Nine Tailors," glow with a vitality which, in spite of their absurdities, justified her vast success. I leave it to the professional

critics—and this is really the question which the whole of this article is directed to asking—to explain to us, why these, in many ways, ludicrous books should have had a verve and vitality so superior to the run of sound, earnest, highbrow legitimate fiction, that their enormously greater sales showed nothing but the good sense of the reading public.

It is, however, in the work of what I may call the "young masters," the work of, for example, Marjorie Allingham, Michael Innes, and Nicholas Blake, that the most interesting and curious developments of the detective story are taking place.

Marjorie Allingham is a more sophisticated Dorothy Sayers. She, too, has a preposterous young aristocrat as her detective-hero. But her love (though I would not question its sincerity for a moment) for her paramour of the imagination is more controlled, less wild, less ecstatic than that of Miss Sayers for her Lord Peter. I can express the difference, perhaps, by saying that whereas Dorothy Sayers has endowed her hero with a title and monocle, Marjorie Allingham makes hers merely the nephew of a duke, and gives him horn-rimmed spectacles. Marjorie Allingham's last book, "The Fashion in Shrouds," was not to my mind her best as a detective story; yet it contains really good social observation of a certain set which exists within the English plutocracy.

At the risk of offending the social sensibilities of both authors, it may be observed, however, that they do their best work by far when they are describing neither the aristocracy nor the criminal classes, about which they have to use their imaginations, but their own world of the professions and smaller businesses. Miss Allingham's best book, as a book—it is not perhaps a particularly ingenious bit of detection—is, for instance, "Flowers for the Judge." For here she is describing the world of publishing houses, the legal profession, writers, doctors, and the like; the world which she (and I) really know. It is this, too, which gives Miss Sayers's "Murder Must Advertise" (incidentally, is not this the best title ever given to a detective story?) a force, shrewdness, and reality unequalled by any other of her books. For "Murder Must Advertise" is laid almost entirely within the office of a big advertising agency. Miss Sayers had, I believe, worked in such an agency; accordingly she is able to reproduce for us the intrigues, the inner struggles, the whole seething life of one of these big offices.

It is in the hands, however, of two young intellectuals, Mr. Michael Innes and Mr. Nicholas Blake, that the English detective story seems likely to reach its limits of sophistication. Mr. Michael Innes's first book, "Hamlet, Revenge!," though full of technical flaws as a detective story, seems to me to be a work which any young writer, in whatever



Marjorie Allingham: "A more sophisticated Dorothy Sayers . . ."

field, could regard with most justifiable pride. The story takes place entirely within an amateur production of "Hamlet" and the murder in the story is a part of the murder in the play. Michael Innes who is, I take it, himself a university lecturer, does not hesitate to interpose many passages of straight Shakespearean criticism with his detection.

Finally, Nicholas Blake, who is "in private life" Mr. Day Lewis, the radical novelist and poet, has produced in his last detective story, "The Beast Must Die," an admirable novel. Its author, whether as Day Lewis, or as Nicholas Blake, could not write badly if he tried, but at the risk of saying something very irritating, I am not at all sure that he does not write even better when he is, presumably, pot-boiling as Nicholas Blake, than when he is "giving himself to literature" as Day Lewis.

Why is it then that so many of those few English writers who, whatever their faults, are prolific, who have got the inestimable gift of gusto, find themselves rushing down this narrow byway of letters, the detective story; this byway which, from a writer's point of view, is surely a cul-de-sac? I have my own suspicions as to the sociological reasons which have caused this strange literary phenomenon. From a technical, literary standpoint, however, is there, perhaps, something in the idea that these authors write good books just because they have chosen a form which is rigid and limited? Just as Wordsworth found it a pleasure to be bound within the sonnet's narrow plot of ground, so the detective story writer, just because his book has got to have a practical function—because he has got to get an elaborate and complex story told; has got to get somewhere, as it were—finds it much easier to write and construct well, than does the unfortu-



Agatha Christie: "the most prolific and efficient professional of them all . . ."

nate serious author who has no need or reason to hold to the scaffolding of any definite plot. Is it not just because, for instance, Mr. Michael Innes is weaving a most elaborate net of deduction that he is able to strike off a passage of first-rate Shakespearean criticism? Would not such criticism be somehow quite unacceptable if it were embodied in a grey, portentous essay on Hamlet? Is it not alive and excellent just because it is merely an ornament woven into the work-a-day structure of a detective novel? Is not this the reason why the contemporary detective novel, in spite of the extreme degree of unrealism involved, in spite of its inevitably heavy "stylization," somehow manages to survive amidst the general decay of English imaginative letters?

Needless to say, however, such a survival serves merely to emphasize a hundredfold the extent and devastating character of this decay. To say that the detective story is the only vigorous, thriving branch of English fiction, is the most bitter criticism of English fiction which one can make. It means that they, the English writers, and we the English readers, cannot bear anything but the most complete form of "escape literature" which can possibly be imagined. Drink, the nineteenth century aphorism had it, was the quickest way out of Manchester. For many of us the detective story is the quickest way out of contemporary England as a whole.

And yet what a subtle and paradoxical business this escapism is! As I have just been saying, our detective story writers fail us as guides out of reality when they themselves become too unrealistic. When Miss Sayers and Miss Allingham describe worlds of which they know little, we find it difficult to follow them; it is precisely when they write, in one sense accurately and realistically, but yet, of course, with the profoundly unrealistic twist which the basic hypothesis of any detective story must give, that we can lose ourselves in their stories. Admittedly, then, the detective story is the opium of the contemporary British reading public. But what is the matter with opium? Is it not an indispensable drug, which it is mere folly to be without in such a century as this? As Mr. Hemingway long ago remarked in one of the very greatest of his stories ("Nun, Gambler and Radio"), almost everything, from religion to food, can serve as the opium of the people. Are not we in Britain to be congratulated that we have manufactured this rather mild, rather innocent, this typically British, form of opium, for use against the fate which has overtaken us?

Incidentally, detective stories have always been, for some reason, the particular opium of statesmen, politicians, and of the politically minded in general. The late Lord Balfour is said to have read at least one a night. And now I see it re-

ported in the press that President Roosevelt is an addict. I do not know whether Mr. Chamberlain reads them. Perhaps he never feels any need of escape from the world of which he is so largely the architect; for he sees nothing the matter with such a world.

In America an attempt has been made, I believe, to write "socially conscious" detective stories; stories in which the detective-hero is a brilliant young radical strike leader, who unmasks the machinations of scabs, labor-spies, stooges, and the like. I have never read any of these stories but I don't like the sound of them at all. In this field, at any rate, I am a strict "art for art's sake" man. I should bitterly resent the intrusion of the real world into the fantasy world of detective fiction. That fantasy world is itself, it is true, bloody, barbarous, sadistic, and cruel. If it were not, if it did not give us substitute terrors for our real terrors, we should find no satisfaction in it. But the terrors of the detective story world are strictly con-

trolled; they are small, manageable events, such as the murder of an individual; and above all, they are invariably overcome; the murderer is always caught; the law is shown to be as strong as it is good. Nothing, surely, must be done to break this basic pattern of reassurance, upon which a great part of the hold of the modern detective story is based?

It will be very interesting to watch the future development of the English detective novel. I have a foreboding that sooner or later its possibilities will be found to have been exhausted. Is it not to be feared that many other writers in this field will go the way of Miss Sayers into "legitimate" fiction? Let us hope, however, that the young masters, Mr. Michael Innes, Mr. Day Lewis, and many others who may yet appear, will in the meanwhile give us many masterpieces of distraction and escape.

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Celtic Romance

SONS OF THE SWORDMAKER. By Maurice Walsh. New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by FLETCHER PRATT

ONE more in the great line of Celtic romances, whose tradition reaches back through "The Crock of Gold" and "The Fates of the Princes of Dyved" to the Arthurian cycle and the legends of Cuchulain. The publishers rather ineptly call this example an "Irish saga"; which is a truthful description only if the adjective be understood completely to alter the meaning of the noun. The saga is an iron-bound Scandinavian invention, a history whose details are selected to produce an artistic effect. The Irish saga is fiction based on history, in which time and place furnish no bounds and the material circumstances are what the teller chooses to give. It is permissible and indeed desirable for him to do what Maurice Walsh has done: describe places and people with great pageantry of rhetoric; unify an old, wandering tale by the introduction of characters and events hitherto unknown to it. The only requirement is that they may not alter the main theme of a story which deals, in the manner of traditional literature, with the unavoidability of fate.

In this respect "Sons of the Swordmaker" is a magnificent success. By placing the one-handed son of a swordmaker in the central legend, a hitherto insignificant appendage of the great story of Cuchulain has been focussed into full and splendid life and considerable importance.

The narrative is rapid and brilliant; never scratches its keel on those shoals of cliché and bathos which wreck so many ships of romance; drives along under a sense of gathering tragic dooms to an end unforeseeable but inevitable. The characterization amply supports the weight of the story; if a man is described as of acid tongue he forthwith makes a bitter epigram, if described as wise, does a wise thing.

In other words, there is no fault at all to be found with that part of the story which constitutes the "Irish saga"; but among the teller's interpolations the cloven hoof comes into view. It seems to have occurred to Mr. Walsh that the one-handedness of Flann, about whom the main story revolves, needs explaining; and further that the explanation he conceived was itself a narrative of some merit. In this he is perfectly correct, for the tale of the five sons of the swordmaker and the blade that always comes home is a very good one indeed. But only one of the sons is needed in the story proper, and the extra characters left on the author's hands are disposed by shunting them off into happily-ever-after domesticity, rather a disagreeable shock when he has been talking about high and glorious destinies.

It also breaks the back of the book at a joint about a third from the beginning and leaves the net impression that Mr. Walsh is a fine romantic writer in the making, not yet capable of running the full length of a novel without fatigue, but one who will turn in some world records when he learns to go the distance.